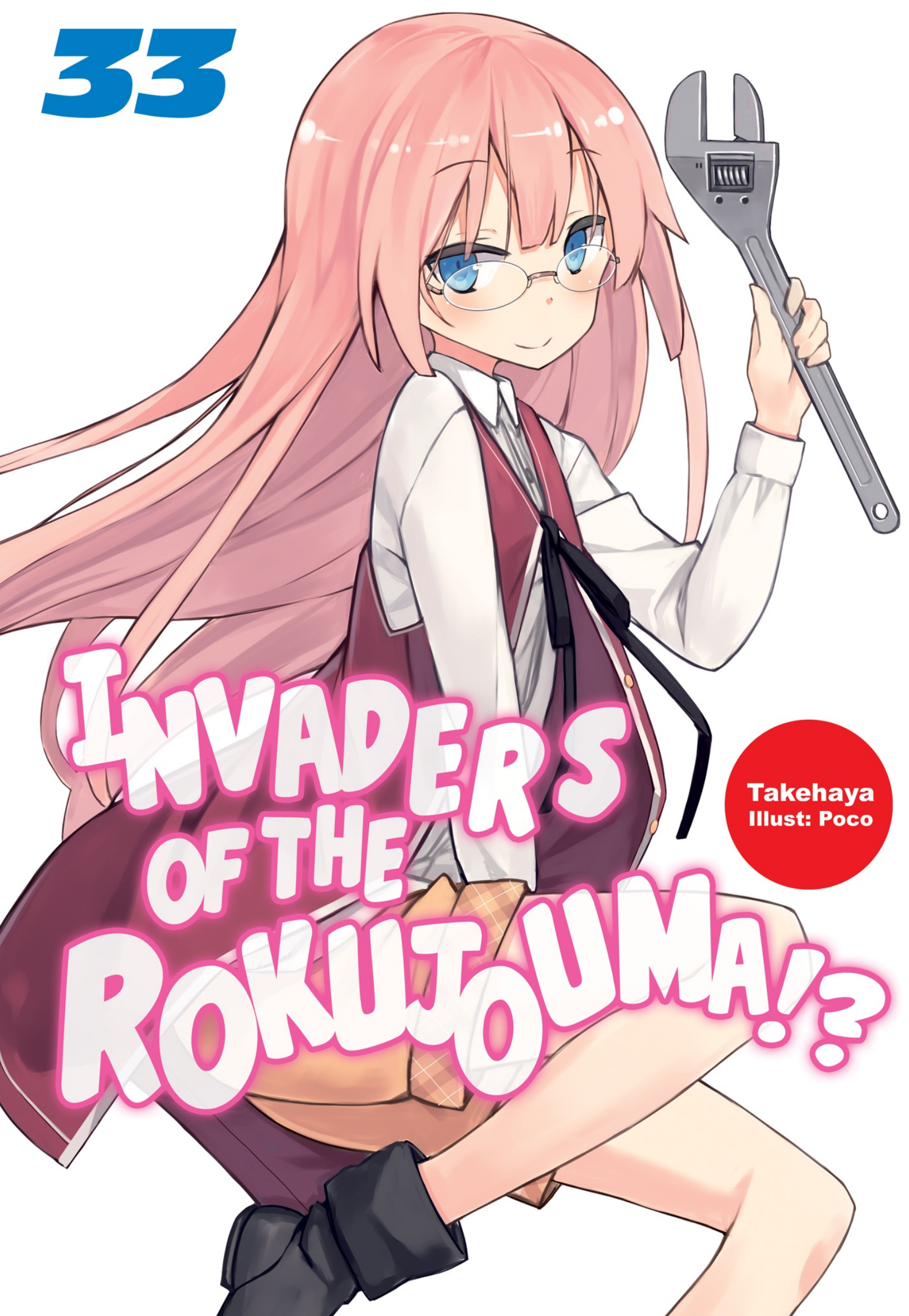


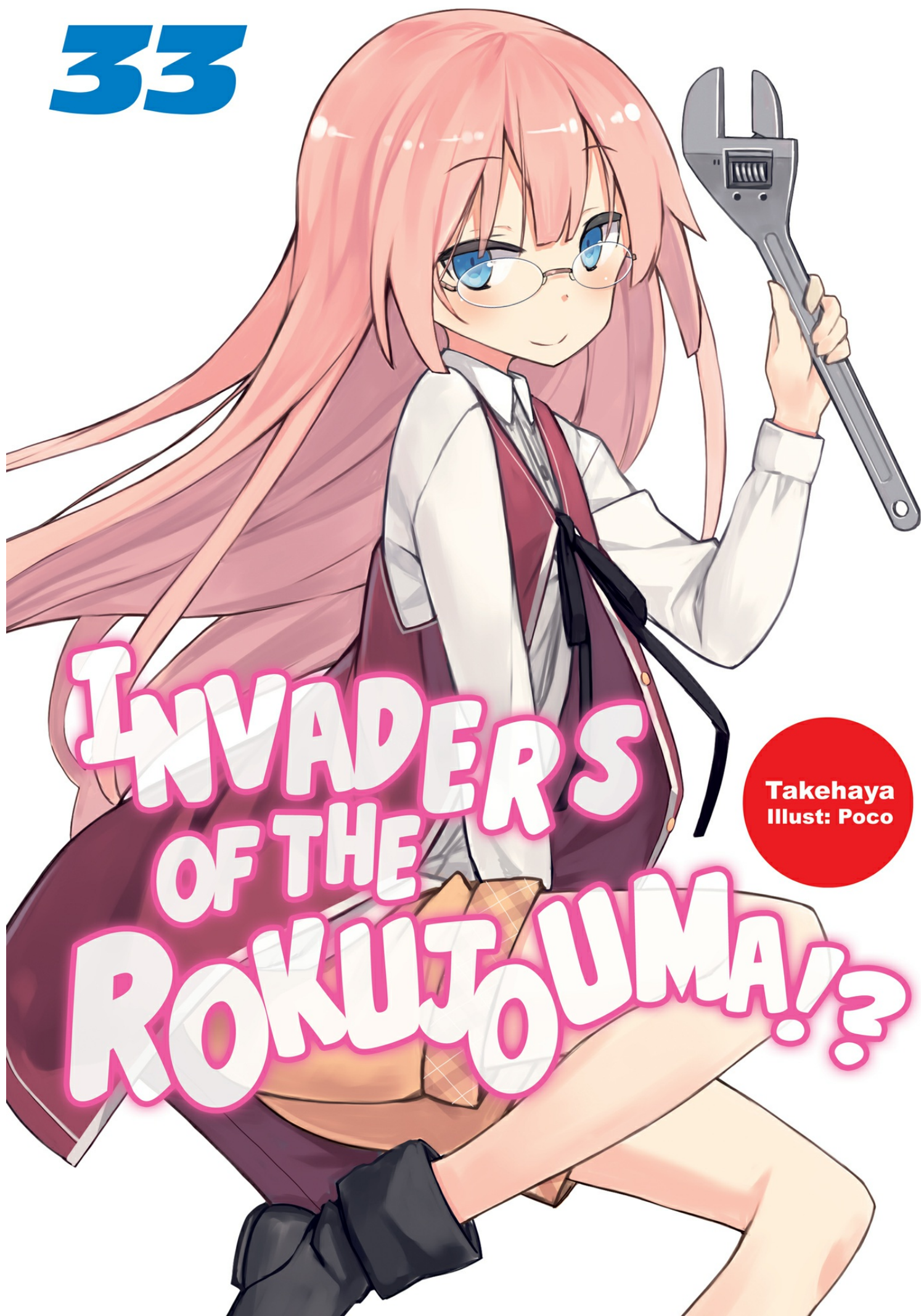
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INVADERS OF THE ROKUTUMA!?

Takehaya
Illust: Poco

33



INVADERS OF THE ROKUTOUMA!?

Takehaya
Illust: Poco



Episode 1

Battle of the Brains! Koutarou's in Danger?!
Kiriha and Elfaria square off for the right to nurse Koutarou!

INVADERS OF THE ROKUTOUMA!? 33



**YURIKA TAKES HER FIRST
STEPS TOWARD BECOMING
A MAGICAL GIRL!**

Episode 2
Fledgling Days
The story of how Yurika and Nana met!

Episode 3

A Nostalgic Place

A chance encounter somewhere special with Maki and Kirihal!

REMINISCING AT
THE AMUSEMENT PARK?



**PARTNERS BECOME...
SOMETHING MORE?**



Episode Clariossa

Everything There Is to Know About Electronic Amplifiers
Koutarou and Clan get together in another world!

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FACTIONS MAP

KASAGI SHIZUKA

Koutarou's classmate and the landlord of Corona House. Alunaya the Fire Dragon Emperor resides within her.



KURANO KIRIHA

Heiress of the underground who's finally found her beloved. With her quick wits and big heart, she's a master of both tactics and love.



UNDERGROUND DWELLERS (OF THE PEOPLE OF THE EARTH)

SATOMI KOUTAROU

Our protagonist, and the formal tenant of room 106. Also the Blue Knight.



MATSUDAIRA KOTORI

Kenji's little sister, but you'd never know it. An introvert through and through. She's now enrolled at Harukaze High.



MATSUDAIRA KENJI

Koutarou's best friend-cum-partner in crime. He can be a bit tasteless, but he's a good guy at heart.



KOUTAROU'S CHILDHOOD FRIENDS



AIKA MAKI

A former member of the evil magical girl group, Darkness Rainbow. After bonding with Koutarou, she's now a loyal member of the Satomi band of knights.

MAGICAL GIRLS (OF THE MAGICAL KINGDOM OF FOLSARIA)

NIJINO YURIKA

The Magical Girl of Love and Courage, Rainbow Yurika. She's a walking disaster, but she's grown into a magical girl who really makes it count when she needs to.



RESIDENTS OF CORONA HOUSE



GHOST FORM



HIGASHIHONGAN SANAE

The ghostly girl that used to haunt Koutarou. She now has her body back, however, and is more energetic than ever before.

GHOSTS



RUTHKANIA NYE PARDOMSHIHA

Theia's retainer and assistant. She's extremely happy to be able to serve the master she so admires.



THEIAMILLIS GRE FORTHORTHE

Princess of Forthorthe and the Blue Knight's liege. She's blossomed into a wonderful leader, but she's still quick to pick a fight.



CLARIOSSA DAORA FORTHORTHE

Koutarou's partner during his adventures in past Forthorthe. She's still growing, both as a princess and as a scientist.

PRINCESS ALAIA



SAKURABA HARUMI

The reincarnation of Princess Alaia, whose soul travelled two thousand years through time to be with her special someone. She's currently happy to be living a normal life alongside him.



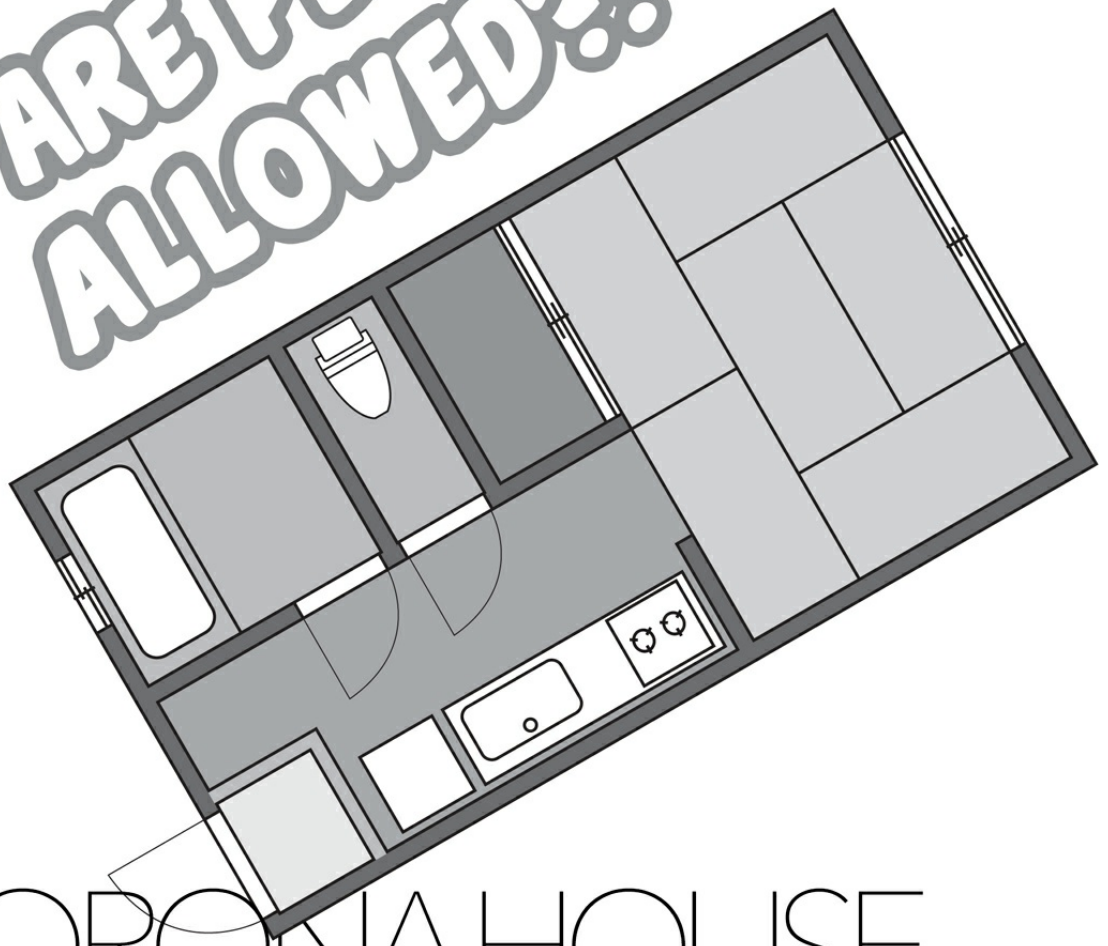
NALFA LAREN

A transfer student who's officially come from Forthorthe, but it seems she shares a special connection with Koutarou and company...

ALIENS

(OF THE HOLY FORTHORTHE GALACTIC EMPIRE)

ARE PETS
ALLOWED?!



CORONA HOUSE
ROOM 106

Episode 1: Battle of the Brains! Koutarou's in Danger?!

Compared to other kids their age, distance was no object for Koutarou and the girls. With Theia's Blue Knight and Clan's Hazy Moon at their disposal, they could go wherever they wanted whenever they wanted. If they felt like swimming in the middle of winter, they could hop right down to the southern hemisphere. If they so wished, they could go mountain climbing in the morning and wrap up the day with a dip in the ocean halfway around the world. It was quite a blessing for teenagers brimming with a youthful love of adventure and fun.

And today, they were putting that blessing to good use. They'd each taken time out of their busy schedules for a three-day, two-night trip to a ski resort—something they'd all been looking forward to.

"Koutarou, I'm going to the expert course! Come with me!" Theia called enthusiastically.

"Are you sure you don't want to go for the long forest course?" Koutarou asked in reply.

"We're going to do them all eventually! We can save that one for later!"

"That's true. Anyone else coming?"

"Oh, I'm in," answered Shizuka. "Sounds like fun!"

The athletic trio of the group—Koutarou, Theia, and Shizuka—was getting excited. They'd been to a few different ski resorts on school trips, so they had plenty of skiing and snowboarding experience under their belts. They were primed and ready to take on the most challenging course without so much as a warmup.

"Just let me know when you're headed for the forest course. I'd like to do that one with you," chimed in Maki.

“Yeah, jeez! Can’t you guys at least wait until we get our snow legs back?” huffed Sanae.

“We can take our time getting used to the snow while Koutarou and the others are doing the expert course,” suggested Kiriha.

“I’d like to gradually work my way up to it,” agreed Harumi.

Maki and Sanae wanted to go with Koutarou, but their skills unfortunately weren’t up to snuff. They just didn’t have the experience to tackle the expert course right out of the gate. Kiriha was in a slightly different position; she had the necessary skill, but she’d considerately volunteered to stay behind and coach the other girls on the basics. As for Harumi, her handicap was simply a matter of stamina. If she exhausted herself too soon, she knew she wouldn’t last a full day on the slopes.

“We should gather data on the snow while we can.”

“Agreed. Without that, the semi-automatic snowboard will be useless.”

Ruth and Clan were taking a different approach to their vacation altogether. They were aware of their lack of athleticism and were trying to make up for it with technology. To that end, Clan had prepared two snowboards that even a complete amateur could use without falling over, but it was dangerous to take them on the more advanced courses without some basic data and trial runs first. For that reason, Ruth and Clan were sticking with Kiriha and the others for the time being.

“What’s so fun about playing out in the cold like this anyway?”

“Oh? Are you not a fan of this kind of thing, Yurika-san?”

“I’d rather be soaking in the hot spring.”

Lastly, there was Yurika and Elfaria—who were both completely hopeless when it came to skiing. Yurika had no excuse, but this was Elfaria’s first exposure to the winter sports of Earth. She needed to be taught from the ground up, starting with what skiing even was.

And so, once Koutarou, Theia, and Shizuka were off, the other girls got to doing their own thing.

Maki, Sanae, Clan, and Ruth could manage themselves well enough in the snow. Maki and Sanae were fine on their skis after a brief refresher, and Clan and Ruth were up and moving as soon as they got the data they needed. That left Harumi and Kiriha teaching Yurika and Elfaria respectively.

“Why do I need to learn how to fall?” Yurika asked.

“Because nobody is there to stop you on the slopes,” Harumi replied.

Harumi was a fine skier from a technical point of view despite her lack of stamina, so she had no problems instructing Yurika. More importantly, Yurika respected her and actually listened to what she had to say. It made them a good pair.

“But would falling in the snow even hurt?”

“If you underestimate skiing, you could get seriously injured. In the worst case scenario, you might even...”

“P-Please teach me everything! I’ll listen good!”

Koutarou had already told Yurika that she’d be in trouble if she ran away and spent the day at the lodge instead of skiing, so it was important that she learn how to do it both properly and safely.

“I see... So these hard-to-walk-in shoes are meant to be affixed to these planks,” Elfaria mused.

“Yes. Once you affix them, you can move your center of gravity to adjust their angle,” Kiriha explained.

“So the idea is to keep the front of these planks toward the slope?”

“Precisely.”

Since Elfaria knew nothing of Earth sports, particularly skiing, she was at a greater disadvantage than most first-time skiers. Nevertheless, she was rather athletic and quick on the uptake. She didn’t have any problems following Kiriha’s instructions and advice. It seemed it wouldn’t be long before she was skiing with the other girls.

“Hey, I’m... Whoa!”

“You’re doing well, Your Majesty.”

“What’s your honest assessment without the flattery, Kiriha-san?”

“You’re focusing too much on trying to control the skis. You’ll be fine if you just adjust them to the slope.”

“I feel like I’ll improve faster if you keep giving it to me straight like that.”

“Understood.”

Kiriha spoke to Theia as an equal, but she maintained a high degree of courtesy when conversing with Elfaria. Kiriha, as a kind of princess in her own right, was naturally respectful of other rulers. That respect, however, was getting in the way of her instruction, so Elfaria sagely asked her to be more frank.

“Heya!”

“Mother!”

Just as Elfaria began timidly sliding on the snow, two familiar voices called out to her from on high. It was Koutarou and Theia, who were currently riding the ski lift overhead. When Elfaria looked up, she could see them waving happily.

“Be careful not to fall, my dear!”

“I won’t! But you be careful too, Mother!”

“Leave her to me, Theia-dono!”

After a brief exchange, Koutarou and Theia were off. In the lift right behind them, however, was Shizuka.

“Kiriha-san, the lift isn’t hanging down or anything, is it?”

Shizuka was worried about the lift sagging, but it wasn’t like she was scared. She was just concerned it might look like the lift was carrying too much weight for a single girl riding it.

“Don’t worry. It looks just like it always does.”

“Great!”

Kiriha wasn't really an expert on ski lifts one way or the other, but the truth wasn't exactly what mattered in this situation. Knowing that, Kiriha had simply given Shizuka the answer she needed to hear.

"Kiriha-san... Don't you want to be with them too?" Elfaria asked.

Koutarou and Theia were still visible up the hill. They were talking with—and sometimes punching—each other as they rode the lift to the top of the slope. It was obvious even from a distance how close they were. Elfaria was sensitive to the hearts of others, so she could easily imagine that Kiriha would much rather be in the lift with Koutarou than stuck here instructing her.

"I'd be lying if I said I didn't want to, but I'd feel bad for Theia-dono if I butted in right now."

"You're so mature, Kiriha-san."

"This is just what we naturally do. Theia-dono doesn't interrupt my time with him either."

"Heehee, it seems you girls are rather considerate of one another."

Elfaria flashed a tranquil smile and turned to watch Theia and Koutarou go. Elfaria always kept her emotions in check, so it was hard to guess what she was really feeling based on her expression alone—but Kiriha had an idea. Elfaria had finally been reunited with her first love after twenty years. Kiriha knew how desperate she personally was to be with him after only ten, so she felt deep down that it was really Elfaria who would rather be in the ski lift with Koutarou right now.

Koutarou, Theia, and Shizuka arrived at their destination after changing lifts three times. Each ride was about ten minutes, so it took approximately forty minutes to reach the expert course from the base of the mountain. Then there was the actual skiing to do, so all told, it was about an hour before Koutarou, Theia, and Shizuka returned to the group.

"Ah, Koutarou's back!"

The first to sense them coming, as expected, was Sanae. She'd been paying close attention to the auras within several hundred meters so she'd know as

soon as Koutarou was in range. She was eagerly awaiting his return, after all.

“Where?” Maki asked.

“Over there!”

“I don’t see him.”

“He’s still on the other side of this hill. You’ll be able to see him soon.”

Maki was also eager to see Koutarou, so she and Sanae happily pulled over to the side of the course so as not to get in the way of any other skiers. As they stood there expectantly looking up the slope, Clan and Ruth pulled up.

“Glasses, can’t you do something about the way you’re snowboarding? It’s so straight and weird.”

“Not until I get any better at it. That’s just how the device was designed.”

Clan and Ruth were using Clan’s special snowboards, which were equipped with an automatic balancing function to make them absurdly stable. A wobbly-kneed amateur like Clan was riding as straight as a pro. Anyone who saw it would doubt their eyes, but Clan didn’t seem to think much of it. The auto-balance function would naturally kick in less once Clan and Ruth’s skills improved, so the stiffness of their snowboarding would eventually go away on its own.

“But Sanae-sama, Maki-san... is something the matter?”

“I was wondering the same thing, honestly.”

Rather than worrying about their own snowboarding, Ruth and Clan were curious as to why Sanae and Maki had pulled over.

“Koutarou and the others will be here soon. Look!”

When Sanae pointed, they could all see Koutarou, Theia, and Shizuka coming down the hill. Now that they’d conquered the expert course, they’d apparently returned to clear the bunny slopes as well.

“It’s Satomi-kun! Huh? Something’s strange...”

Maki smiled upon spotting Koutarou and the others, but quickly cocked her head to the side. They were moving far too fast for the bunny slope. At the

speeds they were going, they were sure to plow right into the less experienced skiers and snowboarders. Maki couldn't imagine the three of them risking something like that just for fun.

“Waaah! Someone save meeeee!”

Maki's doubts, however, were quickly answered when she caught a glimpse of a massive, pink snowball barreling down the hill. It cut a beautiful course right after Koutarou, Theia, and Shizuka almost like it was a homing missile. It was obvious now that the three of them were going so fast to try to get away from it.

“Don't come over here, Yurika!”

“I caaan't stoooooop!”

“Oh no...”

Crash!

There weren't skis fast enough to escape the out-of-control snowball, and Koutarou was directly in its path. The snowball plowed over him without mercy—and Maki and the other girls had a front row seat for the whole thing.

Harumi's careful, patient lessons had all been for naught. Nearly as soon as she set foot on the slope, Yurika fell and tumbled into a snowball that picked up momentum as it picked up size. Koutarou and the others unfortunately happened to pass by at just the wrong time.

On the bright side, however, Koutarou wasn't seriously hurt when the pink snowball plowed over him. The snow Yurika had accumulated actually helped cushion the blow and distribute the impact, though Koutarou ended up covered head to toe in the stuff. He acted like it was no big deal at first and immediately went back to playing with the girls, but developed a fever over the course of the afternoon. By that evening, they could all tell at a glance that he was getting sick.

“You really are foolish, Satomi Koutarou.”

“Can you blame me? I don't get that many chances to go skiing.”

Currently, Koutarou was resting in his hotel room. Kiriha couldn't help smiling as she dipped a towel in some cool water for him and placed it on his forehead. Koutarou was always incredibly reliable in an emergency, but at times like this, he was almost childish. Of course, Kiriha didn't really think he was as foolish as she made him out to be. She knew that this was part of how he depended on them too, so it actually made her happy.

"Layous-sama, would you like something to eat? I could feed you if you'd like."

"Thanks, but everyone kind of ended up feeding me earlier. I could use a drink, though."

"Coming right up."

In addition to Kiriha, Elfaria was helping to take care of Koutarou. She was the oldest of the group and their leader on paper, so it was only natural for her to stay behind and lend Kiriha—their actual leader—a hand. As for how exactly she planned on helping...

Sssip!

"Mmm..."

"Hey! What are you doing?"

"Gulp... Well, I was thinking of trying to give you some juice mouth-to-mouth."

Sip!

"Mmm!"

Whack!

"Mm—Ouch! Jeez, you don't have to be so shy, Layous-sama. Not with the kind of relationship we have."

"Oh yeah? And what kind of relationship is that?"

"That of a beautiful mother and her son-in-law."

"You idiot."

From Koutarou's point of view, it didn't seem like Elfaria had stayed behind

out of a sense of responsibility. Far from it—she'd simply stayed because she wanted to.

She might say it was twenty years ago, but emotions aren't so simple. Especially in Her Majesty's case where it wasn't anyone's fault they met... or had to say goodbye.

Elfaria always wore a mask of humor around Theia and the other girls to play her relationship with Koutarou off as a joke. But Kiriha suspected that there was a genuine longing underneath that mask and all the jokes. She herself knew the pain of unrequited love, after all.

Once Koutarou fell asleep, Kiriha and Elfaria took their leave to have dinner. On their way back to the room afterward, the hotel arcade happened to catch Kiriha's eye. Since guests couldn't go skiing when the weather turned bad, the resort hotel made sure to put a little extra flair and thought into its top-notch indoor entertainment.

"Hmm, if we use this..."

After taking a cursory survey of the available games, Kiriha flashed a small smile. She then turned to Elfaria, who was walking next to her.

"Your Majesty, would you care to learn a bit about the games of Earth?"

"Games? But Layous-sama is sleeping, so..."

Elfaria appeared to be far more concerned about Koutarou's wellbeing, and anxiously glanced over at the elevator back up to his room.

"He is indeed asleep, so it should be all right if we dally for just a bit. Besides, Koutarou would be very disappointed to learn you spent your entire vacation caring for him."

"That may be true, but..."

"So I was thinking that perhaps we could have a little competition. The loser has to take care of Koutarou and the winner is free to do whatever they like. What do you say?" Kiriha suggested with a bright smile.

Koutarou wasn't so ill that he needed two people to care for him. Kiriha

thought she could use a game to divide up the duty and halve the burden on both her and Elfaria. Or, at least, that was the pretense.

“...In that case, I won’t lose, Kiriha-san.”

“Please show me what you’re made of, Your Majesty.”

Kiriha had a very specific goal in mind, and she saw this little competition as the perfect opportunity to accomplish it.

Now I just need to defeat Her Majesty... A most difficult foe...

Kiriha wanted to give Elfaria and Koutarou some alone time together—something Elfaria wouldn’t dare ask for herself out of deference for Theia and the other girls. So, just like she had with Theia and the ski lift earlier, Kiriha came up with a plan specifically designed to give Elfaria what she wanted but couldn’t ask for. Kiriha would make sure Elfaria had no choice but to stay with Koutarou.

Granted, Elfaria wasn’t stupid. She was extremely wise and, because of her position, highly skilled in tactics and negotiation. It was foolish to assume that she didn’t already have some clue what Kiriha was up to at this point. That meant there was no reason for Kiriha to make concessions; Elfaria would be playing to win, and beating her would be no easy task when she put her mind to it... not even for Kiriha.

The game Kiriha chose for their competition was a simple roulette she’d spotted in the token section of the arcade. Participants would place bets on where they thought the ball would land and win a payout accordingly. This particular roulette was completely digital, but the rules were otherwise the same as the analogue version.

As for their game, Kiriha and Elfaria each started with twenty tokens. The winner would simply be whoever had the most tokens after five rounds. If they’d agreed to go until one of them ran out, it would have been a long, drawn-out game of reserved plays and safe bets. But the limited timeframe changed the tactics of the game dramatically. Not betting anything whatsoever and holding on to the same twenty tokens was allowed, but so was betting all of them in the first round. The winner would be whoever had the most tokens

at the end of five turns, regardless of the strategy they used.

With these rules, losing the initiative would be bad. I'll need to stay one step ahead of Her Majesty...

Kiriha's plan was to take the offensive. If Elfaria took a lead in the first round, she could just bet the same way Kiriha did every turn thereafter, effectively preventing her from making a comeback. That said, Kiriha couldn't risk being overly aggressive and losing too much in the first round either. She had to win, but she had to do it prudently.

"I see. So the first move is going to be the hardest..."

"Yes. We can both see how much the other is betting and what they're betting on, after all."

For their game, they'd agreed on a minute hold between each round. During that time, they were free to bet on as many spaces as they liked—but their opponent could see them do it. There was a certain strategy to waiting until the last second to bet.

"Heh, I see we both took a firm stance in the first round."

Elfaria's first bet was four tokens on red. The roulette wheel was composed of eighteen red spaces and eighteen black spaces, numbered 1 to 36, in a circle with an uncolored 0 and 00 space dividing them. That made the probability of winning on a color nearly 50 percent; and with twenty tokens and five turns, betting four tokens on the first round was a reasonable sum.

"I can't lose too big here, after all."

Kiriha made a similar bet with four tokens on an uneven result. The same as with red and black, the roulette wheel was divided evenly between odd and even numbers. So despite the difference in their actual bets, Elfaria and Kiriha had the same strategy.

Really, Kiriha had guessed that Elfaria would bet on either red or black, so she'd avoided doing the same as a form of damage control. If Kiriha had also bet on a color, the result would have either been an eight token difference in their totals or none at all. Meanwhile, if Kiriha bet on odd or even while Elfaria bet on color, the end result would either be a zero, four, or eight token

difference between them. Kiriha's idea was to reduce the risk of the greatest possible loss.

Whirrr...

Since they'd both waited until just before betting closed to make their calls, it was only a matter of seconds before the digital ball bounced into the wheel. It took a few laps, jumping over space after space before finally landing on the red 5.

"Oh my."

"This makes things interesting."

Since the ball landed on both a red space and an uneven number, both Kiriha and Elfaria received an eight token payout—double their original bets.

"Heh, I guess the wait-and-see tactic didn't work."

"Then hopefully this next round will."

Kiriha and Elfaria grinned confidently. Of course, they both knew it was just a bluff. They were really just trying to get inside each other's heads. The goal now was to figure out when and how the other would make their move.

The game took an interesting turn in the fourth round. At the end of the third, Kiriha had twenty-six tokens and Elfaria had twenty-four. But for the fourth round, Elfaria took a big gamble. She used half of her tokens to bet on the numbers 1 through 12. Ignoring the 0 and 00 spaces, that meant there was a one-in-three chance of tripling her bet. She'd be left with only twelve tokens if it didn't work out, but she stood to gain thirty-six.

"So this is when you make your move!"

Elfaria was striking sooner than Kiriha had anticipated. Kiriha had bet the tokens she'd just won on red this round, but because Elfaria made her wager at the last second, there was no time for Kiriha to change her bet in response. All she could do now was wait to see how things played out.

"It's important to think of the last two rounds as one!"

As far as Elfaria was concerned, this was the endgame. There was a two-in-

three chance that her bet would fail this round, but only a four-in-nine chance that it would fail twice in a row.

Whirrr...

Both Elfaria and Kiriha held their breath as they watched the ball bounce around the spinning wheel... before finally landing on the red 9. They'd both won.

"Okay!"

"Ugh."

Despite their mutual victory, their reactions couldn't have been more opposite. Elfaria pumped her fist in the air while Kiriha gritted her teeth. Kiriha had thirty-two tokens, but Elfaria now had forty-eight total. She'd ended up giving Elfaria a considerable lead.

It seems like things are proceeding according to plan...

Confidence and probability aside, Elfaria had really chosen to make her move in the fourth round for a psychological advantage. Despite winning the round too, Kiriha already felt like she'd lost. Elfaria knew that if she and her opponent were standing on equal footing, then it was to her advantage to settle things quickly. She played like a true strategist.

Calm down, Kiriha... If you lose heart here, there will have been no point in even playing this game...

Kiriha understood Elfaria's intentions quite well, but this game had a very emotional meaning for her. She couldn't quite keep her calm like she ordinarily would have been able to. Just like Elfaria had hoped, she was getting flustered. It seemed that, for all her maturity, Kiriha didn't hold a candle to a grown woman after all.

"This is it... The last round!"

Elfaria was in high spirits with the competition going her way, and she did her best to shake Kiriha with increasing confidence in her voice.

"..."

Kiriha tried calming herself with a few deep breaths, but it wasn't exactly

working. She only had one minute left—and it felt like the fastest minute that had ever flown by.

I suppose that's to be expected from Her Majesty Elfaria...

Elfaria presently had the upper hand. Her advantage was so great that she didn't even need to make a wager in the final round. She could simply hold on to her forty-eight tokens, while Kiriha would either have to make a bet or accept defeat here and now.

In the event that Elfaria didn't make a play, Kiriha needed at least forty-eight tokens to win. That goal left her with desperate strategies like dividing her thirty-two tokens between two spaces on the promise of a triple payout. Of course, Elfaria would make a move under the assumption Kiriha would do exactly that. She might try to keep her risk down by making a relatively safe bet for minimal gain, or she might just copy Kiriha's play to eliminate any potential gain at all. Whichever it was, Elfaria would likely bet in a way that tried to reduce Kiriha's chances of winning. That put additional pressure on Kiriha, splitting her between two choices: she could either go for the minimum of forty-eight tokens... or go big.

"I guess I don't have a choice. I didn't want to have to do this, but..."

Kiriha made up her mind. Since it was a rather large gamble, she'd wanted to avoid this strategy... But under the circumstances, she had to choose whatever strategy gave her a fighting chance.

"You're on!"

"Oh my, that's an awfully bold gamble."

Elfaria bet half of her tokens to prevent Kiriha from winning by betting all of hers on a single double payout window—which is what she'd judged Kiriha would do in an act of desperation. But to the contrary, Kiriha was going for a triple payout. She would win if luck was on her side, but things were clearly in Elfaria's favor.

Whirrr...

Kiriha's eyes were glued to the roulette wheel as she said a little prayer in her heart. Her goal wasn't specifically to win, but she couldn't accomplish her real

goal *without* winning. She looked like a nervous wreck compared to Elfaria, who appeared calmly assured of her victory.

Clack!

“All right!”

“Heehee... Well done, Kiriha-san.”

The result? Kiriha had won, and she couldn't hold back a modest fist pump in her excitement. She'd bet on 25 through 36, and the ball was presently sitting in the 29 pocket.

“But... why did you gamble like that at the end? It seems like a very illogical choice for you.”

“I was counting on the game's random number generator not truly being random, Your Majesty.”

Kiriha flashed a small smile as she looked up at the screen that displayed the results of the last twenty rounds. The majority of balls seemed to land on higher numbers, and Kiriha used that for reference in her final wager.

Since the roulette wheel was a digital fabrication, a random number generator determined what space the ball “landed” on. There were several methods to generate a number, and Kiriha bet that the algorithm wasn't really and truly random. She staked everything on the assumption that the machine was more likely to spit out higher numbers than lower ones.

Of course, she didn't have any real basis for thinking that. In fact, it was far more likely she'd just gotten lucky. If the game really did have a true random number generator, then her entire strategy was moot. But in the spirit of gambling, she'd relied on luck to carry her through in the end.

“So you bet your tokens on what you thought might have a slightly higher chance of winning...”

“That's right. And so, I'll leave Koutarou in your care this evening.”

Under ordinary circumstances, Elfaria could never be honest with Koutarou. That was why Kiriha wanted to give her a special opportunity where she actually had a chance, why she'd been so determined to win. Perhaps, rather

than luck, it was that gentle wish that ushered her to victory.

Elfaria had an inkling of Kiriha's plan, which was why she'd played her hardest to win. She just couldn't openly say that; it was easier to pretend she didn't know. She was reluctant to accept Kiriha's kindness, and she also had her pride to consider.

Yet in the end, Kiriha's earnest kindness had won over Elfaria's stubbornness. When earnestness and duplicity clashed, it was only natural that earnestness would win in the end. At least, that was how Elfaria saw it.

"My daughter's friend was being considerate of me, Layous-sama..."

Elfaria whispered to Koutarou as he lay asleep in bed. She had a bittersweet smile on her face, for she was genuinely happy despite the circumstances. She didn't have many opportunities to be alone with Koutarou, and there were things she couldn't say to him while he was awake. This was a very special moment.

"But you know... This is your fault too, Layous-sama. You're the one who jumped twenty years through time..."

Those were words she could never say otherwise. They were feelings that had remained unexpressed all this time, and now they were overflowing from within. Elfaria was alone with Koutarou, and he was fast asleep... It was now and only now that she could say such things to him.

"I thought I'd given up for Theia and the other girls' sake... yet when I look at your face like this, my determination wavers... That's terrible, isn't it? I'm a grown woman..."

Elfaria hesitantly stroked Koutarou's cheek. As she did, she could feel warmth and emotions she thought she'd locked away decades ago surge through her like a wave. It shook her heart and took her back twenty years to when she was just a teenager...

To a time when she ran on passion alone. To a time she met a strange boy who struggled to carry the burdens of a legendary hero. Elfaria herself wore a heavy crown, so she empathized greatly... and it hadn't taken her long to fall for

him.

“I can’t... If I go any further, I won’t be able to go back...”

Before the floodgates of Elfaria’s swelling emotions burst, she pulled her hand back. Koutarou couldn’t cast aside his title as a hero, and Elfaria wanted to respect that. That was why she’d decided to bear her own burdens too and ultimately took up the title of empress... It was all so that Koutarou could be the knight he was today. It was Elfaria’s way of expressing her love, which she believed was more than just staying by someone’s side.

“I’m not some teenage girl anymore...”

Elfaria calmed herself and wiped Koutarou’s forehead with a damp towel.

“Mmph...”

When she laid the towel back over Koutarou’s forehead, he sleepily opened his eyes.

“I’m sorry. Did I wake you, Layous-sama?”



“Oh, that’s right... I got a fever...”

Koutarou stared up at Elfaria in a daze. He looked like he might fall right back to sleep at any moment.

“Elle, why are you crying...?”

“What?”

It was only then that Elfaria realized tears were streaming down her cheeks, and she quickly wiped them away before Koutarou could decipher them.

“Is someone bullying you again...?”

“No, I just had something in my eyes.”

“Ah... But if you’re ever in trouble, you come to me right away, okay?”

There, Koutarou closed his sleepy eyes again. He still hadn’t rested enough to recover, and he knew he could trust things to Elfaria when she was being serious.

“But why would you save me, Layous-sama? For Theia? For Alaia and the sake of the royal line?”

That was something Elfaria would ordinarily never dare to ask. It was something she only had the nerve to ask now because Koutarou was in such a daze; and he would likely be able to answer her for the same reason. In this feverish, liminal space between reality and a dream, they could actually be honest with one another.

“Do I need a reason to save you...?”

Koutarou opened his eyes to say that, but they soon closed again.

“Layous-sama...”

In the end, Koutarou never saw the face Elfaria made at his reply.

“...”

Before long, he was fast asleep again. He was an easy sleeper to begin with, and the cold medicine he’d taken had him out in the blink of an eye. He’d only managed a few seconds of consciousness out of concern for Elfaria’s tears, but

now that that had been cleared up, he was right back off to the world of dreams.

“If you hadn’t said that, I could have given up...”

Elfaria reached out for Koutarou’s cheek again. As she leaned forward, her tears spilled down onto her outstretched hand.

“This is all your fault, Layous-sama... It’s because you so easily give people what they want...”

Elfaria leaned over Koutarou and looked down at him, her tears now dripping directly onto his cheeks. But he remained asleep. Elfaria stayed like that for some time, staring at Koutarou to her heart’s content... her hand fixed to his cheek all the while.

Kiriha made her way to Koutarou’s room around 11 o’clock, sensing that it was about time to return. It had been a few hours since she’d left things to Elfaria after dinner.

“Your Majesty, how is Koutarou?”

“The medicine must have worked. He doesn’t seem to have a fever anymore.”

“That’s also thanks to you taking care of him.”

“Teehee. I just spent the whole time teasing Layous-sama.”

“He’s a strange boy, so I’m sure he didn’t mind.”

By the time Kiriha returned, Elfaria was sitting on a chair next to Koutarou’s bed. She was passing the time by reading a book, but looked up from it to greet Kiriha with a smile. Seeing Elfaria’s smile, however, Kiriha realized that the emotion behind it had changed over the past few hours. Elfaria now wore the relaxed smile of an innocent young girl.

Hmm, it appears I made the right choice...

Satisfied with this outcome, Kiriha considered how to proceed and soon concluded that it would be best to continue leaving Koutarou to Elfaria. Whether Elfaria returned to Forthorthe as empress or not, one thing was for certain: she wouldn’t have anywhere near as much time to spend with him in

the future. In light of this, Kiriha contemplated how best to foist Koutarou on Elfaria again, but before she could come up with a plan, Elfaria called out to her.

“Kiriha-san, why don’t we play that next?”

Elfaria was pointing to a lustrous board accompanied by beautiful marble pieces. Kiriha could tell at a glance it was some kind of game, but it was unfamiliar to her.

“What is that?”

“It’s a classic game in Forthorthe... I guess you could say it’s similar to chess or shogi on Earth.”

“That... does sound interesting.”

Kiriha shelved her plotting for a moment and looked over the marble pieces. While their specific shapes and roles were foreign to her, they were indeed reminiscent of chess or shogi pieces. The board was even neatly divided into squares like it would be on a chess or shogi board.

“The rules themselves aren’t much different either, so I’m sure you’ll be able to pick them up in no time, Kiriha-san.”

With a smile, Elfaria handed Kiriha a small booklet—a rulebook already translated into Japanese.

“Let’s take a look.”

Kiriha opened the booklet and flipped through its pages. Though the exact details were different, the setup of the game, the management of turns, and the functions of the pieces were indeed very familiar to Kiriha. Just as Elfaria had predicted, she would be able to learn the game quickly.

“Why don’t we give it a try?”

“Sure. I think I can manage the rules.”

Since this might give her some insight into Forthorthian tactical thinking and culture, Kiriha had no real reason to refuse trying her hand at the game.

“Then why don’t we wager a little something like before and have the loser take care of Layous-sama?”

“Your Majesty...”

It appeared Elfaria’s goal was to score a win over Kiriha, perhaps as payback for earlier. Perhaps that was even why she’d brought out a game that was more familiar to her. Or least, that’s what Kiriha suspected.

“Heehee. It’s a family motto of ours to keep playing until you win.”

“Is that how the Mastir family has gone undefeated for two thousand years? I have to be honest, Your Majesty. I don’t accept defeat either.”

“I wouldn’t have it any other way!”

Nevertheless, Kiriha accepted Elfaria’s wager. Kiriha had already accomplished her goal, and if she happened to win this game too, she’d be able to further her victory. Since she’d already been contemplating a way to do exactly that, this seemed like the perfect opportunity.

Forthorthian chess was very similar to Earth chess and shogi. The front line of pieces on the board was composed of pawns that could only move forward, and behind them lay a variety of pieces that moved in special ways. The overall rules were similar to chess, including not being able to use captured pieces.

Of course, the game also had its own unique twists to it, the most eye-catching of which was its pieces. The Forthorthian equivalent of the king was the princess, and the queen was the Blue Knight. The rooks and bishops were also giants and fire dragons respectively. Indeed, the pieces were modeled using the legend of the Blue Knight as a motif.

“Oh my, how scary. You’re being so aggressive, Kiriha-san.”

“I don’t have a complete grasp of the strategy involved, so I can’t play defensively.”

“A person who knows that much is scarier than anyone who just knows the rules.”

Right out of the gate, Kiriha had taken the offensive. She methodically moved her line of pawns forward while craftily maneuvering her pieces in the back to attack.

But as Kiriha herself confessed, she still didn't have a firm grasp of the game's strategy. Even with all the pieces and how they moved memorized, effective combinations and other tactics eluded her. So, as a novice player, when the choice came down to attacking or defending, she chose the simpler option. If she ended up on the defensive with a lack of strategy or no strategy at all, she'd be cornered for sure.

"Well, then I'll just have to defend myself."

"Wouldn't you say that's the most entertaining aspect of the game?"

"That's true. A fierce battle is only inevitable, heehee."

While Kiriha took the offensive, Elfaria was defensively moving her pieces around the board. She carefully scooted her princess to the left and surrounded it with other pieces. Her plan was to secure herself as best she could before trying to reduce the attacking forces.

Her strategy and Kiriha's couldn't have been more opposite. And since captured pieces couldn't be reused like in shogi, strict decisions were required for life-or-death plays in the heat of the game. Like Elfaria had said, a fierce battle inevitably lay ahead of them.

"You're not making any mistakes, are you, Kiriha-san?"

"Whether I win or lose, I'd like this to end in the heat of battle."

"I agree. When one of us falls, let us fall forward."

The game slowly progressed from there in silence. Kiriha and Elfaria were both trying to size each other up and outwit one another. They both wanted to have as much of an advantage as possible when they inevitably clashed.

"It looks like the real fight is about to begin."

Their pieces were at last staring each other down. If Kiriha moved forward once more, the fierce battle would begin.

"Indeed. Here I come, Your Majesty."

Clack!

With a smile on her face, Kiriha daringly moved her Blue Knight forward. The

Blue Knight piece was the cornerstone of any bold attack in Forthorthian chess, able to move freely in a straight line vertically, horizontally, or diagonally.

Both Kiriha and Elfaria were in formation at this point, but after several turns of moving in response to one another, their formations weren't exactly ideal. They were each looking for weaknesses in the other's setup and trying to come up with ways to get to the enemy princess. From this point forward, a calm mind and a keen eye would be critical in order to seize victory. Fortunately, both players excelled in those departments.

Because pieces couldn't return to the board in Forthorthian chess like they did in shogi, the battle between players was decisive—and usually swift—once they clashed. Both players had to move carefully with a limited number of pieces, so Kiriha and Elfaria spent upwards of ten minutes considering, planning, and executing every turn.

“How terrifying. I foresee my ruin no matter which piece I move.”

“Ruin awaits me as well if my attack doesn't reach you, Your Majesty. I can hear the end slowly approaching.”

At this point, Elfaria was just barely evading Kiriha's attacks. Kiriha overwhelmed Elfaria when it came to strategic thinking, but she lost out sorely when it came to experience with Forthorthian chess. Elfaria would needle any and every opening, so Kiriha was forced to continue on the offensive without allowing any holes in her formation. Meanwhile, Elfaria was enduring Kiriha's fierce assault, biding her time while she waited for Kiriha to slip up. Because of the difference in their familiarity with the game, they'd adopted completely opposite strategies.

The first to make one wrong move would lose, and the pressure steadily mounted as the turns passed.

“By the way, Kiriha-san...”

With the clock ticking, Elfaria made her move. You see, as their battle dragged on, time was working against them—especially Elfaria, who'd chosen to play defensively.

“What is it, Your Majesty?”

“How did you first meet Layous-sama?”

“Well...”

But the move Elfaria made wasn't on the board; it was psychological. Kiriha was in the midst of considering her next turn and very much bewildered by Elfaria's sudden question. Nevertheless, she quickly smiled and gave her answer.

“Actually, I ran away from home as a child. My mother had just died and I couldn't see eye to eye with my father... So, after a fight over something trivial, I ran away.”

“And that's when you met Layous-sama?”

“Yes. I made it up to the surface world and he came falling out of the sky. As young as I was, I actually thought that my mother had returned...”

“What a lovely way to meet.”

“That's why I believe that he's the person I'm fated to be with.”

Really, Elfaria was just curious. It wasn't her intention to cajole or shake up Kiriha.

Let's see... How far had I thought this through again?

However, reminiscing was a very effective tactic against the sentimental Kiriha. Meeting Koutarou was her most precious memory—something she'd kept near and dear to her heart for over a decade now. The moment she thought of Koutarou and their fateful encounter, all tension vanished from her mind. And with no sense of urgency or pressure on her any longer, her strategy quickly crumbled. A disturbance like that in the middle of such a high-stakes game could prove fatal.

“What about you, Your Majesty?”

“Me? Well, in my case, I was researching Layous-sama for my archeology degree... And he suddenly showed up at an archeological site I was studying.”

“Weren't you surprised?”

“Well, of course. A legendary hero appeared in front of my very eyes.”

“But it didn’t end there, did it?”

“No. Back in those days, I was uncertain whether I wanted to become empress or live my own life, so I had a lot to think about...”

Elfaria’s miscalculation was that a trip down memory lane backfired. Her first meeting with Koutarou was very precious to her as well. And when she indulged in fond thoughts of it... Of course, her strategy was out the window too.

“Layous-sama was completely different from how I imagined him. He was just a normal boy. And I’m not going to lie... I was a little disappointed.”

“I fell in love with him *because* he was a normal boy. He was worried about all the same things I was, so I was sure we could support each other...”

“That’s exactly it. If he’d just been a legendary knight, I would have admired him... not loved him. But because he was just a normal human, I couldn’t help thinking he might need someone...”

Here, the tides of battle took a strange turn. Kiriha and Elfaria had started reminiscing about Koutarou as they played, but the more they talked... the less important the game became.

“But Koutarou sure is stubborn.”

“He certainly is! He never does anything wrong! He’s the Blue Knight through and through when it comes to the strangest things!”

“In my case, he chose saving me over saving his own mother.”

“Layous-sama has no idea how it makes a woman feel when you do something like that for them!”

Eventually, they were so caught up in their reminiscing that they’d put the game entirely on hold. Or perhaps it was more accurate to say they’d transitioned over to a game of complaining about Koutarou. They’d both casually move pieces on their turns whenever they remembered the board on the table, but it was nothing more than an idle way to pass the time now.

Ultimately, Elfaria won the game. Kiriha, with her incomplete grasp of the

game's strategy and her concentration scattered to the wind, fell apart in the end. As the loser, she was supposed to be the one who took care of Koutarou next... But that wasn't what ended up happening.

"...Are you two idiots?"

"I have no excuses."

"Hahaha..."

Kiriha and Elfaria were presently being tended to by Koutarou. They'd both come down with a fever courtesy of their late-night walk down memory lane. After staying up playing chess, they ended up chatting until morning. They then both took a chill after taking a bath—perhaps catching Koutarou's cold.

"Besides, what were you two even doing all night?"

"We were debating which one of us loves you more."

"That's right, Layous-sama. Kiriha-san is just so stubborn."

"You goofballs! Jeez, what am I going to do with you two...?"

And the one who got stuck caring for them was, of course, Koutarou. His own fever had broken and he was feeling better, but he was staying at the hotel today just in case. And since he had nothing better to do while everyone else was out playing, he figured he might as well return the favor and take care of his sick friends.

"Layous-sama, I'm hungry."

"Koutarou, can you cut some apple slices into rabbits for us?"

"...Are you two sure you're really sick?"

"Ahh, my headache's suddenly gotten worse..."

"I can feel my fever growing stronger. Could you wipe me down with a damp towel?"

"You're just faking it, aren't you?"

Despite both having a fever, Kiriha and Elfaria seemed to be having a lot of fun. The sight of them resting side by side in a double bed was rather heartwarming. They looked like children ready to be doted on by their parents.



“Ah, jeez, fine...”

“I love that side of you that does things even when you’re unwilling.”

“I agree. I can feel just how much you love me.”

“Hush up, you two. Don’t make a fuss when you’re stuck in bed.”

“Very well.”

“Okaaay.”

“Are you two really listening to me...?”

Koutarou shook his head in exasperation as he headed for the neighboring room. While he suspected that Kiriha and Elfaria might be feigning illness, he was still willing to peel a few apples for them. They’d kept watch over him all day yesterday, so fixing an apple or two was the least he could do in the way of thanks—sick or not.

“We should have just done this from the start, Kiriha-san...”

“Yes, but I don’t think we could have been as honest then as we are now...”

“Heehee, that’s true. We’re really similar, after all...”

“Both our personalities and our relationships with Koutarou...”

Kiriha and Elfaria exchanged glances and smiled as they whispered to one another while Koutarou was getting apples. In reality, they did genuinely have fevers... although they were also exaggerating the severity of said fevers a bit. They could have gotten up and done things for themselves if they’d wanted to—they just *didn’t* want to. It was far more fun to have Koutarou dote on them, after all.

Under the pretense of tending to Koutarou, a sense of solidarity had budded between Kiriha and Elfaria. And after a whole night of chatting, they each had a far greater understanding of how the other felt. Somewhere in the midst of it all, they’d settled on a compromise. Rather than being overly stubborn, they could both win if they just had Koutarou take care of them instead.

“You two seem to be having fun. Since when have you gotten along so well?”

Koutarou returned with apples and a knife in hand, both of which he’d

brought from Blue Knight.

“We’re both women, you know. There’s a lot we see eye to eye on.”

“And we’re both the brainy type.”

“I guess that much is true.”

With a slight smile, Koutarou sat down on a chair next to the bed to peel apples. There was no hesitation in the way he handled the knife, and he had the apples skinned in a flash. Knife skills were something he’d learned out of necessity in Ancient Forthorthe, and he retained them to this day.

“Here. All peeled. Sit up and eat, you two.”

“Feed us.”

“Honestly. Are you asking a sick empress to eat by herself?”

“What, exactly, did you want me to do?”

“Well, if you sit between me and Kiriha-san, you’ll be able to feed both of us.”

“You two are being a real pain...”

“You can just sleep with us after that.”

“Yes, that’s right! I’m feeling chilly, so I need someone to cuddle by my side!”

“If you two keep fooling around, you’re never going to get better.”

Koutarou climbed onto the bed and sat down between the two supposed invalids, holding up an apple slice on a toothpick for them. Kiriha and Elfaria leaned forward, happily taking a bite each. They really did look like young children.

“...”

“What’s wrong, Koutarou?”

“Were you smitten by my beautiful motherly looks?!”

“Eat up and go to sleep! You still have fevers!”

Unfortunately, Koutarou had honestly thought the two of them munching on their apple slices was adorable. Admitting that, however, would only bring a new series of headaches, so he chose to keep quiet as he continued to tend to

the sickly Kiriha and Elfaria.

Episode 2: Fledgling Days

Yurika's phone buzzed one day while she was absorbed in reading some shoujo manga she'd just bought. Needless to say, she promptly ignored her phone and continued reading. The message could wait. The heroine was busy losing her memory, and her career as a pianist was in danger.

"Yurika, shouldn't you take a look at that message?"

Theia pointed to the blinking screen on the old, cheap cellphone that Yurika used. She felt like Yurika should look into it.

"I will when I'm done with this volume."

Yurika continued munching on a rice cracker as she lazed about on the tatami mat, completely ignoring Theia's advice. It seemed like she really had no intention of checking her phone right now.

"But it looks like it's from the magical girls' secret base."

Theia could see the words "Blue Tower" on the flashing screen. Yurika happened to be a member of the Blue Magic Division of Rainbow Heart, and the Blue Tower was the headquarters of said division. If HQ was messaging Yurika, surely it was something important. What if it was a pressing mission or some other kind of emergency?

"It's okay. If it was really urgent, they would have messaged me, called me, and contacted me with magic all at once. So if it's just a message, then there's no hurry."

"Well, if you say so..."

Theia now understood that Yurika wasn't just irresponsibly ignoring an urgent message to read manga, but she still found the situation a little difficult to accept.

Isn't she slacking off a little too much just because the various problems surrounding the Magical Kingdom of Folsaria were resolved?

Technically speaking, Yurika was an archwizard of Rainbow Heart, making her one of their top field agents. Theia could easily imagine someone shedding bitter tears when she didn't respond to their message.

As it turned out, Yurika was right. The message wasn't particularly urgent, although it did come with a deadline attached. Said deadline was still a month out, however, so there was nothing wrong with Yurika continuing to enjoy her manga this afternoon.

“‘As Rainbow Heart is being reorganized, a portion of our safehouses...’
Koutarou, Koutarou! What's a safehouse?”

“Can you handle this one, Kiriha-san?”

“Simply put, it's like a hideout or a small secret base.”

“There you have it, Sanae.”

“Cool. Okay... ‘A portion of our safehouses will be shut down. Records indicate you're using House B77M7, which is scheduled for consolidation. We request that you immediately collect any personal belongings.’ That's what it says.”

Now that their battle with Darkness Rainbow was over with, Rainbow Heart had a different kind of fight ahead of them. They'd been fighting around Kisshouharukaze City up until now, but from here on out, they'd be battling the remnants of Darkness Rainbow that had taken refuge far and wide. Knowing the fight was changing, Rainbow Heart was strategically consolidating and relocating a large number of their safehouses, which apparently included one that Yurika had been using.

“A safehouse? I can't recall Yurika-sama ever using one...”

With a puzzled look on her face, Ruth set her tea down on the table. She had no recollection of Yurika using a safehouse. It felt like she was always hanging around room 106.

“It's been two years since we all arrived here, and she probably hasn't used it since then.”

“Long story short: it’s being closed down because she’s *not* using it.”

“Aha, so that’s it.”

Ruth had a better grasp of the situation with Kiriha and Koutarou’s insight. The safehouse was being consolidated due to lack of use. Yurika had essentially abandoned it for room 106, and safehouses weren’t exactly free to run. This was only the logical course of action.

“Man, what a pain... They could just keep it running instead of being so mean.”

Flop!

Yurika threw up her hands—manga and all—as she slumped over on the floor. It couldn’t be clearer that she wasn’t interested in moving a muscle.

“You’re being a nuisance to them, so clean up after yourself already! Unlike you, they’re not just playing around.”

“Hey! I’m not just playing around either!”

“All you do is eat, sleep, and play.”

Yurika’s official mission was to protect room 106, but with Darkness Rainbow out of the picture, that wasn’t exactly much of a job. Koutarou was unfortunately more or less correct in his assessment. Yurika knew that and didn’t want the conversation to proceed in that direction any further, so she quickly tried changing the subject.

“Aw, Satomi-san... You’re so nice that you’re gonna help me clean up, right?”

“Of course not.”

“Whaaat?! Do you hate me?!”

“I hate anything that’s a pain.”

“Isn’t that, like, a complete and utter rejection of Yurika’s very existence?”

“Your Highness! You can’t say things like that out loud...”

The procrastinating Yurika had few allies. Sanae was usually on her side, but even she didn’t delay when it came to things that might cause trouble for others. That meant Yurika’s only hope was Clan, who—alas—was not present

today. But just as Yurika was realizing she was on her own, a friendly voice piped up with an offer of aid.

“Say, Yurika... If you really don’t want to do it, do you want me to do it for you?”

“Would you?!”

Yurika’s savior was none other than her good friend Sanae, and Yurika was beaming at this unexpected turn of events. She would love nothing more than for Sanae to clean up the safehouse for her.

“Yeah. But in exchange, I get to take whatever I want. Especially fun stuff like gifts from people.”

“Deal!”

Yurika didn’t even hesitate to jump at the offer. She’d end up paying a steep price for the service, but she was more than willing to if it meant someone would clean up her mess without her having to lift a finger.

Of course, Koutarou wasn’t pleased with this arrangement.

“Sanae, don’t spoil her too much.”

Yurika’s future was bleak indeed if she started leaving her cleaning to other people. From an educational perspective, Koutarou couldn’t accept that as a valid solution.

“I’m not just doing this for her, though.”

“Hmm? What do you mean?”

“If it’s Yurika’s stuff I’m cleaning up, it’s mostly manga and instant noodles, right?”

“Yeah, probably.”

“So I’ll take what I want before giving the rest back to Yurika.”

“That’s pretty smart. I guess I should go help too.”

The wardrobe in room 106 was packed with Yurika’s stuff, and Sanae was right. The vast majority of it was manga, anime merchandise, and instant noodles. Assuming the safehouse would be the same way, Sanae was planning

on scoring a sweet deal for herself by offering to clean it up.

“U-Uh, no thanks! Actually, it’s probably best if I go clean up my own stuff anyway, right? Eh heh heh...”

Yurika had forgotten all about it, but Sanae was right on the mark. And, upon realizing what she stood to lose, Yurika quickly changed her tune about cleaning up. She wasn’t willing to relinquish her beloved manga and instant noodles.

Normally, instant noodles had a listed shelf life of about half a year. But because they were nonperishable, they actually lasted much longer than that. Moreover, the safehouse pantry had a special spell cast on it to keep food fresh. With that, instant noodles should easily last a decade or so... meaning Yurika’s cup noodles from three years ago were still edible to this day.

“Still, to think you amassed this much, Yurika-chan...”

“Ehehehe... I always made sure to stock up whenever there was a sale.”

Yurika had Nana help her clean as she stuffed armfuls of instant noodles into plastic bags—and there was still plenty more to go. They’d already filled up five plastic bags and they weren’t even halfway done yet.

“But was there any reason for you to buy stuff like this?”

“I feel uneasy if I don’t. You never know when you’ll be out on the street after all.”

“I can’t really imagine a homeless magical girl... But I guess that’s just like you, isn’t it?”

Nana wasn’t just at the safehouse to help Yurika clean. Yurika wasn’t the only one who’d used it, after all. She and Nana had both lived there together for a time. But even when she was living with Nana, Yurika had still been a mess.

“Now then... I guess I should get to cleaning up my own things as well.”

“You’re leaving me already?!”

“Heh, I’ll never get home if I don’t.”

Nana actually had more stashed at the safehouse than Yurika did; she’d lived

there for far longer, after all. Yurika had only stayed there for about a year, but it was Nana's residence for years and years, and she'd acquired a good deal of personal belongings in that time. Now that Yurika had her cleaning cut out for her, Nana thought it was time she moved on to her own.

Nana's cleanup was proceeding at a rapid pace. She was the kind of person who kept everything in order, so she didn't need to do any organizing as things stood. She could simply move things from one box to another as they were, so she was quickly catching up to Yurika even though she had far more stuff. At this rate, they'd probably finish up at the same time.

"...Oh?"

But Nana's swift cleaning came to a halt when her eyes landed on a pink muffler. It was something she considered far too cutesy to wear now, though it suited her youthful appearance perfectly.

"So this is where this was... I'm glad I didn't lose it."

Nostalgia took hold of Nana as she carefully picked up the muffler. It reminded her of a precious time in her life... The day she'd met a girl named Nijino Yurika and the strange days that followed.

Nijino Yurika was born with vast amounts of mana—so much so that it overflowed her body despite her complete lack of magical training. It was only slight as a child, but as she grew, so too did the mana she emitted. By the time she was in middle school, it had reached dangerous levels. It was enough that demons who lived in the darkness were willing to step out into the light for a chance to devour her and her delicious mana.

"Kyaaaaah! Wh-What is that?!"

The first demon to attack her was a beast that looked like an enlarged hound. Its mind was equally bestial, simple and quick to jump to conclusions. As such, it had underestimated the risks of attacking Yurika and come for her on pure urge and instinct—just before sundown at her middle school. It was completely ignoring the risk of being spotted. It convinced itself that it could do whatever it wanted about the risk as long as it could absorb Yurika's mana.

“Grrrrr...”

Clumsy Yurika ran for her life, but she only took a few strides before tripping and falling.

“Nooooo!”

She was as unathletic then as she was now, and thus didn’t have a prayer of escaping the hound’s claws. Her overflowing mana functioned as a sort of natural barrier, but it didn’t offer anywhere near the protection of a defensive spell. She was completely cornered.

“Aaahh! It’s going to eat me!”

Even Yurika could imagine what would happen if the hound attacked her with those claws. She saw it all the time in anime and manga: the screen would fade to black with a crimson splash across it.

“If I’d known this was gonna happen, I would’ve bought that manga yesterday!”

Yurika had but one regret. A new volume of her favorite manga series had come out just yesterday, but she was waiting on her allowance before picking it up. If she’d known today would be her last, however, she wouldn’t have hesitated to purchase it. She cursed her foolish lack of foresight.

“Oh yeah! I forgot about the chocolate I left in the cupboard, too! I wish I’d eaten that!”

“Grrrrr...”

Had the hound been able to understand human language, it would’ve been fed up with Yurika. She was screaming over such trivial things that it was hard to believe she was on the verge of being eaten alive.

“It almost sounds like I don’t even need to interfere... But surely that’s just what it *sounds* like.”

Or so the girl who was overhearing all this thought. Just as she was about to jump in, Yurika had started screaming about manga and chocolate. It stymied a lot of her motivation, but in the end, she was a serious girl who’d come here with a job to do.

“Yurika-chan, get back!”

“Wh-Who are you?!”

From out of nowhere, a lone girl leaped out in front of Yurika. Her small, delicate frame and childlike face—not to mention the pink outfit she was wearing—made her look younger than Yurika, but she was actually several years older. She was the very image of the kind of hero you’d see on TV.

“I’ll explain everything later! But for now, I have to deal with this thing! So stand back!”

“O-Okay!”

That was how Yurika and Nana met. Their friendship would greatly change both their fates, but neither of them had any way of knowing that the day they first met.

Nana’s mission at the time was to keep a handle on any magical incidents around Kisshouharukaze City. As the strongest member of Rainbow Heart, she was frequently drafted for missions that involved Darkness Rainbow, but this was different. Nana was put in charge of Yurika—reason being that she didn’t presently have a disciple to train.

Rainbow Heart was actively investigating people born with vast stores of mana, primarily because they were prime targets for demons and Darkness Rainbow. They made fine feasts and sacrificial pawns respectively. And the more mana a person had, the more likely they were to be targeted. Rainbow Heart had to keep a vigilant eye on things.

They’d learned the hard way to take special care of anyone who exceeded a certain level of mana. In most cases, all the target really needed was a spell cast on them to conceal their power. But in certain cases, there were extraordinary individuals who possessed too much mana to conceal over long periods of time. Yurika was one such example.

In cases like hers, she needed to be taught how to control her mana. Effectively, she needed basic magic training. It would be the only way to ensure she was protected.

“...?”

“I’m sorry. I’m really sorry. Let me explain it a little simpler, Yurika-chan... Right now, demons think you look delicious, so I came to teach you how to change that.”

“Oh, so that’s what you meant! I finally get it!”

“I feel like this is going to be harder than normal, and not for the usual reasons...”

Nana explained the circumstances as best she could. It was ordinarily difficult to get people to believe in magic, but Yurika hadn’t batted an eye in that regard. She already believed in magic because of anime and manga. Unfortunately, however, she was pretty much a lost cause when it came to understanding difficult concepts. And it was there that Nana was really struggling.

“So does that mean I can become a magical girl?!”

“It’s a dangerous job, so we won’t force you to do that. All we really need is for you to learn the basics of magic.”

“I’ll do it! I’ll become a magical girl!”

It was true that Rainbow Heart used basic magic training to vet potential new recruits, but their decision was based on more than just mana. They factored in age, stamina, and personality.

But this girl... I feel like she’s just not suited for it.

Considering the requirements, Nana thought Yurika wasn’t really cut out for the job. She had no stamina, her personality was timid and cowardly, and she was already in middle school—far too late to start serious training. Just having large amounts of mana wasn’t enough to become a magical girl of Rainbow Heart.

“Hmm... Here you go!”

Shhf...

While Nana was pondering Yurika’s aptitude, she felt something soft and warm being wrapped around her neck. It was the pink muffler that Yurika had

been wearing just before.

“Yurika-chan?”

“Heehee, it looks good on you.”

Nana hesitated for a moment. Even though she’d been lost in thought, she was surprised that Yurika had managed to seize the opportunity and get the scarf around her neck. If Yurika were an enemy and the muffler had been wire, for example, Nana could be dead right now.

“Oh, and thank you for saving me.”

Yurika smiled innocently, oblivious to the feat she’d just managed. Nana figured that Yurika simply meant to thank her and gave her the scarf out of consideration for her lightly-dressed appearance. That goodwill was probably how she’d managed to slip under Nana’s guard.

“...You really are a strange girl...”

There, Nana realized that while Yurika might not be suitable for frontline missions, her odd ability to lower others’ guard and her untapped kindness might make her a useful magician for other work.

“Now, why don’t we start with the basics?”

“I’ll do it, I’ll do it! I’ll definitely become a magical girl!”

Either way, Yurika needed to learn the basics. Nana would have a much better idea of what she was really suited for when her training was complete. It wasn’t yet time to be considering her future.

Basic magic training was necessary to learn how to control overflowing mana, meaning it would take some time to get to that. And that created a certain problem...

“Whaaat?! I can’t go home?!”

“I’m sorry, but other demons might follow you if you do.”

“Auuugh...”

Indeed, the problem was that Yurika wouldn’t be able to return home for

some time. If she didn't at least learn how to control her mana, her entire family was at risk of a demon attack or a visit from Darkness Rainbow.

And so Nana brought Yurika back to the safehouse she was using.

"That doesn't mean you can't go home at all. You can still visit from time to time."

"Really?!"

"Yes, I can disguise your mana temporarily."

"Only temporarily? I'm sure my family's going to be worried..."

"Don't worry about that. A magical girl from Rainbow Heart is going to take your place."

Of course, Yurika staying with Nana posed its own set of problems. If Yurika never came back, her family would raise a fuss. That's why a magician from Rainbow Heart would be dispatched to Yurika's home. She would disguise herself as Yurika and effectively take her place while Yurika underwent training.

"Isn't it hard to just become someone else?"

"It certainly is. But we're always looking for people with a lot of mana like you, so the agent will have plenty of experience."

With enough information and sufficient magic, there was virtually no risk of the agent being discovered. And even if they were, it could all be covered up with more magic. The job would actually be very simple for the magical girl assigned to the mission, as all she really needed to do was eat, sleep, read manga, and watch anime.

"Magic sure is convenient."

"It's the organizational power that's truly important. But... I think we're getting off track here. Anyways, I want you to live here for a while, Yurika-chan."

"Okaaay."

Yurika repeatedly nodded as she looked around the place in wonder. It was technically a safehouse, but it was also Nana's home. Effectively, it wasn't too

different from any of Yurika's other friends' houses.

"Huh... so this is what it's like..."

"What is?"

Nana turned to Yurika when she heard her disappointed voice. Nana was older, but she and Yurika were practically the same height, so they very literally saw eye to eye.

"I've always wondered what a magical girl's secret hideout would look like, but it's actually pretty normal."

Yurika had a lot of preconceived ideas about magical girls thanks to shoujo manga. She'd expected Nana's base to be full of magical furniture and other treasures. Even magical girls who pretended to be normal still had a couple of magical items lying around. But this safehouse was clearly different. Contrary to Yurika's hopes, it felt like any ordinary home.

"Are you disappointed?"

"Yeah. It's more normal than I thought."

"Heh, well, I'm living a normal life, after all."

"But why not use more magic?"

"Because that might bring the enemy here."

Nana normally didn't rely on magic. The more magic she used, the more likely Darkness Rainbow was to discover her hideout. A spell to conceal mana had been cast on the entire safehouse, but she still refrained from using magic when she didn't have to just to be on the safe side.

"Reality is harsh..."

"Indeed. Another important difference is that your identity will be exposed if they ever see your face."

"It will?!"

"Yes, even though that almost never happens in anime or manga."

Nana's safehouse was closer to something a military agent or an intelligence operative would use. Of course, that was the kind of organization that Rainbow

Heart was so that much was only obvious.

Yurika's first lesson began the day she arrived at the safehouse. Since she was constantly leaking mana, you could say that she was always using magic. And if she didn't learn to control and hold that, she would be targeted by demons and Darkness Rainbow. So Yurika had to learn how to control her mana as quickly as possible.

"Yurika-chan, hold this."

"An egg?"

"Yes. This is the first lesson that all magicians go through."

Nana reached out and placed an egg in Yurika's hand. It wasn't a demon egg or a magical egg or anything special. It was just a perfectly normal egg she'd bought at the supermarket.

"Are we going to boil it with magic or something?"

"Heh, no. Start off by focusing on the egg's shape and how it feels in your hands. Remember that."

"Okay..."

"After studying it for a time, put the egg away and try to recall it. It's a form of image training—imagine yourself still holding the egg."

"Is this going to let me use magic?"

"It's a preliminary step. In the end, you'll have to pour mana into what you imagine to give it shape and form, so imagination and concentration are very important to using magic."

It sounded like a joke at first, but the egg lesson was indeed the first step to becoming a magician. The goal was to recreate the egg by remembering the sensation of it in one's hands. By training her imagination in this fashion, Yurika would build an important foundation of focus, concentration, and recall. That would make it much easier, for example, to conjure fireballs from her imagination down the line.

"If you can do it right, you'll be able to do something like this," Nana said with

a smile as she held her right palm out to Yurika.

An egg suddenly appeared in Nana's outstretched hand. It looked and felt just like a normal egg. It was perfectly indistinguishable from one... except for the fact that Nana had created this one with magic.

"Whoa!"

Before Yurika's very eyes, the egg started to shine and disappear. With a slight waver like it had been a mirage all along, the egg vanished. Nana had effectively skipped steps in creating it for the sake of demonstration, so it couldn't last but for so long.

"Amazing! Do you think I can do that too?!"

"That depends on how hard you work."

"Then I'll do my best!"

In all honesty, Nana didn't think that Yurika would ever be able to freely use magic. She likely wouldn't even be able to create a fully formed egg with mana by the end of her training. At the time, Yurika was fourteen years old—meaning she was getting a *very* late start on her introduction to magic. Nana figured she'd be lucky just to get a handle on the fundamentals at this age.

"I'm going to give it a try too!"

Yurika returned the egg to Nana, looking full of motivation for once. Since this was the first step to becoming one of the magical girls she so admired, she was tackling it with unusual seriousness.

"Good luck, Yurika-chan."

"Appear, egg!"

Despite all her enthusiasm, Yurika's voice was a little shaky. She was, however, quite serious. She faithfully followed Nana's instructions and was desperately imagining an egg in her hands.

"Hnnnnngh!"

"Oh?"

For just a moment, a flicker of mana danced in Yurika's palm. Yurika—who'd

had no other magical training at this point—was unable to see it, but Nana certainly noticed it.

Could she actually have a real talent for this...?

Nana watched in awe as Yurika's mana slowly coalesced into the shape of an egg. It normally took considerable training for a fledgling magician to be able to do that much. Even Nana, the youngest magical girl in history to become an archwizard, had taken an entire month to reach that first benchmark... But here Yurika had done it right off the bat.

If that wasn't just a coincidence, she should be able to create an egg that can actually be seen by the naked eye... And if she can do that, then...

The biggest obstacles for magicians were common sense and presumptions. Magic was essentially the process of using one's will to forge mana into reality-altering phenomena, so thoughts like "magic doesn't exist" and "I could never do that" were inhibiting. That was one of the reasons magic got harder and harder to pick up with age.

But Yurika didn't have any problem with that. She really and truly believed in magic from the get-go. That, combined with her extraordinary supply of mana, coaxed the shape of an egg into being with virtually no training. In other words, Yurika's personality and natural magic were perfectly predisposed to the job of being a magical girl.

"Ahahaha. I guess I won't be able to do it right away."

"Er, that's right... It took me a lot of work to be able to do it too, so don't worry about it."

"I'll try a little more. Please give me the egg."

"Here you go."

Nana was astonished, but Yurika had an innocent smile on her face as she held her hand out and asked for the egg. Nana relinquished it, thinking to herself that fate must have been at work to bring them together. She was that taken aback.

Yurika's training was going well. Like Nana had predicted, Yurika's eggs had quickly become visible to the naked eye. After a week, she began perfecting the sensation and weight too. From there, they moved on to more magic-focused lessons, but Yurika's natural talents were still shining. One after another, she was absorbing magical skills like a sponge.

"Why don't we stop for dinner?"

"Oh, I can keep going."

"You probably can't tell, Yurika-chan, but you're starting to run out of mana. You won't improve any more if you keep going at this rate."

"Oh, I see. That's too bad."

To Yurika, practicing magic was no different from reading manga. It was like she was reading the expository chapters of a magical girl story. But as passionate as she was, not even her vast supply of mana could keep up with her. As such, Nana always concluded their lessons together around dinnertime.

And though Yurika's magical training was going well... the same couldn't be said for the rest of her time with Nana.

"Yurika-chan, what do you want to eat tonight?"

"Fried rice or deep-fried chicken, please!"

"It's unhealthy to eat like that all the time. It's important to find a balance."

"Ugh..."

"I won't add any vegetables you don't like, okay?"

"Then I think I'll be fine."

"Heehee... Could you thaw the frozen rice, Yurika-chan?"

"Okaaay!"

Since Nana was Yurika's magic teacher, Yurika listened to whatever she said. She gleefully ran over to the fridge, pulled out the frozen rice, and threw it in the microwave.

Hummm...

She pressed her face against the window and watched the rice defrost atop the spinning plate. Nana giggled at that humorous sight and got to work on dinner.

“Let’s see... Fried rice and deep-fried chicken...”

Nana was blessed with many talents, and her cooking skills were certainly on par. The way she used her knife to break down a chicken made her look like a professional chef. There was no hesitation in the way she chopped up bite-sized pieces of meat.

Hummm...

“The rice will take another three minutes.”

“Okay.”

Normally, preparing meals was a disciple’s job, but Nana had a very specific reason for tackling the task herself: Yurika was dangerous in the kitchen.

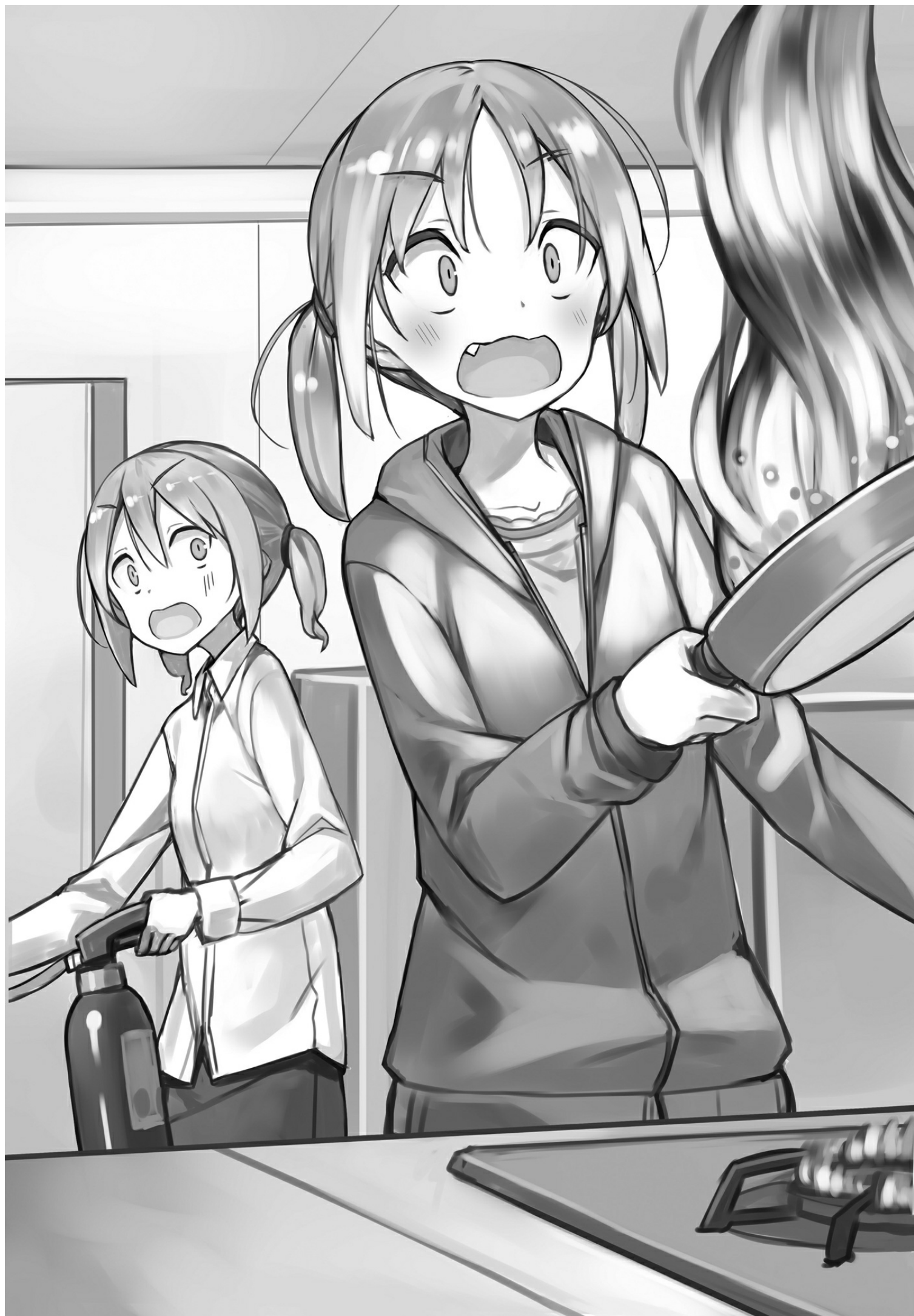
“Kyaaaaaah!”

“Yurika-chan?!”

Boom!

“Waaah! Oh no, oh no!”

“I’ll get the fire extinguisher!”



Nana had researched Yurika ahead of time and knew that she left chores at home to her other family members—but she didn't think that was because she was absolutely incapable of doing them. Indeed, she'd never expected a cooking pot to explode in her hands, or a washing machine to tumble over because it was stuffed so full. But after those experiences, Nana had decided to take on the chores at the safehouse herself. If she didn't, there was a chance it might be burned to the ground before Yurika learned anything about housekeeping. In fact, she was picking up magic faster than she was picking up chores.

Yurika-chan's talents seem rather lopsided...

Nana was a good person and saw Yurika's shortcomings with charity and generosity. Since she wasn't good at chores, there was no reason to force her to do them. Nana would take care of the brunt of the work, leaving only the simplest of tasks to Yurika.

Ping!

"The rice is done!"

"Then bring it over here, please. I'll start with the fried rice."

"Okaaay!"

"Yurika-chan, can you mix the egg in?"

"Okay!"

Unfortunately, Nana's kindness would later bring tragedy upon Yurika and those who lived with her. If only she'd taken the time to teach Yurika chores, she could have saved everyone a world of trouble down the line. Of course, she had no way of knowing that now.

Nana stared at the pink muffler she'd gotten from Yurika, fondly reminiscing about the past. They'd only lived together in the safehouse for about a year, but those days were chock-full of memories.

"I see... I guess I'm feeling a bit lonely..."

"Huh? What's wrong, Nana-san?"

Yurika, carrying a cardboard box filled with junk, happened to be passing by. Seeing Nana sitting still in her room, Yurika stopped with a perplexed look on her face.

“I found this while I was cleaning up. I was just thinking back on how much has happened since we first met.”

“Wow, how nostalgic. It’s already been three years, huh?”

When she spotted the muffler, a smile appeared on Yurika’s face. Now that she was in her second year of high school, three years was approximately one-sixth of her life; it felt like quite a long time to her. Yet the memories were still fresh in her mind. Those days were as precious to Yurika as they were to Nana.

“You haven’t changed since then, Nana-san.”

“I was almost an adult when we met, so of course I haven’t changed much since.”

“Oh, that’s true. I always forget because you don’t look much older than me, Nana-san.”

“Heh, yeah. You’re the one who’s grown since then—both mentally and physically.”

Nana looked over Yurika, who’d gotten much taller in the past three years. But that wasn’t the only way she’d grown. Nana could see it in Yurika’s eyes: a strength of will that hadn’t been there three years ago.

Yet Yurika-chan is the same as she ever was... She’s blessed with friends now...

That was what made Nana happiest. Even after all the fighting she’d been through over the last three years, Yurika was still Yurika. Life-or-death situations had a way of changing people. Exactly how was different from person to person, but it all came back to struggle. Some people hardened their hearts to prepare for future battles, and sometimes fighting simply broke people. Nana was the former, but it seemed neither applied to Yurika. No matter how many battles she went through, Yurika remained herself.

Nana was convinced that that was thanks to her friends, both the residents of room 106 and her other friends at school. No matter how fierce a battle might

be, she had loved ones to return to. Loved ones that would pull her back from the brink into a normal life. That was what kept Yurika grounded as she grew stronger. Or rather, as she became the kind of magical girl she'd always admired.

"That's true for you too, Nana-san."

"Oh?"

Yurika set down her cardboard box, ran over to Nana, and happily sat down next to her. She then poked at Nana's chest.

"Your body might be the same as before, but the aura you have about you is much softer."

"You think so?"

"Yes. I thought you were cool before, but I think you're more wonderful too."

"I've... changed too, have I?"

Nana had never really thought about that. She'd always assumed she was static, but hearing otherwise wasn't an unpleasant realization. In fact, she welcomed it. And if it was true, she had a good idea what the cause was. She reached out and squeezed Yurika's hands tight.

"Nana-san?"

"If I've changed, then I'm sure it's because of you, Yurika-chan. Thank you."

"B-But I haven't done anything... There was Satomi-san and the others, too..."

Yurika was often scolded and seldom praised, so she was more bashful than happy to be commended directly to her face like that.

"Maybe. But I spent the most time with you, so I think you've influenced me the most."

Nana had always thought Yurika wasn't suited to fighting. That she belonged in the bright light of day rather than under the cloak of a darker life. But it appeared the same was true for Nana. Without her knowledge, Yurika had dragged her out into the sun too.

"I-I know! You should just move into room 106 too!"

“But isn’t it cramped enough already?”

“Don’t worry. I was thinking of asking Clan-san or Theia-chan to make the wardrobe bigger anyway.”

The still-bashful Yurika was trying to change the subject, but she wasn’t lying when she said that she wanted to live together with Nana again. Nana had been denied her childhood, forced into magic training and missions rather than playtime and fun with friends. It had ultimately cost her dearly. She was now retired from her work as a magical girl, permanently handicapped after making the ultimate sacrifice on the job. Yurika and her friends had done what they could to help Nana live a normal life, and Yurika was sure that she’d be better off playing around with everyone now that she could. She’d always thought that, and this seemed like the perfect time to bring it up.

“Hmm, I suppose they might actually be able to do that.”

“Yeah! So let’s live together, Nana-san. I’m not as busy with work as I used to be, either.”

“Oh, what to do...?”

Nana inclined her head to the side, seriously considering the offer. Yurika’s proposal was definitely appealing. Nana knew all too well that she’d essentially missed out on her childhood. But looks aside, she was quite a bit older than Yurika and the others. She had serious reservations about whether or not she’d be able to fit in with them.

“You don’t *always* have to stay at room 106. I just want you to be close enough that you can show up whenever something fun is happening.”

“Yurika-chan...”

Before Nana knew it, Yurika was the one squeezing her hands—just the opposite of before. When she felt the warmth in those hands, Nana’s heart began to waver. Living together, always being near, was a very appealing idea to Nana, who’d spent most of her life on her own.

Ah...

And the moment she hesitated, something pushed her forward. It was

something she spotted when she looked down at her and Yurika's hands: the muffler she'd been given three years ago. When she spied it, Nana closed her eyes and exhaled. With a slightly embarrassed expression, she then said to Yurika...

"Okay. Let's be together."

"Really?! All riiight!"

Unlike the hesitant Nana, Yurika was rejoicing like a child on Christmas morning. Yurika loved living with Koutarou and the others, but Nana had always been her best friend. They shared so many good memories, and Yurika would never forget the sacrifice Nana had made for her sake. They would always *be* best friends.

"Say, Yurika-chan... There's something I want to ask you."

Yurika was riding the high of a lifetime, and Nana took the opportunity to talk to her about something that had always been on her mind.

"First, we'll get matching pajamas and— Huh? What is it?"

Yurika's mind was racing with thoughts of her future life together with Nana, and she looked to her with a giant smile on her face.

"Why did you give me this muffler three years ago?"

"Um, that's..."

Yurika shoved her thoughts of the future to the side for a moment as she reached into her memories of the past. Fortunately, that day had left enough of an impression on her that she remembered it clearly.

"It was because I thought a little girl was trying really hard and doing her best, even if she was underdressed."

"Even though I was older than you?"

"I didn't know that at the time! You were so cute that I thought you were just a little girl acting all mature and stuff!"

"A little girl just acting mature... Heh, hahaha!"

Nana couldn't help giggling. She thought Yurika was right on the mark. Upon

joining Rainbow Heart, Nana was forced to become an adult at a very early age. It was only through Yurika that she had any semblance of childhood fun, and she was sure that would continue to be the case in the future. The very thought made Nana's heart dance with joy.

"Anyways, once we're done cleaning up, let's go shopping, Nana-san!"

"Oh? And what will we be shopping for?"

"Matching pajamas, of course! You gotta start with looks!"

"This is starting to sound a bit arduous..."

"Of course! A girl's path in life isn't easy!"

"Heh... I feel like I've only started to come to understand that recently."

Yurika wasn't the only fledgling three years ago. Nana too was still just a chick. It'd been three years since, but not much had changed in that regard. They were certainly both growing, but their feathers were still yellow. It would be some time yet before they were fully fledged.

Episode 3: A Nostalgic Place

It was a lovely morning in Kisshouharukaze City. As Koutarou and Shizuka were out behind Corona House coaching Ruth and Clan, Kiriha and Maki exited room 106. They looked as cute as always, but they were clearly dressed up to go out. Noticing this, Shizuka called out to them.

“Oh, and where are you two going?”

They weren’t dressed formally, but they certainly weren’t in their everyday wear. They’d both found a great median, neither too overstated nor too plain. Shizuka’s female intuition told her they were dressed to go out somewhere special.

“We are going out, but we’re not going out together,” Kiriha answered with a smile.

“We just happened to be leaving at the same time, but we have different business to attend,” Maki replied in kind.

Today was Sunday, and both girls had been invited out by their circle of friends. They ran in different circles, however; they’d simply bumped into each other on the way out for the day.

“Well, goodbye for now.”

“See you later, everyone.”

With their respective rendezvous coming up, both girls were pressed for time and took their leave without dallying. Neither Kiriha nor Maki were the type to be late.

“Later.”

“Bye-bye!”

“See you.”

“Have fun.”

Koutarou, Shizuka, Clan, and Ruth momentarily paused their training to wave goodbye. As they stepped out onto the street, Kiriha and Maki turned to wave back before going their separate ways. Kiriha turned right and Maki turned left.

“By the way, Landlord-san...”

“Hmm?”

“How did you know they were going out?”

“Oh, Satomi-kun... You’ve been with us for so long, I think it’s high time we work on that with you.”

“Easier said than done, Landlord-san...”

“Honestly. Isn’t it cruel to expect that much from Veltlion?”

“I rather think this part of him is cute...”

“Nuh-uh! Park your keister right here, Satomi-kun!”

“Okay...”

“We’ll start with the very basics! First off, small changes in hairstyle mean—”

Once Kiriha and Maki were out of sight, the Corona House crew got back to their training... albeit a very different kind of training now.

Today, Kiriha had gone out with classmates. Since she played the part of the sociable transfer student at school, her peers made sure to include her in all of their group activities. Her classmates—both girls and boys alike—also frequently came to her for advice, and she had a reputation for giving clear, sage guidance. Partially as thanks for that, and partially because of it, everyone was always very welcoming of her on their outings.

“So you see, Kurano-san, that wasn’t really what I meant. It just looked like that to everyone else.”

“The question is whether or not you can talk to your crush without your childhood friend present. If you can’t even talk, a relationship would never work either way. Moreover, your relationship might seem like a slight to your childhood friend.”

“...So I need to choose who I really need?”

“Yes. I think you’ll find that you care about your childhood friend just as much.”

“Yeah, okay. I’ll think it over. Thank you, Kurano-san!”

Fortunately, Kiriha was able to put the heart of the girl asking for advice today at ease in no time. Seeing her smile, Kiriha let out a sigh of relief before smiling back. She’d carried her own love for over ten years, so she was especially sympathetic when it came to other people’s feelings.

“Oh yeah! What about you, Kurano-san?”

“What about me?”

“Don’t be coy. I’m talking about boyfriends. I bet you have one or two!”

“I don’t.”

“No way! Really? Then what about Blue Knight-sama?”

“You mean Satomi-kun?”

“Yeah, him. You’re always looking at him.”

“It’s a shame he’s not looking at me.”

“Ahaha, I guess not even Kurano-san’s above unrequited love!”

Kiriha had originally come to Harukaze High on a mission. She was already well beyond a high school education and certainly more mentally and socially mature than even most university students. But right now, she couldn’t be happier to be a high school student. Not only was she able to learn about the lives of surface dwellers, she was actually making friends with them. She was getting to learn and experience all kinds of things for the first time—things she never would have cooped up underground.

Today, Maki was out with people she’d gotten to know through the cosclub. Normally the cosplay society went out with a couple of people from other clubs, including the fashion and manga societies they’d gotten to know through mutual club activities. And today was similarly being considered a club activity:

costume research. By observing the professionally costumed characters at the amusement park, they might learn something about how to better bring their own costumes to life. Or so they said. It was really just an excuse to come to the amusement park, and they veered away from their alleged goal almost as soon as they arrived.

“I see... So they concentrated all the flaws of a 2D-costume made 3D and hid them behind the shield. As long as that shield stays up, no one will ever see them...”

“Maki-chan, you’re so serious!”

“But we came all this way—”

“Yeah, we came all this way, so let’s play! Come on!”

Since she’d been invited for a research outing, Maki was trying to do some research in earnest. But the other girls, who’d long forgotten their objective, were fully ready to have some fun. Maki looked troubled for a moment but soon broke out into a smile as well. As of late, she’d gradually been learning how to youthfully throw her cares to the wind, which softened the icy air she once had around her and warmed up her relationships with others.

“Now that that’s settled, let me ask you something, Maki-chan... Are you going out with Satomi-kun? The boys in my class keep bugging me to ask you.”

“No, we’re not going out.”

“It sure doesn’t look that way.”

“Really?”

“You two act like you’ve been dating forever, or like you’re childhood friends or something. It’s almost like you can understand what the other is thinking without saying anything... you know?”

“But honestly, we really did just meet last year and we’re really not going out.”

“Then would you consider going out with another boy if he asked you?”

“That’s...”

“So you *do* love Satomi-kun?”

“Um... yes.”

Maki’s cuteness and her earnestness played off of each other well, giving her a special sort of charm. Thanks to that, she was secretly quite popular with the boys—but only secretly, as the boys found it quite hard to talk to her for some reason. Lately, however, her change in attitude had made her more approachable, and as such, Maki’s popularity was skyrocketing. The boys were more interested in her than ever, and the girls found it easier to invite her out than before. Maki, of course, was unaware of all this, but she knew deep down in her heart that she was changing for the better.

Kiriha and Maki had been invited out by different circles of friends today, so bumping into one another came as quite a pleasant surprise.

“Oh, Kiriha-san?”

“Hello, Maki. Fancy meeting you here.”

Despite parting ways earlier, Maki and Kiriha ran into each other again at the amusement park. It was an unplanned, serendipitous reunion. They were out with different groups of friends, but just so happened to be at the same place. While there weren’t all that many places for teenagers to gather and have fun in Kisshouharukaze City, it was still a remarkable coincidence.

“What’s the matter, Kurano-san? Are you... Oh, if it isn’t Aika-san,” one of Kiriha’s friends called out.

“Hello there,” Maki said with a small wave.

“Maki-chan, do you know these people?” one of her cosplay society clubmates asked.

“These are my classmates,” she replied.

“Well, what a coincidence... Since we’re all here, why don’t we go around the park together? I bet it’ll be more fun that way!” the cosclub member suggested.

And so the two circles of friends merged into one large group. Honoring the old adage “the more the merrier,” they all decided it would be more fun to walk

the park together.

“Things are getting interesting, don’t you think?” Maki asked Kiriha as they walked along.

“Indeed. I never expected this when we left the house this morning,” Kiriha replied.

“Heh, me neither. But it seems like fun.”

“I agree. So why don’t we enjoy ourselves?”

Maki and Kiriha had no objections to combining groups, of course. They both knew it was a rare coincidence that would make for a fun day.



A new *Kabutonga* series was produced last year for the first time in a decade. It received high praise upon its debut and a sequel had already been announced. The theme park was taking full advantage of the hype and had staged a special exhibition as a promotion, and it was here that Maki tagged along with Kiriha for some shopping.

“I didn’t think you’d be interested in this kind of stuff, Kiriha-san.”

“I was a child once too. And when I look at such things, I recall those days with great fondness... It’s quite nostalgic.”

To everyone’s surprise, it was Kiriha that had insisted they drop by the *Kabutonga* exhibit. Maki in particular—knowing how mature Kiriha was—was especially surprised to see how invested she was in it.

“But you’re a girl... I can’t really imagine you being so interested in an anime aimed at boys.”

“I can’t blame you. But if it were just about the anime, I wouldn’t have been so invested in it for ten years.”

There, Kiriha smiled and pulled an old trading card from her bosom. It was a commemorative *Kabutonga* card that had lost all of its foil sheen over the years. The face of it was also scribbled on with magic marker. Kiriha herself had written her name on it ten years ago... No, eleven years now.

“Whenever something serious happens, I always see you staring at that card.”

“Indeed. This is proof that I’ve held on to my feelings for ten years, so whenever I look at it, I can feel courage well up from within. You could say... it’s something like a good luck charm.”

“Would you tell me more about it?”

Maki was interested in Kiriha’s good luck charm. She always saw her staring at it pensively before major battles and similarly serious events, and she was curious to know what could give Kiriha such courage.

“Hmm... Only if you promise to share with me something of equal value.”

Of course, the story of that card was special to Kiriha. She wouldn’t share it with just anyone, so Maki would have to repay her in kind. Really, Kiriha knew

that Maki had a similar story to tell, which was why she proposed the exchange.

“I will. I promise,” Maki agreed with a nod and a smile.

It wasn't her intention to get Kiriha to divulge her secrets for free. She was willing to buy her lunch if that's what it took, or even something else. Sharing special memories of her own seemed like a paltry price.

There was only one problem with the two circles of friends joining up for the day, and said problem presented itself at lunchtime. With over a dozen people, they couldn't all get a table together in any of the restaurants. So for practical reasons, they decided to temporarily split up to eat. That way, everyone could get what they wanted and they wouldn't have to worry about finding tables for larger groups. They all agreed on a time and place to regroup, then set out in twos and threes to find their meals. It was an ideal solution for the situation.

“Now then, where should I start...?”

“What kind of kid were you, Kiriha-san?”

Taking advantage of their lunch break, Kiriha and Maki took a seat on the sunny lawn, crepes and milkshakes in hand. They had over an hour before they were scheduled to reconvene with the group, and the warm afternoon sun shining down on them made the perfect atmosphere for their chat.

“I was a very active child.”

“That's really hard to imagine.”

“That's what everyone says... I was a bit boyish. I even kept my hair short to keep it from getting in my way.”

“So you were a regular tomboy?”

“That's why I had an interest in *Kabutonga* too.”

“Ahaha, I get it now.”

As promised, Kiriha started telling Maki about when she was a child, which was the start of the story of her fixation on Kabutonga and the origin of her good luck charm.

“But my boyishness might have been for the worse. When I lost my mother, I got into a fight with my father over something serious and ran away from home—all the way up to the surface.”

“I suppose if you’d been more ladylike, that never would’ve happened, huh?”

“Certainly not, but that was the start of everything. I ended up meeting him because of my boyishness... and that’s where this card came from.”

Kiriha pulled her card out again and gazed upon it fondly, nostalgia and deep love cohabitating in her eyes. Maki could feel the strong emotion coming from Kiriha, making even her own heart throb.

“Before she passed away, my mother told me that she would become a blue star and watch over me when she left this world. So when I saw a blue shooting star that night, I was convinced it was my mother coming back to earth.”

“A blue shooting star...? Ten years ago? You mean...”

Maki was already picking up on key elements of Kiriha’s story. Maya had told her about the night a blue shooting star streaked across the sky and about the boy who wielded a sword that could dispel mana. And not too long ago, Clan had told her that she and Koutarou had made a brief stop ten years in the past on their way back to the present. Maki was smart enough to connect the dots from there.

“So you met Satomi-kun chasing after that blue star?”

Ten years ago, Koutarou had returned to Earth on the Cradle. Before freezing time on the ship for the last jaunt to the present, he ended up meeting a young Kiriha.

“Indeed. Back then I was a real tomboy and only caused trouble for Onii-chan...”

“Knowing Satomi-kun, there’s no way he would’ve left you be, Kiriha-san.”

“Yes, though it’s embarrassing to think about it now.”

There, Kiriha blushed. But not out of shame. Though the foil sheen on her card had long faded, her feelings never would.

“Onii-chan made me promise to go back to my father after seeing the

Kabutonga movie.”

“I think I see where this is going.”

Maki smiled. After hearing Kiriha’s story, Maki had a much better understanding of why she treasured Kabutonga and the card she carried. Maki knew she’d feel much the same way in her position.

“We came to this park, saw the movie, got this card... We rode all of the rides at the time... except that one.”

“The rollercoaster?”

“I wasn’t tall enough at the time, and it was oh-so frustrating.”

“Heehee... How heartwarming.”

“I was just a child back then.”

Kiriha had been telling her story with a smile so far, but here her expression clouded over and her voice got low.

“But on the way back home, I was attacked by the underground’s radical faction.”

“Ah...”

This sounded familiar to Maki too. Ten years ago, Maya initiated contact with the underground. She essentially acted as a covert operative for the radical faction, and if they made a move, there was a high chance that Maya had been involved. But Kiriha had specifically avoided mentioning her name. She had no wish to inflict guilt on Maki; the emphasis here was on something much more important.

“Because of that, he was faced with a grave dilemma. It was the same day he would lose his mother, you see, so he was forced to choose.”

“That’s...”

Koutarou knew exactly when and where his mother would meet her mortal end. But young Kii’s life was simultaneously in danger, and he couldn’t be in two places at once. That meant he had to choose between letting a little girl or his own mother die.

“...In the end he came for me, claiming it was the right choice.”

“That’s... just like him.”

“And because of that, he was unable to save his mother. He had to lose her all over again.”

Kiriha cast her eyes downward. That day was the most powerless she’d ever felt in her entire life. It was her greatest regret.

So that’s what happened...

Kiriha wasn’t actually shedding any tears, but Maki felt like she was crying on the inside.

“Seeing him wailing... It was that day I swore to myself that I’d grow stronger. Strong enough to protect him.”

“And that’s when you fell in love...”

“I think I fell in love before then, but it was then that I decided I needed him and he needed me. That we needed each other.”

“So you came to love him as a woman.”

“It wasn’t that clear of a feeling. I was just desperate to save him and make him happy.”

There, a smile returned to Kiriha’s face. Her feelings from back then had supported her for over a decade, and they continued to do so now. Her smile revealed that deep, trusting love.

“Because I was a child, I stupidly believed that our meeting was fate. And that something wonderful would happen as long as I didn’t give up and continued to feel for him.”

“...It’s a good thing you didn’t give up, then.”

“To be honest, when I came back to the surface again ten years later, I had almost given up. For better or worse, I had grown up.”

“But you could never completely give up, could you?”

If she had been in Kiriha’s position, Maki knew she probably wouldn’t have been able to give up either. And she was sure Kiriha never would. It was love for

the same boy that sustained them both, after all.

“That’s right. I loved him for ten years, those feelings firmly engraved in my heart. I could logically understand that he was probably living a happy life already, but my heart couldn’t accept it. That’s why I had to confirm it for myself.”

Ten years was a long time, and people changed. Kiriha certainly had. So she resigned herself to being satisfied as long as her first love was safe and happy. She didn’t need him to accept her.

“Fortunately, we were able to reunite... and now I can stay by his side. There’s nothing more wonderful.”

Kiriha held her hands against her voluptuous chest with a truly happy smile on her face. Now that everything had been resolved underground, she was free to pursue her love to her heart’s content. She could love Koutarou in earnest, just as she’d done ever since she was a child.

“I think I understand the significance of that card to you now. It’s something like a reminder of your love, isn’t it?”

“Yes, I think so.”

“Heehee, then I wish you and Satomi-kun the best. I hope you’re both happy.”

“That’s the plan. And I’m willing to do what it takes to get there.”

“I get that. I feel the same way.”

Maki smiled back at Kiriha, carrying a similar love in her heart. She was as hopeful and determined about the future as Kiriha was.

“Now then, it’s your turn, Maki.”

“But my story isn’t as grand as yours, Kiriha-san...”

“It’s not a matter of how grand it is. It’s about the feelings that came out of it.”

“Okay... It’s a little embarrassing, but...”

It was now Maki’s turn to tell the story of a girl who longed for love but was only treated to isolation and distrust. The sad story of a girl who could only find

a way to live by hurting others. The humble story of how the evil magical girl Dark Navy became the girl known as Aika Maki.

Maki had initially believed Koutarou to be a formidable enemy, both in terms of strength and strategy. But, really, it was all a misunderstanding.

“As you know... I thought that Satomi-kun was a mastermind who’d given Yurika a cover story as a cosplayer.”

Just admitting that was embarrassing now. Maki munched away on her crepe with red cheeks in an attempt to hide it.

“Of course. Magical girls always try to hide their identity, so it was perfectly reasonable to think so.”

“I never could have imagined that she was being treated as a cosplayer because of a misunderstanding. And Satomi-kun was so strong when we fought that I couldn’t help thinking he was powerful.”

Out of kindness, Kiriha didn’t tease Maki for her previous misapprehensions. She simply smiled and listened as Maki told her story.

Maki took a sip of milkshake to collect herself before continuing.

“That’s why all I could think about at first was how to defeat him. I still considered him a formidable foe and mistook whatever he did as part of some grand plan... I only ended up confounding myself that way. I feel rather stupid looking back on it.”

Maki smiled as well, but her smile was far more self-deprecating. She’d wasted so much time fighting an imaginary foe. Even Koutarou had realized Maki wasn’t an enemy before she came to see the truth.

“So what was it that reconciled the misunderstanding? Considering the situation you were in, it must have been something rather serious.”

The more she confounded herself, the more serious things seemed... and the more certain Maki became that Koutarou was a terrible enemy. With things at a head, Kiriha was right. It would have taken something very serious indeed to turn it all around.

“Heh, you see right through me, Kiriha-san... You’re exactly right. It was the night I was attacked by a rampaging demon and nearly died. It was then I finally realized what kind of person Satomi-kun truly is.”

She could remember it clearly even now. As she lay dying, she had a dream of a small boy. It was a young Koutarou, covered in his late mother’s blood. At the same time, Koutarou dreamed of a young Maki all alone, freezing and starving to death. And when they saw visions of each other like this, they’d both reached out to try to help one another.

“It was like a sudden reversal. He was always on my mind after that. My eyes were always chasing after him. How could I get him to like me? How could I protect him? Such thoughts were constantly racing through my mind. But because I was a member of Darkness Rainbow, I desperately made excuses and kept myself in check... And looking back on it, even that’s embarrassing.”

Maki began to place her trust in Koutarou after that night on the mountain, and that was no mean feat. It was the first time she’d ever trusted someone since becoming a magical girl. That led to her harboring special feelings for him, feelings any normal girl might have. She wanted Koutarou to like her. She wanted to protect him. Maki continued to deny those feelings in the name of Darkness Rainbow... though she wasn’t fooling anyone.

“So you understood that he wasn’t an enemy, but you couldn’t admit that you loved him... Changing your way of life is hard, after all.”

“It would take some time yet before I accepted that. Stepping out into the sun slowly warmed my heart, but it wasn’t enough for me to leave Darkness Rainbow...”

Playing at the normal life of a high school girl changed Maki. Never trusting anyone before then, she’d always seen the world cynically. But as she got closer to Koutarou—even under the pretense of a mission—her worldview began to change. She learned to love, and that helped her see the world in a rosier light. Yet even so, she didn’t walk away from Darkness Rainbow. She couldn’t. She knew no other way to live.

“But one day, a major incident happened that forced my hand.”

“What was that?”

“Satomi-kun and I, as well as other friends from our class, came here to play the day Darkness Rainbow attacked room 106.”

“Ah, yes, I remember...”

Kiriha knew exactly what day Maki was talking about. Darkness Rainbow had attacked the apartment while Koutarou and Maki were out. They could talk about it with nostalgia now, but it was a deadly serious encounter at the time. Kiriha would never forget it.

“That day, my job was to keep Satomi-kun busy. Since—strictly speaking—he wasn’t cooperating with Yurika, Darkness Rainbow thought that it would be better to keep him out of things.”

“And what did you think?”

“No matter how strong he is, battle just doesn’t suit him. I also thought it would be best to keep him out of the fighting. Moreover... because I was weak, I was scared to go back to being all alone.”

Maki’s expression clouded over somewhat. She hadn’t held Koutarou back to protect him; she’d simply feared that the magical connection between them might be severed. Even if their bond was just an illusory byproduct of magic, she dreaded the thought of losing it. She dreaded the idea of being alone again.

“But Satomi-kun showed me that I didn’t have to be alone. That if I thought of my classmates as friends, I could do the same for him.”

“Is that why you let him go?”

Kiriha knew how the rest of the story went. Koutarou had shown up together with Maki that day, and in the end, Maki decided to trust him and take his side.

“Yes. His words that day transformed me from Dark Navy into Aika Maki. I might still possess strange magical powers, but I’m just a normal high school girl these days...”

Before she’d realized it, Maki had come to like her classmates and enjoy their company—all without a magical bond. That meant that she should also be able to love Koutarou, even without magic. Things might be different, but her friends gave her the courage to believe that it would be okay... the courage to change

her life. And so she quit being Dark Navy to live as Aika Maki.

“Right now... I can treasure this world and the people who live here. They’re far from perfect, but that’s why they’re so precious. Because people need to come together to support each other,” said Maki.

“For you to think that way, you need to be able to love yourself,” Kiriha pointed out with a smile.

Maki had a tendency to be hard on herself, but if what she was saying was true, it also meant she had to be kind to herself. She had others that were counting on her now, after all.

“Kiriha-san...”

Maki’s eyes widened at Kiriha’s words. But she quickly pulled herself together and smiled. Like Kiriha’s, her smile was sweet and gentle.

“...It’s hard, but I would like to be able to feel that way someday. If not, I’ll only be clinging on to someone else...”

Suddenly turning one’s life around was indeed difficult. Beliefs ingrained in the heart and soul aren’t changed so easily. But if that’s what it took to truly live as Aika Maki, no matter how arduous the road to get there might be, Maki would stay the course.

After hearing Maki’s story, Kiriha gave a satisfied nod as her lips curled into a somewhat mischievous grin.

“I think it’d be hard for you *not* to fall in love with Koutarou after that, teehee. But now I finally understand your devotion.”

“Satomi-kun turned my small world into something much bigger. That’s why I’ll...”

That was the reason why Maki appeared so overly dedicated to him. He’d opened up her tiny world and changed her life for the better. Koutarou was no longer her only connection, but he was still an important one that she never wanted to lose. That was why she was prepared to sacrifice herself for him should the need ever arise.

“But the same goes for Koutarou.”

“Yes. I understand that now too.”

As she was now, Maki knew that her way of thinking was still wrong. She would eventually come to accept that she had to treasure herself as well if she truly wanted to love someone. She wanted to help expand his world too.

“However... I can understand how you feel. I would think the same if I’d been through what you have.”

Kiriha narrowed her gaze, prompting Maki to look down with a slight blush. She couldn’t look Kiriha directly in the eye when she saw through her like this.

“M-Me too... If I’d grown up like you had, I would treasure that card too.”

Maki similarly understood Kiriha’s position—another reason for her bashfulness. She felt Kiriha’s love almost as if it were her own.

“It seems we’ve undergone similar experiences, really.”

Kiriha happily looked over at Maki. Hearing a former dark magical girl talk like this, she was certain things had happened exactly as they should have. And in that sense, she enjoyed seeing Maki so nervous and uncomfortable.

“Indeed, they just appear dissimilar on the surface...”

“In the end, we’re not so different.”

Ultimately, the girls came to the conclusion that Koutarou had changed both of their lives. Kiriha had grown up a little, her relationship with her father improved, and she eventually worked her way to the surface again. Maki had escaped her closed-off world and come to live as a normal girl. Thanks to meeting Koutarou, they both began to see the world in a more positive light.

“Hey, Kiriha-san!”

“Maki-chan! Everyone’s already gathered!”

Two voices suddenly came from a distance, and Kiriha and Maki waved in acknowledgment. They concluded their chat there, prepared to head back to their other friends.

“Let’s go,” said Maki.

“Indeed. That was the conclusion we reached, wasn’t it?” replied Kiriha.

“Heehee, yes, it was.”

Returning to their friends was yet another way of affirming their new lives. This was what they’d chosen for themselves, after all. So when their friends came calling, they happily ran over to them.

Kiriha and Maki didn’t return to room 106 until that night. They’d played with their friends up until the sun went down, and they were going home fully satisfied and exhausted from such a fun day. They were still basking in all the wonderful memories they’d made, their smiles as bright as could be when they walked in the door. Koutarou, however, was looking rather dour.

“What have you been up to, Satomi Koutarou?”

“And why are you looking to the left like that, Satomi-kun?”

“Oh, I just hurt my neck during some martial arts practice.”

“But you had everyone help heal it, right?”

“Yeah, it’s only as bad as a sprain now.”

“Ah, I see.”

Koutarou had hurt his neck during the martial arts training that morning. He’d taken one of Shizuka’s attacks the wrong way during a sparring match, and this was the price. The girls had immediately come together to help heal him, but it still hurt badly enough that he couldn’t comfortably look straight forward. Seeing him in this condition, Kiriha came up with a mischievous plot.

“Maki, why don’t you sit down over there?” Kiriha said, pointing to Koutarou’s left side. He was presently seated at the tea table, and the cushion to his left was vacant.

“Okay...”

Maki wasn’t sure what Kiriha was up to, but she had no reason to refuse and took the cushion for herself. The moment she sat down, however, she understood why Kiriha had urged her to do so.

“Um, Satomi-kun, it’s embarrassing to have you stare at me like that...”

“I’m sorry, Aika-san, but it hurts to look forward right now.”

Sitting at Koutarou’s left side with his head turned like this meant they were practically sitting face to face. Maki could have looked away, but it wouldn’t change the fact that Koutarou was looking right at her. After her trip down memory lane with Kiriha today, she was even more conscious of him than usual. Her heart was practically racing, and Koutarou’s started pounding too when he saw Maki blush. Just sitting still was hard.

“That’s no fair. You’ve never given me such a passionate look, Satomi Koutarou,” Kiriha said teasingly. Things had gone just as she’d planned, so she was in a rather good mood.

“You’re the one who made Aika-san sit here in the first place!”

“If you don’t like it, Maki, you can always move.”

“I-It’s not like I don’t like it... I just can’t keep calm.”

“Then there’s no problem, is there?”

“Jeez, Kiriha-san...”

The troubled Maki knitted her brows while Kiriha sat across from her pouring tea like nothing was amiss. She was in high spirits, making her profile even more charming than usual. Her gleeful expression was from more than just teasing them; she was in love. Really, she felt like she’d fallen in love with Koutarou all over again after hearing Maki’s story. But alas, Koutarou couldn’t see Kiriha’s lovely face right now since he was turned the other way.

“Say, Aika-san, Kiriha-san... did something happen on the way home?”

Koutarou, however, did seem to notice that the atmosphere between the two girls was slightly different from usual. Kiriha was being more direct with Maki, and Maki was more readily trusting. They’d said they were going out separately this morning, so he didn’t think they’d spent the whole day together. The situation was a complete mystery to him.

“Oh, it’s not like we met up on the way back or anything,” answered Maki.

“We went out for different reasons, but we ended up bumping into each

other at our destination by sheer coincidence,” explained Kiriha.

“I see... That was lucky.”

“So we spent the day sharing secrets.”

“I told Maki about the origin of my card, and she told me about how her life changed at the amusement park.”

“You don’t mean...”

Koutarou realized the significance of their encounter when Kiriha revealed where they’d gone. In short, they’d shared embarrassing stories about him—in his mind, anyway. But in doing so, they’d gotten much closer to one another. The danger now was that they could put Koutarou in an even more embarrassing situation.

“I don’t suppose I could ask you not to go into any more detail...”

“That depends on how nicely you ask. I wouldn’t mind taking another trip down memory lane.”

“Ugh.”

“We don’t have to, Kiriha-san...”

“I wouldn’t mind getting something from Koutarou in exchange for our cooperation, however.”

“...I want something like a card too, Satomi-kun!”

“All right, I’ll accept your terms.”

With both Maki and Kiriha on the attack, Koutarou didn’t stand a chance. Without the slightest hint of ill will in their actions, he couldn’t even reprimand them. He’d spend even longer in this awkward position if he resisted, so it was easier just to give in.

“So Aika-san wants something for her silence... What about you, Kiriha-san?”

“Well, why don’t you just sit like that for a while?”

“Huh?”

“I would like you to remain seated right where you are no matter what I do.”

There, Kiriha leaned in and pressed herself against Koutarou's right arm. His head fixed to the left, Koutarou still couldn't see her... but he could feel the tickle of her long hair and knew that she was right against him.

"K-Kiriha-san, are you really going to do something so extreme?!"

Seeing Maki's astonishment, however, Koutarou started to feel like he'd gotten the wrong idea.



“W-Wait a minute, Kiriha-san! What are you doing?!”

“You just need to sit still and not move... Don’t worry, Satomi Koutarou. It won’t hurt.”

“I can’t *not* worry!”

Koutarou’s neck hurt badly enough that he couldn’t turn to look at her even if he’d wanted to. He’d have to rotate his whole body to do it, but seeing how Maki was covering her blushing face with her hands and peeking through the gaps in her fingers... Koutarou started to think it might be best if he didn’t look. He was too scared to. He was powerless to do anything at all.

“Ane-san is such a genius, ho!”

“Maki-chan is a good actress too, ho! She’s completely fooled Koutarou, ho!”

In truth, Kiriha wasn’t really doing anything. She’d merely laid her head on Koutarou’s shoulder. She’d just given Maki a nod and a wink ahead of time, and the two of them were having a little fun with him.

“Satomi Koutarou, which would you prefer? Soft or hard?”

“No, Kiriha-san! We can’t!”

“Ahhh! What on earth is happening?!”

Spending the day apart from Koutarou, Kiriha and Maki had realized something important. Their most cherished memories shouldn’t be only of Koutarou. Their time with him was most precious when they deepened their bonds with each other as friends... which was what they were doing right now. So in order to enjoy their time with Koutarou to the fullest, they also made sure to enjoy their own newfound bond.

Episode Clariosa: Everything There Is to Know About Electronic Amplifiers

Clan's head was filled with thoughts of Maki and Koutarou. Maki, who'd been dreaming of another life with Koutarou, had woken up just a little while ago and run out of room 106 with a grave expression on her face. That was why Clan had gotten Koutarou up and made him chase after her. Both she and Maki had been Koutarou's enemies once, so they shared a great number of concerns about their relationship with him. Clan often worried for Maki the same way she did for herself.

"Glasses, hurry up and pick a card already!"

Sanae was holding a couple of fanned-out cards toward Clan, flapping them up and down. She was rushing Clan, who'd been distracted from the game at hand.

"I'm sorry. I was just a little lost in thought..."

"You had a big wrinkle on your forehead and everything."

"I wouldn't want it to be permanent, so I'll put such thoughts aside for now."

"Good!"

Clan smiled at Sanae and selected one of the cards she was still waving at her. Discounting Harumi, Maki, and the girl from the ruins, the remaining seven girls were currently in the middle of a game. As per the previous round, the winner would get to be the next in line to get a glimpse of another life with Koutarou. The game they'd chosen this time involved connecting cards to work your way through a maze and collect various treasures. There were multiple goals, but only one would win the game. The players traded cards while trying to be the first to make it there.

"Well, I'll use the card I took and play it right away."

"And I'll draw a new card."

Clan put the card she got from Sanae down in front of her while Sanae drew a new card from the pile. With that, Clan's turn was over. The game allowed players to take a card from another player's hand rather than the deck on their turn if they so chose. This allowed them to interfere with other players' plans or steal cards to further their own. The rules of the game were quite simple, but the card-stealing aspect made it very strategic.

"Then I'm taking one from Kiriha!" Sanae announced.

"Oh, so that's what you're up to," Kiriha mused.

"I can feel a dangerous aura emanating from you. You're planning something, aren't you?"

"Correct. But will you be able to pull the right card?"

"Uh, you didn't look at your cards, did you?"

"Heh, certainly not. If I had, you'd be able to read them with your spirit sight, after all."

The next turn saw an intense showdown between Sanae and Kiriha. As expected from a contest to see who'd get to sneak a peek at a different world, everyone was desperate.

I wonder how Maki is doing... Veltlion went after her, so she's probably not in any danger, but...

But despite the fierce game at hand, Clan's mind was elsewhere. She really was worried about Maki.

Moreover, having been Koutarou's enemy for so long, she wasn't particularly anxious to see what her life with him might have been like. She was curious about it, certainly, but her foolish past kept her from looking forward to it the same way the other girls did. That was partially why her mind was still on Maki, who was in a similar position. She wanted to know what had happened.

"Wait, did Clan-san just find the goal?" Yurika piped up.

"...What?"

Clan snapped to her senses upon hearing that. Several minutes and a few more rounds had passed since Clan had taken the card from Sanae. But with her

mind out of the game, it wasn't until Yurika pointed it out that Clan realized she'd won.

"Hmm, Clan was pretty difficult to read today..."

"Clan-san, your poker face was perfect."

"Very well done, Clan-sama."

Theia, Shizuka, and Ruth all praised Clan. Her victory was that impressive to them, although it could hardly be said that Clan had done it on purpose.

So I'm going to be the next person to peek at a different world...?

Clan had just been playing one card after another without any real strategy while she was thinking. She was quite astonished that had led her to a win.

"We're home."

"We're back."

"Meow!"

Fortunately for Clan, Maki and Koutarou returned to room 106 just after she seized victory.

Prior to Maki running out of room 106, all Clan had heard was that Maki had a good dream. She'd said that she had a cat in the dream world, but suddenly in the middle of her story... Maki's face turned deadly pale and she ran out of the apartment. That was why Clan had sent Koutarou after her rather than going herself. She was worried, in the worst case, Maki might need someone more trustworthy.

"M-Maki, you... You've got cats! Ahahaha!"

Indeed, Maki had returned home with three cats. The unexpected scene made Clan burst into laughter. She couldn't keep a lid on her overwhelming relief, and she was genuinely amused at the sight. Maki wasn't exactly a cat person.

"I'm sorry, Clan-san... I had to find out how they were doing in this world."

"Ahahaha, phew... W-Wait, in this world?"

“Yes. In my dream, I saved these little guys.”

Maki had apparently flown out of the apartment to check on the cats she’d had in another life. In the dream she’d had about it, Maki had saved the cats and then kept them as pets. When she’d realized that they might not be safe in this world, she dashed right out of Corona House.

“And since you have them with you now, I take it everything turned out fine?”

“Yes, Satomi-kun came to save this little one.”

“You called?”

There, Koutarou came into the room with a saucer and milk for the cats.

“Oh, no. We were just talking about you and Dozy.”

“Ah, I see.”

Koutarou crouched down on the spot, setting down the saucer and pouring milk into it. The cats almost immediately came over and started sniffing around the saucer. Once convinced it was safe, the smallest cat started lapping up the milk as the two larger cats watched over it.

“Anyway... Sanae’s really the one who found Dozy. She sensed it drowning and scared, and told me to go save it...”

“I, Sanae-chan, strive to become a magical girl kind to both animals and nature! Hello again, Dozy!”

“Mew!”

There, almost as if summoned, Sanae appeared from behind Koutarou. The cats seemed familiar with her, as they didn’t momentarily tense up like they had with Clan.

“Thinking about it now, I remember Satomi-kun and Sanae-san being with me in the other world...”

Maki was desperate to save the cat she’d met with Koutarou, although he would have saved it even if she hadn’t. She’d just been in a fluster from her dream, and she now let out an embarrassed giggle to try to laugh it off.

“So it was for nothing, then? Hahh... Jeez, talk about a false alarm...”

Once she had a full grasp of the situation, Clan let out a deep sigh. One of relief, of course. She'd genuinely been concerned about Maki.

"...You're not all bad after all, Clan," Koutarou said with a smile.

Considering her personality and experience, Clan had always kept others at a distance in the past. Because of that, Koutarou thought it was rather unusual for Clan to be concerned about Maki.

"E-Even I worry about other people sometimes."

"Relax. It's not like I was making fun of you."

"Then what *were* you doing?"

"You said that you wanted to become an even more impressive empress than Her Majesty Alaia, right?"

"Whether or not I can really make that happen aside, isn't that a natural ambition for a royal? What of it?"

"I was just thinking that it doesn't seem all that impossible from here."

Compared to Alaia, Clan was lacking in terms of humanity and experience, but she certainly wasn't Alaia's inferior when it came to intelligence and courage. Moreover, Clan pulled ahead when it came to scientific innovation and perspective on the future. As things stood, it definitely wasn't impossible for Clan to surpass Alaia... and Koutarou was glad to see that.

"Th-This is so sudden... I-I don't even know how to... Um..."

Clan, who was previously grumpy because she thought Koutarou was slighting her, suddenly changed her tune. Her face red, she cast her gaze downward to avoid eye contact with Koutarou, all the while twiddling her fingers. She was acting like she'd just been confessed to by the boy she loved. As a princess looking to become the greatest empress of all time, it meant a lot to hear praise like that from the man she recognized as the greatest knight of all time. It meant as much as, if not more than, a heartfelt confession. After all, becoming the greatest empress meant having the greatest knight serving at her side forever.

"But Clan-san, there's still a part of Satomi-kun that hopes that you'll stay a

princess,” Maki interjected with a big smile on her face.

“Hey, wha— Aika-san!”

Koutarou had been staring at Clan with a smile, but he fell into a panic when Maki called him out like that.

“Er... What is that supposed to mean?” Clan asked.

“He wants you to fulfill your dream, but he secretly also wants you to stay his princess.”

“H-Hey, I don’t...”

“Really now? Are you hearing what Satomi-kun is saying, Snoozy?”

“Meow.”

Maki laughed and picked up the smallest of the three cats. It seemed to trust her quite a bit, as it affectionately rubbed its face against her fingers. Seeing how dishonest Koutarou was being about his feelings compared to the cat, Maki couldn’t help but want to laugh.

“...”

Koutarou, meanwhile, was silent. The girl from the ruins had said she’d grant any wish he had, and he’d wished for Clan and the other girls back. He felt there was nothing more to say on the matter. Really, the only thought on his mind right now was wishing that midnight would come sooner. He couldn’t wait for their memories to be wiped of all this.

“Even if I become empress, I’ll still be your... um... I mean to say I won’t change at all...”

Koutarou’s only saving grace right now was that Clan was more or less in the same position. She was equally bad at showing her emotions, and she wasn’t sure how to act with someone who liked her for herself, not for her status as a princess or her abilities as a scientist. She was in no state to think about Koutarou’s odd behavior.

“B-But you know, if you’re serious about becoming like Her Majesty, then you have your work cut out for you.”

“What?”

“If you become empress, then you’ll need to join hands with your adversaries—just like you did with me. And that’s your worst suit, right?”

“...Veltlion...”

Koutarou’s words sank deep into Clan’s heart. It was only an attempt to change the subject, but it was truly what Clan needed to hear. If she were to become the empress, she couldn’t just eliminate anyone who opposed her. Politics were about compromise. Like Koutarou said, she would have to work toward finding middle ground with lots of different people.

“Then this is good timing.”

“What is?”

“If I take a look at another world, then I’ll get to observe the two of us on opposing sides. I’ll make sure to study it for future reference.”

Koutarou’s words also helped bring clarity to the murky feelings in her heart. If her future meant endlessly having to overcome opposition, then the first confrontation she had with Koutarou was hardly anything. Considering what she’d be up against in the future, her fight with Koutarou was actually a good lesson. If she averted her eyes from it forever, then surpassing Alaia would be nothing more than a pipe dream. Clan mustered her courage to face her own foolishness.

Though she was prepared for it, facing her past folly was still a shock for Clan. She badly wanted to cover her eyes while watching what had happened the day of the first play, but she could still remember it clearly—she’d attempted to assassinate Theia with a trap she had the utmost confidence in.

“Tch, damn fake Blue Knight! You’re getting in the way!”

The Clan of this world clicked her tongue in frustration. Before her stood Koutarou in blue armor, appearing from the smoke of an explosion. He held his arms spread wide to shield Theia, who was directly behind him, with his own body.

“There is no way I’ll forgive some barbarian from a backwater planet for interfering with my plans!”

Clan had absolute confidence in herself, but Koutarou—a primitive brute in her eyes—stood in her way. She lost her cool over her wounded pride, her expression twisting and her voice seething with malice.

Without even realizing that my opponent was the epitome of knighthood, I arrogantly looked down on him and cursed him for being a backwater barbarian. And my behavior... Just what part of this did I think was befitting of royalty? I don’t look or sound like an empress-to-be... Hahh...

Observing the fight, Clan clutched her head in agony. Faced with her own past, she was filled with disappointment and shame. Past Clan had known she wasn’t suited to become empress, but believed she could still seize the throne one day by killing Theia. Had she gone through with it, however, even if she’d gained the title... she would have made a terrible ruler.

“A-Are you okay, Theia...?”

“I’m okay! You protected me! There’s no need to worry. Only my hair is a little scorched.”

Another source of consternation for Clan now was Koutarou and Theia.

Veltlion and Theiamillis-san were already so close...

Theia and Koutarou were still something between rivals and friends at this point, but they were already acting like a princess and her knight. The time they’d spent together so far had fostered a mutual sense of respect.

Compared to them, the Schweiger family had... no hope. There was no way I could’ve won. Signaltin never would have protected me when I was like this...

“Kyaaaah! Th-The barrier’s converter won’t last at this rate!”

“Haaaaaaaah!”

“I-I’m being beaten this easily?!”

The power of the royal families’ greatest treasure, Signaltin, protected Koutarou and subsequently Theia. But not Clan. In fact, it was what overpowered and defeated her. That meant that, at this point in time, Clan had

no aptitude as a royal... much less an empress.

But if I'm going to become empress, I'll have to confront far worse than this... I can't look away...

Staring down her own immaturity and the head start Theia had gotten on her, Clan was swamped with a gloomy feeling. But in spite of it, she refused to avert her eyes. If she was going to become an empress that surpassed even Alaia, looking away would be a mistake.

Clan continued watching her bitter past unfold... But something was different on the day of the second play.

“Can you protect everything?! You can't even protect your friends with that sword alone!”

“I'll protect them all! I have to make sure that they all succeed with their invasions!”

During their second confrontation, Koutarou had Clan against a wall. Feeling cornered, she'd unleashed her secret weapon: the Super Space-time Repulsion Shell. As its name suggested, the Repulsion Shell blew its target through space-time. And thanks to Koutarou cutting it in half, it activated prematurely, sending both Koutarou and Clan to Ancient Forthorthe.

You did well to stop this fool, Veltlion. Jeez... I really am just...

Watching over everything, Clan applauded Koutarou. She couldn't deny what she'd done that day, but in the end, she was glad Koutarou had stopped her. It was thanks to him that Clan was finally able to face what she'd done. It was over now.

“But still... just where is the real Blue Knight?”

Past Clan had now left Koutarou with Alaia and was moving on her own in search of the Blue Knight. Koutarou was serving as a replacement until she found the real deal. Without him, the course of history would change forever—leaving her and Koutarou unable to return home. And since they were stuck in the same boat, they'd agreed to a reluctant truce.

“He can’t be that far from the route the princess and the others are taking... Otherwise he wouldn’t be able to show up and save her in time.”

Three days had passed since Clan parted ways with Koutarou and began her search, but she’d yet to find a single trace of the Blue Knight. She’d first checked the towns and villages near where they’d found Alaia, assuming that the Blue Knight couldn’t be far from their fated meeting spot. Nevertheless, no one had seen or heard of him. No one had ever met a Layous, and no one knew a knight that wore blue armor. Clan got the same answer no matter who she asked. The same turned out to be true in this town, so she gathered her things and prepared to move on to the next.

“Wait...”

Yet just as she reached the gate, a flash of inspiration hit her. She thought back to the cliff far beyond the forest in front of her.

“Maybe that wasn’t really where the Blue Knight was supposed to save her!”

That was where Koutarou and Clan had encountered Alaia, but perhaps Alaia wouldn’t have met her end there either way. Perhaps she could have jumped to escape, or perhaps she would have been captured only to be rescued later. Clan had been absolutely sure the Blue Knight was supposed to save her on that cliff, but that wasn’t necessarily true.

“In that case, I need to rethink my strategy from the ground up...”

Clan crossed her arms to think. Koutarou hadn’t saved Alaia in the Blue Knight’s place; he’d jumped the gun. That meant things had happened sooner than expected, so Clan would have to expand her search radius considerably. Once she worked all this out, Clan tapped her bracelet to enlarge her map.

“That should do it... I have four days left. I just hope I can check everywhere in time...”

Once she had her new map, she kicked off the ground and floated up into the sky.

The small device Clan was wearing let her manipulate gravity around her, essentially allowing her the power of free flight. She normally took special care not to use it anywhere she might be seen, but time was of the essence right

now.

“How pathetic that my only clue is Theiamillis-san’s manuscript. It’s so unreliable... And gosh, it’s cold up here. Jeez, this could hardly get any worse...”

Clan sighed as she floated higher into the air. All she had to go off of presently was the script for Theia’s play. Not only did it feel like she was relying on an enemy, but Theia’s account of the legend wasn’t exactly taken from the history books word for word. There was no telling how differently things might actually play out, meaning that Clan couldn’t depend on the script but so much. It made it uniquely frustrating that it was her only lifeline.

“...Achooo!”

With the harvest festival around the corner, winter was fast approaching. Moreover, the higher Clan flew, the colder the harsh winds became, fanning the flames of her frustration.

Koutarou wrung out the damp towel and put it on Clan’s forehead. He then peered at her face. Her cheeks were bright red, but not from blushing.

“So you caught a cold and came back early, huh?”

Clan had planned to spend a week searching for the Blue Knight, but she was forced to return on day five after catching a cold. She’d fallen under the weather while flying through the freezing skies without rest. And now she was lying in bed at an inn after meeting up with Koutarou and the others.

Koutarou had taken it upon himself to tend to Clan to make sure no one else saw the medical kit she had on hand. Alaia and her cohorts were allies, to be certain, but recklessly introducing advanced technology to them could change the course of history. Moreover, Koutarou was the only one who knew how to use the kit.

“...Do you have any complaints about my return?” Clan asked.

She was burning up with a fever, but her voice was ice cold. She and Koutarou were still quite distant at this point. They’d settled on a truce, but they were at each other’s throats just a week or so ago. Clan hadn’t fully come around on their alliance just yet.

“Not really. I did at first, but I thought better of it when I realized what’d happened.”

Koutarou was equally critical of Clan, but he came around when he saw that she was unwell. He knew she was out of shape from the get-go, but she’d insisted on doing the hard work of searching for the Blue Knight. It wasn’t really a surprise she’d fallen ill, so Koutarou refrained from giving her a hard time about it.

“Besides, I know when to keep my mouth shut. You were working hard, so I’m not going to rib you right now.”

The real Blue Knight was still nowhere to be found. Clan was anxious over his whereabouts, so she’d soldiered on in her search even while pressed for time. When Koutarou considered being in her shoes, he didn’t think he could have done any better. Really, he didn’t have the right to complain.

“I’m sorry to call the search off so suddenly...”

Perhaps because Koutarou didn’t take the opportunity to dig at her, Clan’s expression softened and her voice took on a warmer tone.

“Well, how did it go while you were looking?”

“To start, I checked all of the towns and villages along the path that Alaia-san and her cohort took.”

“I see. That’s a sensible way of doing it.”

There, Koutarou and Clan got down to exchanging details about what they’d been doing. They talked freely and openly without any degree of hostility between them. It seemed Clan’s cold had gone a long way toward lowering the barrier between them.

This is turning out pretty interesting. Because I caught a cold, our relationship is developing in a positive direction...

Clan of the future watched this all unfold with great interest. She hadn’t gotten sick in Ancient Forthorthe, so she didn’t discuss things with Koutarou for another two days. But when she caught a cold here, the timeline essentially advanced, jumping their relationship forward two days.

To think something so trivial could change fate...

It was seemingly the smallest of things. Clan had only caught a cold, but it was enough to bring about momentous change. This two-day head start on their relationship would make all the difference in the world.

“Oh yeah, it’s about time...”

“Kyaaah!”

In the middle of their conversation, Clan suddenly let out a yelp and recoiled. But not without reason—Koutarou had suddenly leaned in.

“Calm down. I’m just changing the towel on your forehead. I’m not going to do anything to you.”

Koutarou, however, had no ulterior motives. As promised, he simply took the towel off her forehead and rinsed it in a wooden basin. They’d been talking for long enough now that he thought it was time to refresh it.

“I-I see...”

“What did you think I was doing?”

“A man leaning over a woman... in bed... is a little...”

“You idiot! What do you take me for? I wouldn’t do anything to an invalid!”

Even if they’d still been enemies, Koutarou wasn’t the type to take advantage of someone defenseless. He was irritated at the suggestion and spoke a little more harshly than before because of it.

“R-Right. I-I’m sorry.”

Clan knew by now that Koutarou was rather old-fashioned. She admitted her mistake and apologized, partially out of courtesy since he was taking care of her.

“Even if you weren’t sick right now, you’re my only ticket home. I’d be in real trouble if I got on your bad side. The same goes for you, doesn’t it?”

“I-Indeed, we are in the same boat...”

Without Clan’s help, Koutarou had no way of returning to Earth. And without Koutarou’s cooperation, the course of history would change forever. Clan and

Koutarou both needed each other in order to get home.

“If I do something to you now, you might toss me out in deep space somewhere.”

“Maybe I would...”

“So I’m going to play nice until we get back to present-day Earth.”

“...So a temporary truce it is...”

“I’d prefer a permanent one, honestly...”

Koutarou had been focused on Clan, but he turned his gaze toward the starry skies outside the window for a moment.

“...”

She knew what he was really looking at. His thoughts were on Theia and his other friends far, far away on Earth. He sought a permanent truce for their sake.

“I-I seek a truce too, you know?! If you do something strange in this time period, it’ll have an impact on the future! And you need to act as a replacement for the Blue Knight until I can find the real one!”

It was because Clan knew where Koutarou’s heart was that her words had a bitter edge to them. After all, she was the one in front of him now, and a strange feeling began budding in her chest. She wanted him to look back at her. Of course, Clan was unaware of all this at the time. She still perceived Koutarou as an enemy, and her mind was somewhat hazy because of the fever. The subtle changes happening within her went completely unnoticed.

How vexing of myself... I should have come around when he carried me on his back... Gosh, I guess this is how Theiamillis-san and the others have felt watching me lately...

But the truth wasn’t lost on the Clan observing the situation. From an objective point of view, she readily spotted the change. It was an effective check on her perspective, forcing her to realize how other people must feel when they saw her. The way she refused to admit her feelings was unbelievably vexing.

I’ll try to be more honest when I wake up... There’s no point in trying to hide it.

I'm sure everyone already knows... even Veltlion...

Seeing herself in this position gave Clan a hint about how to handle her own situation. There was no point in desperately trying to hide what was already known. In fact, it would cost her more than she stood to gain—both from her friends and the boy she loved. The same would be true when she was empress, both with opposing factions and her allies.

Knock, knock, knock!

Just as Clan made up her mind about the future, there was a rapping at the door.

“Yes?”

“It’s me.”

“Princess Alaia?!”

To Koutarou and Clan’s surprise, it was Alaia knocking. Not wanting to keep a princess waiting, Koutarou leaped up from his wooden chair to answer the door.

“I’m a princess too, you know...”

I’m a princess too, you know...

Both Clans had the same reaction. She was frustrated at the difference in the way Koutarou treated her and Alaia, despite knowing the circumstances. However, even though both Clans had the same reaction, the feeling behind it was quite different. Present Clan watching all this unfold was honestly a little happy Koutarou *wasn’t* treating her like a princess.

“I brought some food.”

“If you had just said something, I would have come to pick it up.”

“Heehee... The truth is that I wanted to see how Clan-sama was doing, so I brought it over personally.”

“I’m sorry for the trouble. Here, I’ll take that.”

“Certainly. Here you are.”

Alaia handed the tray of food over to Koutarou with an innocent, trusting

smile. When the Clan observing this world saw it, she was reminded of something.

Alaia-san really does have feelings for Veltlion...

Present Clan knew that Alaia fell in love with Koutarou on the night of the harvest festival. That was two days from now, but it was as plain as could be that she already had feelings for him. Clan could also see now how objectively attractive Alaia was. She would be irresistible to most men.

I'm impressed you were able to turn her down and return home in the end, Veltlion... I can't tell if you're stupid or just stubborn... Well, what would you expect from the Blue Knight?

Despite Alaia's feelings, Koutarou would return to the present with Clan. In other words, he'd chosen the girls back home—Clan included. Clan was proud of that, though her stubbornness made her sound more critical than she really was.

"Hey, Clan. Her Highness went out of her way to bring you something to eat."

"My sincerest apologies for the imposition... It is an honor, Alaia-san. Pardon... I mean, Your Highness."

They were both princesses, but Clan admired the legendary Alaia. She was thrilled that she'd brought food just for her, which helped soften the resentment she felt toward Koutarou.

"There is no need for thanks after everything you two have done for me."

"You honor me."

"I made sure to bring things that were easy to eat. I hope they'll help you recover."

"Thank you very much for your consideration."

Alaia smiled at Clan as they chatted. Her face was still red from the fever, but she spoke clearly and lucidly. It was clear, sick though she was, that her life wasn't in danger.

"Do you even have an appetite?" Koutarou asked.

“I will happily eat whatever Princess Alaia brought. But in small amounts, please.”

“Yeah. You take small bites even when you’re not sick, don’t you?”

“You just lack manners.”

“It’s not about manners right now. You just need to eat. A cold is just a battle of stamina, you know?”

“I just can’t eat that much all at once!”

Koutarou cut Clan’s food into small morsels with a knife and fork. On the menu was typical inn fare: bread, soup, and freshwater fish. It was pitiful compared to what Clan was used to at home, but she didn’t complain about the food. Instead, all her complaints were directed at Koutarou, who was feeding her. She looked like a fussy baby bird being fed by its mother.

“Heehee...”

Alaia giggled at the sight, causing Clan and Koutarou to stop in their tracks. They both gave her a mystified look.

“I was just thinking back to when we first met, when Layous-sama was carrying you, Clan-sama. The two of you seem to get along so well.”

Alaia, her heart warm, wore a bright smile. But Koutarou and Clan both protested.

“Hardly. She’s just always causing me trouble.”

“That’s my line! You always say the most unnecessary things!”

They couldn’t help thinking of each other as adversaries still, which was why they were only reluctantly cooperating. But even so, they’d spent quite a bit of time together now and their relationship was already starting to change. Neither of them were aware of it yet, however, hence their reaction to Alaia.

“Heh, it certainly doesn’t look that way to me... Heehee.”

Alaia, oblivious to Clan and Koutarou’s history, could tell there was more to their relationship than they were admitting. They seemed even closer now than when Koutarou had carried Clan.

“I can’t keep up with her sly, spiteful antics.”

“This is all your fault to begin with! You’re too stuck in your old-fashioned way of thinking!”

“Yet even if it’s because you’re sick, you let Layous-sama stay by your side as you slept, didn’t you, Clan-sama?”

“Erk...”

Clan had always promised herself that she would only let the man she’d marry see her sleeping face. But now Koutarou had seen it... And Alaia didn’t realize the grief she’d caused Clan by pointing that out.

“And as for you, Layous-sama, you’re caring for Clan-sama without any complaints.”

“Ugh...”

Koutarou had given Clan an earful, but it was true he’d never once complained about taking care of her. It was only when Alaia pointed it out that he came to realize that wasn’t exactly how one treated a mortal enemy... He was no longer too sure how he felt about Clan.

“See? It seems to me the two of you are rather close, heehee.”

“...”

“...”

Koutarou and Clan exchanged a look before blushing.

Don’t tell me I...

That’s not possible... This man is my sworn enemy.

But in the end, both of them remained obstinate, coming to the conclusion that Alaia was sorely mistaken.

The way Clan saw it, catching a cold was the turning point in her relationship with Koutarou. Ever since that day, she found herself stealing glances at him constantly. But she wasn’t the only one who was changing; Koutarou continued being kinder to her even after she recovered from her cold.

“What is this?”

“Don’t ask me, Veltlion. I don’t know anything about life in Forthorthe two thousand years ago.”

“Hmm, I guess we’ll pick one up.”

“What? Why?”

“It’s clear that it’s food. And you just got better, so you need to eat what you can.”

“I might not be able to eat it all...”

“Then I’ll eat the rest. Anyways, let’s go!”

“Jeez, you always have to have it your way... Heh...”

Today, Koutarou had taken Clan out to observe the harvest festival with him—his idea of getting her a little fresh air and sunshine now that she was feeling better. The harvest festival wouldn’t begin in earnest until that evening, but the town was festive enough already during the day that there were decorations and smiles as far as the eye could see.

“Do you see that balloon-like bird normally in present-day Forthorthe too?”

“Unfortunately, there are almost none left alive. Supposedly their population was largely hunted off by animals migrating from the south.”

“I guess they don’t run so good when they’re that round, huh?”

“Do you like them?”

“Yeah. They’re pretty funny and cute.”

“You sound just like a child.”

“I can still pass for a child, and so can you.”

“Heh, that’s true. I’d forgotten.”

Clan and Koutarou spent a while taking in the hustle and bustle of town, and that afternoon became a precious memory for her. She was almost always cooped up in her laboratory and virtually never went out to play. Perhaps that was why the afternoon left such a strong impression on her.

“Preventing the water source from being poisoned will change the course of history... But at the same time, we can’t just look the other way.”

“I’ll take responsibility for forcing your hand in the matter. Besides, whatever happens in Forthorthe aside... Earth shouldn’t change much because of this, so you can stay at my place for a while.”

“You mean in that old, cramped apartment of yours?”

“Landlord-san would kill you if she heard you talk about it like that.”

“Landlord-san? Oh, you mean that monstrous—”

“Don’t ever say that to her face either, okay?”

“S-Starting today, I’ll be washing my own clothes!”

“Why? Aren’t you busy treating everyone?”

“Even if I’m busy, I just realized that there’s a line that mustn’t be crossed!”

“This is an emergency, so I don’t really think you have to be so concerned about that.”

“Having the Blu— I mean, having a man wash my underwear is already an emergency!”

“Why are you bringing that up all of a sudden? Talk about weird...”

“You are not just kind to Alaia-san, but Charl-san as well, aren’t you?”

“Well, yeah. She’s royalty, and this is a terrible time for her. She’s also pretty defenseless. I don’t have any reason not to be.”

“I’m also royalty, and this is also hard on me. I’m also pretty defenseless.”

“You’re—”

“What?”

“Well... Hmm, it’s hard to put into words.”

“Then why not show me what you’re trying to tell me?”

“Like this?”

Squish!

“Veltlion, take your hands off my face at once!”

“Sheesh, you’re the one who told me to show you...”

“Oh yeah, Clan. Princess Alaia was talking about preparing a room just for you.”

“What?! I-I don’t need one!”

“You know, you’re technically an unmarried girl, so she seems to be worried about the propriety of you staying with me, even if we are supposedly master and servant.”

“I have no need to be concerned about my reputation in this day and age! Moreover, I can’t do anything that might leave a record of my existence here!”

“Oh, yeah, you’re right. That would be a problem.”

“See?!”

“Then we can just use my name to get two rooms and—”

“That might still influence the future, Veltlion! It’s safest just to stay as we are!”

“Really?”

“Yes! Jeez, you really don’t get it...”

“Hey, Clan!”

“...”

“What’s with the long face?”

“I’m just a little discouraged after seeing how majestic Alaia-san really is. I don’t think I’ll ever be able to reach her level...”

“You’re wrong.”

“...What?”

“You were able to keep it together when Dextro attacked.”

“That was just... desperation. It wasn’t especially on purpose.”

“I think that’s how it is for everyone. It’s not like Princess Alaia is like that all the time either.”

“Are you trying to cheer me up?”

“I dunno... Not especially, I guess...”

“You aren’t very honest, are you?”

“It’s pretty difficult.”

“Heehee, that’s true. It certainly is...”

In the end, it wasn’t just the harvest festival. Clan had made precious memory after precious memory with Koutarou in past Fortthorthe. Whenever she thought of one, ten others came to mind right along with it. They weren’t all of happy times, but they pieced together to form something profound—a change in Clan. And because of that change, Clan was planning on making a proposal to Koutarou. It was now the evening of January 24, 2010, just after the second play had ended.

Koutarou had a part in the play, but Clan didn’t. After making sure he got to the gymnasium and watching the last scene from afar, she headed up to the roof where Koutarou had asked to meet her afterward. Clan leaned on the railing, lost in thought as she watched the sun set. She was planning on waiting for Koutarou here like this.

“Jeez, he just doesn’t understand a woman’s feelings. Granted, maybe it’s because he doesn’t know that I...”

Clan appeared to be in a good mood. She was smiling and even humming to herself from time to time. She was only waiting for Koutarou, but the air about her was completely different than before. Though she was unaware of it herself, she was acting very similar to a girl in love waiting for her boyfriend.

“I’m sure that Theiamillis-san went through a lot too. She was crying and everything... heh heh...”

Clan squinted as she looked up into the fading sun, recalling Theia's reaction to her and Koutarou reappearing. She'd burst into tears, her knees giving out from under her. Clan now knew that wasn't a sign of weakness; it was a sign of the hardships she'd been through.

"...What are you grinning over here all by yourself for?"

"K-K-Kyaaaah!"

Surprised by the sudden voice by her ear, Clan slipped off the railing she was leaning on with her elbows. In a panic, she grabbed it with her hands to steady herself before whipping around to face the owner of said voice.

"Veltlion, don't call out to me from so close all of a sudden! You scared me!"

"Well, you didn't react when I called to you from afar."

"Oh, really?"

"Yeah. So what *are* you grinning about?"

"That doesn't matter!"

Clan couldn't reveal the truth, so she instead rebuked Koutarou and turned away. He could tell she was acting strange and considered prying further, but ultimately decided against it. He'd come here for a more important reason, after all.

"Okay, okay. Fine."

"So, what did you want to talk about?"

"There's two things I want to ask you."

When Clan broached the subject, Koutarou's expression turned somber. He had two serious favors to ask of Clan: to keep quiet about what happened in the past, and to delete the data from past Forthorthe on the armor that he was currently still wearing.

So this part hasn't changed... I guess Veltlion wouldn't have come back if it had...

Once they got to talking, things played out just as Clan remembered them. Koutarou was sure that these two measures were necessary in order to protect

Theia and keep things quiet in Forthorthe. Clan agreed with him, though she did have a bone to pick about Koutarou's fixation on Theia.

"It's all done."

"Thank you, Clan."

"You're welcome."

It wasn't long before Clan was done copying and deleting the data from Koutarou's armor. She slowly lowered her braceleted right arm as the smile on her face faded.

"By the way, Koutarou, rather than another request, I have a suggestion."

Clan was now the one looking to Koutarou with somber eyes. Finally feeling somewhat relieved about the prospect of being able to return to his normal life, Koutarou answered her casually.

"What is it?"

"Won't you serve me?"

"Wh-What?!"

But his peace of mind was quickly blown away by Clan's so-called suggestion. She'd said just about the most shocking thing he could imagine.

"Y-You... Are you serious?!"

After spending so much time with her, Koutarou no longer had any wish to fight Clan. That said, her relationship with Theia and the others was still contentious. And for that reason, he'd expected his truce with Clan to be dissolved upon returning to present-day Earth. So instead, to hear her suggest that they get closer rather than further apart... It was the surprise of a lifetime. He couldn't help but think that it was some kind of joke.

"I am."

Yet on the contrary, Clan looked perfectly sincere. Her serious eyes remained focused on Koutarou as she waited for an answer.



“Don’t be stupid! If I do that, Theia won’t be able to complete her trial!”

Theia’s trial was to conquer room 106 and its residents. In other words, if Koutarou agreed to serve Clan, Theia would fail her trial. That made it an impossible proposal to accept, which was the biggest reason he thought it was a joke.

“Please calm down. I don’t mind if you wait until after Theiamillis-san’s trial is complete.”

“Huh?!”

With that, Clan surprised and confounded Koutarou even more. What she’d just said flew in the face of why she’d come to Earth in the first place.

“If you serve at my side, I won’t mind giving up my right to the throne. That will even put Theiamillis-san one step closer to becoming empress herself.”

“J-Just wait a minute, Clan! Do you understand what you’re saying?!”

It was meeting Alaia that had recently made Clan want to become empress in earnest. Yet now she was talking about giving up on the throne altogether. Koutarou was baffled.

“You’re the one who doesn’t understand, Koutarou.” With a soft sigh, Clan gently dragged her finger across the sword in Koutarou’s hand. “It’s almost as if you can’t appreciate the value of this sword.”

“Its value?”

Koutarou lifted the sheathed sword up in front of him—the holy sword Signaltin, the sword given to him by Alaia.

“The greatest treasure of the royal families, a relic of history, the sword of kingship: Signaltin. Just how meaningful do you think a person who can wield this might be to the royal families?”

It was only there that Koutarou began to understand Clan’s intentions. Signaltin’s worth was indeed unfathomable to the royal families. That was why Clan was willing to give up the throne to have it. In other words, Theia’s problem could now peacefully be resolved at Koutarou’s discretion.

“Of course, it holds meaning for me too,” Clan said as she put her hand to her chest, her cheeks flushing red.

Oh?

Seeing this, the Clan observing them felt something was off. She remembered saying the exact same thing herself, though it had given her no reason to blush.

“In other words... you want a royal heirloom like this to stay in the hands of the royal families. You also want to study me and this sword, don’t you?”

“Study...?”

At that, Clan seemed surprised. She honestly hadn’t been thinking about studying the sword or Koutarou.

“Oh? Was I wrong?”

“Well, I certainly wouldn’t mind being able to do some research...”

Once Koutarou suggested it, she couldn’t deny that Signaltin would indeed be a worthy research subject. But that wasn’t her priority right now.

“Then what did you mean? What does it mean to you?”

“...”

Clan fell silent as she cast her eyes downward, her cheeks turning bright red all over again. It took her a moment to muster her courage before looking back up at Koutarou.

“This way, everything will be resolved... and we won’t have to fight...”

That was what was truly important to Clan right now, far outclassing research. After realizing her own immaturity and finally getting along with Koutarou, she wanted to avoid a confrontation with him no matter what... as that would mean fighting with the only person who understood her.

Our reasons are different!

The most surprised of all at this development was none other than the Clan observing this world. At this point in her own timeline, she hadn’t realized her feelings. Her primary goal in asking Koutarou to serve her *was* research. But after catching a cold in past Forthorthe, the Clan of this world had come to

realize her true feelings sooner.

“Yeah, that would be for the best... I agree.”

The throne to Theia and Signaltin to Clan. Clan couldn't give up her right to the throne of the most storied empire in history for nothing, but Signaltin was a suitable price. And by making sure Clan and Theia both got what they wanted, they should no longer have a reason to fight. Koutarou and Clan wouldn't either. It was indeed a perfect resolution.

“Ah...”

Hearing Koutarou agree with her, Clan broke out into a smile. The situation was intricate, complex, and multifaceted, so she'd been unsure whether or not Koutarou would really agree to serve her. She was prepared for him to refuse, but she was also scared of being rejected... So in the end, she couldn't be happier that they saw eye to eye on the matter. The big, blossoming smile on her face spoke to her relief.

I really don't want to fight against a girl that smiles at me like this...

Clan's smile tugged at Koutarou's heartstrings. Hers was as bright as any of the other invaders' when they'd revealed their true selves to him.

“I-I... I will hear your answer formally another time, so do make sure to think about it.”

“R-Right...”

Koutarou was entranced by that smile. He couldn't help wondering if Clan had always been so pretty, momentarily finding himself at a loss for words. Puzzled by his silence, Clan looked at him quizzically.

“...Koutarou?”

“Oh, my bad... Yeah... But even if this doesn't work out, make sure you face Theia fair and square, okay? And in a fashion befitting Forthorthe royalty, with no one's life at stake. That way, I won't have to intervene.”

“Please don't worry. Even I'm not foolish enough to do something to lose Signaltin's protection.”

“That's true. You're very calculating, after all.”

“Jeez! Can’t you compliment me some other way?!”

And with that, the seriousness between the two of them dissolved into their usual banter. Things had been tense, despite all the smiling, but now everything was perfectly back to normal.

“You say that, but— Achoo!”

“Oh? Catch a cold?”

“I’m fine. It’s probably just from the evening chill.”

“Anyways, that aside—”

Both Clan and Koutarou could feel something clicking into place deep in their hearts. It shifted their perspectives a little, making the light of the setting sun appear all the more vivid.

Koutarou came down with a cold the day after the play. After coming home from his part-time job that evening, he collapsed with a fever. It caused a ruckus in room 106, but fortunately his fever had broken by the next morning. That helped put everyone at ease, but just to be safe, Koutarou stayed home from school.

“I’ll come back when things get boring at school, so just sit tight until then, ‘kay?”

“Just make sure you study some.”

“Kay!”

Sanae, the last one to leave for the day, slipped through the wall and headed outside. The invaders had discussed leaving a couple of people behind to take care of Koutarou, but since he was already getting better, he’d shooed them all off to school. He wanted them to concentrate more on their studies than on him.

“Achoo!”

Koutarou’s sneeze echoed through the now empty apartment. Though his condition was improving, he still wasn’t back to full health yet. He’d sent the girls off to school in spite of that for two reasons: the first was that he didn’t

want them to worry, and the second was that he had a hunch there was someone else who'd be willing to take care of him.

"Seems like you caught a cold after all..."

Not long after Koutarou sneezed, a familiar voice called to him from his bracelet. It seemed his hunch had been right, for said voice belonged to the second princess of Forthorthe, Clariosa.

"I'm surprised you could tell."

"You can thank the bracelet for that. It's constantly monitoring its wearer's health."

There, a hologram of Clan appeared from Koutarou's bracelet.

"So it still functions like it did in Ancient Forthorthe and ten years ago..."

"That's right. I got a notification while I was in my lab, and I wasn't sure what to think."

"Oh yeah? I was sure that you were stalking Theia or something."

"Certainly not! Alaia-sama would never do that, so neither would I!"

The holographic Clan furrowed her brow at Koutarou's snide remark. Of the girls around him, her expression was the most dynamic. He couldn't help ribbing her a little just to see it.

"I know. I just wanted to tease you."

"Jeez... Is that really the kind of attitude you take with someone who's going to be taking care of you?!"

Suddenly, Clan's voice was coming from somewhere in the apartment rather than Koutarou's bracelet. He looked up to see her emerging from the glowing wall, arms crossed. She'd used a transfer gate to warp to room 106 instantaneously, so she was still making the same sour face she had been in the hologram.

"I'm sure that the reborn, mature Princess Clariosa will forgive me out of the kindness of her heart."

"Y-You little..."

“Oh, Princess Clariosa, you’re oh-so beautiful today.”

“...I can just leave, you know?”

“N-No, wait! I’m sorry, Clan.”

Koutarou was of course grateful to Clan, and knew he’d be bored out of his mind without anyone around. He was perfectly happy to apologize to get her to stay.

“You could have just been more honest from the start, jeez...”

With a small sigh, Clan took a seat by the resting Koutarou and leaned over to take a peek at him.

“Please don’t look at my sleeping face. It’s something only my future wife is allowed to see,” he said with a grin, parroting what Clan had once said in past Forthorthe.

“I’ve already seen it countless times! Be more serious! I’m here to treat you!”

“You don’t have to get so angry... It was just a friendly joke.”

“If you don’t cut it out, I’m going to take you seriously!”

“Are you saying you *are* my future wife?”

“I...”

“...”

Silence fell over the room. Clan had already seen Koutarou’s sleeping face countless times, so if that really was a privilege reserved for his wife-to-be, then...

“A-Anyway, how are you feeling?!”

Clan couldn’t help but blush at the thought of marrying Koutarou. It wasn’t a strange thought, however. In fact, it was easy to imagine. But precisely because of that, she rushed to change the subject. She was scared that she would say something strange if she didn’t.

“O-Okay. My fever’s broken, but I’m still lightheaded.”

Koutarou was also eager to change the subject and jumped on the

opportunity. He was equally flustered over imagining taking Clan as his wife... and the pleasant, warm feelings that came with that.

“A-All right, then let me run some tests and get you some medicine.”

“Yeah, thank you.”

Both of their mouths were dry, their hands clammy, and their heads burning up. They were both still overtaken with emotion, despite having changed the subject.

The two worlds are clearly different now. I wasn't this conscious of Veltlion when I came back... much less my own feelings. I even tried to sever my connection to him...

Things had distinctly diverged at this point from how the observing Clan remembered them. Her relationship with Koutarou was nothing like this upon their return to Earth, so her own timeline was no longer a point of reference. In truth, she had no idea what would happen from here.

But if these two are this close, then if I show my feelings to my own Veltlion... maybe he would respond the same way...

Clan couldn't imagine what would happen next, but she could imagine her Koutarou responding in kind if she were able to put her strong feelings into words. At this point, she was certain that she had a stronger connection to Koutarou than the Clan in front of her did.

“I've got the results from the diagnosis. It really is just a cold.”

“That's all technology can tell me, huh?”

“The real difference is where we go from here. I'll get you medicine specifically for your condition.”

“Now there's a real advancement in medical science.”

Slowly but surely, Clan and Koutarou calmed themselves as they continued to chat about other things. Nevertheless, their hearts remained unmoved. They couldn't deny their feelings from before, and both of them wondered in the back of their minds if it was really okay to have simply dropped the subject.

“Um...”

“Hey...”

That nagging feeling grew stronger and stronger until they both blurted something out. But because they did so simultaneously, they inadvertently took the wind out of each other’s sails.

“Wh-What?”

“It’s nothing... What were you going to say?”

“N-Nothing in particular...”

At this juncture, neither of them knew what to say. It was an effective stalemate. What could they say to get back on that topic, and how could they do it in a way that wouldn’t invite misunderstanding? Sanae would have said this was easy, but it couldn’t be harder for the two of them.

“ ...”

“ ...”

Silence returned to the room, but it was far heavier than before. At this point, they’d both vaguely realized what the other wanted to talk about... and they knew they’d probably regret it if they didn’t talk now. Yet the silence still continued. Several minutes felt like several hours.

“Hey, Clan.”

Koutarou, eventually, was the one to break the silence. He was quicker when it came to taking action, but he mostly just couldn’t stand the tension any longer.

“Wh-What is it?”

“I, uh... I can’t really explain why, but... I don’t mind you seeing my sleeping face...”

“I-I don’t particularly mind you seeing mine either... A-Although I don’t really know why myself...”

They were too embarrassed to put their real feelings into words. The change in their relationship had been too fast. But one thing was clear: neither minded the other seeing them asleep. That was the most they could express right now.

“Heh... heehee...”

“Ahaha...”

And that became how they confirmed each other’s feelings. The oppressive silence from before was blown away by their refreshing outburst of laughter.

“W-We really are stupid! We’re well past this! Ahahahaha!”

“Hahaha, yeah! But I blame my cold!”

There was no denying that they’d started out as enemies, but they’d since overcome all kinds of hardships together. At one point, they were even prepared to get lost in the space-time continuum together... And here they were, fretting over each other’s sleeping faces. It was just too funny.

“Heehee... Really, I blame my cold too...”

But they were only able to laugh together like this because they’d been able to soothe the unease in their hearts. They both now knew that their feelings weren’t one-sided, and Clan was smiling more sweetly than ever before because of it.

Kiriha first noticed that Koutarou was acting strange toward the end of the month after he’d gotten over his cold. Her first inkling that something was up was that someone had clearly come to take care of him while he was ill. The washbasin had been moved, and there were fewer clean towels than there were before she and the other girls had left for school that day. There was also a glass that had been used for tea which had obviously been washed by a more thorough hand than Koutarou’s. When Kiriha asked him about all this, he simply said that a friend had come over. She began observing him after this and discovered that he would meet with Clan from time to time. That was where things took a very strange turn in Kiriha’s eyes as Clan, up until very recently, had been Koutarou’s mortal enemy.

“It appears more time has passed than we thought...” Kiriha mused, her arms folded.

During the second play, Koutarou had cleaved Clan’s superweapon in two. He and Clan had both gone missing for a few minutes in the resulting explosion,

and all they'd really said upon their return was that they'd gone to a distant world. Based on the way they talked about it, however, it sounded as though they'd been gone far longer than just the few minutes it had seemed like. Kiriha had been assuming it was a period of a few days or so, but seeing Clan and Koutarou now, she started to suspect that it was really much longer than that.

"So this is where you were, Ruth," Kiriha called out in greeting.

When it came to gravity and space-time, Ruth was by far the most knowledgeable of their group. She was the only person who could answer Kiriha's question now.

"What is the matter, Kiriha-sama?"

Ruth was currently in Blue Knight's maintenance hangar. It held all size and manner of machines for maintaining Blue Knight's various weapons. Ruth was presently in the middle of servicing the maneuver suit—in other words, Koutarou's armor.

"There's something I'd like to ask you."

"If you came all the way here, then... is it something confidential?"

"I'm glad you're so fast on the uptake. It's about Koutarou and Clan."

"I see. So that's what this is about..."

There, Ruth narrowed her eyes. She had her own misgivings about the two. But upon hearing that was the subject, she stopped what she was doing and walked over to Kiriha.

"I was just thinking that Koutarou and Clan seem to be getting along a little too well recently. I suspect that they were together for far longer than we initially imagined, so I wanted to ask you about space-time travel."

"Satomi-sama did say that he had traveled to a different world and had to work with Clan-sama to return. He also said that going into too much detail would cause problems."

"This leads me to my question: how much would travel between worlds affect the passage of time?"

Kiriha guesstimated that it would have taken several months at minimum to

foster such a momentous change in Koutarou and Clan's relationship, and she had confidence in that. It was based on personal experience, after all. That was why she was wondering if a distortion in the passage of time of that magnitude could have occurred when traveling between worlds.

"Based on the nature of the weapon that Satomi-sama detonated, both he and Clan-sama were definitely exposed to dense gravity. However, based on the energy readings, the ensuing distortion in the passage of time should have only amounted to a few days or weeks."

"That's short... That wouldn't explain the change in their relationship."

Ruth's answer wasn't enough to satisfy Kiriha. It backed Koutarou's story, but it certainly didn't explain what had happened with Clan.

"If your deduction is right, Kiriha-sama, then two new possibilities arise. The first is that time simply moved faster in the world they found themselves in."

If the passage of time was effectively faster at their destination, then a few minutes on Earth could have amounted to months over there.

"And the other possibility?"

"...They didn't travel to another world at all."

Ruth wasn't entirely sure about the second possibility, so she couldn't answer Kiriha with any confidence. Nevertheless, there was circumstantial evidence to support the theory. She couldn't completely discard the idea.

Ruth's circumstantial evidence included the condition of Koutarou's armor when he returned. All the data from the time period he was missing had been erased. And so, looking for answers, Kiriha and Ruth decided to pay Clan a visit.

"Even if you were sent to a different world because of an accident, what reason is there to hide what happened? Who exactly is it going to cause problems for, and how?" Ruth asked.

If Clan and Koutarou had been sent to a world that had nothing to do with this one without any other issues, they could have just selectively erased the data that they didn't want anyone to see. That way, they could have avoided

any supposed problems caused by it without inviting suspicion. Yet all of the data from that timeframe had been wiped. Was it really possible *all* of it was that damning?

“Wh-What might you be talking about? I erased all of the data because that was the simplest course of action. It would have taken too much time to weed through it and only remove the problematic parts.”

Confronted with Ruth’s logic, Clan was in a panic. She racked her brain, desperately searching for exactly the right words. There were a lot of landmines and pitfalls she had to avoid in this delicate conversation. Fortunately, things were working out so far. Clan gave a logical reply, and Ruth relented. That, however, was where Kiriha stepped in.

“Then it wasn’t just past Forthorthe that you traveled to?”

The priority on the armor’s automatic translator had been changed, with Ancient Forthorthian slotted at the top. Ancient Forthorthian was spoken widely two thousand years ago in Forthorthe, but it was now considered a dead language. That was why, when Kiriha saw it prioritized in the translator, she assumed it meant that Koutarou and Clan had gone back in time, leaving them no choice but to wipe the armor’s data completely.

“How—”

Clan found herself speechless. She couldn’t respond to Kiriha’s sudden remark, but in truth, it wasn’t completely unexpected. And so Clan took a moment to pull herself together, then started racking her brain again. She was up against Kiriha, her most dangerous foe. She’d have to be even more cautious than before.

“How would you assume that? The language spoken there was unknown. Ancient Forthorthian just so happened to be similar, which is likely why it was given priority in the translator.”

“By the way, Clan-dono, I have a message from Kii: ‘If you don’t do your own laundry, Onii-chan is going to hate you.’”

“Wha?! How do you know about— Oh no!”

Kiriha was indeed a formidable opponent. Knowing Clan’s mind was on

Forthorthe, Kiriha attacked from a completely unexpected angle. Clan couldn't hide her genuine surprise upon hearing Kii's name, betraying her true colors.

"So it really is true... I suspected as much the moment I set foot in this spaceship again. I have a vague memory of its interior."

Kiriha nodded, satisfied with Clan's reaction. She then looked at her with gentle eyes. Not the kind you would regard an enemy with, but an old friend.

"Then, then... You're Kii?!"

The glint in Kiriha's eyes was familiar to Clan. She'd seen it before in the eyes of a runaway girl she met ten years ago just outside Kisshouharukaze City.

"Hello again, Onee-chan," Kiriha said with a childish, innocent smile.

In truth, Kiriha hadn't smiled like that in the last ten years. It was something she'd stopped doing the day she grew up, and this was the first it had resurfaced since. That was just how meaningful her meeting with Koutarou and Clan a decade ago had been.

"What do you mean?"

Ruth, unaware of the situation, quizzically inclined her head. She had no idea why Clan called Kiriha "Kii" or why Kiriha called Clan "Onee-chan."

"The truth is that when Onee— When Clan-dono and Koutarou returned from Forthorthe, they stopped by Kisshouharukaze ten years ago. That was when I first met them."

When she turned back to Ruth, Kiriha was already back to her normal, adult self. She proceeded to tell Ruth her story. About how she ran away from home to the surface, how she chased after a blue comet, and how she stumbled upon Koutarou and Clan... all leading up to the present day.

"So something like that happened..."

Ruth nodded sagely after hearing Kiriha's story. Contrary to expectation, it was now Clan who was cradling her head in agony.

"What a mess... I even pointed a weapon at Kii... I'm glad I lost. I really, truly am..."

She was surprised to learn that Kiriha was Kii, making her all the more appalled she'd tried to kill the little girl she was once so desperate to protect. A chill ran down her spine when she thought about what would have happened if she'd succeeded.

"I was surprised too. To think Clan-dono was my Onee-chan..."

Kiriha felt something similar. The lady in her memories was so completely different from the Clan she knew. That was why she hadn't realized it sooner, despite their identical looks. Granted, Kiriha had her vague childhood memories, a ten-year handicap, and something as illogical as a timeslip working against her. No one could have expected her to figure it out on sight.

Nevertheless, Kiriha was also relieved that she hadn't gone too far.



“And...”

There, Kiriha pulled out a card from her bosom. It was the Kabutonga trading card she'd treasured for so long.

“I'm sorry, I just remembered something urgent. I'll be taking my leave for now.”

“Kiriha-sama?”

“Yeah, I bet... Get going, Kii.”

“Thank you, Onee-chan,” Kiriha said as she ran out of the Cradle.

By the time she passed through the door, Clan and Ruth were already out of her mind. There was something far more pressing at hand. Something she absolutely needed to do.

“Heh, that side of her hasn't changed at all...” Clan giggled as she watched Kiriha run off.

The young Kii of ten years ago was clever and quick to spring into action whenever she made up her mind. And seeing her act this way, Clan could definitely see Kii in the now-grown Kiriha.

“Where is Kiriha-sama going?” Ruth asked.

“Kii has finally discovered a clue about her first love, so she's gone to meet him.”

“Her first love? I see...”

Ruth also had a clue as to his identity. That's why she was certain that something wonderful would happen.

“Ten years have passed since then... and her feelings have remained the same all this time...”

Clan flashed a bright, gentle smile. She was overflowing with compassion—something no one would have thought her capable of just weeks ago.

Clan-sama has changed...

Seeing her this way, Ruth could tell. She was sure that something had

happened to stimulate such a change while she was gone. She also had an idea of what that was.

“You met Her Majesty Alaia in Past Forthorthe, did you not, Clan-sama?”

That was the conclusion Ruth had come to based on the damage to Koutarou’s armor, the erased data, and the updated translation priority list. And now that she knew Clan and Koutarou had traveled at least ten years back in time and that Clan had undergone such a transformation... Ruth was certain that Clan had become friends with Alaia two thousand years in the past.

“Th-That’s not...”

Clan reflexively tried to deny it. Koutarou had asked her to keep it quiet to avoid any problems, and she’d agreed.

“...You’re not wrong. We did indeed travel two thousand years into the past and meet Alaia-san.”

But she reconsidered her stance partway through and revealed the truth to Ruth. Considering what had just happened with Kiriha, she knew she wouldn’t be able to deceive Ruth.

“Then is Satomi-sama...”

The damage, the data, and the translator. The facts of the matter told Ruth in a roundabout way what had really happened to Koutarou in the past.

“He is... He is none other than the person we Forthorthians know as Layous Fatra Veltlion.”

“Satomi-sama is the Blue Knight?!”

Astonishment filled Ruth’s face. She froze in place before the strength left her knees, forcing her to sit down.

“I... see... So Satomi-sama is the knight commander, His Excellency the Blue Knight... That means we’re... Oh, Goddess of Dawn! I thank you for delivering this miracle unto us!”

Ruth leaned forward and began to cry like a child. Her parents had actually been having marriage talks recently, and she was considering accepting for Theia’s sake. Her future husband’s power would make it easier to secure Theia’s

future... But Ruth's heart wasn't in it. In fact, her heart was already devoted to someone else. But if Koutarou was truly the Blue Knight, then she could love him with impunity. There was nothing more joyous than that. Ruth's exalted tears, which continued to flow freely, said as much.

"I'm happy for you, Pardomshiha..."

"Th-Thank you very much, Clan-sama..."

"Having you thank me feels strange."

"Hngh... You never should've attacked us."

"I can't argue there. Jeez... I would like to go back in time and smack myself."

Clan began fiddling with the computer at her hands with a wry smile. There was a lot she wanted to show and tell Ruth. Indeed, it was clear a change had come over her, but she herself remained unaware of it. Ruth had noticed, but she was too busy crying at the moment.

While Kiriha and Ruth had at last learned the truth of what had happened in past Forthorthe, it was kept secret from the others for a while. As Clan and Koutarou had warned, this information had the potential to cause serious problems. Yet even so, Koutarou had no choice but to bring out Signaltin against the various enemies that threatened them. By that summer, everyone knew that Koutarou was the Blue Knight. Thanks to her assistance in the battles they faced, Clan was also accepted into their circle of friends during that time. When the truth about Koutarou finally came out, everyone understood why she'd been helping them.

"Even if you say that, I can't just do that all of a sudden!"

"Why not?"

"Th-That's... Because of everything that's happened..."

Nowadays, seeing Clan in room 106 had become an everyday occurrence. And today in particular, she was sitting at the tea table and talking to Sanae.

"There's no point in sweating the small stuff like that. Your position is especially strong today, so now's your chance."

“Even if you say that...”

Clan cast her gaze downward at the tea table. On it sat an alarm clock with its cover removed. The alarm clock belonged to Koutarou, and Clan had been called to repair it after it suddenly stopped working. So, as Sanae had said, Clan was in an especially strong position today. Nevertheless, that wasn't enough of a motivator for her to be more honest.

“Okay, then I'll show you how when Koutarou comes back!”

“What was that about me?”

Almost on cue, Koutarou returned to the room carrying a tray loaded with a bottle of tea and several cups. It was a hot summer day, and since he'd specifically asked Clan to come over to help, he thought he should show her some hospitality.

“Koutarou, Koutarou, sit down here!”

“Yeah? Okay.”

He was none the wiser to what Sanae and Clan had been discussing, and obligingly followed Sanae's instructions. He set the tray on the table and sat down cross-legged on the cushion he'd been using before.

“What is it?”

“Whee!”

As soon as he was in position, Sanae suddenly dove onto his lap. She'd been doing this since before she ever got her body back, so he wasn't particularly surprised at the gesture. He simply reached out over her back and began pouring tea.

“Koutarou, stretch!”

“Okay, okay.”

As an athlete, Koutarou would do stretches in the apartment from time to time. By sitting in a butterfly position, pushing his feet against each other, and lifting his knees up and down, he could stretch his hips without taking up much room or being too much of a bother to anyone. And when he did it with Sanae lying in his lap, she would move up and down with his legs. It was silly, really,

but Sanae enjoyed it. She would move her arms with the rise and fall like she was swimming.

“I’m getting good at this.”

“Maybe we should actually go to the pool someday.”

“Yeah! That would be fun! Teeheehee...”

Satisfied with Koutarou’s reaction, Sanae let out a giggle and glanced over at Clan. It was like her eyes were saying...

Just do something like this!

Indeed, Sanae was trying to show Clan how to be more intimate with Koutarou.

I-I can’t do that!

But Clan swiftly shook her head back and forth. Sanae’s demonstration was far too high-level for a novice like Clan to attempt. Besides, Koutarou would be flabbergasted if she tried something like that.

“Sanae, have you gotten a little heavier?”

“Yup! I’ve gotten taller!”

“Good thing you got your body back, huh?”

“It’s only natural that we’d keep growing together.”

“Yeah, that makes sense.”

But while the Clan of this world was shyly hiding within her shell, the Clan observing all this felt enlightened.

So that’s how you do it... He would certainly be surprised if I did something, but it should be within the permissible range...

She’d already made up her mind and was now actively looking for clues about how to proceed. Her intention was to collect as much data as possible.

“...What are you doing?”

Seeing Clan fiercely shake her head and then stare at him, Koutarou couldn’t help asking her what was up.

“What?! N-N-Nothing!”

Clan fiercely shook her head yet again, which only made Koutarou more suspicious. He reached out for her face nearly out of reflex. As of late, he’d taken to tugging on her cheeks until she answered him, the same way he did with Theia and Sanae.

“Ah...”

Seeing what he was about to do, Clan broke out into a smile. She’d been feeling jealous whenever he did this to the other girls recently. However, his hand stopped before it reached her face.

“Anyway... So, how’s the alarm clock look, Clan?”

Since he’d called her over for repairs, Koutarou didn’t want to be too rude to her today. Little did he know this ran counter to Clan’s wishes.

“Aw...”

Her expression grew darker. She’d wanted him to go all the way. Not just to rub her cheeks, but to get even closer. That was a feeling that had been blossoming inside of her ever since Koutarou had caught a cold.

“What’s wrong, Clan?”

“Uh... Um, er... The alarm clock, was it?”

Returning to her senses upon seeing Koutarou shoot her a worried look, she hurriedly changed subjects. It did little to ease Koutarou, however.

“Yeah, but are you really okay? You’re acting strange.”

“I’m fine! Ahem... So, about the alarm clock... The problem is a faulty connection between the battery compartment and circuit board. It can be fixed with a little soldering.”

“I see. Then can you do that?”

Fortunately, Clan was able to talk herself out of the situation by getting down to business. Koutarou’s attention shifted over to the clock. The small, visible gap was the reason for the malfunction, and Clan was relieved to see Koutarou staring at it rather than her.

“I can fix it right away... Or, rather, I could if I had the solder to do it. I’m currently out, so I’ll go buy some more,” she said as she stood up.

Soldering was like a form of simple welding, which used different kinds of metals depending on the parts and the project. Clan just so happened to be out of what she needed for this particular repair, so she was happy to go out and cool her head while she bought some more.

“I’ll come too.”

But, contrary to her intentions, Koutarou offered to come with her. He stood up too and headed for the front door without hesitation.

“I-It’s fine! It’s not a big deal...”

“I can’t let you go alone. I’m the one who asked you to fix it.”

Koutarou was willing to ask Clan for help, but he wasn’t the kind of guy that would leave all the work in her lap. He thought it was the least he could do to go buy the necessary solder.

Clan was initially shaken when Koutarou offered to go with her, but once they were out and about, she realized she’d overreacted.

“Hold up, Clan. Let’s let that car past first.”

“Er... Okay.”

There was so much going on in the hustle and bustle of the city that his eyes were never focused on just her. Things may have been different elsewhere... The most problematic of which would’ve been if they were left alone together. But out in public, Clan didn’t have much to worry about.

I guess I am still sheltered when it comes to these sorts of things... I don’t want this...

Clan’s outlook on life had opened up significantly after meeting with Alaia, but her vision was still very narrow when it came to certain things. As someone striving to become a worthy noble, that was something disheartening.

“What is it?”

“I’m just a little embarrassed thinking about how narrow my point of view is...”

“You don’t need to be so bothered over not seeing a single car. No one keeps perfect track of their surroundings, you know?”

“...”

Koutarou had misinterpreted Clan’s statement, assuming she was referring to the passing car. Clan, however, let it slide. She wanted to keep what she really meant a secret.

“Oof!”

Suddenly, up ahead at the pedestrian crosswalk, Clan and Koutarou saw an elderly woman trip and fall.

“Oh no!”

Clan quickly ran over to her. The way she was now, there was no way she could just turn a blind eye to an old woman in need. This particular crosswalk was especially dangerous, as it didn’t have any traffic lights.

“Are you okay?” Clan worriedly asked the elderly woman as she offered her a hand.

“Thank you, dear. I seem to be fine,” the elderly woman replied with a clear voice as she took Clan’s hand.

As she said, she appeared to be fine.

Looks like I didn’t need to step in... Good, good...

Koutarou was just a few steps behind Clan, but since the woman didn’t seem to be hurt, he left things to her.

“It’s dangerous here, so let’s walk across together.”

“Thank you, dear. I’m sorry to be a bother.”

“Hardly.”

Clan held the elderly woman’s hand and escorted her to the sidewalk on the other side of the road. It was the opposite direction from where they were originally headed, but Koutarou didn’t complain. He would’ve done the same

thing.

“Thank you so much. What a kind girl you are.”

“Oh, I still have a long way to go...”

“Ohoho. Come now, dear.”

After thanking Clan, the elderly woman turned an elegant smile to Koutarou.

“Your girlfriend is really something, isn’t she?”

“Yes. She’s very reliable when it counts.”

The girlfriend part aside, Koutarou thought the elderly woman was exactly right. He’d seen this side of her several times now. And because he saw no reason to split hairs with a stranger about his relationship with Clan, he nodded.

“Take good care of her, you hear? Girls like her are hard to find these days.”

“I intend to. Although, we do fight every now and then...”

“Ohoho, that’s okay every once in a while.”

Satisfied with her exchange with Koutarou, the elderly woman turned back to Clan.

“Well, I’ll be on my way. Thank you again, dear.”

“Please do take care of yourself.”

“Oh, that’s right!”

“Oh...?”

The elderly woman turned to leave, but suddenly seemed to remember something and walked back over to Clan. She then leaned in and whispered something in her ear.

“...Hold on tight to that boy, you hear? He’s like my husband. The moment you let him go, he’ll fly off who knows where.”

“E-Excuse me?! ”

“Ohoho! Good luck, dear!”

And with that, the elderly woman walked off, leaving behind a blushing Clan

and a bowing Koutarou.

I wonder what she told her...

Based on how Clan was behaving, it must have been something embarrassing. Koutarou was curious, but not enough to ask outright. Clan had helped a person out of sheer goodwill, and he didn't want to ruin that by saying something stupid.

"All right, I guess we should get going too."

Instead, Koutarou suggested they be on their way. He turned around and entered the crosswalk again, seemingly in a good mood despite not having done anything.

"Ah... Wait a moment!"

In a fluster, Clan hurriedly chased after Koutarou. What the elderly woman had said was still whirling around in her head, so she wasn't paying very much attention to where she was going.

"Kyah!"

And because of that, just like the elderly woman, she tripped and fell in the crosswalk.

"Ouch..."

When Clan tried to get up, a hand suddenly appeared in front of her face.

"Are you hurt, Your Highness?"

When she looked up, she saw Koutarou smiling.

"Thank you, Veltlion. I seem to be fine."



She took hold of his hand and squeezed it tight. He squeezed hers back and pulled her up.

Normally, Clan would have been too stubborn to take his hand. But because of what he said, and what the elderly woman had said before him, she decided to hold on to him. Ultimately, the encounter with the elderly woman was a blessing in disguise.

“It’s dangerous here, so let’s walk across together.”

“Thank you. I’m sorry to be a bother.”

“Hardly.”

Clan and Koutarou had a good laugh as they walked the crosswalk together, hand in hand the entire way.

She did say not to let go of him. And Sanae told me to be bolder...

Even after they were on the other side of the road, Clan continued holding on to Koutarou’s hand.

Clan had tripped and fallen like the elderly woman, and she’d gone through the same exchange with Koutarou. Koutarou was just joking around, but it led to a strange development... Even once they were on the other side of the street, Clan held on to his hand.

“Do you see that post over there, Veltlion? The corner shop to the right of it is our destination.”

Clan was acting a little strange. Her behavior was normal, but she seemed unusually tense. But that wasn’t all. Moreover, the sparkle in her eye, her manners, and the way she carried herself all seemed especially gentle to Koutarou... And he wasn’t exactly sure why he felt that way.

That thing is the only thing I can think of...

If he had to hazard a guess, it had something to do with the fact that he was still holding her hand. They were already several hundred meters from the crosswalk, but Clan’s hand remained in his. Koutarou hadn’t let go of hers, either. He always pushed people away by nature, but for some reason he didn’t

feel like that right now. It was a most mysterious feeling.

“Veltlion? Are you listening?”

“Hmm? Yeah, I heard you. We’re turning by that post, right?”

“...Is something on your mind?”

“You could say that. It’s a delicate problem, so I’m not sure what to do about it.”

“That’s an unusual worry for you. Heh...”

The truth was that Clan knew precisely what Koutarou was thinking about; she simply pretended not to. As he’d said, it was a delicate problem. Moreover, she didn’t have the courage to bring it up outright. This was already testing her limits.

If I try to put it into words, I’ll just... I’ll end up sounding sarcastic and saying something stupid. So, in that case...

Whenever Koutarou and Clan talked, he always ended up teasing her. But he knew good and well that now wasn’t the time for that. So, instead of trying to talk about it, he gave up on words and simply squeezed Clan’s hand tighter.

“Ah...”

A small gasp escaped Clan’s lips. At the same time, tears filled her eyes. She’d anxiously been awaiting Koutarou’s response... And now that he squeezed her hand, she was overwhelmed with relief.

“C’mon, don’t cry... You’re making it seem like this is my fault.”

“I-It is your fault. I’ve been waiting so anxiously...”

“Well, you’re the one doing weird things.”

“Th-That’s... If I’d used words, I only would have said something strange.”

“I know how you feel... I probably would’ve done the same.”

Koutarou smiled wryly at this state of affairs. It was possible that his own nature had had an influence on it, but either way, Clan and Koutarou both had trouble being honest about their feelings. They knew this was a roundabout way to address things, but they couldn’t help themselves. And that was exactly

why Clan gave him a wry smile in return.

“And how would you have reacted if I’d actually said it?”

“I dunno, maybe just by saying that it was hot or we should get moving... What about you?”

“If you’d actually said it... I would have told you that I just forgot to let go, or that I wanted to but you hadn’t yet...”

“Aaand we would’ve ended up fighting like always.”

“I wish we could just fight the way you do with Theiamillis-san...”

“We’re like this precisely because we can’t.”

“Indeed. Heehee...”

Theia and Koutarou fought just as often as Clan and Koutarou did, but Theia attacked with her fists. Clan couldn’t do that, but holding hands wasn’t a bad alternative. Even if they couldn’t be honest with words, they could be perfectly clear with each other this way. And when Clan realized that, their relationship took another step forward. She was now as close to Koutarou as Theia was, or perhaps even closer.

“Ah, we’re here, Veltlion.”

“So this is the place...”

At last, they arrived at their destination. It was an electronics specialty shop that stocked resistors, transistors, and the like. It was filled with all sorts of tiny parts that Koutarou had never seen before. Clan, however, had been here several times before.

“Wha...”

Clan walked right up to the display window. She usually followed behind Koutarou, but she was the one pulling him along this time. There was something on display that elicited that much excitement from her, and she stared at it through the glass with Koutarou by her side.

“Hmm, that’s an interesting looking thing.”

“Isn’t it? It’s a radio that uses vacuum tubes. Next to it is an amplifier that also

uses them.”

Clan’s eyes were sparkling at the sight of the assembly kit for a radio and accompanying amplifier. They were simple makes using vacuum tubes. From a technological standpoint, this was old hat to Clan. But nevertheless, the design of several vacuum tubes lined up in a wooden case was intriguing to her. It had a certain aesthetic appeal.

“This seems like it would look good sitting on top of a wooden chest.”

“I am surprised you can tell.”

“I did live in the ancient past for a while, you know?”

“Yeah, heehee. That’s true.”

Even as she spoke to Koutarou, Clan’s eyes remained fixed on the display window. Its design and its neat presentation as an assembly kit all spoke to her. She looked like a child admiring the latest toy.

Come to think of it, she didn’t get along very well with her family, did she? I bet she never got to fully enjoy her childhood...

Koutarou knew a bit about Clan’s family situation. Her sheltered lifestyle was in part because of her poor relationship with her family, her late grandmother being the only exception.

Maybe that had something to do with how she treated that woman too...

Koutarou couldn’t help wondering if the elderly woman had reminded Clan of her own grandmother in some way. But here she was, practically glued to the display... If Clan’s grandmother had been here, what would she have done?

“Should I buy it?”

Normally, Koutarou never would have been forthright enough to ask that. But spurred on by what had happened today and the warm sensation of Clan’s hand still in his, he was able to be a little more honest.

“Y-You don’t have to do that! I have money, so I could just come back later and—”

Clan reflexively shook her head just like she always did. But her hand had

other ideas, as it squeezed Koutarou's all on its own.

"Just shut up. I'll buy it, so you put it together."

That was the reason Koutarou didn't hesitate to say that, and he squeezed her hand back just as hard.

"...You're so selfish. You always just do whatever you want..."

Clan gave a seemingly dissatisfied response, but her tone couldn't have been brighter. Betraying her true feelings, an equally bright smile was plastered on her face. Despite what she'd said, it was clear she was overjoyed. Not even Koutarou failed to pick up on that.

"I don't really think that's the case this time."

"Er... Um, I'm sorry for being so stubborn. And Veltlion... thank you..."

"Sure. This is actually pretty convenient, you know?"

"Sometimes things are just easier to say this way..."

"Hahaha, you can say that again!"

"Heeheehee..."

They shared another laugh together as they stepped inside the store. They bought the solder they were after, as well as the vacuum tube radio kit. But neither was the most important thing they went home with that day, holding hands all the while.

In order to fix Koutarou's alarm clock, all Clan needed to do was remove the battery compartment and then properly solder it back in place. With her exceptional skill and steady hand, the entire process took less than ten minutes. But in stark contrast, the vacuum tube radio got a very different treatment. She took her time putting it together.

"Veltlion, could you get me the 10 kilohm resistors?"

"The bag's full of these things. You'll have to give me more than just a number."

"Heh, okay. I think it's brown, black, orange, and gold."

“Brown, black, orange... and gold. Found one.”

“Thank you.”

The reason for the slower pace was simple: Clan was having Koutarou help. Since he was completely unfamiliar with this kind of work, he was frequently holding things up. Clan could have done the whole project much faster on her own—within a day even. But here they were on day three of working on it together. Since they only worked on it when they both had free time, however, “day three” actually fell two weeks after they’d originally purchased the kit.

“Anyway, Clan, I’ve been meaning to ask... What even is a vacuum tube? It’s sort of glowing on the package, but that’s not the point of it, right?”

“Vacuum tubes served the same function as semiconductors before those were invented, and they have plenty of uses. For radios, their primary function is to turn the radio waves in the air back into audio signals, or to enhance said signals.”

“That makes it sound like it’s something really important.”

“It is. You can say that all modern electronics began with the vacuum tube.”

Rather than just the radio, Clan was interested in building it *with* Koutarou. As such, she didn’t mind all the time it took to explain things just for him. If anything, she was actually enjoying it. It was obvious enough that even Koutarou noticed upon entering day three of the build. She’d seemed so disappointed when they’d had to put it off, but now she was smiling brighter than ever as they worked away on it.

“Even in Forthorthe?”

“Yes. Even in Forthorthe, the vacuum tube was born from research on lightbulbs. So in a way, Earth is following in Forthorthe’s footsteps.”

“So that’s why you’re so interested in these tube things, huh?”

“Yes. I’ve only ever seen pictures of them in old documents... They have a certain warmth to them.”

“I can get that. They’re pretty cool.”

“Heehee, they certainly are.”

The two of them chatted away as they worked on building the radio. Considering the talk-to-work ratio, however, progress was slow. Nevertheless, Clan was still in a good mood. She was smiling whether she was working or talking, and Koutarou was just having fun watching her. In a sense, this little project they'd embarked on together was no different from them holding hands... although neither of them had realized that yet. As things stood, they were simply enjoying their time together.

"Are you thirsty, Clan?"

"A little, now that you mention it."

"Okay, lemme go get some tea."

"Hold on. Let me get it today."

"What about the radio?"

"Heehee... What's the rush?"

Over the course of the project so far, Koutarou had been the designated host while Clan kept working away. Feeling like her womanliness was taking a hit, however, Clan was eager to offer to do it this time around and practically leaped up from her seat. She took a single step... and then went down.

"Kyah!"

She'd been sitting for so long that one of her legs had fallen asleep without her even noticing. Suddenly springing up like that, she couldn't support her own weight and fell straight for the tatami mat.

"Clan!"

Seeing her fall, Koutarou threw his hand out to grab hold of her. She ended up pulling him down with her, but Koutarou was okay with that. It was far better than letting her fall helplessly. Even if the tatami mat might break her fall some, she could still be hurt.

"Velt—"

"Ugh!"

And so Koutarou fell to the floor with Clan in his arms. It knocked the wind

out of both of them for a second, but fortunately, that was the worst it did.

“Owowow...”

“Are you hurt, Your Highness?”

Koutarou had asked her the same thing two weeks ago when she tripped and fell. He was even looking at her the same way. The only difference was that rather than Clan being on the ground in front of him, she was safely in his arms this time.

“I, um... Thank you, Veltlion. I think I’m fine...”

Clan was physically fine, but she was an emotional mess. It was only inevitable given the situation, but she’d never been so close to Koutarou. She couldn’t stop herself from blushing. Moreover, they were in a rather awkward position. Clan was lying on top of Koutarou like she was about to kiss him.

“Be careful, okay? Yurika does this a lot too.”

Koutarou didn’t seem to particularly mind, however. He was often this close with Sanae, and Yurika was constantly falling over on a near daily basis. So in Koutarou’s eyes, this wasn’t anything particularly out of the ordinary. He simply smiled at Clan the way he always did.

“...”

Nevertheless, Clan was so flustered that she’d fallen silent. Being this close to Koutarou made her blush furiously... yet she didn’t want it to end. Like she’d talked about with Sanae, she genuinely wanted to get closer with Koutarou. This was just too sudden for her.

“What’s up, Clan?”

“...”

“Clan?”

Clan avoided making eye contact with Koutarou, but she made no attempt to get off of him. She’d said she wasn’t hurt, but she was red in the face and seemed to be hiding something. Koutarou was puzzled.

“Um... well...”

Clan moved her hand ever so slightly, gripping Koutarou's shirt... and tugging at emotions within him.

She's cuter than ever. This is the first time I've seen Clan like this... No, I guess there was two weeks ago.

Such sentiments welled up in Koutarou's chest as he looked at Clan. He felt like his heart was being squeezed. And there, he too fell silent. He didn't want to say something stupid and ruin things.

"..."

"..."

Their hearts and minds were captivated with the same thoughts, wondering what they could do to make this moment last forever.

But since neither of them knew how the other felt, they were both worried. What should they do? What *could* they do? Sanae or Kiriha would both be laughing at them for fretting over such things, but Clan and Koutarou still just couldn't be honest with one another. They didn't know what to do and they were desperate... oblivious to the fact that they didn't have to do anything at all.

"..."

"..."

Time passed—it felt simultaneously like an eternity and like the blink of an eye. They both continued to worry and wonder, lost as to what they should be doing. And still very much unaware that they were already doing it.

"S-Say, Clan..."

As expected, it was Koutarou who finally broke the silence. He was just as worried as Clan was, but his personality drove him to action.

"Y-Yes?"

Anxiety filled Clan's chest and she nervously clenched her fist trying to figure out what she should say. As a result, she ended up tugging more on Koutarou's shirt.

“I feel like I’ll screw things up if I try to use words, so let me use actions instead...”

“I... I don’t mind...”

“Then...”

As Clan continued to tug at his shirt, Koutarou gently lifted his arm and wrapped it around Clan.

“...”

He still said nothing. Just silently hugged her.

“...”

Clan was equally speechless, but she wanted to answer him in kind. She gently lifted herself up and forward, pressing her lips against Koutarou’s cheek before lying back down on top of him.

“...”

“...”

Time continued to pass in silence, but it was fundamentally different from before. Rather than nervously avoiding eye contact, they were warmly smiling at each other now. Something precious had surfaced and settled into its rightful place.

A total of three weeks after Clan and Koutarou purchased it, the vacuum tube radio was finally complete. It had taken six hours of work, far over the time commitment listed on the box.

“That took quite a while...” Koutarou sighed as he looked over the completed radio.

The radio itself sat in a wooden case with knobs and five vacuum tubes that stood out like chimneys. The whole thing glowed with a soft, warm light.

“Was there any reason to hurry?” Clan asked with a smile.

She too looked over the radio, reaching out and putting her hand in Koutarou’s as she did. Without batting an eye, he held it tightly.

“Not at all.”

“If anything, I feel like it was over too soon. Heehee...”

The reason why the project had been so delayed was obvious. The building process was frequently derailed with Clan and Koutarou often ending up doing something else entirely. Over the past week, they were lucky to get one part installed for every twenty minutes of break they took.

“Since it’s finally built, why don’t we listen to it? It would be a waste to just stare at it.”

“Jeez, where’s your sense of elegance?”

“I don’t know what’s elegant about an alien building a vacuum tube radio.”

And the reason for all the derailing was the change that had come over their relationship. It was just a couple of weeks ago that both of them had felt tense to be near each other, but things couldn’t be more different now.

“Would you dare say that to Alaia-san?!”

“Of course not. She’s elegant by nature.”

“Then say the same thing about me!”

“Oh, can it. You’re just an alien.”

“Silence, neanderthal!”

Well, things may have *sounded* the same, but they too were different. Clan and Koutarou were smiling at each other and holding hands as they called each other names. It couldn’t have been more obvious they were joking around. And perhaps that was the most important difference of all. Rather than just physically being connected by holding hands, they were holding each other’s hearts too.

“Me neanderthal, so me smash radio!”

“Ah, wait a moment. The battery’s not in yet.”

Snap.

“There you go, neanderthal.”

“Ooga!”

Click.

Despite his primitive threat to smash the radio, Koutarou very gently turned the power on. When he did, soft static began coming from the speaker. Clan carefully turned one of the dials, and the soft static clarified into a voice.

“...There will be heavy rain in the Ogasawara Archipelago today. Make sure you take an umbrella if you’re going out...”

“It works!”

“Sounds like we found the weather.”

“It’s really something that the vacuum tube glows, you know?”

“Well, it was derived from a lightbulb. There are vacuum tubes that don’t glow too, but these were crafted specifically to do so.”

“I can see why. The warm glow is nice.”

The whole radio seemed to glow with the dim, orange light from the vacuum tubes. It was almost like an old oil lamp. It had a delightful charm to it.

“It’s even more wonderful than I had expected...”

Clan rested her chin on the tea table and admired the radio in front of her. She’d seen an example at the store, but somehow this one looked different. Perhaps it was the warm light and classical music playing as the radio program changed.

“Heh... heehee...”

But perhaps most importantly, it was the fact that she’d made this one with Koutarou. Clan grinned to herself as she fiddled with the knobs and dials.

“You look like you’re in a great mood.”

“I’m allowed to be every once in a while.”

“Once in a while? Hasn’t it been pretty much every day lately?”

“Has it...?”

“Yeah. You’ve been smiling nonstop.”

“Goodness... Heh, and you’ve just been watching me?”

“...”

“Heehee.”

Building the radio had been more fun than Clan was expecting, and it continued to be fun even after it was complete... yet she was still a little sad that it was done. That was the only downside.

“But... you didn’t find it boring to put something like this together, Veltlion?”

“Guys tend to like this sort of stuff.”

“I’m glad to hear it.”

“Besides, I’m always asking you for favors, so I certainly don’t mind doing things like this with you every now and again.”

“Can you not just honestly say ‘thank you’?”

“Yeah, that’s probably the problem.”

“I forgive you. I can’t honestly say it either, heh.”

Koutarou and Clan’s relationship had changed dramatically over the past couple of weeks, but in the most subtle way. They were doing and saying most of the same things they always had, but the feelings behind it all were different.

“Besides... you’ve been rather nice. Almost every day, in fact.”

“Have I?”

“Yes. You’ve been ever so gentle.”

“And you’ve just been watching me?”

“Yes. Heehee...”

“Then I guess I should be a little rougher from time to time.”

There, Koutarou took Clan’s hand and pulled her close. He then gently wrapped his arms around her neck and squeezed.

“Ow, that hurts!”

Despite what Clan said, she wasn’t in any pain. In fact, she was giggling. She

knew good and well that Koutarou would never actually hurt her on purpose. He was holding on to her tightly for a very different reason.

“Jeez, Veltlion. You’re so oafish...”

Clan knew his reason, and she was happy about it. She just felt that playing along would be best for both of them. Yet even as she complained, she lovingly stroked the arms that embraced her.

“I am a neanderthal after all.”

“And I’m an alien, and a quack princess at that.”

“Ooga!”

“Kyah! Ahahahaha, if you insist on your oafish ways, I will turn you into green goo!”

Lately, Clan and Koutarou had been watching movies together as they worked. The aliens in movies always used lasers to turn their enemies into green goo, and it had become something of a running joke between them.

“Oh, how scary... Actually, now that I think about it, is there any truth to that green goo stuff?”

“It’s so inefficient that I wouldn’t dream of using it, but I could certainly make a laser that would do something along those lines.”

“That’s an evil alien for ya.”

“Mind your tongue, you backwater ape.”

“Ooga!”

Koutarou looked down at Clan, and she looked up at him. They were shockingly close. If one of them moved just a hair, they would inadvertently kiss. Unlike the last time this happened, however, both of them were calm. Neither could admit it, but they trusted each other implicitly.

“Ooga booga...”

“You don’t have to be so scared to touch it. The radio won’t break that easily.”

“Booga.”

“I’ve only started to appreciate it recently, but you’re overly cautious with things I treasure, aren’t you?”

“...Oo...”

“Jeez, you are so... Teeheehee.”

Clan and Koutarou thus sat chatting with each other for some time. About what happened yesterday, about a good book... The topic shifted and the conversation evolved frequently. It was like instead of enjoying talking about something, they were simply enjoying talking to each other.

“All right, let’s go.”

And their casual conversation came to an abrupt end as the orange light of sunset began streaming in through the window. Koutarou unwrapped his arms, freeing Clan.

“Oh? Where to?”

Clan looked a little lonely. She was personally hoping things would stay like this for as long as possible, so she stubbornly stayed in his lap with a sullen expression.

“The store.”

“Which store?”

“The one where I bought this radio.”

“What are you going to do there?”

“You’re so slow on the uptake.”

“Stop putting on airs and just tell me already.”

“We’re going to buy the vacuum tube amplifier.”

“The amplifier...? But why?”

“You *really* are slow on the uptake... Consider this my way of keeping things going.”

“Ah...”

There, Clan finally realized what Koutarou was getting at. Now that the radio

was finished, he wanted to move on to the amplifier. And just like with their earlier chatting, it wasn't about the build... It was about spending time together. Koutarou wanted to keep that up.

"A-Are you sure? The amplifier is a bit expensive..."

"You don't want it?"

"I do! Very much! But we won't need just the amplifier. There's also the record player, so..."

A vacuum tube amplifier needed a record player and speaker as well. Unlike the radio which could be used on its own, the amplifier required the full set of kits—which would cost a fair bit more. Clan felt bad about that.

"Don't worry about the money. I have funds that I only use for important things."

Ever since Koutarou started work at his part-time job, he'd been putting away the majority of his pay. He believed that it was more efficient to save and spend when necessary rather than constantly be spending casually.

"...Is this important?" Clan asked worriedly.

In the past, she'd always had complete confidence in her worth. But as a more mature woman, that subject gave her great pause. She still felt like she was far from an ideal noble.

"Isn't it? There's not much that's more important than this."

Spending money on this was like making an investment in their relationship. It was embarrassing, but Koutarou mustered his courage to take that step forward.

"You're right. You're so right... This *is* important!"

And Clan felt the same way. This was a precious, important investment.

"Then get up and let's get going."

"Okay."

Clan had been stubbornly sitting in Koutarou's lap, hoping to keep the conversation going. But after hearing what he said, she sprang to her feet. Her

long hair slapped Koutarou's face like a whip.

"Ouch... I know that you're happy, but calm down a little."

"I most certainly will not! You're the one who got me so excited, so I expect you to take responsibility!"

"As you wish, my princess..."

"Now, let us go!"

"Yes, yes. As you wish."

And so Clan and Koutarou left room 106 together. They were only going out to buy a sound amplifier assembly kit, but it didn't look that way.

It's like they're going out to buy an engagement ring...

That was what it seemed like to the Clan observing all this, and that beautiful sight was the last she saw of her dream.

The first thing she saw when she woke up was a familiar wooden ceiling and a familiar boy looking down at her.

"Are you awake, Clan?"

"Hmm... Veltlion?"

"From the look on your face, I'm guessing things didn't turn out so bad."

"Um..."

Clan stared up at Koutarou and racked her brain. Her dream hadn't abruptly cut in the middle of something, so she hadn't awoken in a daze like Harumi had. She thought back clearly on what she'd seen, recalling something similar to this.

That's right... Veltlion saw my sleeping face...

When she remembered it, she blushed a little. But she wouldn't let it throw her off anymore. It was still embarrassing, but she believed her relationship with Koutarou was beyond such things now.

"It was awful at first. I mean, *I* was awful at first. The worst of me was on full display."

“Figures. Immediately after you fell asleep, there was a big furrow in your brow. Just like this.”

“Was it really that bad?”

Clan put her hands on her cheeks and blushed slightly. She was embarrassed she’d made a face like that.

“Yeah. I mean, it didn’t last long, so it’s not like I got a really good look or anything.”

“I see... So we really did perceive time differently.”

“So it seems. The rulemaker is over there, so if you want to know more, go ask her.”

“That’s not necessary. I believe that being able to freely find the answer to anything is the same as not knowing anything.”

“That’s your way of saying you need to figure things out for yourself, right?”

“Yes, that would be the gist of it... Our relationship didn’t improve because someone else told us what was wrong with it, right?”

“Yeah... I guess that was an important part of it.”

Koutarou understood what she meant. He and the other girls weren’t able to make peace with Clan just because they knew it was the right thing to do. In fact, they hadn’t been sure that it was. They had to feel that out for themselves.

“That is often the case in science as well. Like I said before, vacuum tubes were derived from lightbulbs.”

“Vacuum tubes?”

At the mention of vacuum tubes, Koutarou cocked his head to the side. That was when it hit Clan.

Oh, we haven’t talked about that...

It was only in her dream. Here in the real world, Clan and Koutarou had never discussed vacuum tubes.

“Yes, er, well, you see... vacuum tubes were used before semiconductors. They were created from modified lightbulbs.”

A sad look overtook Clan as she explained. She was disappointed that Koutarou didn't know about vacuum tubes. Of course, like with Harumi and Maki, she was glad to be back in her own place and time. But nevertheless, the vacuum tube radio had left a deep impression on her.

"So if a higher power— Well, I suppose she's right over there, but nevertheless. If a higher power had simply told man how to make the perfect lightbulb, we never would have had vacuum tubes."

"Because it was a byproduct of the research, huh?"

Koutarou had no idea what Clan was really thinking as she explained this, but he could readily see the melancholy look in her eyes. Did it have something to do with vacuum tubes?

"So, what exactly *is* a vacuum tube?"

It was only after praying for the return of Clan and the other girls at the ruins that Koutarou truly began to understand his own feelings for them. And with that understanding, he now hated more than ever to see them sad. So if vacuum tubes were the only clue he had to go off of, he would pursue that lead as far as possible.

"Veltlion..."

Clan didn't really know what Koutarou was thinking either. She had no idea why he'd zeroed in on the vacuum tubes, but it was clear that he had.

It was his own earnest, clumsy way of showing his feelings. Clan too would have to respond in her own clumsy way to get to the truth, however... Just like how the Clan in her dream had reached out for Koutarou's outstretched hand. She had no need to be envious of herself in the dream world because she was absolutely sure she could do the same thing here. She had the necessary groundwork. All she needed now was courage. And so Clan smiled.

"Its structure is almost identical to a lightbulb. The key difference is another stripe next to the light-emitting part, and the light-emitting part controls the flow to it."

"Hmm... So when it gets hot, electricity runs across that other stripe?"

“My, that’s surprisingly sharp for you. And exactly correct. Now, try to imagine the next step. What would happen if it got even hotter?”

“...More electricity would run through it?”

“Precisely. By taking advantage of that, you can control and amplify the electricity. All basic electronics, really.”

“So you could, like, change the volume that way?”

“Correct again. You really are on the ball today.”

Even though they were each unaware of what the other was thinking, there seemed to be a sort of tacit understanding between Clan and Koutarou. An understanding that they needed to try things. To feel them out. Even if it was just chatting to kill time. Who knew what might come of it, after all? Just like with vacuum tubes.

Time passed and it was now almost May. Koutarou and the girls had long had their memories wiped of the events of April 5th so that they could go about their daily lives as normal. This had its disadvantages, however, in that it meant Clan remembered nothing of peeking into another world.

“What’s that thing you’ve been carrying around with you lately? A lightbulb?” Koutarou asked her one day.

“This? It’s a vacuum tube,” she replied.

“What’s that?”

“Vacuum tubes were the precursors to semiconductors. They’re essentially modified lightbulbs.”

After having their memories wiped of that night, there was no way Clan and Koutarou could know they were repeating a conversation they’d already had.

“Okay, I get that much, but... Why are you carrying it around? It looks pretty fragile.”

“It’s actually already broken.”

“What?”

“It was a broken tube I replaced, but I couldn’t bring myself to throw it away...”

“Ah, I get that. I have trouble throwing out my old bats and stuff too.”

“That’s surprisingly romantic of you.”

“Hey, that’s my line. Anyhoo, does that mean you have an emotional attachment to that thing?”

“Actually, I had a dream about a vacuum tube radio... I thought it was a lovely idea, so I bought one to build for myself as a sort of charm.”

“A charm...? Oh yeah, I remember everyone talking about that.”

Koutarou and the girls had all concluded back in April that it would be too sad to forget absolutely everything about the dreams they’d had. So they all petitioned the girl from the ruins to allow them to remember their dreams as exactly that—dreams. That way they would be harmless enough, and the girls could choose to go about acting on them as they pleased. That was why Harumi now wore a ribbon around her wrist and why Maki had gotten a pair of headphones. It was also why Clan had bought a vacuum tube radio.

“Honestly, you should pay a little more attention to me yourself.”

Experiencing firsthand just how thickheaded Koutarou was when it came to women, Clan sent a sharp glance his way. It seemed that, no matter the world, women didn’t have a lot of tolerance for that.

“I try, but it’s pretty hard to do things you’re not used to.”

“My... That’s surprisingly obedient of you.”

Koutarou would normally put up a fight—especially against Clan—but for some reason, he didn’t this time. Clan’s bespectacled eyes opened wide in surprise.

“I also had a dream that left a pretty strong impression on me. It was about my mother scolding me.”

“Whatever for?”

“Roughly put, she was telling me to be nicer to people,” Koutarou said with a

shrug.

After having that dream, Koutarou had scrutinized his life and come to realize that he was causing trouble for the girls in his own way. In Clan's case, it was frequently pushing her buttons on purpose. That was just sort of the relationship they had, but he now appreciated that he took it a tad too far sometimes. So at times like this, he now tried to dial it back.

"And so you had a change of heart..."

"Yeah. Well, I wouldn't say it was a change of heart, but it at least gave me a direction."

"Because changing yourself is hard?"

"Yeah, something like that."

Even when you want to change, it's difficult to unlearn what's long been ingrained into you. For example, it might take years for Koutarou to hold himself back from blurting out insults at Clan. He'd only just started on his journey of correcting that, but things would slowly change over time.

"So be it. If you're making an effort, it would be cruel to hold you responsible for what you can't help."

"Your generosity is a great honor, Your Highness."

"Pfft... You only do that at times like this."

"Well, speaking of changing... I think you girls have been changing too."

"How so?"

"Hmm, it's hard to put into words. It's like your presence has grown softer... you know?"

"Heh, if we hadn't, then there would be no point in our charms."

"Your charms, huh?"

"In my case... mine's for courage."

There, Clan pensively put a finger to her chin. Each of the girls had picked a different charm for a different reason, and Clan's represented courage.

“I think you have more than enough courage already, Clan.”

Koutarou gave Clan a puzzled look. He had seen her panicked plenty of times, but he’d never seen her truly frightened.

“That’s not the kind of courage I mean.”

At his core, Koutarou still didn’t understand women. Clan flashed a wry smile, but she kept hope alive that he’d grow.

“Then what kind of courage did you mean?”

“That’s...”

Clan’s smile disappeared as she looked down at her hand. In it was the broken vacuum tube—a part of the radio she’d bought as a charm. After staring at it for a second, she looked back up at Koutarou.

“...This,” she said as she took his hand.

It was a simple enough gesture. Sanae or Kiriha would hold hands with Koutarou on a daily basis. But that wasn’t the case for Clan. There were a plethora of obstacles in her way, and she couldn’t reach over them until she had the courage... Until now. But it still wasn’t easy. The desperate look in her eyes and the bright red color on her cheeks as she squeezed Koutarou’s hand said as much.

“Clan...”

“I seek the kind of courage... to do the right thing when the time comes.”

“That kind of courage, huh...?”

Koutarou could feel the warmth from Clan’s hand, and from her heart. In broad strokes, his worries were ultimately similar to hers.

The courage to do the right thing... That’s what I need too.

Koutarou denying people and pushing them away was, in the end, because he lacked courage. So he shared that goal with Clan and squeezed her hand back as he stared at the vacuum tube too.

“Veltlion...”

Clan’s eyes shot wide open. She hadn’t had the confidence to hope for this

outcome. That was exactly why she needed courage, and exactly why a smile broke out on her face.

“...”

“So you *will* squeeze back... You’re always being mean, so this is a... a little...”

“...”

Koutarou simply squeezed Clan’s hand, not saying a word. If he opened his mouth, he knew he would say something stupid. That much hadn’t changed—this Koutarou was every bit the same as in the other world.

“Let’s go. We’re almost at the store, right?”

“D-Do you see that post over there, Veltlion? The corner shop to the right of it is our destination...”

Today, Koutarou and Clan were headed for an electronics specialty shop. Koutarou had recently kicked his alarm clock in his sleep, rendering it nonfunctional. He’d asked Clan to repair it, and so they headed out for some solder to get the job done.

“C’mon, don’t cry... You’re making it seem like it’s my fault.”

“It is your fault.”

“You started this.”

Koutarou pulled on Clan’s hand and dragged her around the corner to the store. There was no doubt about it—it was the exact same one from her dream.

“So you bought the vacuum tube radio here too?”

“That’s right... I-It has such a classic design... I j-just thought it was wonderful...”

“Seems like it would look good sitting on top of a wooden chest.”

“I’m surprised... that you can tell.”

A strange sense of déjà vu overtook Clan. She felt like she’d had this exchange with Koutarou before—a holdover from her dream of another world. But Clan’s memories of it were vague and hazy at best, so she couldn’t identify it as the

source of the feeling. Nevertheless, it was enough to put a smile back on her face.

“I did live in the ancient past for a while, you know?”

“Yeah, heehee. That’s true.”

After wiping away her tears, Clan peered through the display window. Before her sat the vacuum tube radio she so adored, and next to it was the vacuum tube amplifier. Koutarou watched as she admired them lovingly.

“Say, Clan...”

“Yes? What is it?”

“Nah, never mind.”

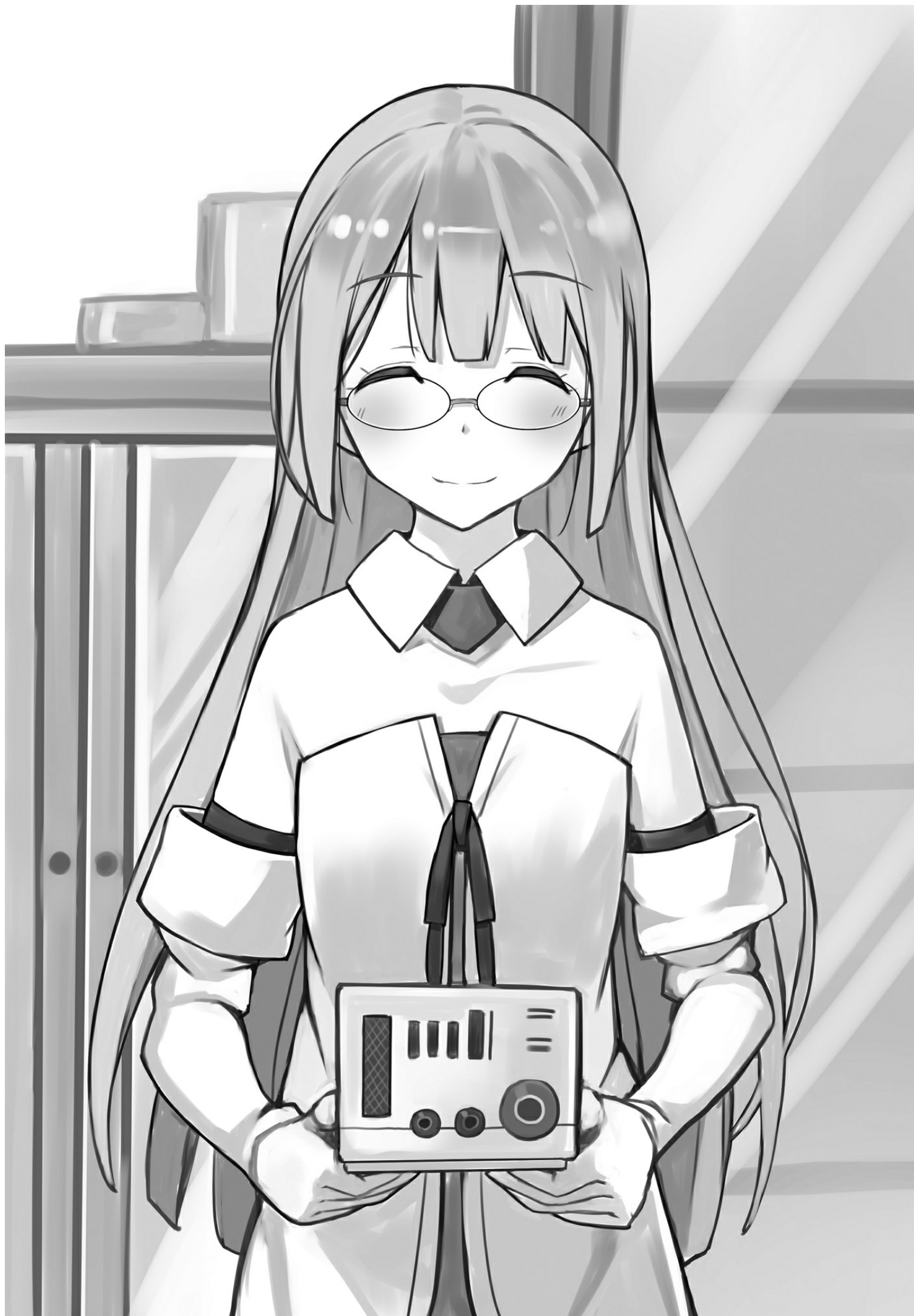
“What a strange boy you are...”

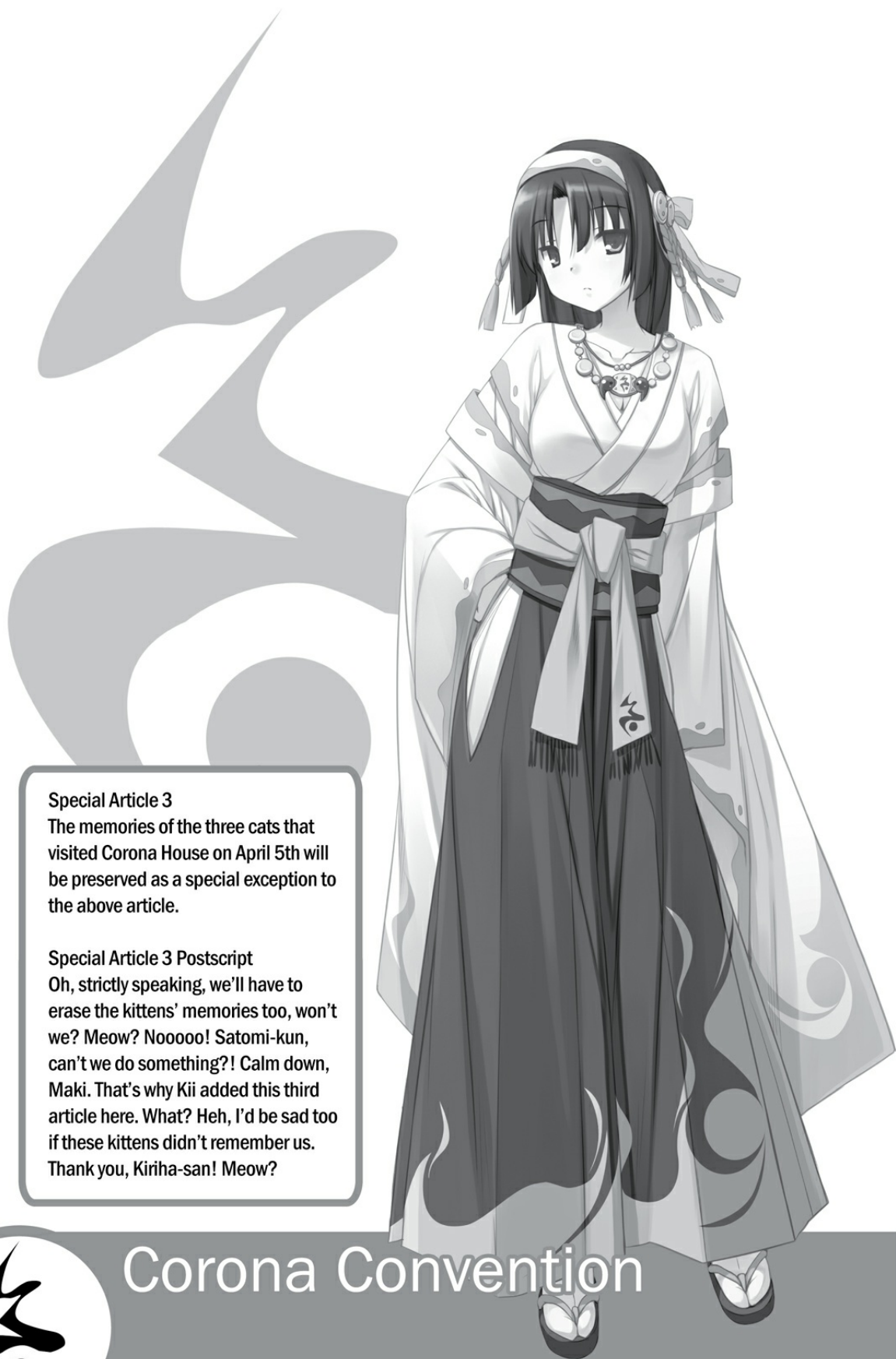
“I don’t want to hear that from a strange girl like you.”

“How interesting... When we’re holding hands like this, your words don’t seem to have their usual edge.”

“Ugh...”

In the end, Koutarou didn’t ask. There was no point. He simply bought the vacuum tube amplifier kit without consulting with Clan, and they spent the next several weeks assembling it.





Special Article 3

The memories of the three cats that visited Corona House on April 5th will be preserved as a special exception to the above article.

Special Article 3 Postscript

Oh, strictly speaking, we'll have to erase the kittens' memories too, won't we? Meow? Nooooo! Satomi-kun, can't we do something?! Calm down, Maki. That's why Kii added this third article here. What? Heh, I'd be sad too if these kittens didn't remember us. Thank you, Kiriha-san! Meow?



Corona Convention

New!

April 5th, 2011

Afterword

Long time no see, everyone. It's the author, Takehaya. This time sees the release of volume 33 of *Invaders of the Rokujouma!*? There's also an attached drama CD being sold with the special edition in Japan, so work got pretty busy for me there for a while. Luckily, everything got done on time. Whichever edition you purchased, I hope you enjoyed it.

Now, we have a lot to cover here. Just like last time, the new drama CD is part of the ten year anniversary celebration, and BOOK☆WALKER thankfully took the initiative to make it happen. More specifically, they held a vote on their site about which of the other nine girls should be featured on the CD. Maki was the winner, and Clan was the runner-up. As such, Maki is featured on the drama CD and Clan is featured in the second half of this volume. As expected, the two invaders who didn't get much of a showing in the anime had the strongest appeal. They've been consistently popular in the polls, and I think Maki ultimately won out against Clan because Clan was already featured in the drama CDs for volumes 7.5 and 8.5. Really, these results tell me that there isn't that much of a difference between the girls in terms of popularity. I think Maki and Clan had an especially strong showing here because people want to hear more from the defectors after switching sides.

In fact, the running was pretty neck and neck. I think the results and the order of popularity will simply change based on what the poll is. Like who should get the next drama CD, who would make the best wife, who you'd want to go on a date with, who you'd want to live with, and so on. Yurika would likely also be consistently popular... except for if we voted on best roommate. (Ha!)

Anyway, Maki was ultimately chosen to be featured on the drama CD, and that's where the trouble began. Maki is the most serious of the girls, so any romantic development with her needs to go through the proper steps. In other words, it would take time. Fitting all that into the length of a drama CD (75 minutes at max) was a challenge. I racked my brain over how to make that happen, and the answer was Dozy. A free spirit like a kitten could lead the

serious Maki down unexpected roads. And once I had that, everything else fell into place.

I wrote a short story for the drama CD and handed that over to the anime's scriptwriter, Yasukawa Shougo-san, to be turned into a script. We were able to get together the vocal cast and production team from the anime (which is an amazing feat), and the making of the drama CD was a huge success.

Harumi/Alaia's voice actress, Takamoto Megumi, did a wonderful job last time, and Kitou Akari did another wonderful job as Maki. The anime only covered about halfway through volume 7, so diving right into Maki from volume 33 was quite a challenge. And not only did she have to depict old and new, but also the gradual shift between them. I'm sorry for being so demanding, but I knew the readers would really want to hear what Maki is like once she gets along with everyone. My hands were tied. (The perfect excuse.) All I can say is that I owe a very big thank you to Kitou Akari-san.

Incidentally, the Heart Invaders—Naganawa Maria (Theia), Oomori Nichika (Yurika), Suzuki Eri (Sanae), Tazawa Masumi (Kiriha)—as well as Kitou Akari have all grown so much since the anime! They're full-fledged adults now, although they haven't gotten any taller. You always hope for that one last growth spurt in your twenties, but that wasn't the case for them. Nevertheless, they've hardly changed otherwise. They were all squealing with nostalgia.

I'm glad to see them all doing so well. It's a relief. It goes without saying, but professionals really are something.

Once everything was all done and over with, I realized that this was the series' sixth drama CD and that almost no other series has gotten this many of them. That speaks volumes to your support as readers, as well as how blessed I am to have this production team and cast. I'm so very grateful to all of you to be able to create something like this for the series' ten year anniversary.

Now then, let's move on to discussing this volume. Volume 33 consists of three short stories from *Invaders of the Rokujouma!? Hercules!* for the first half and a freshly-penned story for the second.

Looking back on the short stories, they were released in January, March, and May of 2017 respectively. That was around the time volume 25 came out,

during the Forthorthe arc. Essentially, they were all written before the group traveled to Forthorthe—somewhere around the time volume 23 took place. That was quite a while ago, but the girls' hearts and minds were already made up, so I guess things weren't too different from how they are now. Maybe when it comes to honesty, but certainly not emotion.

As for the second half of the novel, we have our feature about Koutarou and Clan becoming a couple. Both of them are so stubborn that there are a lot of twists and turns before they finally get there. I can only hope you enjoy that tantalizing feeling. Honestly, I could imagine Clan's voice actress, Tamura Yukari-san, struggling with that. Well, not *her*. I think she'd pull it off flawlessly. During recording, Tamura Yukari-san was as accurate and precise as a professional sniper. Oh, but she has a playful side too. She actually voices one of the stray kittens that appear in the drama CD. Probably. The kitten roles were up for grabs for any of the vocal talent present, and she offered to do one. So I guess... you could call her a playful sniper?

Speaking of, the kitten roles were surprisingly popular. Everyone wanted to get a shot at them. (Ha!) Anyway, I think that about covers it for this volume. Let's talk about what's to come.

I touched on it a little in the last afterword, but the next volume will be about the underground dwellers' spiritual energy technology. Vandarion's faction got both some magical and spiritual energy technology via Elexis, but they were far from understanding it. They merely assumed that it was some new technology from DKI. The remnants of Vandarion's faction now, however, know better.

So the next volume will involve their scheme to try to get their hands on it. Of course, Koutarou and the girls will do what they can to stop them... but things won't be as easy as they have been before now that they're facing more thorough opponents. Will they really be able to keep the underground dwellers' technology safe as the battle becomes more than a simple clash of strength? Please look forward to finding out.

I think this is a good place, so I'll wrap things up here. Allow me to end with the usual acknowledgments.

I would like to thank the editorial department for their assistance when

writing this volume; Poco-san who never complained once even as work piled up thanks to the special edition; everyone who was involved in the production of the drama CD; all of the returning vocal cast; and most of all, all of you readers who have stuck with me all this time. The tenth anniversary celebration is coming to an end, but I would like to keep up my efforts, so please continue to support me.

Let us meet again in the afterword of volume 34.

October, 2019

Takehaya

Bonus Short Stories

Side: Kiriha

In Kiriha's mind, being a good woman meant accommodating her man to a certain degree. Because of that, she behaved quite differently when she was with him alone.

"What're you doing there, Kiriha-san?"

Koutarou sat at the tea table doing his homework. Kiriha was sitting across from him, but she'd swiftly finished her homework and had now pulled out a sewing kit.

"Oh, this? Well, I noticed a hole in one of your shirts, so I was thinking of mending it."

Kiriha paused her handiwork and smiled at Koutarou. It wasn't her usual mischievous grin, but a kind and gentle expression.

"There's a hole? Where?"

"Here. Look."

Kiriha held the shirt out to Koutarou, pointing to a hole about a centimeter big. He stared at it for a moment before putting a hand on his side and nodding.

"Ah, yeah, I bet that's from soccer the other day. I must've torn it when I fell."

"Are you hurt?"

Kiriha looked concerned. The way Koutarou had put his hand on his side made her worry that he'd injured himself in the fall.

"Aw, don't look at me like that. I'm fine. It's hardly anything. Just a small bruise."

"I see... I'm glad."

"You're overreacting."

“You say that, but you know you’re the most important thing in the world to me.”

“Erk...”

Koutarou looked away in a fluster, escaping by throwing himself into his homework. A teenage boy could do nothing but blush when faced with such an earnest profession of love.

“...”

Kiriha simply smiled, not saying a word. She knew Koutarou was feeling bashful, so this was her way of accommodating him. In the meantime, she got back to sewing.

“You can just consider sportswear expendable, you know...” he eventually muttered.

“Don’t worry. I’ll fix it up as good as new.”

“I don’t doubt your sewing skills... It’s just that I’d feel bad about putting another hole in it after you sew it up so nicely.”

“In reality, I’m not fixing this for you.”

“Huh?”

“I’m doing it because I want to.”

Koutarou was at a loss for words. This was what Kiriha was really like when it was just the two of them. Instead of teasing him, she didn’t hold herself back. She was honest with her feelings, and that honesty had only grown stronger since they became third-years.

“...Thank you...”

“Of course.”

In reality, Kiriha being so forthright bothered Koutarou even more than when she teased him—but just because it was embarrassing, not because he disliked it. After mustering his courage to show his gratitude, he got right back to his homework. Kiriha said nothing more either as she got back to sewing too.

“...”

“...”

Silence then fell over the apartment. The only noises in room 106 were the sounds of Koutarou scribbling and Kiriha sewing. The atmosphere was perfectly tranquil. And after about thirty minutes of this...

“Koutarou.”

“Hmm?”

“I just wanted to say your name.”

“I see...”

It was a meaningless exchange of words, but a very meaningful exchange of feelings. Kiriha was beaming afterward, while Koutarou was beet red.

Side: Sanae

Video games weren't a common pastime in room 106, primarily because not everyone could play at the same time. Things had started to change as of late, however, after Sanae brought over a console she'd asked her parents to buy for her.

“Koutarou, who's the culprit?”

“Why don't you try thinking for yourself? You should be able to figure it out with your powers of deduction.”

“Come on!”

Group multiplayer games were on the rise these days, and lots of them were beginner friendly. As such, gaming was becoming more and more popular with the Corona House crew.

“Don't be like that. Think about how the developers would feel if I spoiled it for you.”

“Hmm... Then just give me a hint.”

“Oh, fine. Well... there's that one fishy guy, right?”

“The totally suspicious dude wrapped in bandages? I never thought he'd be

the first to die...”

But today, Sanae and Koutarou were the only ones at the apartment. Sanae took the opportunity to play a detective game, and she was trying to solve the case with Koutarou as her assistant.

“That’s the problem.”

“What do you mean?”

“Nope. No more hints.”

“Come on! Pretty please!”

Sanae puffed up her cheeks, flopped herself across Koutarou’s lap, and wiggled in protest.

“If I tell you any more, I’ll practically be giving it away.”

“You mean, manly, super-serious cheapskate!”

“Pick between insulting me and praising me, will you?”

“Okay, you’re manly and super serious!”

“So you *were* praising me.”

Sanae continued to wiggle and pout. She didn’t want to think for herself; she simply wanted Koutarou to tell her the answer.

“...Oh?”

Her tantrum came to a sudden stop, however, when she let go of the controller and put her left hand on her chest.

“What is it?” Koutarou asked curiously.

“Bra malfunction. Eeheehee...”

Sanae let out a giggle—not out of embarrassment, but because she genuinely found the situation funny.

“That wouldn’t happen if you didn’t behave like a child.”

“Fix it for me, Koutarou.”

Sanae picked up her controller again. As far as she was concerned, the game

was more important.

“Sorry, you’ll have to do it yourself,” Koutarou politely refused.

“Come on. It’s not that hard,” Sanae implored him, wiggling more as she typed out a name in the input box on the screen.

“That’s not why I’m refusing, you know?”

“You can feel me up while you’re at it. It’s win-win for you!”

“That might have worked on me ten years ago, but definitely not now,” Koutarou said with a wry smile as he patted Sanae’s head.

She could sense his feelings through the gesture, and she flashed a bright smile in return.

“Am I... Are we really that precious to you?”

“Let’s just say that I’d really regret doing something like that as a joke.”

Because Sanae could read people’s hearts via their auras, lying to her was pointless. She knew Koutarou was telling her the truth.

“Eeheehee, then I guess I have to do it myself after all.” Sanae had no idea what it was like to be a teenage boy, so she was especially forgiving of Koutarou. “Hold the controller for me.”

“Sure.”

“Jeez, boys sure are a handful... Heehee...”

Sanae handed the controller to Koutarou, then hiked her shirt up so she could fix her bra. Not wanting to stare, Koutarou turned his attention to the screen.

“Sanae...”

“Hmm? What?”

“This isn’t the right answer.”

“No way! Put in the right one for me, then!” she begged for the umpteenth time.

Koutarou hesitated for a moment, but ultimately relented and gave up the culprit’s name.













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Invaders of the Rokujouma!? Volume 33

by Takehaya

Translated by Warnis Edited by Morgan Dreher

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