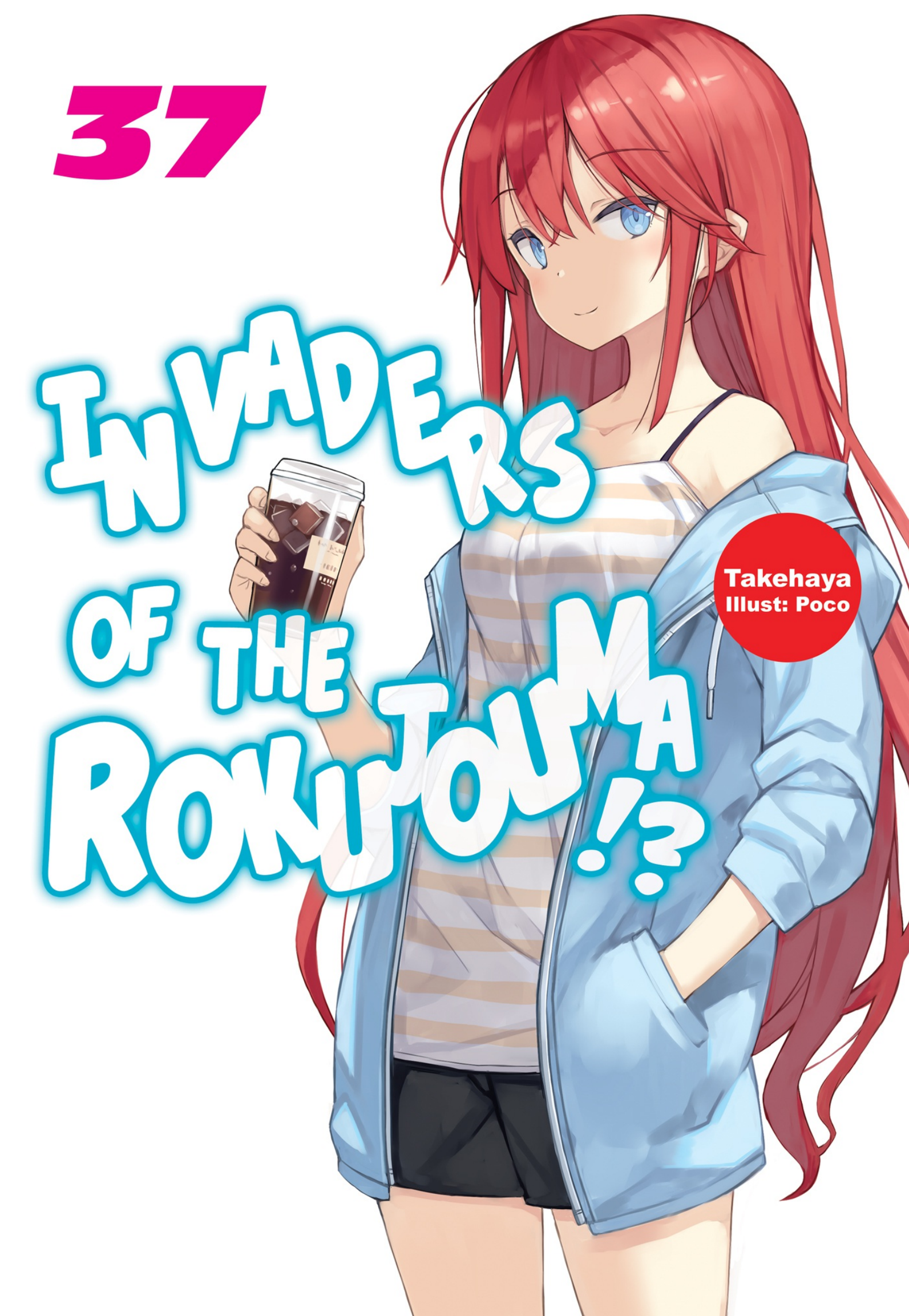
37

Invaders of the Rokujouma!?



Takehaya
Illust: Poco

37

Invaders of the Rokujouma!?

Takehaya
Illust: Poco

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EVERYONE'S SECRETS
HARUMI AND CLAN TRADE PLACES?!
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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.

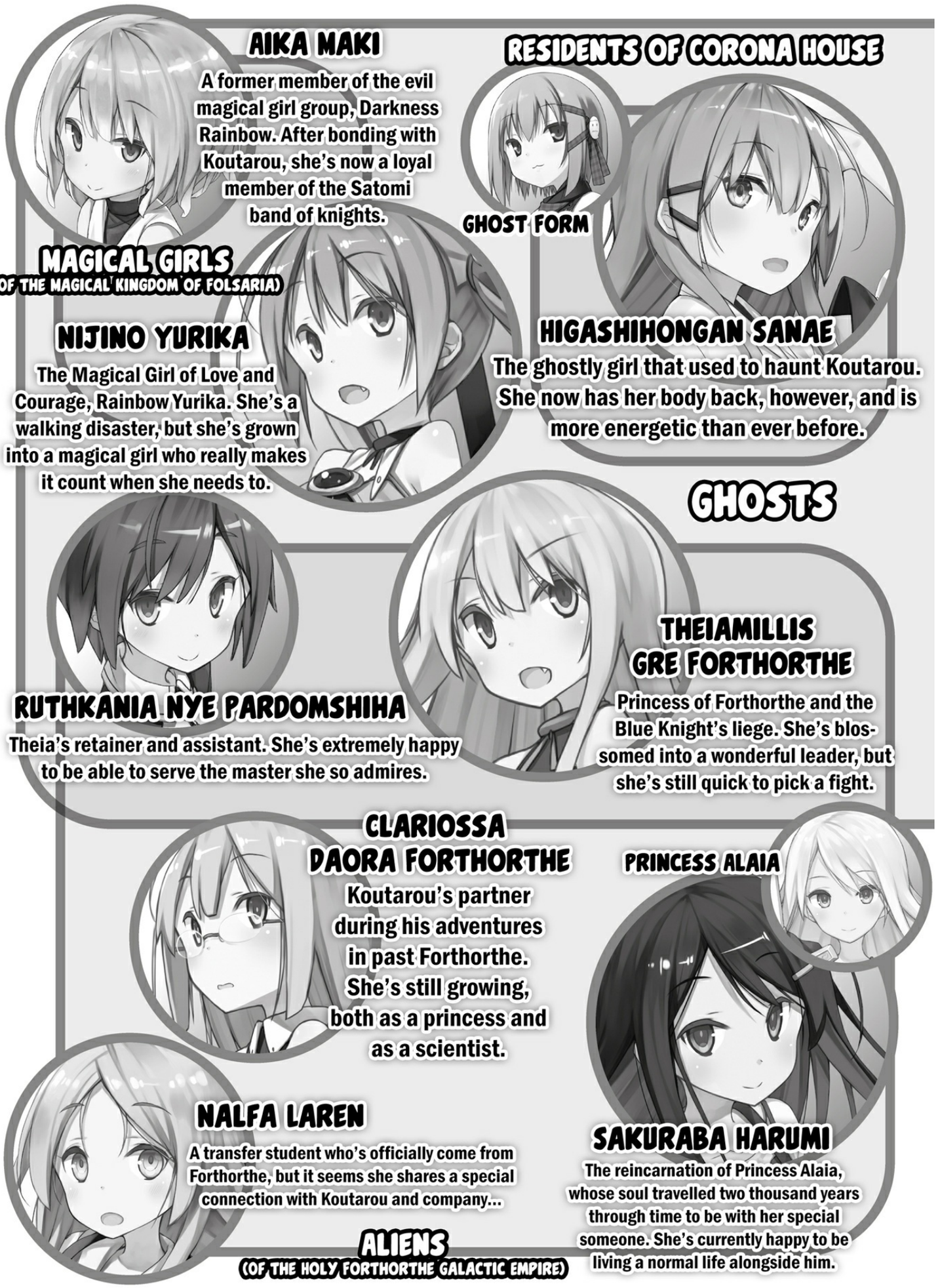
UNDERGROUND DWELLERS
(OF THE PEOPLE OF THE EARTH)

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

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

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

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)
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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.
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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
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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
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)
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.

CORONA HOUSE
ROOM 106

Episode 1: Everyone's Secrets

Two days had passed since the final showdown against Vandarion, and Koutarou was now faced with a challenge of an altogether different sort—a crisis brought about by Clan's carelessness.

"Where did I put my glasses...?"

"This is what happens when you don't clean up your room, Clan."

"I didn't ask for nasty comments! Just help me find them already!"

"Just whose fault do you think this is?"

Indeed, Clan had lost her everyday glasses. When she had work to do, she switched to a specialized pair, so she and Koutarou believed she'd misplaced them during the switch. Accordingly, they knew the glasses had to be in her room *somewhere*. Most likely buried in a pile of research material.

"Since we're in the palace, why not just call for a maid or attendant?" Koutarou asked.

"No way!" Clan adamantly refused. "I'd never humiliate myself by dragging a maid of the Mastir family into this!"

"Then don't drag me into it either."

"You're different! This is just how things have to be!"

With an emergency meeting coming up, Koutarou wanted to find Clan's glasses ASAP without wasting any more manpower on the task. And Clan was too embarrassed to ask anyone else for help. While she'd grown in many ways, she was still terrible with people. Inviting strangers into her room would be bad enough, but then having to explain what they could and couldn't touch would simply be a royal pain.

Koutarou was different, however. He and Clan had known each other for a long time now, so like it or not, she had no choice but to rely on his assistance. He also conveniently already knew what was off-limits in her room. Clan

wouldn’t have minded letting any of the other girls into her room either, but they weren’t as familiar with her research and the relevant precautions. They were also busy with their own schedules.

“I can’t believe the girl who had me wash her underwear has suddenly developed a bashful side.”

“Don’t bring that up! That was back from before I knew better!”

“Yeah, I guess so. You were still a sheltered princess treating me like a neanderthal back then.”

“Ugh...”

Clan knew she couldn’t argue. She was the cause of the problem here—and there was an easy way to fix it, but her personality kept her from acting on it. That just made her look selfish, which only made her feel more uncomfortable about the situation. As she stewed over it, however, there came a friendly voice and a knock at the door...

“Satomi-kun, Clan-san, how is it going?”

Clan had few friends who were so polite as to always knock, but her best friend was one of them. It was none other than Harumi, of course, who’d shown up with refreshments for Clan and Koutarou.

“We still haven’t found them,” Koutarou reported. “Clan’s sloppiness is coming back to bite her.”

“Harumi, Veltlion is being so mean to me!”

“Oh my...” Harumi giggled as she stepped into the room with tea and snacks on a tray. Despite her best friend’s desperation, she was enjoying herself. “If I make a mess in my room, would you clean up after me too, Satomi-kun?”

“C’mon. You never leave messes, Sakuraba-senpai.”

“I’m sure I will if I stop cleaning up after myself starting today!”

“I’m sure you’ll buckle after two or three days.”

“You’re so unfair. Come over and clean for me even if my place is already clean!”

“What’s the point...?”

Harumi was envious of how much attention Koutarou always paid to Clan. Harumi had never had to ask Koutarou to help her find anything, which she knew might be embarrassing... But when she saw how much fun Clan and Koutarou were having together—no matter how much Clan might try to deny it—Harumi just couldn’t help being a little jealous.

“If you want Veltlion, you can have him,” Clan offered sulkily.

“If I leave you alone, you’re never going to get anything done,” Koutarou objected.

“I’m not like Yurika!”

“You’re the only one who thinks so.”

Clan was secretly envious of Harumi too. Koutarou trusted her and treated her more like a princess than anyone. Instead, he treated Clan more like a troublesome little sister, and she couldn’t stand it. She wanted to be treated like a princess too, so the disconnect was a great source of frustration.

In the end, it was Harumi who located Clan’s glasses. They were sitting on a sink shelf, right where Clan had probably left them while cleaning some laboratory equipment. Once found, Clan restored them to the bridge of her nose where they rightfully belonged and, crisis solved, was able to participate in the emergency meeting regarding Folsaria without any issues.

“...Besides, Veltlion doesn’t even see me as a woman!”

Yet despite how much time had passed, she was still miffed at Koutarou. She was currently venting to her best friend Harumi accordingly.

“That’s just Satomi-kun’s way of being bashful.”

“It is not! He enjoys bullying me!”

“Must be nice...”

“There’s nothing nice about it!”

From Harumi’s point of view, Koutarou did see Clan as a princess—a special

one that he'd decided to keep close to him. Otherwise, the sword wouldn't have shone with all nine lights in the decisive fight against Vandarion. She knew that, deep down, Clan and Koutarou were connected, even if it didn't seem like it on the surface. The way they expressed their feelings just never aligned. Clan wanted to be pampered, while Koutarou couldn't be upfront with her. Harumi's intuition told her that this was the result of Clan's personality and Koutarou's extraordinary shyness for a boy his age... But her intuition also told her that pointing this out wouldn't fix Clan's mood. So instead, she changed the topic.

"I have an idea, Clan-san. Why don't we take a look around while we're here?"

Since the emergency meeting concerned Folsaria, they'd come out to Veltlion's special territory. It was about the only place where Folsarians could be received for the time being, but it was also a very meaningful location to Harumi. That was really why she'd suggested touring the place.

"That's a good idea," Clan said after a pause. "We did come all this way."

And just as Harumi had hoped, Clan's attention turned away from Koutarou. Veltlion's special territory was just as significant to her.

"Do you mind if I ask about the official designation of this place, Clan-san?"

"This is, er, Veltlion's dominion. He supersedes the law here, so it's basically like its own country."

"So it's extraterritorial, like an embassy or something?"

"I suppose it would be closer to Vatican City on Earth."

This was particularly meaningful to Harumi, as Alaia had established this inviolable domain for Koutarou's sake. And for Clan, she remembered it as the place where she and Koutarou slept for two thousand years before meeting their dear friend Elfaria. They both had a strong connection to it, so they both wanted to see what it looked like in modern times.

Harumi only knew a little bit about Veltlion's special territory. She'd inherited Alaia's memories, but only up to the point she parted ways with Koutarou. That was why she had to turn to Clan now for supplementary details.

“So, legally speaking, this place must be complicated to deal with, mustn’t it?” she asked.

“That’s right. If a wanted criminal were to flee here, the authorities would need Veltlion’s permission to go after them. But since he would never be present to make such a call, the territory was deemed inviolable.”

“It seems Princess Alaia put a lot of thought into this.”

“Of course. Any woman would.”

Though Harumi had questions for Clan, the reverse was also true. There were certain things that only she could answer. When it came to the world of two thousand years ago, no one knew it better than Harumi.

“Say,” Clan began, “wasn’t there a tower standing here?”

“Indeed. There’s a small hill just over there. You couldn’t see it back then because of the outer wall, but a tower was necessary to survey anything beyond it.”

Veltlion’s special territory was the birthplace of the Reborn Forthorthian Army, meaning it was originally a fort in Pardomshiha territory. Even long after the fort was gone, the Pardomshiha family was still in charge of managing the land. Clan had stayed there for a while herself, but Alaia was much more knowledgeable about it as a member of the royal family at the time.

“I remember now,” Clan laughed. “Charl-san was always wanting to climb it.”

“And in the end, she had Koutarou-sama take her up there. Oh, Charl...”

“But it’s thanks to her that morale never wavered. Hahaha.”

The two girls stood looking up at the sky together. The tower they spoke of was no more, but they could both see it clearly in their minds—including Koutarou climbing it while carrying a young girl. Even with the monument itself gone, those memories were forever etched into their hearts.

“The soldiers guarding Charl did get pretty worked up, though.”

“She would run off to find Veltlion whenever she got the chance, after all.”

“Halfway through the war, I decided to station some of her guard directly

with Koutarou-sama.”

“I thought you were increasing security around him... So that was your real goal, huh?”

Clan and Harumi continued to tour Veltlion’s special territory, fondly recalling various memories and chatting away with smiles on their faces. They’d only stayed here a short time in the past while raising an army, but it had left a profound effect on them.

“It’s changed a bit since the old days. Although, I suppose that’s inevitable since it *has* been two thousand years...” Harumi sighed.

“I should apologize for that,” Clan confessed.

The girls’ final stop was a cave halfway up a certain small hill. The cave itself was considerable in size, and its entrance was several dozen meters wide. Even Alunaya would have been able to come and go freely without any trouble.

“Did something happen?” Harumi asked.

“I may have crashed the Cradle when we landed.”

“Goodness! Was everything okay?!”

“Well, it was already broken to begin with...”

This was the cave where Clan and Koutarou had hidden with the Cradle for thousands of years, protected by Alaia’s decree. It was truly thanks to her that they were able to slumber undisturbed. In the modern day and age, Veltlion’s special territory was overseen by a regent, so entry to the area wasn’t as strictly forbidden as it had been in the past. Nevertheless, the territory had gone nearly untouched for two millennia. It wasn’t exactly hospitable to visitors. That seemed to be evident in the cave as well, whose depths extended well beyond the sunlight of the entrance.

“Just a minute. I’ll brighten things up...” Clan said. “I hope this still works.”

She tapped her bracelet to issue a command. The next moment, lights all over flashed on and banished the darkness. Fortunately, the lighting Clan had installed two thousand years ago was still functional.

“So this is what it’s like inside,” Harumi remarked.

“That’s right. You’ve never seen the inside, have you?”

Harumi beheld the illuminated cave with great curiosity. The memories she’d inherited from Signaltin only went through Alaia and Koutarou’s parting, meaning she had no recollection of what had happened afterward. This was indeed her first time seeing the inside of the cave for herself.

“Clan-san, where was the Cradle buried?”

“Over here. I made sure it was out of sight from the entrance.”

“Haha, of course. That was smart.”

The girls continued deeper into the cave, relying on Clan’s lights. A few were broken here and there, but not enough to obscure the way. Before long, they arrived at their intended destination.

“Right here in this cavity,” Clan said, pointing.

“Ah, I see. It does look like the Cradle would fit in there perfectly.”

“And you watched over us here for so long.”

As Harumi inspected the cave wall, Clan showed her an old stone plaque nearby. Etched into it was a snowy crest and an inscription: *May the knights who departed for the other side of the sky slumber soundly. Let none disturb their rest.* At first glance, it appeared to be a memorial to fallen soldiers. Next to Alaia’s crest, however, the message took on a whole new meaning. Alaia had known that Koutarou and Clan were resting here, and she made sure that nobody would interfere as the years wore on.

“This is...” Harumi faltered. “I... I...”

The moment she’d entered Veltlion’s special territory, the Alaia within her had begun stirring. Even without those specific memories, Harumi could easily imagine what she must have felt two thousand years ago. There was nothing in it for her, but she did her utmost to ensure that Koutarou could return to his own world as thanks for protecting both her and Forthorthe. She wanted him to be able to go home and fulfill the promises he’d made to the girls of his world—just like a true knight should. But it hurt Alaia to send him off when she wanted nothing more than to wake him.

“That’s why Veltlion and I owe you more than we could ever repay. That’s why I want to let you do what you couldn’t back then,” Clan said quietly.

She knew how Alaia felt, and she could imagine what must have gone through her mind when she found the Cradle frozen in time here. Alaia just wanted to live as a normal girl. To fall in love like normal. To build a normal family. And if that just so happened to be with Koutarou, Clan wouldn’t get in the way. Nevertheless, she had no intention of backing down herself. She was determined to continue looking after Harumi’s health and working on the PAF to support her.

I get it. This must be why Veltlion...

Clan was struck by a sudden realization about why Koutarou treated her and Harumi so differently. It wasn’t just because they’d always had that kind of relationship, but because he too felt he owed Alaia more than he could ever repay. That meant even though both girls were equally precious to him—as the crests on their foreheads proved—there was a difference in the way he expressed his feelings for them. A perfectly natural one, even, given how indebted they were to Alaia.

“You needn’t feel that way.” Harumi wiped away the tears in the corners of her eyes and gave Clan a bright smile. She then pointed to the stone monument. “I think I built this in hopes of fulfilling my own wish to relinquish the past in favor of moving forward alongside you and Satomi-kun.”

“Harumi... thank you. But when you say it like that, you sound more like Alaia-san than ever. I think it’s going to take a little longer to let go of the past.”

“Then I’ll try to look at things in a more Harumi-like fashion.”

“I believe in you,” Clan said with a chuckle.

Alaia would have wanted nothing more than for Harumi to be her own self. There was no need for her to forget her past life *as* Alaia, but she still wanted Harumi to be Harumi. She wanted Harumi to live for herself—for everyone’s sake.

The cave held more mementos of Clan and Koutarou’s time there than just the Cradle’s hiding spot. Since only twenty years had passed since they’d emerged, artifacts of their life here still lingered.

“The remains of a campfire? That’s right... You and Satomi-kun lived here for a while, didn’t you?”

“We did. We made do here twenty years ago while I got my hands on the parts that we needed.”

Harumi had discovered an old campfire as well as a simple table, some chairs, and other daily necessities. They were all thoroughly caked in dust, however, suggesting they’d been undisturbed for years.

“So you were cooking back then, Clan-san?” Harumi asked with a smile, picking up a half-open container and dusty pot. As the rather domestic sort, she looked right at home holding them.

“Ugh...”

Clan, however, groaned when she saw them and looked away. Seeing this, Harumi cocked her head. It wasn’t the reaction she’d been expecting, although the reason for it suddenly hit her.

“So you weren’t, were you?” she asked.

But Clan had no response.

Harumi had heard that Koutarou handled all the housekeeping chores. Clan was a princess, not to mention occupied with her research, so it was out of necessity. Even so, Harumi hadn’t thought Clan had done *nothing* during their time together. She’d always imagined that she’d lent a hand whenever

Koutarou was busy.

“You did help a little, right?”

“Um, n-no comment...”

If Clan was avoiding the question, that could only mean one thing: she really hadn’t ever lifted a finger. This shocked Harumi.

“H-How on earth were you living?!” she exclaimed.

And she genuinely wanted to know the answer. She couldn’t imagine living together with the boy she loved for months and letting him do all of the chores. It was unthinkable. Yet in spite of everything, Clan had forged a deep bond with Koutarou. Harumi both respected and admired that.

“I was just, um, living like normal...” Clan stammered. She could feel Harumi staring at her admiringly for all the wrong reasons. She couldn’t help blushing and averting her eyes.

“Clan-san, please teach me how to live normally too! It’s very important to me! It’s exactly what Alaia and I couldn’t do!” Harumi pressed Clan with sparkling eyes. This was a most unexpected outburst for such a modest girl—it was just that important to her. This, she thought, might be her chance to get Koutarou to treat her more like Clan.

“S-Say what you will, but...” Clan hesitated.

Harumi was essentially asking her to lay bare her bad side. If possible, Clan would personally prefer never to bring it up or even think about it ever again. Yet when her best friend begged her so, she could hardly say no. She felt she owed Alaia at least this much.

“F-Fine...”

“Thank you so much, Clan-san!”

Thus Clan proceeded to tell Harumi everything about living together with Koutarou in the past. It was an embarrassing story she’d never told anyone else before. A secret she’d intended to take to her grave.

Harumi’s first questions were about how Clan and Koutarou had managed

upon being thrown into the past. She recalled meeting them and how they'd behaved around Alaia, but the princess was none the wiser about their former relationship as enemies. Harumi was curious how the two of them had come to team up together.

"It was right after you tried to interfere with the school play, wasn't it? So how were you able to reconcile so soon?"

"Th-That's... um..." Clan looked down and blushed with all the bashfulness of a little girl.

It was a telltale sign that she still didn't have much experience opening up to people. Had she been talking to anyone else, they likely would have noticed and backed off. But right now, Harumi was utterly fixated on Clan's relationship with Koutarou.

"Um, I think I was lucky," Clan finally squeaked, still avoiding eye contact. Right now, she wanted to run away and hide somewhere.

"Lucky?" Harumi asked.

"Yeah. What happened after Veltlion destroyed my Super Space-time Repulsion Shell was so dire that we were in no position to fight. The incident may have been unfortunate on the whole, but the circumstances were also lucky in that they forced us to cooperate."

When they were initially shunted to the past, Clan and Koutarou believed they'd prevented the Blue Knight from meeting the Silver Princess. They'd accordingly entered into an emergency truce in an attempt to get history back on track. Clan couldn't leave Koutarou, let alone kill him. They had to work together.

"If something less dire had happened, like we were simply stranded in space... we might still be fighting," Clan confessed, forgetting her embarrassment as she shuddered.

As she was now, she understood just how nasty she'd been in the past. Imagining what she would be like today if she'd stayed that way upset her. She was sure she'd have become the kind of princess to wreak misfortune on Forthorthe, or even the empress herself—and if that's how things were going to

turn out, she would've preferred dying at Koutarou's hands. Thinking through it, Clan felt she was truly lucky to have been sent to the past.

"So you were reluctantly working together at the start. I didn't think you were any ordinary knight and servant myself..." mused Harumi. Clan and Koutarou in the past popped into her mind courtesy of Alaia's memories. They'd claimed to be a knight and his servant, but there was a palpable tension between them in the early days.

"We were enemies, so it's not like we trusted one another right away."

"I can see how there would be plenty of friction. So, how did you live back then?" Harumi and Alaia were both curious about what kind of life they'd shared upon going from enemies to reluctant allies.

"Ugh..." Clan had looked serious for a while now, but her expression abruptly stiffened as she blushed, once again turning away to avoid eye contact. "Well, that's, u-um... I was busy with work... so Veltlion ended up doing things for me..."

"Satomi-kun helped you out from the start? Even with the laundry?"

Harumi could understand helping with cooking and cleaning, but the washing was a different story. She couldn't imagine the courage it would take to ask a boy to launder her clothes—much less her undergarments.

"U-Uhh..."

Clan's face was beet red, and it was all she could do to nod in answer. She then hung her head low. She now understood how big of a deal it really was.

"I'm honestly surprised you let your enemy wash your clothes," Harumi remarked.

"I was just so sheltered and busy with work. Besides, I only thought of him as some neanderthal, and... um..."

"And what?"

"I thought it would be fine since I was just going to kill him once we got back..."

"Oh my!"

At the time, Clan had planned on finishing off Koutarou once they safely returned to Earth. In that light, it didn't matter to her what he saw since dead men tell no tales. This revelation came as a surprise to Harumi, who sat there with her mouth wide open in disbelief.

"I-I realize how pathetic that sounds now! I even do my own laundry these days! I'm not that person anymore, okay, Harumi?!"

"Pfft!" When she saw how flustered Clan was getting, Harumi quickly recovered and broke into a laugh. "Hahaha! Don't worry, Clan-san. I understand."

"Y-You do?"

"Of course. Everyone was inexperienced at one point. I couldn't even talk to people until I started acting, remember?"

"Really? Phew..." Clan sighed in relief.

After all this time and everything that had happened, Harumi was Clan's best friend. She was loath to reveal past indiscretions that might make Harumi dislike her, but Harumi bore no such ill will. To the socially awkward Clan who'd practically grown up in a laboratory, this was a huge relief. Once she collected herself, Clan turned her attention back to Harumi to discover that she was still laughing.

"Haha! Ahahaha!"

"Harumi?"

"I think I understand why you get angry when Satomi-kun teases you so."

"Huh?"

Now it was Clan's turn to sit there with her mouth wide open in disbelief. She'd never confessed the real reason to anyone before.

"You're worried that he does it because of your behavior in the past."

At this, Clan gasped. She felt like her heart was being squeezed. Harumi had hit the nail on the head. Clan had always worried that Koutarou only teased her for how she'd carried herself when they first met—especially because he was so quick to bring up their time in past Forthorthe together.

“W-Wait, Harumi!”

With the truth exposed, Clan was panicking. Kiriha might have already realized the truth and simply decided to keep quiet on the matter, but this was the first time Clan knew for certain that she’d been read like a book. That meant both her deepest flaws and her deepest affections for the boy she loved had been revealed—things which, if possible, she didn’t want anyone to know about.

“Please don’t worry, Clan-san. I’ll keep your secret,” Harumi assured her.

“I, uhhh...”

“I’ll also do my best to help you get over that nervousness someday.”

“Harumi...”

“In exchange, please help me with my frustrations too.”

“I’m no match for you, Harumi...”

Harumi likewise considered Clan to be her best friend. That’s why she showered Clan with kindness. Above all else, Clan was grateful to have such a friend.

After that, Clan told Harumi more about her past with Koutarou. Ancient Forthorthe was like a foreign land to her, so it had been a huge boon to have a comrade from the future with her. That was how her feelings for Koutarou had first come to evolve.

“I first noticed the change when *that* happened... I mean, when Maxfern poisoned the water and got people sick.”

“I see... Did something happen that I wasn’t privy to?”

“When the virus broke out, I was prepared to look the other way. But Veltlion erupted with rage...”

“Hahaha! That sounds just like Koutarou-sama.”

Clan had had a change of heart about Koutarou during the virus incident. Letting people die just so they could return to their own time was wrong. It

certainly wasn't royal behavior. Koutarou's stand left a strong impression on Clan—he'd shown her how to be a better princess. And ever since then, she'd seen him in a different light. In her eyes, Koutarou was a paragon of knighthood who always followed the righteous path.

"But didn't that pose a problem?" Harumi asked. "What about him washing your underwear?"

"It made my life a living hell. Even if I'd demanded to do it myself at that point, it was too late and unnatural..."

"I can imagine. So in spite of yourself, you still let Satomi-kun do your laundry?"

"Aaaaahhh! Someone please erase my memories from those daaays!"

Clan clutched her head and writhed in agony. After acknowledging Koutarou and backing off of her plans to kill him, she'd wished she'd never let him do the laundry. Worse still, telling him to stop would have only been a backhanded way of admitting her feelings had changed.

"But I think you're the only Forthorthian in history who's done that," said Harumi.

"Huh?" Clan asked, puzzled.

"I mean you're the only Forthorthian in history who's had Layous Fatra Veltlion wash your underwear."

"N-Noooooooo! Won't someone please wipe my memory?!"

It was the biggest blunder of Clan's life. Not only was Koutarou a legendary hero, he was also the man she had feelings for. Yet she'd made him do all sorts of chores for her—including, tragically, washing her underwear. It was a dark past she wanted nothing more than to run from. It was no small wonder she was sensitive about Koutarou teasing her. She wasn't just worried about their past as enemies; she was worried he didn't see her as a woman at all.

"Fortunately, it wasn't long before the Reborn Forthorthian Army was established," reminded Harumi.

"A-And thank goodness for that," sighed Clan. "Otherwise I might've put

myself out of my misery already.”

Right around the time Clan began to see Koutarou differently, Alaia and her cohort reached Pardomshiha territory and formed an army to retake the country. Thanks to that, all daily necessities were provided for them and Koutarou no longer needed to wash her clothes personally. So in the end, Clan’s ordeal had only lasted for about a month.

“Ahaha,” Harumi laughed. “So what did you do about cooking and cleaning?”

Seeing Clan’s embarrassed desperation, Harumi decided to move on. With that, Clan was finally able to breathe a little and relax.

“The cooking situation wasn’t as bad as the washing,” she began. “But Veltlion still did most of it. He had a hard time with the unfamiliar ingredients, although he managed to make do with them.”

Clan had successfully been able to contribute in terms of meals thanks to the rations she had stored aboard the Cradle. She had a little pride in that, and her expression subsequently returned to normal.

“What kind of things did Satomi-kun make?”

“Hmm, mostly simple ones. To be expected, I guess, seeing as how he’s not a chef or anything.”

Clan proceeded to tell Harumi about all of the dishes Koutarou had made. She recalled him cooking with ingredients that were easy to get their hands on, such as vegetables and poultry. They were also able to procure fish from time to time, but their staples were primarily lightly browned potatoes and bread. Since they were constantly on the move, they had limited seasonings and other pantry supplies.

“We quickly made our way to Pardomshiha territory, and the military provided our food after that, so the lack of variation didn’t bother me too much.”

“I see. If Satomi-kun is that good at cooking, I’ll need to be more careful about what I serve in the future...”

“He continued to work with the army after that, so I’m sure he improved even

more after I stopped eating his cooking.”

“Good to know.”

What exactly Koutarou could do in the kitchen and his food preferences were critical pieces of intel to Harumi. She thought it would be fun to let him do his thing while she helped out. She wasn’t interested in spoiling him completely. She thought it would be more enjoyable if it were a two-way street.

From there, Clan ended up telling Harumi about most everything about the past. Events had unfolded quickly in Ancient Forthorthe after the Reborn Forthorthian Army was established, and that turmoil was followed by meeting Elfaria and then Kiriha. By the time Clan got to the end of it all, Harumi had one last question for her.

“Um, Clan-san,” she began hesitantly. “May I ask you something rather forward?”

“I don’t mind. What is it?” Clan nodded without thinking too hard about it.

She then noticed that Harumi’s cheeks were a little flushed, but by the time she realized what she’d walked into, Harumi had already asked: “Um... Wh-What did you do for sleeping arrangements?”

Not only were Harumi’s cheeks flushed now, but her eyes were darting this way and that as she restlessly fiddled with her fingers too. Anyone who knew her would have been surprised to see her like this. Her calm demeanor had evaporated, leaving her fidgeting bashfully.

“W-Well, that’s...” Clan stammered, shaken to the core. It had been a hard question for Harumi to ask, but it was just as hard for Clan to answer.

“You two were always together during your travels, even sharing the same room...”

“Th-That’s just how things worked out! We were pretending to be a knight and his servant after all!”

“Even so, you were alone together at night... I don’t know what you did or what you talked about... It’s something I have no memories of, so I’m curious...”

It was true that Clan and Koutarou had spent many an uninterrupted night together. Of all the Corona House crew, Clan had spent the most time with him in that regard, period. It was only natural that Harumi was interested in what it was like.

“When we first agreed to a truce, we didn’t even speak that much. Then we started discussing how to resolve our never-ending spate of problems—nothing more than that! Nothing special happened... ever...”

At first, they’d even set up a divider between their beds because Clan hadn’t wanted Koutarou to see her sleeping face.

“Nothing at all?”

“...Maybe a little something...”

As time passed, they’d used the divider less and less. It stopped seeming worth the time and energy it took to set up. As Koutarou and Clan came to trust each other, she’d even started to take comfort in being able to see him.

“I may have moved my bed so I could see Veltlion’s face...”

“I can understand that. I discreetly moved our chairs in the club room too.”

Eventually, Clan had begun slipping out of bed at night to sneak a peek at Koutarou’s face from up close. She’d even seriously considered going to bed with makeup on in case he did the same.

“At night, I’d tiptoe over to his bed and... um... get close enough to feel his breath...”

“Considering Satomi-kun’s sleeping habits, that was dangerous. It would’ve been terrible if he caught a hold of you.”

“...”

“Did... you *want* him to catch you?”

“Ugh...”

There, both Harumi and Clan blushed. But in spite of the awkwardness, they continued to chat away. This was a special topic near and dear to both of their hearts.

“That’s unfair, Clan... I wish I could do that too...”

“Wh-What about you, Harumi?! I bet you’ve seen a lot of Veltlion that I haven’t! I want to hear all about your club activities and the harvest festival in past Forthorthe!”

“U-Um... well...”

Clan had now shared all her embarrassing secrets with Harumi, and she wasn’t going to leave until Harumi shared hers too.

Clan hardly knew anything about Koutarou prior to her arrival on Earth. She’d shown up just before the culture festival in his first year of high school, meaning she’d known him for half a year less than everyone else. Clan was always curious about the time she’d missed, as the Corona House crew often reminisced about the past she wasn’t a part of. She was hoping Harumi could help fill her in on that. She was also curious about the time Koutarou had spent alone with Alaia. She wanted to know more about that too.

“I first met Satomi-kun when I was recruiting members for my society at school,” Harumi began, just like Clan asked.

She’d already pestered Clan about the details of her past with Koutarou, so she thought it was only fair that she shared too. Moreover, she wanted her friend to know the story of how she’d met Koutarou. She figured this was a good opportunity to tell Clan what she was like before they met.

“You mean... your knitting club, was it?” Clan asked.

“That’s right. Satomi-kun stepped in to save me when a boy was bothering me.”

“Bothering you?”

“Er, well... he said he’d join the knitting society if I went out with him.”

“So there are people like that all over the universe... Couldn’t you have just beaten him and chased him away yourself?”

“Ahaha, I couldn’t use magic back then.”

“Then I imagine it was a difficult situation to be in.”

“That’s why when Satomi-kun came to save me, I, well...” Harumi hesitated. “He looked like a dashing prince to me.”

“Hahaha, even though he’s just a knight.”

“Well... Hahaha.”

Harumi blushed, but Clan was smiling brightly. She’d gotten over the nerves of sharing her own secrets with Harumi, so she was fully able to enjoy her friend’s.

“So, how big was this knitting society of yours?” Clan asked.

“Well, it was just me and Satomi-kun.”

“Oh? So you got to spend plenty of time alone with him, didn’t you?”

“We were only working together on club activities...”

“I get that. He and I were basically only working together too.” Clan was keenly interested in Harumi’s tale. It was the story of a romance from another planet, and also the story of how reserved Harumi had come to be the girl she now was. “Did you ever make any moves on Veltlion?”

“No way! I’d never! I fell for him after everything that happened, but boys are like a totally different species!”

“I know how you feel... Except in my case, it’s not just boys. I felt that way about everyone.”

“I mean, I did try... but my methods were so roundabout that they hardly produced any effect.”

Even now, Harumi could clearly remember having a hard time getting her feelings across to Koutarou. Just last year she’d given him a valentine—only to insist in the end that it was an obligatory gift that didn’t mean anything special. She just wasn’t used to dealing with men, and her naturally shy personality worked against her. She’d since confessed her true feelings to Koutarou, but a year ago, she’d spent every single day wondering what to do with herself.

“After what he went through as a child, he subconsciously came to believe that he would lose everyone he cared about,” Clan explained. “Or perhaps it was completely conscious and he simply ignored it.”

“Perhaps. I felt like he’d built up a wall that kept him from ever truly getting close to anyone,” Harumi agreed.

“Yet we all managed to break through it together,” Clan said with a smile.

As she grinned, her forehead began glowing. Harumi had once been the only girl who bore the sword-shape crest, but now all nine of them wore the honor. They’d each broken through the wall around Koutarou’s heart, and the mark upon their foreheads was a sign that he’d accepted them. One could say that the crests symbolized their relationship.

“We sure did. That’s why I’m so happy the impatience of the past feels like just a dream now,” Harumi said with a smile of her own.

She was now convinced that her feelings had reached Koutarou—but it wasn’t because of the crest on her forehead. She was certain she’d feel the same way even without it.

“I’m jealous,” Clan confessed. “I wish I had your confidence.”

Unlike the beaming Harumi, Clan now wore an uncertain expression. Even with the crest on her forehead, she wasn’t as sure of her relationship with Koutarou.

“Don’t be silly, Clan-san. Satomi-kun loves you too,” Harumi assured her.

“That’s not what I’m worried about... I just don’t think he sees me as a woman.”

Clan understood that she was precious to Koutarou, but she questioned the exact nature of his affection for her. Such doubts were nowhere in her mind during the decisive battle against Vandarion, but they’d blossomed once things had settled down after the fact. She and Koutarou had started off as enemies, after all, and she was exceedingly immature. Even now, he still treated her like a little sister.

“Aren’t you just overthinking things? Satomi-kun *did* say that he loves us all.”

“It’s not like he would’ve admitted it if he felt differently about me when he said that.”

“Clan-san...”

Harumi was concerned. Clan's worry was far more serious than she'd imagined. The rocky start to Clan's relationship with Koutarou left her feeling anxious to this day. She loved him, and he loved her—but Clan wasn't convinced it was the kind of romantic love she wanted. That was precisely why she hated him treating her like a sister. If she could just be certain of his feelings for her, she'd be much happier.

"Anyway, that's enough about boring ol' me!" Clan said with a smile when she saw the worried look Harumi was giving her. "I want to hear more of your story!"

"Clan-san..."

"I might be able to learn something from you."

"Okay... Then what would you like to hear next?" Harumi acquiesced with a gracious smile. If she could help Clan, she wanted to do exactly that.

"We've talked about the past a little, but why don't we go further back? Tell me about Alaia-san."

"So you want to know more about me, do you? Let's see..."

Clan was precious to Harumi and Alaia, albeit in a different sense than Koutarou. She was a dear friend who shared memories of their distant past. In a way, that brought them closer together. Talking to one another was easy.

"From my point of view, Koutarou-sama was most mysterious back then."

"He *did* come from two thousand years in the future."

"That was part of it, but while he treated me like a princess, he was also very familiar... You could say he was friendly."

Alaia was mystified by Koutarou's behavior. He always carried himself like a model knight, but there were times he went far above and beyond his chivalric duties. The best example was when Alaia had considered abandoning her fight against Maxfern in order to preserve the peace of the land. Any normal knight would have asserted the legitimacy of their liege and insisted on fighting for their honor, but Koutarou had heeded Alaia's hesitations and told her to follow her heart. She knew of no other knight who would have put her feelings first.

“I think that’s the byproduct of his intense dedication to Theiamillis-san and his genteel care for his Princess Harumi,” volunteered Clan.

“I think so too now, though I didn’t know any better back then...”

“So you ended up falling for him?”

“I think I first felt it when I saw him running around with Charl on his back...”

It hadn’t taken long for Alaia to realize the knight of her dreams had come to her. The longer she looked at Koutarou, the more her affection for him grew. She had strong feelings for him, and seeing the way he interacted with her loved ones only inflamed those feelings. Meeting him was like seeing a missing puzzle piece fall into place in her life.

“So that part of the legend is true then, huh?”

“What part?”

“That you were already in love by the harvest festival.”

“Er, yes... I do believe so.”

“In other words, it was obvious to everyone around you.”

“Oh my...”

Influenced by Alaia inside of her, Harumi had wistfully been looking off into the distance, but now a crimson blush blossomed on her cheeks. Alaia had never realized that she was so transparent. She was embarrassed to be finding out about it now.

“Charl mentioned in her memoirs that she was pretty sure something happened between you and Veltlion when you sneaked out for the harvest festival.”

“Oh, that Charl!”

“It came up in the diaries of various soldiers too. They all said something was suspicious after the battle with the giant, and that it was all but confirmed by the fight against the dragon.”

“To think that’s how they saw it...” Harumi struggled to contain herself and bashfully turned away. Even the legendary princess was just a girl right now.

“So, what actually happened with Veltlion?” Clan asked, pushing closer to Harumi.

“Erk...” Whenever Alaia came to the surface, Harumi seemed almost invincible—but right now, she was unusually vulnerable.

“You made me tell you everything, but you won’t tell me even that much?” Clan pressed.

“F-Fine... Okay, I give!” Harumi wiggled and fidgeted nervously, eventually caving to the pressure. It would be unfair if she didn’t spill the beans too. “We actually opened up to one another about our personal troubles. Koutarou-sama admitted that he didn’t do well with fighting...”

“That does sound like him... What’d you tell him?”

“That I was uncertain about retaking the country when it would put the lives of the very citizens I was trying to protect at risk.”

“Those are on completely different levels,” Clan remarked, her eyes wide. She knew that, given Alaia’s position, she only would have been able to share such a worry with a close confidant. It was proof of Alaia’s absolute trust in Koutarou.

“In reality, they aren’t so different,” Harumi insisted. “They’re fundamentally the same problem.”

“What did Veltlion tell you?”

“He said that even if a knight’s sword breaks, all that matters is that the oath sworn upon the blade is upheld. He said that he wouldn’t mind fighting in the name of peace.”

“Yeah, that’d do it...”

“Indeed... I felt as though he were the one for me.”

Harumi could clearly remember that night even now. Koutarou had understood Alaia’s feelings and assured her that she was doing the right thing. He’d promised that he’d follow her even if she were to lose her position. It was more comfort and support than Alaia could have ever hoped for, and those welling emotions cemented her love.

“But at the same time... that became a barrier between us,” Harumi

continued.

“What do you mean?”

“Just like you, Koutarou-sama never treated me like a normal girl. My status always got in the way.”

“I see...”

That was a problem for both Harumi and Alaia—his upperclassman and princess. The respect Koutarou had for them prevented him from getting too casual with them. He might have insisted otherwise, but Harumi could feel the difference. She knew he didn’t treat her the same way he did Shizuka or Sanae.

“That’s why I want to ask you how to get Koutarou-sama not to treat me like a princess,” Harumi put forward.

Koutarou was clearly different around Clan too. He treated her almost like he did his best friend, Kenji. Harumi wanted to know how to get in on that, which was why she’d been curious about how Clan had gotten into her current relationship with Koutarou.

“So one princess is being treated too delicately, and the other too roughly...” Clan sighed.

“I’m glad you shared your story with me, Clan-san. I think we should try to find some middle ground between us,” Harumi suggested. She felt they could get Koutarou to treat them each a bit like the other.

“Find middle ground? Yeah, you’re right,” Clan agreed with a nod. She originally wanted to be respected and loved like Harumi and Alaia. But after hearing Alaia’s story, she realized that finding a happy medium would be for the best. She pensively folded her arms to think on the matter.

Thinking about it, it’s not like I really want to be treated like a princess all the time. Sometimes it’s actually nice to have things the way they are...

While Clan wanted to be treated more like Harumi, Harumi also wanted to be treated more like Clan. If they could swap problems, everything would be solved—but such a revolutionary idea wouldn’t come to them right away. Harumi folded her arms like Clan and began thinking over the matter for

herself.

Is there some way to solve both of our dilemmas?

After some time, Clan casually muttered, “If only we could trade places...”

“That’s it Clan-san!” Harumi exclaimed, her face alight. “Why don’t we just trade places?”

“Huh? Wh-What are you saying?”

“We’re going to trade places somehow! If we combine our powers, I’m sure it’s possible!”

Clan hadn’t been entirely serious when she’d said it aloud, but Harumi was gung-ho. And indeed, it should be possible with their combined powers of magic and science. It wouldn’t have to last for long to work, and they’d only need to fool Koutarou. Accordingly, they wasted no time getting to work.

Harumi and Clan’s plan was simple. First, Clan would generate holograms and synthesized voices to change how they looked and sounded. Basically, they’d be wearing very technical costumes. Harumi would then use her magic to round out the act and make it more believable. Rather than casting a full-blown illusion, she would conserve her mana by just altering Koutarou’s perception a little. The only potential problem was just how sharp Koutarou was. Even if the girls’ disguises were perfect, the jig would be up if he got suspicious and used his spirit sight on them.

“It’s not like Veltlion is stupid, so we’ll need to be careful,” Clan said, looking and sounding like Harumi as she put her hands on her hips and glanced forward with a stern expression on her face.

The girls were now standing just outside a guest room at the imperial palace. According to his schedule, Koutarou should be done with his engagements and retired for the day.

“He *does* have a knack for uncovering things we’re trying to hide,” Harumi said, looking and sounding like Clan as she pushed up her glasses.

The unfamiliar spectacles sat uncomfortably on her nose. Since they would

have made the Clan hologram more complex, Clan had chosen to simplify things by handing her glasses over to Harumi for the experiment. But because Harumi wasn't used to wearing them, she might accidentally tip Koutarou off.

"If there's anything you'd like to try, make sure you do it early before he suspects anything is up. Just don't be too obvious," Clan warned her.

"I'm awfully hesitant with decisions like that. It's hard for me to make a move..."

"Likewise. But if we don't take the plunge now, we'll lose this chance."

"Then I'll do my best."

The girls had exchanged appearances in hopes of finding out what made their respective relationships with Koutarou so different. It was going to take boldness and bravery, but it was a delicate dance. They couldn't blow their own cover. They'd have to embody each other in spirit—not just looks—to pull this off.

"Let's go, Harumi. Er, I mean Clan-san."

"I-Indeed, let us—"

"That won't do, Clan-san. You wouldn't normally knock on the door."

"R-Right. In that case..."

The girls braced themselves and barged into Koutarou's room. There was no reason to think they'd be discovered so soon, but their hearts were pounding nevertheless. It wasn't just nervousness affecting them, however. They were both excited about the opportunity ahead of them.

Whenever Clan and Harumi walked together, Harumi generally stayed a few steps behind out of deference to Clan's position. Harumi was a polite girl, and she thought it was only proper to be respectful with a princess even if they were friends. They'd been walking side by side more often recently at Clan's behest, but Harumi never dared to walk in front of her... until now, under these most unusual of circumstances.

"I'm so sorry, Clan-san..."

"What are you talking about?! Look, Velt— Ahem, Satomi-kun is looking this

way.”

As expected, the girls found Koutarou relaxing in his room alone. He was reclined on the sofa watching the equivalent of Forthorthian TV. Harumi and Clan had arranged things with the other girls ahead of time. They’d promised not to interfere, and in exchange, Harumi and Clan had promised to stream what happened live for them to watch. They were on the edge of their seats at this very moment.

“Hey, it’s just you two,” Koutarou called, looking over his shoulder at the girls as they entered. Harumi immediately felt a change.

He even looks at us differently... So this is how Satomi-kun sees Clan-san...

She couldn’t help notice the glint in his eyes. She was used to the kind gaze Koutarou beheld her with. If she were to describe it, it was like the gentle sunbeams of early spring. But the way he looked at Clan? It was more like the strong sunlight of summer. Vibrant and powerful. Harumi just wanted to bask in it, and reflexively smiled at the pleasure.

“What are you grinning about?” Koutarou asked.

“Ah...”

When Harumi smiled, her Clan hologram smiled the same way. So from Koutarou’s point of view, Clan had just walked into his room and started grinning for no reason. He wouldn’t have thought that strange behavior from Yurika or Sanae, but this was Clan of all people.

“I-It’s nothing... Ahem, I mean it’s none of your business! I’m allowed to be in a good mood sometimes!” Harumi insisted, desperately trying to recover. Just talking to him was harder than she’d thought it would be. Hopefully he wasn’t onto her yet.

“Then what’d you walk in here looking all worried over?” he pressed.

If he were talking with Harumi ordinarily, he would’ve let things go there. But with Clan, he expected more of an answer. He felt she owed him at least that much after the lost glasses debacle that morning.

“Er, um, that’s...”

“What?”

Harumi found herself at a loss for words when Koutarou called her out like that. Her reaction was similar to Clan’s normal antics, but their back and forth was unnatural. Koutarou assumed that something else had happened to Clan.

“More importantly, Satomi-kun, there’s something I want to ask you.”

“What’s up, Sakuraba-senpai?”

Fortunately, Clan’s quick thinking saved Harumi. Clan had spent much of her life relying on lies and schemes, so she was much more calm and collected under the circumstances. She also had complete confidence in her disguise as Harumi, her rival and trusted friend.

Harumi let out a sigh of relief now that Koutarou’s attention was off of her. To him, whatever Harumi needed was more important than whatever Clan had gotten up to. And thanks to that, his suspicions about her immediately faded.

Aren’t things happening a little too fast for Clan-san?

Harumi couldn’t help remarking how fast and loose her interactions with Koutarou seemed to be. He was always off the cuff with her and never seemed to stop to think about how what he said might affect her. It was hard on Clan, certainly, but Harumi saw it as a form of trust. Koutarou counted on Clan—in a way that he didn’t on Harumi or Alaia.

Where does that camaraderie come from? Why doesn’t he ever talk to me like that?

Harumi wanted to know why, and she wouldn’t stop until she had the answer. She thus paid close attention as Clan and Koutarou continued talking. It was out of character for Clan, but fortunately Koutarou was none the wiser thanks to her Harumi disguise.

“Would you come with me please?” she asked.

“Is there something on your mind?” he replied, following along.

Harumi was upset at first that Clan had taken him over to the corner of the room so she couldn’t hear what they were talking about, but she ultimately decided that Clan must have her reasons. Thus Harumi continued to watch over

them intently from afar.

“Hmm, you could say that, though it’s not really on *my* mind,” Clan said behind the guise of her Harumi hologram.

“What do you mean?” Koutarou asked.

“The truth is that there is something bothering Clan-san. She’s wondering why you’re so hard on her,” Clan continued, for she really and truly did want to know the answer. She was certain that Koutarou would answer her as long as she was pretending to be a concerned Harumi.

“Dang... Again?” he muttered.

Koutarou already knew what troubled Clan’s heart. Shizuka had warned him of it once before. Ever since, he’d tried to be more gentle with her... though he’d be the first to admit that he hadn’t exactly been that mindful of his behavior given all that had transpired lately. Here and now, he realized that he’d made her worry again.

“Do you really have that much trouble treating Clan-san like a lady? As a woman?” Clan asked with a quick glance over at Harumi.

That was the question she was dying to know the answer to. If she’d looked like herself right now, she probably wouldn’t have had the courage to even ask. It was only thanks to her absolute trust in Harumi and her appearance that she’d managed to get the words out.

“Senpai, can you promise to keep this a secret from Clan?”

“...Y-Yes, I promise.”

“Okay,” Koutarou hesitantly started. He then likewise glanced back at Harumi, who he believed to be Clan at the moment. “I think because it feels lonely.”

“Lonely? What do you mean?” Clan pried.

“Necessity kind of forced us into a partnership. That’s how it’s always been with us, and that’s how I’d always like it to be... But the truth is that I *do* see her as a woman.”

Koutarou had a long history of clashing with Clan. There were even times Shizuka and Kiriha had admonished him for it. He knew what was in her heart

now, and he couldn't run from it forever.

"She loves me. I mean, for real. She even risked her life for me," he continued.

Clan and the other girls had staked their very souls to bring back Signaltin and Saguratin. Thanks to their joint effort, it had only cost each of them a small bit of their life force, but that didn't change what they'd risked. Clan had been fully prepared to die for Koutarou's sake. And not even he could pretend not to see that kind of blatant devotion. He understood it was a sign of love.

"I can't ignore that. But I still love the Clan I've always known."

"What..."

"She was sheltered and selfish at first, sure, but she gradually came to realize her own immaturity. And ever since, she's done her clumsy best to grow," Koutarou explained. "I feel a kind of kinship with her because of it. I want her to do her best, and I want her to be happy."

Koutarou had been fighting for years now to change himself. That was why he sympathized with Clan, who'd realized her own flaws and was desperately trying to escape herself too. Koutarou had liked her since the day she decided to change, and he wanted to be there for her like Kenji had been for him. So while he might give her a hard time occasionally, he would always be there for her. That was the only way he knew how to love.

"So I want her to keep fighting, even for just a little longer. I don't care if Landlord-san says I'm stupid."

Clan was growing. She was gradually becoming a real woman. That said, Koutarou still didn't want to let go of the Clan he knew. Maybe that made him greedy or overdependent on her, but he'd be sorry to lose her as she was now.

"Then... she's worried about nothing..." Clan mumbled.

Koutarou's confession came as a complete surprise to her. She was loved, and not conditionally. She was loved for who she was.

It's not just my good sides... Veltlion truly loves me.

His conflicting desires to see her grow and to keep her as she was led to the inconsistent way he treated her. It wasn't just awkwardness that made him

tease her. He was trying to get her to be her old self.

“I think that’s just fine, Satomi-kun.”

“Senpai...”

“The heart wants what the heart wants, as they say. I’ll try to explain it to her.”

“Thank you.”

“I’ll go tell her right now, in fact.”

Clan hurried back over to Harumi. Since she already had the answers she wanted, there wasn’t really anything she needed to tell Harumi. Clan had simply run away for fear of blowing her disguise, as she’d been on the verge of hugging Koutarou. It was a tactical retreat.

Harumi and Clan chatted quietly for a time while stealing glances at Koutarou. Harumi, disguised as Clan, then approached him. It was her turn to ask her own burning questions.

“Veltlion, I don’t really understand, but Harumi says that things are fine. So I will forgive you just this once,” she began.

“Hey, I helped you look for your lost glasses. What’s there to forgive?” Koutarou demanded, placing his big hand on Harumi’s head and pressing down.

“Owowow, that hurts!” she yelped.

“That’s the point. It’s supposed to make you think about what you did.”

Such punishment was hardly exceptional for Clan. It was an everyday occurrence for her. But for Harumi, this was her first time. Koutarou had never been rough with her before. He firmly believed in decorum and would never lay a hand on his ladylike upperclassman. Harumi was thus pleased to finally get to experience his adorable breed of tough love for herself, but it also inspired a bit of jealousy.

I wish I had this kind of contact with him on a daily basis too...

“What’s up? You hit your head or something?” Koutarou asked.

While she was enjoying herself, Harumi had let her guard down. Normally,

Clan would smack Koutarou's hand away and demand that he not tease her. Harumi, however, had simply let him do as he pleased. This puzzled him, prompting his confused reaction.

"I-I'm fine! I was just thinking about something!" she insisted as she pulled away, though she was sorry to do it.

"Oh yeah? About what?"

"U-Um..."

Harumi hadn't put that much thought into her frantic excuse. She hadn't expected him to press her on it.

I know. This is a good chance to bring that *up...*

Fortunately, however, she wasn't exactly strapped for ideas. There really was something on her mind, so she decided to go for it.

"Something's been bothering Harumi, you see. You treat her too preciously, Veltlion."

"She is precious, after all."

"That's not what I mean. Theiamillis-san and I are precious too, but you treat us differently, don't you?"

"You're not gonna break just because I'm a little rough with you."

"Harumi won't break either! Anyway, that's what she's worried about. She doesn't get to have as much fun because you're so delicate with her," Harumi explained, speaking her heart behind the guise of her Clan hologram.

Hearing this, Koutarou pensively folded his arms. Since he wasn't intentionally modifying his behavior around Harumi, he had to stop and think about what Clan was saying.

"You might be right. I do have a tendency to be delicate with her," he admitted after a long moment.

"See?"

"Sakuraba-senpai was always fragile and shy. Moreover, I respect her. How *could* I be rough with her?"

The biggest reason for Koutarou's behavior around Harumi was his respect for her. Harumi was introverted and levelheaded, not to mention kind. Kiriha could always find a logical solution, but Harumi could always find a peaceful one. She was the ideal leader for the knitting society, and her weak constitution and timidity only made Koutarou want to protect her more.

"Her Majesty Alaia also rests inside of Sakuraba-senpai. She's special."

"Koutarou-sama..." Harumi whispered, unwittingly saying something Clan never would. Koutarou's words had struck a chord deep in Alaia.

So my existence really is a fetter upon Harumi... Not just physically, but mentally as well.

Fortunately, her whisper was so quiet that Koutarou didn't hear it. Even if it had, however, it was doubtful he would have paid it much mind. At that moment, he was still lost in thought.

"But the way you treat Harumi makes her lonely, Veltlion," Harumi explained. "She's not content merely to be someone you respect."

"Yeah, I get that..." Koutarou confessed, cocking his head and racking his brain.

At the end of the day, Clan and Harumi were essentially concerned about the same thing. Their feelings for Koutarou had changed, and they wanted their relationships with him to reflect that. Koutarou, meanwhile, wanted things to stay as they were. He understood that was selfish, however, so the dilemma gave him great pause.

"...All right," he eventually said with a nod.

"Sato— Er, Veltlion?"

"Hang on. Sakuraba-senpai, could you come here for a sec?" he called, beckoning Clan over.

"Yes?" Clan replied, wandering over with a quizzical look. "What is it?"

"Senpai, could you stand next to Clan?"

"Um, sure..."

“Clan, get a little closer to her.”

“Like this?”

“Yeah, that should do it.”

Harumi and Clan were lined up next to each other, both unsure of what Koutarou had planned. When they looked to him for an answer, they caught a glimpse of a most unexpected sight—Koutarou’s face was beet red. Seeing this, the girls looked at each other in confusion.

“Pardon me...”

“Oh?”

“What?!”

Harumi and Clan were astonished when Koutarou leaned forward between them and hugged one girl with each arm. This was the conclusion he’d reached after mulling everything over.

“Let me just say... that I understand why you’re both worried. And I know things can’t stay like this—that I can’t. I’m trying to do better, but it’s hard, y’know? So... will you accept this as an apology for the time being?”

Not acknowledging the girls who’d risked their lives to save him was nothing short of arrogance in Koutarou’s eyes. He knew he’d slighted them for long enough already. Yet even so, it was too much to do all at once. He’d decided to express his feelings to the best of his ability in the hopes that they’d be patient with him. It was the best compromise he could make right now.

“Clan-san...” Harumi whispered, reaching for her friend’s hand when she realized what Koutarou meant.

“I’m here, Harumi.” Clan implicitly understood the gesture and grabbed Harumi’s hand in return.

The girls then shut down their holograms and returned to their original appearances, for they no longer believed they needed the disguises. As a result, they functionally swapped places... but Koutarou didn’t notice. He was staring at the wall, and his mind was racing with other thoughts.

“If possible, though,” he said, “I’d like you both to forget about this for a

while.”

“What do you think, Harumi?”

“I think Satomi-kun should convince us.”

“Then how about this?” Koutarou asked, squeezing them both tightly in a great big bear hug. Little did he know it was what they both wanted—it was the perfect way to express his affection without being delicate.

“This isn’t nearly enough, I think,” said Clan.

“I agree. I believe this would be the bare minimum,” added Harumi.

It was a good start, but the girls wanted more. They took full advantage of this situation where their hearts were united, leaning in to give Koutarou a kiss on either cheek. They weren’t sure they’d have the courage to do it ever again if they let this chance slip by.

“U-U-Um, isn’t that a little much right off the bat?” Koutarou stammered.

“Why are you getting flustered over just that?”

“She’s right. You need to get used to it, Satomi-kun.”

Both girls knew they’d been a bit too bold, but they felt they more than deserved it. Besides, Koutarou really couldn’t afford to let this fluster him. He had Clan and Harumi in either arm, but there were seven more anxious girls watching. It would only be a matter of seconds before they came storming through the door to get their just deserts too.

Episode 2: Theia and Ruth's Journey

Just days after Vandarion's defeat, tensions in Forthorthe were steadily winding down. What was left of the coup d'état army had already surrendered and been disarmed, and the men involved were now solemnly awaiting their judgment. This was, in large part, thanks to the decisive battle being broadcast across the galaxy. Seeing Vandarion's monstrous transformation was eye-opening for his sympathizers. But as the turmoil surrounding the civil war died down, new hubbub began arising in the aftermath. Namely, all of Forthorthe was now demanding information on the Blue Knight.

"We can deal with that later," sighed Theia. "At least... that's what I'd like to say."

"I can understand how the people feel. I felt the same way when I first realized Master's identity," added Ruth.

"Me too."

The Blue Knight had channeled the will of the Forthorthian people into a powerful weapon and used it to cut down the corrupt Vandarion—and as such, he was hailed as a hero all over again in the modern age. People were clamoring to learn more about him, his origins, his personality... They wanted to know everything about their national savior.

"Hmph, I suppose we can't ignore this. We have no choice but to disclose the data we have on him," Theia acquiesced.

"But we can't disclose *all* of it," Ruth countered.

"And why not?"

"That would also mean exposing some very embarrassing secrets, Your Highness."

"Th-Th-That won't do! J-Just reveal what's safe to share!"

"If that's what you want, we should review the data ourselves."

“Very well. Let us go over it while we have some free time on our hands.”

“I’ll set things up right now, then.”

Taking the feelings of her people into account, Theia agreed to disclose information on the Blue Knight. The bracelets she and Ruth always wore were constantly collecting and recording data, and their archives improved the accuracy of combat, translation, and other programs. They also contained plenty of information on the Blue Knight, as well as some particularly sensitive files. Like footage of Theia eating some ice cream in her underwear, for a prime example. As such, the archives couldn’t just be released to the public wholesale. They’d need to be gone through manually.

“Let’s outline the events. That way, we can fill in any details in later installments,” Theia suggested.

“I think that makes sense, especially as we only have limited time right now,” agreed Ruth.

“Hmm... I suppose we should start at the very beginning with how we got involved in all this.”

“I believe it would be appropriate to start with Her Majesty Elfaria’s plans, as she’d already met Master before Your Highness was even born.”

“Indeed. Let’s start there.”

The Blue Knight’s story began with Theia’s first trip to Earth, meaning the prologue was how and why that trip had come to be. Theia and Ruth had first met as babies, meaning they were dependent on records from that time to tell the story of what happened. They were too young then to remember anything concrete themselves, after all. According to their parents, they’d gotten the young girls together as playmates because they were similar in age.

“It seems I had a bad attitude already then. Look, I’m glaring. I’m amazed you wanted to be friends with me, Ruth.”

“I wonder... I can’t tell you what I was thinking. But you look lonely in this footage to me, Your Highness, so I’m sure that I wanted to stay with you.”

“That does sound like you.”

Currently, Theia and Ruth were watching a recording from their early childhood featuring a sulking Theia and an innocently smiling Ruth. Their difference in attitude and appearance was stark, but Theia had a reason for being that way. Her mother, Empress Elfaria, was so busy with her official duties that she was never able to spend much time with her. As a result, Theia was starved for familial love. On top of that, her mother's title and position had a great influence on her upbringing. The children of rival families were hostile toward her, and most adults either talked about her behind her back or tried to use her for their own ends. Theia thus believed at an early age that she couldn't trust anyone. She knew not everyone was out to get her, but the risks were just too high.

"What did you think of me back then, Your Highness?"

"I'm sure I thought you were serious. Your father was to a stupid degree, so I imagine that predisposed me to think you were too."

"So you trusted me to some extent."

"Yes, though I was just a child then. I didn't really wall myself off until later."

Thanks to Lord Pardomshiha's reputation, her own serious demeanor, and her family's demonstrated loyalty to the crown, Ruth slowly earned Theia's trust. And Theia's opinion of her only grew loftier as the years wore on and she better came to understand the dark depths of the world. Ruth was the only thing that could bring something resembling a smile to young Theia's face.

"Come to think of it... I didn't smile much before we came to Earth, did I?"

"That always bothered me. But it always came out so strangely whenever I tried to put it into words..."

"Even if you had said something, I wouldn't have listened back then... I'm sorry for all the trouble I've caused you, Ruth."

"Not at all."

As she grew up, Theia's smile had gradually disappeared. She could still put one on to pressure or provoke someone, but she never honestly smiled. Her distrust had grown with her, to the point that she saw Ruth as her only ally. Of course, Ruth was constantly trying to fix that, but the burden Theia carried was

a weighty one. Finding someone who could look past that was difficult, and even if she found the right person... there was no guarantee that Theia would accept them. It seemed an almost insurmountable task, even for diligent Ruth.

“To think this is how I looked when I came here... No wonder Koutarou always fussed at me.”

“There was no way around it, I’m sure. Her Majesty was always busy and you never trusted anyone...”

“You were the only thing that kept me sane.”

“You’re too kind, Your Highness...”

Ruth was an only child herself, so she’d always been desperate to protect her childhood friend like a sister. That was how the two girls had come to bond the way they did.

“And eventually, it came time for my trial... but didn’t you think it would be too much for me?”

“No, I thought you would be able to complete it just fine.”

“Oh? And why is that?”

“Your assignment was to conquer a random location out in space, meaning there was very likely to be nothing there at all. I believed the trial was just for show.”

“It sure didn’t turn out that way.”

“That was a surprise, wasn’t it? To think that our destination wasn’t just a planet, but one populated by aliens who look just like us.”

“It turned out Mother had tampered with the system to send us to Koutarou, but that was utterly beyond my comprehension at the time.”

“To be honest... I was certain that the trial would be difficult the moment I realized there was life at the designated coordinates.”

“Haha, I still think so even now—but I thought it would all be easy back then, and that’s where the problems started. Without you at my side, I would’ve failed my trial that first night.”

Theia's trial was to establish dominion over a randomly generated set of coordinates. If there was anyone living there, she was to have them swear fealty. And, as proud as she was back then, Theia looked down on people—especially backwater Earthlings. Theia now understood no one would ever accept a princess like that as their liege, but at the time, she had thought it was a mere matter of demonstrating her power. That was how Ruth had known the trial would be hard for her.

"And so the two of us—a naive princess and her wise knight—descended to the planet."

"Wise or not, I never dreamed things would turn out like this, Your Highness."

"Hahahaha, but of course! Who could have expected this? I bet not even Kiriha could have predicted it!"

That was the beginning of Theia and Ruth's long, long journey. There were trials and tribulations leading up to it that they were oblivious to—they simply came to room 106 as fate had ordained.

In Forthorthe, young members of the royal families were each given a trial. Once said trial was completed, their right to the throne would be acknowledged. In that sense, it was essentially a coming of age ceremony. As for Theia, her trial involved heading to Earth, so Ruth was assigned to be her guard. Theia was hoping to make the trip as short and sweet as possible, however...

"Since Mother was fighting alone in Forthorthe, I was desperate to clear the trial and return home quickly."

"I remember."

"Then again... if I'd returned back then, I only would have gotten in her way."

"That's not—"

"It is. I should know. With how narrow-minded I was then, I would have fallen for the pettiest of provocations and caused more problems for my mother," Theia said with a bitter smile as she pulled up a video from two years ago.

The footage showed her laughing as she whipped out an antimatter cannon

meant to obliterate Koutarou and the others. And since that was how she'd treated the people she was meant to be winning over, it was easy to imagine how she would have treated a real enemy.

"Yet you relented in the end, Your Highness."

"Only because you stopped me. I didn't back down on my own."

There, Theia switched to footage of Ruth stopping her. Ruth was rarely so outspoken, but she'd felt her hand was forced. If she hadn't intervened, not only would Theia have failed her trial... all of Earth would have been doomed. That was why she'd been willing to stop her, no matter the cost—and it was thanks to Ruth's desperation that Theia had agreed to lay down arms. Indeed, Ruth had ultimately kept the peace.

"But it's not like I was completely convinced," Theia sighed, advancing the footage. Once she'd put her cannon away, she'd sulked as Ruth explained the situation to Koutarou and the others. "I was the one who should've explained myself..."

It was her trial, after all. She was the one sent to conquer room 106 and make Koutarou her vassal. There wasn't even anything particularly technical about the situation that fell on Ruth to explain—yet she'd taken the job nevertheless, and all the while Theia did nothing more than stand in the background fuming. There was nothing majestic about her, yet she was incapable of seeing that at the time. Looking back at it two years later, however, she thought it was so pathetic that she wanted to cry.

"And this is what came of it... Shizuka, someone I looked down on as a backwater Earthling, trounced me good. Served me right," said Theia, now advancing the footage to when Shizuka had barged into the apartment.

As the landlord of Corona House, Shizuka had been furious with Theia and the others who simply refused to get along. She ended up putting a stop to the ruckus herself with her karate and the power of a dragon sleeping inside her. Yet even though she'd been humiliated by Shizuka, Theia was happy with how the situation had turned out. If possible, she'd love to go back in time and follow Shizuka's example.

"The more I see, the more I feel that Mother was right to send me to

Koutarou. If not for him, I would've been dancing in Vandarion's palm."

On paper, Elfaria had sent Theia to complete her trial, but in reality, she'd sent her to meet Koutarou. The empress had considered it a good way to protect her daughter while simultaneously challenging her. If she'd told Theia as much back then, she would have objected fiercely, but now she understood her mother's wisdom.

"It was after this defeat that you began to change, Your Highness."

"It was the first I'd ever met someone I couldn't beat in a fight... I realized I was lacking something, and it was only thus backed into a corner that I started to grow. How immature."

If Theia had tried to fight Shizuka with violence alone, Shizuka easily would have won. It forced her to realize she needed another way to secure her victory —one that everyone would recognize. That came to be their daily gaming sessions, through which they all competed to earn ownership of room 106, and it was gaming together with everyone that Theia had opened up to everyone and vice versa.

"As a result, you matured and came to care for other people. I enjoyed being able to watch you grow every day, Your Highness."

"When was it?"

"When was what?"

Ruth cocked her head, unsure of what Theia meant. It wasn't how one would normally ask a question of a princess, but Ruth sometimes treated her like a dear childhood friend above all else. The familiarity brought a smile to Theia's face.

"When did you start thinking that I'd successfully be able to complete my trial after all?" she asked.

"That summer, I believe," Ruth replied. "By the time Sanae-sama was captured by the ghost hunters, I was sure of it."

Back then, Theia had decided to save Sanae of her own accord even though she had no obligation to do so. Losing Sanae would have meant one less rival

for room 106, even. Yet Theia had chosen to help her in her time of need, which was her first big step toward becoming a proper ruler.

“Then when did you first start to think I might be able to do it?” Theia asked again.

“Around the time when the dynamic between you and the others began to change. After the obstacle marathon,” Ruth replied.

Indeed, Theia had already begun to change that spring. She was locked with rivals in a fight with no regard for status. Their first major showdown had been the obstacle marathon, through which Theia got a little closer with everyone. Keen Ruth had picked up on that.

“It was the first time in your life you found yourself on equal footing with the people around you,” she said. “People you might even call friends.”

Though it was only through games, Theia had learned how to put herself in someone else’s shoes. That was ultimately why she’d chosen to go save Sanae. Really, it was the first time she’d felt a sense of camaraderie with anyone other than Ruth.

“Indeed... they’re probably the first friends I ever made after you, Ruth.”

“It was wonderful.”

“But isn’t the same true for you?”

“Maybe so, Your Highness... Because of my own inexperience, I always regarded other Forthorthians with suspicion as well.”

Ruth’s situation back home wasn’t too dissimilar from Theia’s. She might have been able to make friends on her own, but as the princess’s retainer, she was forced to be wary of people. Coming to Earth and meeting people who had no stake in Forthorthian politics was her chance to make friends too.

“Thinking back on it, it was only after coming to Earth that you started asserting yourself too,” remarked Theia.

From her point of view, sociability wasn’t the only thing that had changed about Ruth. She’d also learned to speak her mind since coming to Earth. Back home, she’d only ever quietly watched over Theia from the shadows.

“Really? I had no idea...” Ruth, herself unaware of the change, looked at Theia in awe. She felt like she wasn’t any different.

“It’s only natural. You need to speak up with your friends, after all.”

“Yes... I suppose you’re quite right.” Organizing and coordinating a large group of people required input from everyone. So as Ruth made more friends, she’d naturally needed to share her opinion more. Thinking of it that way, she narrowed her eyes and nodded.

“After the boy you love mistakes you for a tree with beetles, anyone would get a little more assertive...” Theia mumbled. She was sure that had produced a change in Ruth too. It only made sense that she wanted to emphasize her charms after being put on the same level as a beetle, after all.

“Excuse me? Did you say something, Your Highness?”

“Oh, um... just that meeting Koutarou really had an effect on us all,” Theia said, strategically paraphrasing without mentioning beetles.

Fortunately, Ruth seemed to believe it. She replied with a smile, “I agree. I think Master was the first person I managed to trust completely.”

“The same goes for me, although I only realized it much later.”

Koutarou was just one of many people Theia would need to make her vassal—but he was special. He had no connection to her and no ties to Forthorthe, meaning he had no investment in getting anything out of their relationship. They opposed each other, shouted at each other, and even fought sometimes. It was the first Theia had ever truly been able to go head to head with someone, which was yet another stepping stone on her journey to maturity.

“When I realized you were growing, Your Highness, I decided to take a chance on Master. Finding someone who wouldn’t hold back with you was like a miracle.”

“And when was that?”

“That summer at the beach—about the same time I realized you’d be victorious in your trial.”

In discussing how they’d grown, the girls inevitably found themselves talking

about Koutarou and his influence on them. That would be what the citizens of Forthorthe wanted to hear about most. But in spite of his major role in the development of Theia and Ruth's story, there was yet more to it.

"Unfortunately, I only saw him as a neanderthal at first. Just some loud savage from an undeveloped world. Little did I know that I was the real brute."

Theia had intended to force Koutarou to swear his loyalty so she could go home. Her concern for her mother instilled her with impatient urgency, meaning she'd cared nothing for anyone else's opinions or feelings. She had been perfectly happy to strong-arm Koutarou into what *she* wanted.

"Now that I think about it, Master was incredibly thorough. He tried to hear everyone out and reach a compromise. And when that failed him, he resolutely stood his ground."

"Kiriha was so close to reaching an agreement with him that she quickly resorted to a change of plans, if you remember."

Even though Theia had tried to use force from the start, Koutarou was diplomatic with her. He'd tried his best to accommodate everyone, and when that didn't work, he'd insisted on neutrality. Being able to balance his views and his pride, Koutarou had come off as more civilized than Theia.

"Even so, there was one thing he just couldn't believe... and that was magic," Ruth recalled.

"Who could blame him? It defies common sense, not to mention it was *Yurika* trying to tell him it was real. You remember what a mess she was back then."

"You're saying the messenger means more than the message?"

"That's right. Take me, for example. The righteousness of your stance is practically irrelevant. In the end, it's people who move hearts."

In the beginning, Koutarou had rejected both Theia and Yurika, whereas he'd chosen to enter a ceasefire with Sanae and hash things out with Kiriha. Theia believed the deciding factor was a difference of character. Both Theia and Yurika had had good reasons for asking for room 106, but Theia had resorted to violence and Yurika's negative attitude had worked against her. Neither girl exactly inspired trust, which was why Theia looked back on the two of them as

the real neanderthals of the situation.

“I was lucky to have you with me, Ruth. We were able to avoid the worst case scenario.”

“That’s not—”

“It *is* the truth. There were several times that Koutarou was only willing to compromise with me because of you. We can laugh about it now, but you were trustworthy—unlike me. Who knows what would have happened without you?”

Ruth was normally quiet, but she always stepped in to pull Theia back whenever she was about to make a mistake. She was, without a doubt, the reason Theia and Koutarou’s relationship hadn’t gone up in flames. Theia knew she had a lot to be thankful for.

“What made you trust Koutarou, Ruth?”

“Like I said before, he was thorough. To put it differently... he’s earnest in his own clumsy way. Regardless of the trial, I believed he would make a fantastic ally.”

“So it was love at first sight, huh?”

“Y-Your Highness!”

“No? For someone as fastidious as you to rely on a feeling that someone would make a good ally... That kind of profound trust only comes from love, even if you didn’t realize as much until later.”

“Y-Your Highness...” Ruth faltered there before blushing and admitting, “Then... yes.”

At this point, both Theia and Ruth were aware of their and each other’s feelings. Still, Ruth found it embarrassing to say it so plainly. Especially like this.

“I believed he would stand alongside me to protect you. And I hoped he would become your Blue Knight...”

“I’m just surprised you came to trust him so quickly.”

“You might not realize it, Your Highness, but there aren’t many people who could push you the way he did. You also might not realize how valuable it is to

have someone treat you like a normal person...”

“So I was just a convenient gateway to your ideal man.”

“Hardly, Your Highness! All I wanted was for someone to protect you, both physically and emotionally!”

“Jeez, hearing you say that makes me realize how high your bar is. Like no one *but* the Blue Knight would do.”

“I didn’t mean...”

“Right now might be a different story, but I think it would’ve been difficult for any modern knight to protect me emotionally back then.”

Over the past two thousand years, Forthorthian chivalry had evolved. Knights true to the ways of old—the kind Ruth dreamed of—were hard to come by. That was part of the reason the citizens were happy to see the return of the Blue Knight, who embodied the original ideals of knighthood. People’s expectations of knights had waned over the long years, but the dream was suddenly alive again. That went for Ruth too. She wanted an old-fashioned knight for her princess, but one who would also be able to see and treat her like a normal girl. Theia couldn’t imagine that many, if any, men like that existed in Forthorthe.

“Goodness...”

When Theia spelled it all out for her like that, Ruth finally realized the immenseness of what she was asking. She’d just admitted herself that there weren’t many people who could do it. Demanding it from a potential romantic partner was indeed a high bar.

“Except a man matching that description exactly just so happened to appear right in front of us during my trial. Who could blame you for not noticing?”

“I am so embarrassed, Your Highness...”

Ruth had, after all, met her dream man during Theia’s trial. It was a miraculous encounter that set gears in motion and she couldn’t help falling in love, like it was fated to happen.

“What about Your Highness then? When did you become aware of your

feelings for Master?” she asked, urging the conversation onward—partially because she knew they were short on time, and partially because she couldn’t bear to keep talking about herself.

“During the play,” Theia stated boldly without a hint of embarrassment. She couldn’t have said as much to the boy in question, but she had nothing to hide from Ruth.

“How exactly, if I may ask?”

“Hmm... it must have started with the casting.” Theia had realized her feelings during the play, but it took place in several steps. “Choosing Harumi as the heroine was for the best. After all, she *is* Princess Alaia. But when practice began, I had to wonder why I wasn’t up there beside him.”

Theia had written a play based on the legend of the Silver Princess and the Blue Knight, and she was initially unsure who to cast as Alaia. It was such a nuanced role that she couldn’t make the decision lightly—otherwise, she simply would have picked herself. In the end, the production moved forward with Harumi as the star, but Theia found herself thinking *she* should have been the one with the Blue Knight. Those feelings had surprised her.

“You must have known deep down that you wanted to be with Master.”

“I guess so, but my case was almost the opposite of yours. I wasn’t looking for the Blue Knight. I just wanted my own knight to see me for myself.”

Theia hadn’t been concerned that Koutarou was the Blue Knight in the play—but it had bothered her that he wasn’t looking at her. That was her first step toward realizing her feelings, even if she wouldn’t understand that for some time afterward.

“It’s not like I specifically needed the Blue Knight either...”

“Despite your strict requirements? I guess you just got lucky that the Blue Knight himself happened to fall into your lap.”

“Ugh... B-But I still fell in love with Master for who he was, not because he was the Blue Knight.”

“Hahaha, I believe you. Don’t worry.”

“Y-Yes, Your Highness...”

By the time practice for the play began, Ruth had already put her trust in Koutarou. She’d fallen in love. She even dreamed of him being the reincarnation of the Blue Knight. Theia knew that well, and she was amused to see Ruth so flustered over it.

“I suppose the next step was the night before the cultural festival. He had the gall to ask me to teach him how to dance.”

“Yes... I remember that. You looked so happy dancing together.”

“You saw that?!”

“I did. I found the two of you dancing in the gymnasium, but I thought it would be best not to interrupt... though someone else came to interrupt in the end.”

Ruth remembered the sight of the two dancing even now. Koutarou was a complete amateur, but his movements had looked fine from afar. More importantly, Theia looked happy. She was defenseless, free, and shining brightly.

“I thought that was our little secret...” Theia grumbled.

“That was the moment for me.”

“What do you mean?”

“It was the moment I became convinced that Master was the person I’d been waiting for.”

Ruth had never seen Theia look at anyone the way she’d looked at Koutarou that night. That was what convinced her that the princess needed him.

“It wasn’t during the engagement incident?” Theia asked.

“Th-That was when I realized that I wanted Master to love me back... My own feelings blossomed much sooner.”

“Hahaha, sounds complicated.”

Ruth’s dream was for Koutarou and Theia to be together, so she’d thought she was fine with unrequited love at first. Her engagement to Elexis, however,

had changed her mind. She no longer wanted her love to be one-sided.

“I realized it for myself when he detonated Clan’s bomb and disappeared for a while,” Theia explained.

“You mean...”

“I felt like my soul had been ripped apart, and that’s what made me realize how important Koutarou was to me...”

“I felt the same way. It was like the ground had fallen out from beneath my feet...”

“I’m sure it was an awakening for all of us. And with our deep attachment to the play, it affected us particularly profoundly.”

“Yes... perhaps that was the beginning of everything.”

“I think so.”

Theia and Ruth each loved Koutarou for their own reasons, but they’d both fallen for him without being any the wiser to his identity as the real Blue Knight. They’d simply believed he was a normal boy, and they’d wished for nothing more than a normal love. But fate smiled on them.

Koutarou, after cleaving Clan’s Super Space-time Repulsion Shell in two, was gone for months in Ancient Forthorthe. Yet to Ruth, Theia, and the other girls, he was only missing for a matter of minutes. They didn’t think it was at all strange when he said he’d worked with Clan to get back, even without the knowledge that they’d been on an adventure of world-shaping proportions.

“I first felt something was off because Koutarou and Clan were getting along so well,” said Theia.

“They were fighting just moments before by our watches, after all,” remarked Ruth.

“It wasn’t just that... He was treating Clan like he would me, which got my attention and made me think that something was up.”

“I can only imagine how sensitive you would’ve been to that, given you’d just realized your own feelings... but even I felt they’d gotten strangely close.”

Those misgivings had tipped Theia and Ruth off, even though Koutarou kept the truth a secret. Something had happened between him and Clan—something more than just the two of them temporarily being sent to another world. Theia had detected that almost right away. If that was all, she was convinced Clan would have remained hostile upon their return.

“For me,” said Ruth, “there was also the condition Master’s maneuver suit came back in.”

“I remember you mentioning that.”

“It was badly damaged, showing signs of extensive battles. It even had scorch marks on it.”

Koutarou’s armor had sustained severe damage over his time in past Forthorthe, and not just surface damage like dents and scratches. There was serious wear and tear on the moving parts, including the motors and bearings. Based on that evidence, Ruth concluded that Koutarou had been fighting something at least as strong as a mobile weapon over a prolonged period of time.

“But what really gave it away was the priority list in the automatic translator,” she continued.

“What do you mean?” asked Theia.

“Ancient Forthorthian had replaced Modern Forthorthian.”

“I see... If he’d been alone with Clan, it should have been set to Modern Forthorthian. And if they were in some unknown world, it should have been set to learning a new language. What other reason would there be for Koutarou to prioritize Ancient Forthorthian?”

“That was why I suspected he and Clan-sama traveled to Forthorthe of the past, and that there wasn’t much he could say because of it.”

Ruth had managed to figure out for herself that Koutarou and Clan traveled to the past. Never in her wildest dreams had she imagined that they’d met the Silver Princess, but her deductions were nonetheless impressive.

“Even so, that’s all circumstantial,” pointed out Theia. “You would have

needed something more definitive to confront Clan.”

“That’s right. She evaded my questions when I went to see her, but she received me warmly and sent me home safely. That only further increased my suspicions at the time.”

“I can see why. That isn’t how you normally treat a mortal enemy. So she had a reason for dialing back the hostilities...”

“In hindsight, it was because Clan-sama already knew Master’s identity and didn’t want to make an enemy of him by fighting us.”

“Not even she could turn her guns against the legendary Blue Knight. Politically speaking, he’s a stronger card than the empress. It would have been to her advantage to keep him to herself. I’m also sure she was interested in Signaltin as research material...”

Now that Theia and Ruth knew the truth, it was obvious that what Koutarou and Clan were hiding at the time was the truth about the Blue Knight. To get to that truth, however, normal intelligence gathering methods hadn’t cut it. The girls needed to take a leap of faith.

“Oddly enough, the final piece of the puzzle only fell into place in the heat of trouble...”

“You mean when things went sour with Elexis?”

“Yes. You were in danger, and when Master realized that calling for reinforcements wasn’t an option, he made his decision. He summoned the sacred sword he’d left with Clan-sama.”

Ruth still remembered it as though it had just happened yesterday. Koutarou had called forth a graceful silver sword from the Cradle. One glance at its craftsmanship and jeweled decoration made it clear that it was no replica—but the most telling sign of all was the snowy crest engraved upon the blade. It was unmistakably Alaia’s, and only one sword in history was known to bear it.

“Signaltin, huh?”

“Yes. And he wasn’t about to let us die to protect the secret of its existence... It was so very like him.”

Ruth brought up the footage from that day. It was taken from Koutarou's perspective, but it was otherwise exactly as she recalled it. A hole opened in space-time, from which Koutarou retrieved the brilliant blade and pointed it at the enemy. He looked just like a knight from a storybook, and in short order, all his enemies had fallen.

"That was the ideal outcome for you, wasn't it, Ruth? The man you love turned out to be the Blue Knight."

"Yes. To be honest, I thought my heart was going to burst with joy at the time..."

Even now, Ruth teared up remembering it. She'd felt justified in her love. Not only was Koutarou really and truly a model knight, he was the Blue Knight himself—meaning he could marry Theia, even if he was an alien. Ruth had felt like a distant dream was suddenly becoming real, like the universe was giving its blessing.

"I didn't see it that way... Koutarou being the Blue Knight meant that he was Empress Alaia's knight, and that was no cause for celebration for me."

Theia had felt the opposite of Ruth. She was aggrieved to learn Koutarou's true identity because she thought that it meant he'd already sworn himself to Alaia. The Blue Knight was Alaia's knight, after all. All of Forthorthe knew that.

"But in the end, Master returned to us."

"I know! I know that now! But it was so hard for me to believe that he'd even gone back in the past in the first place that I was fixated on it! I was stupid, I know! So go ahead and laugh if you want!"

The holographic footage playing now showed Theia in tears. She'd truly believed that Koutarou had chosen Alaia.

"You're not stupid in the slightest, Your Highness. That's just how much you love him."

"W-Well, as long as you understand!"

Theia normally didn't mind Ruth knowing anything about her, but she was particularly embarrassed about this. She'd wasted so much time running herself

in circles, to a spectacular degree even. She looked back on it as a disgrace, so she was actually quite thankful that Ruth didn't laugh at her.

"Shall we share this part with the public, Your Highness?"

"Of course not!"

"I think it's wonderful footage though."

"Only you would! How could I show the people that I didn't believe in my own promise to the Blue Knight?! Delete it! Delete it, I say!"

"What a waste..."

"It's anything but!"

Ruth marked the footage as private, but after reconsidering, she earmarked it for later review. A few days later, it would be made public. Theia was just so cute that Ruth felt it her responsibility to share it with the people—in the interest of full disclosure, of course.

Most of what transpired after Theia and Ruth learned Koutarou's identity had already been made public thanks to what had come to light during Vandarion's failed coup. Thanks to that, the girls decided to pause their data review for the time being and get back to what they were originally scheduled to do that day—that is, pick out dresses. They needed to choose their outfits for the end-of-war memorial ceremony and the following celebration in a few days' time.

"How about this one, Ruth? Does it suit me?"

"It looks splendid, Your Highness!"

"And if you cut your loyalty by 20 percent?"

"Purple does suit you, but I prefer the red one from before."

"Hmm..."

"Master will be wearing blue, so I think it would stand out more."

"Then let's go with red, but prepare a purple version in case it clashes with the other princesses' dresses."

"A fine decision. What about the design, Your Highness?"

“That’s the thing...”

With Forthorthe’s advanced technology, Theia could preview all of the possible design and color combinations at once. She could even try them on holographically. The problem was that the plethora of available options made it difficult to choose.

“This one is a little too plain, but this one is too revealing... Oh?” As Theia was flipping through the pages of designs, she suddenly stopped and changed the designated color.

“Your Highness?” Ruth asked. Theia was browsing on her private terminal, but Ruth’s curiosity got the better of her. She brought up what Theia was looking at with the large projector in the center of the room, and...

“Ah?!”

“My, this is a fantastic design,” she said with a smile.

The projector had put Theia in a pure white wedding dress. Her golden hair shone brilliantly against the alabaster fabric and platinum crown, yet the long skirt gave a certain ease to the entire ensemble. It was undoubtedly the work of a famous designer.

“Would you like to wear this one, Your Highness?”

“I-I can’t wear something like this to the memorial ceremony!”

Theia hurriedly aborted the hologram and went back to choosing dresses. The way she flipped through the pages was different from before, however. Her usual aggressiveness had softened. There was almost something gentle about her. It seemed thoughts of a wedding dress had brought out her girly side.

“You could wear it as entertainment for the party,” Ruth suggested.

“No, thank you,” Theia replied shortly.

“Why not?”

“Because it’ll lessen the impact of the real thing.”

“My, I suppose I can’t argue with that. Hahaha...”

Ruth understood that when Theia said “the real thing,” she meant her own

wedding. When she got married, she wanted her husband to remember the dress she wore at their ceremony. That was why she refused to put one on now for the sake of entertainment, and so Ruth readily relented.

“Anyway, you should hurry up and choose a dress too, Ruth!”

“Me?” Ruth asked, surprised. She didn’t see the need for her to dress up for the occasion.

“Of course! You don’t have the leisure of only being concerned about what I’m wearing!”

“But as a knight, Your Highness, shouldn’t I attend the ceremony in uniform?”

Ruth was Theia’s personal guard and the vice captain of the Satomi knights. She’d always played a supporting role, both as a retainer and a vassal, so she thought it was only appropriate that she attend the ceremony on duty.

“Do you plan to shame our future husband?” Theia asked pointedly.

“What?!”

“Do you intend to let the man you love spend the entire day with a straitlaced knight in uniform?”

At this, Ruth fell silent. Theia was suggesting that, instead of as an on-duty knight, she attend the ceremony as a woman—and that struck a chord with her. After touching the crest on her forehead, she looked straight at Theia and declared, “Your Highness! Please teach me how to choose a nice dress! I need to look as lovely as I can!”

“Well said! That’s more like it!”

Her eyes were now shining with determination that stemmed from her deep love and sense of responsibility. She’d found a reason to dress up after all—she wanted her beloved to enjoy it.

“That said, I am still the vice captain of the Satomi knights. I must avoid anything unduly ostentatious.”

“Leave it to me! I’ve already spoken with the designers!”

After that, the two girls happily discussed dresses together. The memorial ceremony and following party were right around the corner. They were eagerly looking forward to their chance to celebrate Forthorthe’s newfound peace and honor the hero who’d helped achieve it all. In fact, after reviewing their journey

leading up to this day, it was fair to say they were more excited for it than anyone.

“Th-This dress would expose too much of my chest!”

“That’s fine. Koutarou is the only one who’d have a chance to get an eyeful.”

“Master will think I’m some pervert!”

Soon after, however, Koutarou left behind a short letter and returned to Earth. He was oblivious to the girls’ circumstances, but he thought it would be best to remove himself from Forthorthe as soon as possible. The girls, of course, would never forgive him for this. They would use any means, no matter how dirty, to bring him back to Forthorthe. And if they succeeded, they agreed to show off the dresses they’d picked out this day.

Episode 3: Corona House Spring Cleaning!

In the middle of February, Shizuka decided it was time to give Corona House a good cleaning. She normally did it in December, but the Corona House crew had all been in Forthorthe during that time last year. The Folsarian double who'd stood in for her while she was gone had handled the day-to-day cleaning, but Shizuka had exceptionally high standards. She wanted to clean the past year's worth of dust from Corona House, as well as spiff up a vacant room for a new tenant. So as a proud landlord, she decided to get to work. Since the job was so big, however, she tried recruiting a little help too.

"Any volunteers? Your reward will be all the cake you can eat from the cafe in front of the station!" she announced.

Cleaning all of Corona House on her own would take several days—several days that she couldn't afford to waste with the school year drawing to a close. She was hoping to find a few helpers to speed things up. But since she was asking as the building's caretaker rather than as a friend, she'd prepared a fine reward in the form of cake.

"Here! Me! I'll help!"

"I'll help too!"

The first to jump at the offer were Sanae and Yurika. Sanae loved sweets, and Yurika was happy as long as she got fed. In other words, they were exactly who Shizuka had been expecting to volunteer.

"But Yurika, you have a meeting in Folsaria that day," Maki cut in.

"Whaaaaat?! Really?!"

"Yes. I was called to attend as well."

Unfortunately, Yurika had to back out immediately. As Maki had pointed out, they had an important engagement that day. A meeting to discuss Folsaria's future couldn't be skipped for the sake of cake.

“Aww, it looks like I can’t help after all. I’m sorry, Shizuka-san.”

“That’s all right, Yurika-chan.”

“But the cake...”

“So *that’s* the part you’re sorry about, huh?”

“Don’t worry, Shizuka! Everything’ll go great with Sanae-chan on your side!”

“Hahaha, thanks. I’m counting on you.”

In the end, Sanae was the only one able to help. Since the request was so sudden, no one else was able to make time in their schedule for it. Shizuka wasn’t going to let that get her down, however. Given the situation, she was happy to have even a single volunteer. And if that single volunteer was Sanae, she had no complaints. Sanae was a great help when it came to cleaning.

The spring cleaning session was set for that Sunday. First on the docket was Corona House’s outdoor areas, including the parking lot. They needed to clean up the vacant room 105 too, but they began their spring cleaning outside. Since it was so cold, Shizuka hoped to finish up quickly and move indoors.

“Sanae-chan, can you wipe down all the windows? And when you’re done with that, can you clean up any dirt you see on the walls?”

“Aye, aye, sir!”

Having received her mission, Sanae gave Shizuka a confident salute. Armed with a bucket and dustpan, she then took off with a spring in her step. Knowing cake awaited her at the end of the day, she was raring to go. Seeing her like this made Shizuka smile.

“Here we are!”

Sanae bounded up the outer stairs so she could start with the windows on the second floor. She moved quickly and confidently, getting the windows visibly cleaner. She didn’t even struggle with the hard-to-see places. It was some fine work.

“Hmm hm hmm!” she hummed happily.

“Just what I’d expected from Sanae-chan,” Shizuka remarked.

Sanae’s talent for cleaning had a lot to do with her psychic powers. People left residual thoughts behind when cleaning, meaning that uncleaned places were free of them. Sanae was able to perceive that, so she was like a dirt-seeking missile even without any direction from Shizuka. The problem was that she usually lacked the motivation to clean at all, but fortunately the promise of cake was enough to encourage her. And thanks to Sanae’s psychic powers, Shizuka didn’t need to worry about her falling off the ladder and hurting herself. As long as she was focused, Sanae was a master at cleaning. There was just one hiccup...

“Hmm hm hmm!”

“Hey, Sanae-chan! No flying!”

As short as she was, Sanae had trouble reaching certain places from the stepladder. She had to get down and move it frequently, which she found rather annoying. So instead, she’d started using her psychic powers to fly up and scrub the out-of-reach spots.

“Aw, why not?”

“What if the neighbors see you?! Hurry up and get down!”

“Come on...”

“I’ll make it all you can drink in addition to all you can eat from the cafe!”

“Really?! Coming right down, then!”

Fortunately, Sanae acquiesced and safely landed back on the stepladder. The hot chocolate from the cafe in front of the station was her favorite. The rich cocoa flavor with the fresh milk had a hold on her. Sanae loved it with a ton of extra sugar. If Shizuka was offering as much as she wanted, she had every reason to listen to her. And so Sanae started working according to Shizuka’s wishes.

“Phew, she should be fine now...”

“Leave this to me, Shizuka!”

“I won’t be upstaged! Time for me to get to work too.”

Satisfied with Sanae's handiwork now, Shizuka pumped herself up to get to cleaning. There was a lot to be done, and if they didn't get to it, the day would be over before they finished it all. Shizuka was determined to work every bit as hard as Sanae.

Shizuka's primary job that morning was cleaning, but by the afternoon, she'd shifted over to general maintenance and repair. She swapped out cracked bricks, fixed a real estate agent's sign that was about to fall down, and so on. The building didn't look very nice if left uncared for, and Shizuka wanted to keep her family heirloom in good shape. By that evening, she was working on repainting the fence around the courtyard.

"Heh. I think I'm getting pretty good at this."

She used sandpaper to smooth out the peeling paint. The trick was to grind away a little more than actually necessary for a better finish in the end. After prepping, she sprayed the fence with a primer and waited for it to dry before applying the paint with a practiced hand. Like she said, she'd picked up the technique after doing it for several years.

"I wonder if Dad would praise me if he saw the job I'm doing..."

She looked at the fresh coat of paint and thought of her parents, who'd passed away six years prior. Shizuka's father had been a karate fighter. He was fortunate enough to inherit land, and by constructing the apartment building on it, he'd been able to strike a good balance between his family life and his karate career. He'd always taken good care of Corona House. The reason Shizuka was so good at fixing things up was because she'd been helping him since before she could remember.

"Nah, I'm sure he'd say that I still have a long way to go. He really loved this place, after all..."

The property Corona House had been built on was passed down in the family for generations, and her father had cared for the building every bit as much as he had the land. As a result, it was still in excellent condition twenty-five years later. It looked at least ten years younger than it really was. Shizuka wasn't quite as skilled a caretaker as her father had been, but she hoped to catch up

one day.

“Heya, Shizuka.”

“Wah!”

While Shizuka was working, Sanae suddenly tackled her from behind. The impact nearly made her drop her paintbrush. Fortunately, she was able to grasp it again because it wasn’t too heavy. When she looked back down at what she was doing, she noticed Sanae’s arms around her chest. Rather than tackling her, Sanae had actually hugged her.

“What’s the matter, Sanae-chan?” she asked.

“Eeheehee, nothing. Am I not allowed to hug you unless something’s wrong?”

“I didn’t mean that...”

“Then who cares? Take this!”

“Ahahahahaha!”

There, Sanae initiated her tickle attack. With her paintbrush in hand, Shizuka was unable to defend herself. She was completely at Sanae’s mercy.

“P-Please forgive me, Sanae-chan!” she begged.

“No way! You’ve got it coming!”

“Ahahahaha, s-stop it!”

Shizuka realized that Sanae was probably doing this because of the lonely expression she’d been wearing. Since Sanae was sensitive to the feelings of others, she’d picked up on Shizuka’s wistful mood.

“Ahahahaha—okay—hahaha—I get it already, so please forgive me!”

“Sanae-chan can see through all lies! I’m not letting go of you yet!”

Knowing what Sanae was up to, Shizuka couldn’t bring herself to get angry. She was happy that Sanae cared so much for her, so she wanted to cheer up too. And so she let Sanae do as she pleased. It was the least she could do to be able to face her with a smile.

The part of Sanae's soul that had wandered free of her body as a child came to live in room 106 before Shizuka's parents passed away in the hotel fire. But since it took a while for that part of her soul to develop an ego, she didn't have any memories of them.

"Your dad was pretty good at karate, wasn't he?"

"Oh, you knew?"

"It's more like I can sense the residual energy."

"You mentioned that earlier."

"I can feel a lot of it from this gi, so he was either really strong or just really believed he was... But since this is your dad we're talking about, I'm sure it was the former."

"That's right. I first learned karate from him."

"I can also sense that he wanted to show off to his daughter a lot."

"Oh, Dad..."

Even though she hadn't known Shizuka's parents personally, Sanae was able to learn lots about them thanks to her psychic powers. She'd happened upon some of Shizuka's keepsakes in storage when she went to put away the tools they'd used so far. She'd also detected some of Shizuka's parents' residual thoughts while cleaning, so she recognized them immediately.

"Why did your mom get angry over here, Shizuka?"

"One time when we were cleaning, Dad put me up on his shoulders to reach a high spot and I ended up bumping my head there."

"Hmm, so she was worried."

"With things like that happening, my mom was against me learning karate. She wanted me to do more girly things. But my dad lived for karate, so taking care of this building was the only other thing he could teach me..."

"It seems like your mom was dying to teach you how to cook," Sanae said with a grin as she picked up an old frying pan.

It was the same frying pan Shizuka's mother had used in their old house

before moving to room 206 in Corona House. The kitchen here was cramped, so she'd bought a smaller one for the apartment.

"It's true! My mom and dad argued over what I should learn, which put me in a tough place as their daughter."

"But you ended up learning both, right?"

"That's why I know how to cook *and* fight! Funny, isn't it?"

"Yeah, it's pretty weird."

"I wasn't sure what to pick up myself back then," Shizuka replied with a grin of her own.

She'd been feeling lonely, but thanks to Sanae, she was all smiles now. Since Sanae could get a feel for the past based on lingering thoughts and energy, she really and truly understood Shizuka. That was largely what had put a smile back on her face.

"What'd you *want* to do?" Sanae asked.

"Both, troublingly enough. Dad looked so cool when he was fighting, but mom was just wonderful when she was cooking."

"That's a toughie."

"Yeah. But in the end, both are useful, so it all worked out."

The cooking skills she'd inherited from her mother not only fed Shizuka herself, but everyone in 106 too. And the karate she'd inherited from her father allowed her to protect her friends. As it turned out, both skills were a great boon.

"You're protecting Corona House and everything, Shizuka! You're doing a great job!"

"You think so?"

"Yeah. I think everyone does."

"Thanks, Sanae-chan. I'm happy to hear that." With that, Shizuka picked up a bucket, a bundle of dust cloths, and a bottle of detergent. She then turned to Sanae again. "Now, I'd love to keep talking, but why don't we get back to

cleaning?”

“Yeah. I’m never going to get my cake if we stand around here all day.”

The two girls exchanged smiles and left the storage unit. In their hands now were the supplies they’d need to start cleaning indoors. They’d finished up outside, so all that was left on their list was cleaning up vacant room 105.

Room 105 was, up until very recently, occupied by a university student. They’d graduated earlier this year and moved back home. It was before the typical moving season, but they’d been able to find a good place because of it.

“Looks like they didn’t smoke, so we probably won’t need to change the wallpaper,” Shizuka said in a cheery voice as she got to work wiping down the walls.

Since the wallpaper in room 105 was treated, a light wipe was all it took to restore it to its original beauty. It would’ve taken more if smoke residue was involved, but thankfully that wasn’t the case. The wallpaper was torn in two places, though that would be easy enough for a contractor to fix up.

“Don’t you need to return the security deposit thing?” Sanae asked, curious.

“Only after the cost of repairs has been covered. I think we’ll be able to return more than half of it,” Shizuka explained.

“That still means you’re spending almost half, huh?”

“Ahaha, well, hiring help isn’t cheap.”

Shizuka was good at cleaning, but there were certain jobs outside of her expertise—like getting rid of grease stains in the ventilation, or fixing up the kitchen sink and the flooring. Since this apartment would be rented out to a new tenant, she wanted to be thorough.

“So you do most of the jobs yourself to save money?”

“That’s right. That’s how you make a good name for yourself.”

“You sound so professional.”

“Right?”

Shizuka would include a surcharge to cover the costs of the cleaning, but she aimed to reduce them wherever she could. Even if she was spending her tenant's security deposit, she believed being frugal with that money would make a good impression on future tenants. Promising they'd get a good portion of their security deposit back was an easy sell for a real estate agent. Most landlords with multiple properties couldn't offer something like that, but Shizuka only had Corona House to take care of.

"Sanae-chan, could you replace the lightbulbs in the bathroom?"

"Aye, aye... Oh? You're not using LED lights?"

"That's right. Residents typically only live here for a few years, and it's not like the lights in the bathroom are on all the time. It's cheaper to just use conventional lightbulbs and change them out whenever they move."

"Wow, you really are professional."

"Right? Hahaha."

Shizuka kept cleaning with Sanae's help. Together, it didn't take them long at all to spiff up the apartment. They were done within the hour.

"Good work. Thanks, Sanae... Wait, what's wrong?" Shizuka asked. She'd just come back from dumping out the dirty water in their cleaning bucket and found Sanae looking around in the middle of the room.

"Hmm... Well, I was just thinking how room 106 was kind of like this when I was alone."

"Sanae-chan..."

Sanae was smiling, but Shizuka could sense her loneliness. She knew what it was like to be separated from her parents. She knew Sanae had been all alone in an empty apartment. And thinking back on it now probably made her feel the same way Shizuka had in the storage unit.

"Take this!"

So Shizuka wrapped her arms around Sanae and hugged her without warning, just like Sanae had done to her earlier.

"What are you doing, Shizuka?"

Surprised by the suddenness of it all, Sanae could only blink in puzzlement. She had a tendency to jump on others, but they rarely did it to her.

“Can’t I hug you for no reason?” Shizuka asked.

“Of course you can.”

It was only there that Sanae realized Shizuka was really trying to cheer her up. But she didn’t have a chance to think much more, because...

“And you get this next!”

“Ahahahahahaha!”

Shizuka started tickling Sanae for revenge. Sanae loved tickling others, but she was actually quite ticklish herself, so she promptly burst into laughter. It was like the emptiness inside her instantly filled up—not because she was being tickled, but because she wasn’t alone anymore.

“Take this! And that! Is this your weak spot?!”

“Ahahaha, n-now you’ve gone and done it!”

Sanae was a sore loser, so she wasn’t willing to go down without a fight. She reached out for Shizuka’s sides and started tickling her back. And so a spontaneous tickling match erupted.

“Ahahahaha, stop it, Shizuka!”

“Hahahahaha! Sanae-chan—ahahaha—not there! Hahaha!”

The intense tickling match continued for about five minutes. By the time they were done, both girls were out of breath and exhausted from laughing so hard. They’d collapsed in the middle of the floor.

“I’m beat... I thought I was going to die,” Shizuka sighed.

“No one dies from laughter,” Sanae interjected.

“Heh, that’s true.”

“Heeheehee.”

The tickling match was over, but the girls continued laughing for a bit. When they were done, Sanae turned to Shizuka and quietly said, “Hey, I never really

apologized, did I?”

“Hmm? For what? Do you have something to apologize for?”

“Yeah. It was just a long time ago, so you’re not remembering it.” There, Sanae lifted herself up and looked down at Shizuka, seeming unusually serious. “You know... I’m sorry for chasing all of the residents out of room 106 even though this place is important to you.”

Of course, she was talking about when she was a ghost. Back then, she’d felt like she was protecting her home—but to Shizuka, it was the opposite. Corona House getting such a bad rap must have been heartbreaking for her.

“That’s fine. It’s all in the past,” she said, sitting up and slowly shaking her head.

“Still...” Sanae argued. She couldn’t just leave it at that after seeing just how much Corona House really meant to Shizuka today.

“Really, it’s okay. Sure, I lost revenue because of all the tenants you chased out, but it’s also thanks to you that Satomi-kun moved in. And that’s how I got to meet all of you. So I don’t have any complaints. Corona House isn’t any worse for wear, and I’ve gained something money could never buy.”

Shizuka thought about what her life would have been like without Sanae. The rent for room 106 likely would have been too high for Koutarou, meaning he never would have met Clan and slipped through time, leaving room 106 a perfectly ordinary apartment. The other girls never would’ve had any reason to show up—and that’s not what Shizuka wanted. So at the end of the day, it was a good thing that Sanae had chased out the other tenants.

“Shizuka...”

“I would hate it if I had all that money and none of you guys were here.”

“Yeah, I get that... You’re right.” Sanae hugged Shizuka for the second time today, but this time, she was shedding tears instead of trying to tickle her. “Thank you, Shizuka.”

“Sanae-chan...”

Shizuka might have been crying too, but since they were hugging each other

so tightly, Sanae had no way of knowing.

The girls remained silent for a while after that, but when their smiles returned, so too did the conversation. With no furniture in room 105, it reminded them both of how room 106 used to look.

“When Koutarou first moved in, he couldn’t see me. He couldn’t even hear my voice.”

“Oh? Really?”

“Yeah. So I relied on all kinds of paranormal phenomena, like making rapping noises or subtly shaking the room.”

Sanae remembered the day she met Koutarou like it was yesterday. She’d been determined to chase him out of the apartment, and she did her best to recount the events to Shizuka with wild gestures. Her childlike storytelling put a warm smile on Shizuka’s face.

“But it didn’t work, did it?” she asked.

“Nope. Once he fell asleep, he wouldn’t wake up for anything,” Sanae explained. “And it’s not really scary when you do that stuff during the day.”

“So he was hard to handle for a ghost.”

“How rude, right? He had cute little Sanae-chan right next to him, and he didn’t even know it!”

Despite Sanae’s best efforts, Koutarou hadn’t noticed her. Thinking back on the indignity, Sanae angrily puffed her cheeks out. She had been mad that he wouldn’t get out at the time, but now she was just mad that he hadn’t paid any attention to her.

“I bet he would’ve gotten the message if you used your polter-thing to hit him with something. Didn’t you try that?” Shizuka asked.

“Huh... I wonder why I didn’t.”

Sanae was perplexed by the question. If she’d just been more direct with her haunting tactics, she surely would have gotten his attention. Why she hadn’t resorted to that was a mystery to her.

“Now that I think about it, my powers didn’t get stronger until after Koutarou showed up.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. When Koutarou came back from his part-time job after hitting his head, I could move heavy things. And it was around then that he started being able to see me.”

Everything had changed drastically when Koutarou came home from the ruins that day. He was able to sense Sanae, and she was able to move heavier objects around with her powers.

“Do you think it’s because Signaltin started working on you?” Shizuka asked.

“Ah, maybe that’s it!”

“It was like that at the beach too.”

“Eeheehee, that was when I started understanding how Koutarou felt.” With a smile, Sanae reached for the charm around her neck embroidered with the words *family safety*. “No matter what Koutarou might say out loud, he thought it was okay for me to stay in room 106.”

Sanae stared blissfully at the charm as she held it. It had once hurt her, but after the events at the beach that first summer, it began protecting her. Never again had it burned her to touch it, making it like a valuable treasure that proved she wasn’t alone anymore.

“I wish I had something like that too...” Shizuka mumbled.

“But you have Corona House and room 106. They’re like super big charms,” Sanae said, pointing toward the room next door.

“Yeah.” Shizuka glanced that way, then shrugged her shoulders. “But it’s not like I can walk around with them.”

“Make Uncle Alu carry them for you!”

“Would you like me to?”

“Leave them where they are, please!”

Thinking about it, Shizuka realized Koutarou had never given *her* anything

special. There were small presents or gifts for the group, but nothing unique like Sanae's charm or Kiriha's card. It was kind of a lonely feeling.

"Then let's go bug Koutarou together. I'm sure he'll cave as long as we double-team him."

"You think so?"

"Yeah! He never listens to one person whining, but he's all ears when we gang up on him," Sanae pronounced, full of confidence.

She believed that Koutarou would listen to them in earnest. She was also planning on asking for items for the other girls as well while she was at it.

Back when Sanae was haunting room 106, she'd had no interest in anything apart from the apartment and getting back to her parents. She'd thus paid relatively little attention to Koutarou personally when he first moved in. Shizuka had gotten to know him a bit even before then, however, and Sanae was now curious about what their initial meeting had been like.

"Hmm, well... at first I thought he was awfully serious," she explained.

"Didn't you feel something? Like love at first sight?" Sanae asked.

"Nothing at all, unfortunately... Maybe I'm just dense?"

"I don't think so. I tried to chase him out first too, after all."

To Shizuka, Koutarou had been just a potential tenant she'd been introduced to by the real estate agent. Her first impression wasn't much beyond that. Or rather, everything that happened afterward made their initial meeting seem so commonplace.

"Nice to meet you. I'm Satomi Koutarou."

"I'm Kasagi Shizuka, the landlord here."

Koutarou had been perfectly polite, never saying a word about Shizuka's young age for her position. He'd bowed properly and shown her all due respect. Shizuka thus thought he'd make a fine resident and happily signed his lease. It was a very normal meeting between a landlord and tenant.

“Didn’t you tell him about me?” asked Sanae.

“I did. It wasn’t like anyone had died in room 106, so I didn’t really *have* to, but I did anyway because I want to be honest with my tenants.”

“And how’d he respond?”

“He was full of confidence and signed the contract saying that he wasn’t scared of some ghost.”

Koutarou had never seen a ghost before, but he’d figured that if one showed up, he’d deal with it. That was one of the reasons he’d moved in with so many charms. It was a simplistic and direct plan—just what the girls expected from Koutarou.

“What’d you think when he said that?”

“Well, I’d seen other tenants run screaming after saying the same thing, but I wasn’t sure what would happen. As landlord though, I wanted to put an end to the rumors, so I was really hoping he’d be fine.”

“So you were on Koutarou’s side.”

“I was on his side the minute he told me that he didn’t want to be a burden on his father.”

“Yeah, okay. You would be.”

That was the first profound impression Koutarou had made on Shizuka. He’d lost his mother and been raised by a single father, so she understood why he didn’t want to be a burden. She’d found herself thinking of him after that, and not just as a tenant.

“So were you on Koutarou’s side when we were all fighting too?”

“Hmm, I’m not sure... Since the room was damaged, I got so angry that I wasn’t really on anyone’s side at the time.”

“Ahahaha, sorry about that.”

“Oh, it’s fine. Haha.”

Sanae now understood why Shizuka had been so enraged. Someone damaging Corona House was no different from someone trying to take her

charm away. It was a capital offense. If she'd been in Shizuka's shoes at the time, Sanae would probably have gotten just as angry.

"So, when did you fall in love with Koutarou?" she asked next.

"Th-That's..." Shizuka hesitated, her cheeks turning red. Since the girls had been happily chatting away, the change that came over her was obvious even to Sanae. "When Uncle lent me his strength... No, that's not it. That's probably when I first realized it, but I think it happened much sooner."

"What made you fall in love with him, then?"

"After losing my parents and growing up alone, my dream's always been to have a big family to live with. And with Satomi-kun, I kind of had that... Before I knew it, I'd gotten pretty comfy."

"Eeheehee, I know what you mean. I got so dependent on Koutarou that I accidentally almost killed him. Whoops."

For Shizuka, having the family she'd always longed for was like a dream come true. Letting it go would be hard. She'd developed a deep attachment to it—to him—that would be difficult to sever. But left alone, it only continued to grow.

"It felt like the pieces of a puzzle had fallen into place. Like I was being told that this is where I belong."

"Yeah, I get that. It means everything, you know?"

Shizuka craved the same things Sanae did—love and warmth. That was also what Koutarou sought, meaning they'd be able to provide it for each other. So after they met, the rest was history.

"But you know, Shizuka..."

"What is it?"

"If that's true, should we really be here?"

"Yeah, I guess you're right. This isn't where we belong."

"Nope. We got the wrong apartment."

"We should be in room 106!" both girls exclaimed in unison. They nodded at each other and flew out of the door to get home.

Since room 106 was Koutarou's apartment, cleaning it was his job. Sanae and Shizuka, however, began tending to it like it was their own. They felt room 106 was the frame of a picture they both belonged in.

"Check it out, Shizuka! This is our very first score chart!"

"Kiriha-san and Theia-chan really were strong competitors..."

"And Yurika was dead last, like always."

"Our relationships may have changed, but the dynamic is still the same in that regard."

"You could call it fate."

"Ahahaha!"

The girls' spring cleaning quickly ground to a halt in room 106. Everything they picked up to clean brought back memories, especially after what they'd talked about today.

"That's right," remarked Shizuka. "There were only five of us at first."

"Yeah, you and Ruth weren't playing back then."

"The scorecard looks kind of empty with only five names on it, though. Ten fills it up much better."

"Ten is the perfect number."

"Except Satomi-kun would say it's a lot..."

"Only because he likes to be a meanie. He doesn't really think that."

"Hahaha!"

"Ahaha!"

Indeed, the girls weren't making any progress with their cleaning now. In fact, it could be said that they were losing ground with all the mementos they were digging up. Still, it brightened up the room immensely.

"Sanae-chan, I found something really dangerous," Shizuka called out, something rattling in her hands.

“What’s that?”

“One of Theia-chan’s mines. Remember the kind she used during the obstacle marathon?”

“Oh, those!”

“She must have forgotten this one.”

“So it’s been here for over a year? That could have been dangerous for Yurika...”

“Honestly... I can’t tell if she’s lucky or unlucky.”

The cleaning wasn’t getting anywhere, but the girls were okay with that. They were really in room 106 to find their place, after all. Spring cleaning was just a means to an end.

“Gosh, we’re never gonna get anything done in here,” remarked Sanae.

“I know, right?”

“There’s too much fun stuff.”

“Things were only difficult at the very beginning.”

“Yeah.”

The girls had uncovered mountains of memories in room 106, and virtually none of them were bad. Even the tough times they’d been through had all been a prelude to something wonderful. There were no tears in the apartment, only laughter.

“I think this is true happiness...”

“Love is all.”

“Hahaha... The only thing that kinda concerns me is what my parents would think if they could see me now.”

Shizuka’s past had been painful for her, and she was always wondering if her parents would approve of the way she’d turned out. With no way to know, it only made her worry.

“If their daughter’s happy, they’re happy too. Duh. Why would you think

anything else?” Sanae replied, uncertain why Shizuka was so worried. She saw things much more simply.

“Parents always have a lot to consider. I mean, we do dangerous things sometimes, and I don’t know that I’m taking care of Corona House like they’d want.”

“Don’t worry. They’re both all smiles.”

“Huh?”

“Your mom and dad are smiling, so it’s fine.”

“You can see them?!”

“Yeah. They’re normal guardian spirits, and since you’re not in danger, they’re sort of just a blur. But I can tell that they’re smiling.”

Sanae’s incredible psychic powers allowed her to sense the spirits of Shizuka’s parents around her, and they were clearly radiating joy. As such, she didn’t think Shizuka had anything to worry about at all.

“Really? Mom, Dad... I’m doing just fine, okay?”

“Keep believing in that love. It’s important.”

“Yeah. Thank you, Sanae-chan.”

“Heehee, you can count on me!”

The sun eventually set, dimming room 106. It was almost dinnertime, and the apartment would naturally brighten when everyone returned home. Koutarou was the first to get there, and when he flipped on the lights, he was surprised to find Sanae and Shizuka in the dark.

“Whoa! Sanae, Landlord-san?! What’s wrong? Why didn’t you turn any lights on?”

“Hey, welcome back, Koutarou.”

“S-Satomi-kun! We were just cleaning around Corona House and figured we’d clean up over here too...”

“Oh, thanks. Sorry to trouble you.”

When he looked closer, he saw that Sanae and Shizuka were wearing aprons and kerchiefs—they were clearly in the middle of cleaning. They'd just been taking care of the lights, so they'd naturally had them off. And thanks to the darkness, Koutarou hadn't noticed Shizuka crying when he'd first walked in.

"I know! Koutarou, let Shizuka ride on your shoulders!"

"Huh? Why?"

"Um, well... Oh, yeah, to clean the clock!"

"What's gotten into you, Sanae-chan?"

"Just play along! You two clean the clock up there and straighten it out."

"Sure thing."

Sanae was behaving oddly, but Koutarou didn't mind helping out with the cleaning. It was his apartment after all. The clock on the wall was indeed slanted and dusty, so it was hard to argue with Sanae.

"Sorry about this, Satomi-kun."

"Why are you apologizing, Landlord-san? It needs to be cleaned."

"Jeez, take a hint!"

"Wait, did you mean how much you weigh—"

"Don't you say it!"

Koutarou crouched down and Shizuka climbed onto shoulders. Being athletically inclined, she was astoundingly dexterous and didn't even wobble when Koutarou stood up.

"It's nothing to be ashamed of. I mean, you've gotten more muscular."

"Even so, I don't want you to think that I'm heavy!"

"If you hadn't said anything, I probably wouldn't have even noticed."

"Easy for you to say when you have no idea what kind of psychological damage a girl takes when you *do* notice!"

"But—"

"No buts! Just forget it, please!"

“Hrmmf!”

Shizuka covered Koutarou’s mouth with her hands. Koutarou had something he wanted to say, but he knew that it was better to keep it to himself when a girl got like this. And so he approached the wall with his mouth still covered.

“Jeez. This is the worst thing about you, Satomi-kun.”

“Hmmnmm.”

Shizuka was looking down on Koutarou from above. It was the first time she’d ever seen him from this angle, but...

Huh...?

For some reason, it felt familiar. Like this had happened before.

But when...?

Shizuka searched through her mental archives. It wasn’t anything recent. No, it was something from long ago. Fortunately, it didn’t take long to realize it. She remembered exactly what it was by the time Koutarou reached the wall with the clock.

That’s right. I did this with my dad...

Riding on Koutarou’s shoulders had conjured memories of cleaning Corona House with her father. The way she’d looked down at his face and held on to his warmth... was something she’d never get to do again.

“Is something wrong, Landlord-san?”

“No, nothing. I’ll get this cleaned up in a jiffy, so just hang tight for a second.”

“Okay.”

Shizuka left her tears as they were. Koutarou couldn’t see them from his angle, and she couldn’t hide her feelings from Sanae either way. She just desperately tried her best to keep from sobbing.

“Sanae-chan,” Shizuka called out to Sanae.

“Whaaat?”

“Could you bring me a rag?”

“Okaaay.” Sanae happily agreed with a smile that reminded Shizuka of how her mother had warmly watched over her piggyback rides from her father.

“Thank you, Sanae-chan...”

The words that came out of her mouth were simple, but they were full of complex emotions. A normal person would have only been able to take them at face value. And in reality, that’s exactly what Koutarou did.

“Eeheehee. You’re welcome.”

Yet their true meaning was perfectly conveyed to Sanae. Still smiling, she reached out and wiped away the tears in Shizuka’s eyes.

Episode 4: The Beach and Awkward Men

Koutarou stood in front of Kotori's camera. Even though he was like a brother to her, she was always embarrassed to look straight at him... but she didn't feel that way with the lens between them. Not only was she doing Nalfa a favor, she'd actually taken quite a liking to photography.

"Hello, everyone! It's time for the Blue Knight's blast-to-the-past cooking program!"

As Nalfa's cheerful voice rang out, Kotori pulled the camera back to get her in the frame too. She was standing next to Koutarou, for they were filming another show about cuisine from two thousand years ago.

"Lord Veltlion, what's on the menu today?"

"Let's see... Today we'll be making root vegetables and Dalshian shank cooked in Lacirno wine."

They'd filmed the first episode back at the start of summer vacation, and today would be the third installment of the series. The first and second episodes had already gotten rave reviews in Forthorthe.

"That sounds like a pretty wild dish!"

"The person who taught me the recipe, Guy Lewain, was a cook in the infantry who hailed from the mountains of northern Mastir."

"I see. Northern Mastir is historically known for its hunting traditions and cold climate. Preserving root vegetables, alcohol, and freshly caught Dalshian was easy there."

The Blue Knight was the biggest reason for the show's popularity, but people were also enjoying his insight into the food culture of ancient times. Modern Forthorthe curated an annual award for outstanding documentary work, and as of right now, Nalfa had no idea she'd be winning it this year. She was just having fun making videos.

“This is how you recreate it with ingredients from Earth!”

There, Shizuka entered the frame. She was taking part in the show as a cooking assistant. In addition to helping Koutarou prepare the meal, she was also holding a flip chart listing the equivalent ingredients: potatoes, pork, red wine, and a handful of different herbs. Kotori had formerly tried to do that part herself, but filming was much smoother now that Shizuka was handling it.

“Since this is a local dish done military style, it doesn’t have any complicated steps. It’s simple to make, meaning it’s beginner friendly. I was a beginner myself back when I learned to cook this,” Koutarou explained as he peeled potatoes.

Since prepping them all alone would take too long, Shizuka was quietly helping out next to him. She peeled faster than Koutarou, showing off her skills as a member of the cooking society.

“So you learned this dish not long after meeting Empress Alaia, Lord Veltlion?”

“That’s right. Speaking of Her Majesty... while I was making this dish once, Princess Charl took an interest in the wine.”

Sometimes while cooking, Koutarou’s commentary would go off on a tangent. But rather than stop him, Nalfa would let him go. She loved the stories he would tell, so she’d just add captions later to explain the necessary cooking steps he’d glossed over.

“What do you mean?” she prompted him.

“She threw a fit asking to taste the Lacirno wine.”

“What were the age limits on alcohol like back then?”

“There weren’t any, but I knew that it was bad for children.”

“So it caused a fight between you?”

“It did. I had to promise to go horseback riding with Her Highness to calm her down.”

“Ahahahaha, I can just see it now.”

Koutarou waxing nostalgic about the royal family of yore was always a highlight of the show. And since he was mostly sharing his memories of them in connection to food and cooking, the wholesome content was always family friendly. It went over well with audiences of all ages.

“Did Empress Alaia like this dish, Lord Veltlion?”

“Yes. When I made it the second time, I added some crushed roasted nuts for flavor that Her Majesty particularly enjoyed.”

“Everyone, it seems the secret ingredient to pleasing Empress Alaia’s palate was nuts.”

The light-hearted chatter between Koutarou and Nalfa, the glimpse into life two thousand years ago, the stories about Alaia and Charl, and the cute assistant with the ponytail all worked together to make the cooking video series popular.

Since this was already the third episode, filming went off without a hitch. The video would go into editing later, but production had wrapped for the day. The whole group understood that art couldn’t be rushed. And more importantly, a fresh meal was waiting for them. Work could wait.

“This looks great!” exclaimed Sanae.

“It’s better than I thought it would be!” echoed Yurika.

They were eagerly staring at the stewed dish set upon the table. Since it had been recreated with local ingredients, it was primarily potatoes and pork simmered in wine. Its rustic origins, however, gave it a certain impact. The wine-cooked pork was tender, and the herbs in the broth had an enticing aroma. It was hard to believe that Koutarou had made something so delicious looking.

“Try it with some of this bread. This spread also goes great on both the bread and the meat, so enjoy it whichever way you’d like,” he suggested.

“I’m starving!” Sanae roared.

“Thank you for the food!” Yurika squealed.

The girls dug in with gusto as soon as Koutarou wrapped up his introduction.

Their childish manners made him smile.

“What is it, Koutarou-sama?” asked Nalfa, who was serving food next to Koutarou. She’d noticed his grin and was curious about what had inspired it.

“Oh, it’s nothing... They just reminded me of Princess Charl.”

“Heehee, I see.” Realizing what he meant, Nalfa looked to Sanae and Yurika. Recalling the story he’d told during filming earlier, she smiled too.

“If Theia did that, she’d look just like Her Highness,” Koutarou continued.

Perhaps because of her bloodline, Theia already had Charl’s looks. So if she deigned to shovel food into her mouth like Sanae and Yurika, she’d be a perfect incarnation of the young princess. Theia, however, had her own opinions about this...

“I’m a grown woman, thank you!” she reminded everyone. “As if I’d behave so improperly!”

“I know that,” Koutarou assured her. “It’s just a fond memory.”

He understood how Theia felt and certainly had no intentions of forcing her to do anything she didn’t want to do. He just couldn’t help indulging the nostalgic thought.

When he relented so readily, however, Theia became a bit despondent. She immediately regretted how she’d responded. Instead of insisting on propriety since Kotori and Nalfa were present, she started to wish she’d gone through with it anyway.

“With all due respect, Princess Theia, could I possibly ask you to play the part of Princess Charl in a reenactment?” Nalfa piped up.

She was throwing Theia a lifeline. She understood the complex emotions stirring in her heart, and she also wanted to soothe the loneliness in Koutarou’s wistful smile.

“A reenactment?” Theia asked.

“Yes. I’m quite sure the viewers would love to see it for themselves. Koutarou-sama brought up Princess Charl in today’s video, you see.”

“I-Is that so? Then I suppose you leave me no choice...”

As long as she had an excuse—even a reenactment would do—Theia would take it. She thus accepted Nalfa’s offer, beaming on the inside in spite of her indifferent behavior.

“Thank you very much, Princess Theia.”

Nalfa thanked the princess even though she was really the one doing her a favor. She didn’t think of it that way, however, and smiled brightly at the arrangement.

“If I’m going to do this, I’d like it to be cute,” Theia insisted.

“Of course! Kotori!” Nalfa called.

“Leave it to me!” Kotori nodded in agreement.

The two girls then retrieved their camera bags and pulled out all of the equipment they’d stowed away before dinner.

“Okay, Your Highness, take it away!”

“R-Right...”

With the cameras and lights on her, Theia glanced up at Koutarou and proceeded to throw all etiquette out the window. She took her plate in hand and began shoveling food directly into her mouth.

She really does look like Princess Charl...

Koutarou was taken aback. Theia was already a dead ringer for Charl, so seeing her like this nearly moved him to tears.

I’ll need to thank Nalfa-san and Kin-chan later...

He couldn’t overlook the part they’d played in this. Two years ago might have been a different story, but Koutarou as he was now would never let such a kind deed go unnoticed and unrepaid. As he watched them film, he started wondering how he might return the favor. Coming up with a good present was hard for him, but thankfully, an excellent answer dawned on him...

“Say, Nalfa-san, Kin-chan, why don’t you come with us?”

“We appreciate the offer, but...”

“Would that even be okay, Kou-niisan?!”

“There isn’t much of a difference between a party of ten and twelve—especially on a private beach.”

Koutarou’s idea was to invite the girls to the beach with the rest of the Corona House crew. He figured that would be a much better reward than a gift chosen at random.

“Isn’t that right, Theia?” he asked.

“I don’t see the problem,” she replied with a nod after a moment. “Both of you are quite welcome to come.”

Though she’d been surprised by the suggestion at first, she realized what Koutarou was trying to do. She wouldn’t say it out loud, but she was equally grateful for what the girls had done.

“Nalfa will still be guarded over summer vacation as well,” she reasoned, “so it will actually be more efficient to have her with us.”

“Hey, that’s a good point.”

Koutarou was impressed. A boss, much less a royal, always needed to keep their subordinates in mind. It was wonderful that Theia hadn’t neglected to take them into consideration.

“Will you admit you respect me now?” she asked.

“I might have if you hadn’t asked me that.”

“It wouldn’t kill you to be open and honest instead of so stubborn.”

“I hear you had your measurements taken the other day and you’ve barely grown any.”

“You don’t need to be open and honest about *that*!”

Koutarou and Theia’s discussion grew more and more intense as it drifted off topic. Their candid energy put smiles back on the hesitant faces of Nalfa and Kotori. After exchanging a glance, they nodded at each other.

“Kou-niisan, we’ll come too.”

“Koutarou-sama... would you mind if we film everyone when they’re not in

their swimsuits?”

“Ahahaha, you sure are shrewd. I’m sure that would be fine,” responded Koutarou.

“I wouldn’t mind being filmed in my swimsuit,” added Theia.

“I would! I could never get married if I get filmed sinking into the sand!” shrieked Shizuka in tears.

“Sorry.”

“It’s not your fault, Uncle! But pretty please don’t film me!”

It had now been more than two weeks since the battle in Folsaria, but Alunaya had used up so much mana in the fight against Darzakah that it still hadn’t fully recovered. That meant the gravitational distortion Alunaya generated hadn’t yet normalized. Shizuka currently weighed over a hundred kilograms. The wooden floor in the apartment creaked when she walked, so she was convinced she’d sink right into the sand at the beach. Having that recorded for posterity was her worst nightmare.

“It’s okay, Shizuka-sama. I won’t film you in a swimsuit, and I won’t record your feet in other scenes either.”

“Really?”

“I understand how you feel. Besides, you’ve been such a help to us with the cooking show.”

Nalfa gently smiled at the anxious Shizuka, which finally calmed her down. She heaved a relieved sigh.

“Thank goodness... I was worried I wouldn’t get to wear my new swimsuit.”

“Speaking of!” Kotori cut in. “Do you have a swimsuit, Nalfa-chan?”

“I don’t,” she replied with a shake of her head.

When packing for her intergalactic study abroad, Nalfa hadn’t included anything that she could get here on Earth. There was a limit to how much she could bring with her, after all. A swimsuit had been an easy cut since it wasn’t an all-season article, and she had no way of knowing if she’d ever have the

occasion to need one.

“Then we need to go buy one!” Kotori insisted.

“Shopping for a swimsuit on Earth, huh? Now I’m getting excited.”

“Why don’t we film it, Nalfa-chan? I’m sure girls in Forthorthe are curious about fashion here.”

“That’s a great idea! Let’s do it!”

Now that Nalfa and Kotori were on board for the beach vacation, the girls began discussing various other needs for the trip. They went from swimsuits to types of sunscreen and so on. Koutarou struggled to keep up with any of it, and just as he felt he was truly in over his head...

“Oh?”

His phone dinged with a new message alert. He suspected it was Nana, but pulled his phone out to see it was actually a message from the vice captain of Nefilforan’s unit. The subject line read, “Training Request.” Since he was long lost the girls’ conversation anyway, he tapped the message to give it a read.

From: Vice Captain Cosettaunt Hyudin Hilbolace of Princess Nefilforan’s Unit

To: Commander-in-Chief of the Holy Forthorthe Galactic Empire, Lord Layous Fatra Veltlion

Subject: Training Request

Greetings. This is Vice Captain Cosettaunt. I had the pleasure of meeting you during training the other day, and I would like to thank you again for the honor.

As the subject says, I would like to extend a similar invitation to another training session with our unit. This time we will be focusing on how to fight enemies using magic and spiritual energy. As such, we believe your assistance and insight would be most enlightening. For details, please refer to the attached training plan.

So please regard this a formal request for you to honor us again with your presence. We humbly thank you for your time and consideration.

When he finished reading it, Koutarou groaned. Though the message had come from Nefilforan's vice captain, it was most likely Nefilforan herself who'd felt such training was necessary. She must have heard from Nana what a dangerous threat Grevanas posed upon his resurrection, which inspired an urgent need to prepare for anti-magic combat. The fact that she wasted no time getting to work was a sign of her excellence.

"What is it, Satomi Koutarou?" Kiriha asked, crawling over when she heard him groan.

In response, Koutarou held out his smartphone for her to see. "Princess Nefilforan wants to practice anti-magic combat."

Kiriha leaned in closer to get a look at his phone screen. When she did, her long hair tickled his hand. "How prompt," she remarked. "She must have contacted you immediately after getting the report."

At present, the People of the Earth, Folsaria, and Forthorthe were all working together. As such, news of the incident in the kingdom of magic had been immediately sent to the top brass of each faction. A more detailed follow-up document, however, had only been issued yesterday. Kiriha herself had gotten it yesterday evening, so the timing of Nefilforan's message suggested she'd taken immediate action after reading through the entire report. In other words, Koutarou was on the money.

"Princess Nefilforan and her unit are good people. I'd like to help them."

Reading through the message again, Koutarou reflected on the group. After first sparring with Nefilforan, Koutarou had participated in a training exercise with her entire unit. In much the same fashion she'd wanted to show Koutarou what she could do in their one-on-one match, Nefilforan had wanted to demonstrate her unit's capability. She'd thus set up a mock battle with her men divided in two—the red team under her command, and the white team under Koutarou's.

It was his first time with Nefilforan's troops, but they respected and supported him. Nefilforan naturally had the upper hand given her relationship with her soldiers, so it came as no surprise that the red team won, but Nefilforan was ultimately successful in demonstrating the height of her men's

abilities. The whole exercise was so nostalgic for Koutarou that it reminded him of leading his own men two thousand years in the past. He couldn't stand the thought of Nefilforan's troops in danger because they were unprepared to battle against magic. He was determined to help them.

"Spoken like a true important military man." Kiriha smiled when she heard his resolve. Since she and Koutarou were looking at his phone together, her upturned lips were dangerously close to him.

"Technically I *am* the commander-in-chief," he reminded her.

He was actually quite shaken by her smile but nonetheless managed to keep up the conversation. Kiriha had been sneaking in all kinds of surprise attacks like this recently. But Koutarou didn't have any reason to stop her. If anything, he had all the reason in the world to let her continue. That was where the girls who didn't understand Kiriha's game came in handy—Clan first and foremost among them.

"You can save that for later!" she shouted.

Her lack of social intuition had gotten Koutarou out of many a sticky situation. At times like this, Theia, Sanae, and Yurika also often saved him unwittingly.

"You know that's a problematic statement, right?" he replied with a smirk, though he was actually truly grateful she'd cut in.

"What about going to the beach?" she demanded.

"Our swimsuits are more important!" Theia insisted.

They were so invested in their upcoming vacation that they were disappointed to see Koutarou grinning about the idea of another training exercise. It wasn't dissimilar to the frustration most girls felt when their boyfriends got distracted from a date and started thinking about sports.

"You girls are always important to me."

"You... You can't fool me!"

"That's right! Th-That won't work on us!"

Fortunately for Koutarou, things weren't always so one-sided against him. He didn't stand a chance with Kiriha, but he was on more even footing with the

other girls. They'd made a connection that was only possible because he'd truly accepted them now.

The resurrected Grevanas was on the loose and Ralgwin remained unaccounted for, but it was unreasonable for the group to work nonstop. They'd decided it would be for the best to take some time to rest and relax. That was the idea behind their beach vacation, but as busy people, they had to keep it to a one-night stay. Koutarou in particular had his hands full, as he'd be training with Nefilforan's unit the following morning.

"Having zero travel time is a huge advantage," he remarked.

"You can thank me for that. I had Ruth prepare the transfer gate yesterday," boasted Theia.

"I'll thank Ruth, then. In fact, let's all thank her!"

"Thank you, Ruth!" the group said in unison.

"Really, it wasn't much..."

"What, you're *not* going to thank me too?!"

Koutarou and the girls were currently at their private beach destination early the first morning of their vacation. With Forthorthe's advanced warp technology, they'd teleported straight from room 106. The trip normally would have taken several hours, which Ruth had saved them. It was only natural for everyone to thank her.

"As for you, Your Highness," said Koutarou, "I'd like to thank you for arranging the use of this private beach."

"Huh?! O-Oh, of course..."

"Come on, everyone!"

"Thank you!" the group again harmonized.

"I-Indeed. I hope you all enjoy it."

Unlike last year, most people now knew how important Theia, Clan, and Ruth were. They also had Nalfa the newsworthy Forthorthian transfer student in tow.

With so many recognizable faces in their group, going to a normal beach could have been troublesome. There were just too many of them to protect in a crowd.

Of course, if they'd wanted to, they could have brought along even more guards to keep them all safe... but that would've put a damper on the fun for everyone. A private beach was a good compromise. Renting one was expensive, but it made security that much easier. Being able to reduce the guard they had with them was a huge win. It turned out that renting the private beach was actually cheaper than going to a normal one and packing it with bodyguards.

"In that case, we should thank you too, Lord Veltlion."

"That's right. Thank you for inviting us, Satomi-san."

In addition to the usual Corona House crew, Nefilforan and Nana had also come along. Nefilforan wasn't in her usual uniform, but rather casual wear. Nana, who was just behind her, was dressed the same way, albeit in a cuter fashion.

"I should be thanking you ladies for coming," Koutarou replied politely.

"Nonsense. We get to enjoy the beach this way," Nefilforan countered.

Nefilforan was actually present for two reasons. First, she'd brought her unit for the training session with Koutarou. Second, she would be guarding him and the girls.

Nefilforan's unit was temporarily relieved of supervising Forthorthe-related facilities on Earth. Another unit was subbing in for them so they could take part in tomorrow's training. In total, the unit consisted of twenty-five hundred men in four battalions that had been split into two groups. At present, the first battalion was assigned as Koutarou's personal detail. They were keeping watch from a safe distance so as not to interfere with the fun, but they had very strict security in place. The second battalion had been assigned the duty of preparing for tomorrow's exercise. The third and fourth battalions were off duty and resting on the beach on the other side of the mountain. Come the afternoon, they'd swap with the first and second battalions so everyone had some time at the beach.

Nefilforan herself was out on the sands because she had the morning off. When not on duty, she, too, required a personal detail as a princess. That was why she was with Koutarou and the others rather than the off-duty battalions. Right now, her vice captain—the same one who'd messaged Koutarou—was in charge. As for how this situation had come about, it was all because Koutarou suggested that they hold their training exercise in the mountains between the two beaches. He felt it would be the most effective use of their time.

"Thanks to you, I finally get to test just how waterproof this body is!"

"Nana-san, are you going to swim with us?!"

"Yes! This new body you all made for me is that incredible, although I'll need to oil it up later so it doesn't rust."

"I'll help you!"

"Ahaha, thank you, Yurika-chan."

Nana had tagged along with Nefilforan simply to hang out and have fun with everyone, though she was technically also serving as a guard. At first glance Nana looked young and weak, but in reality, she might have been the strongest one present—especially at the beach where everyone else was unarmed.

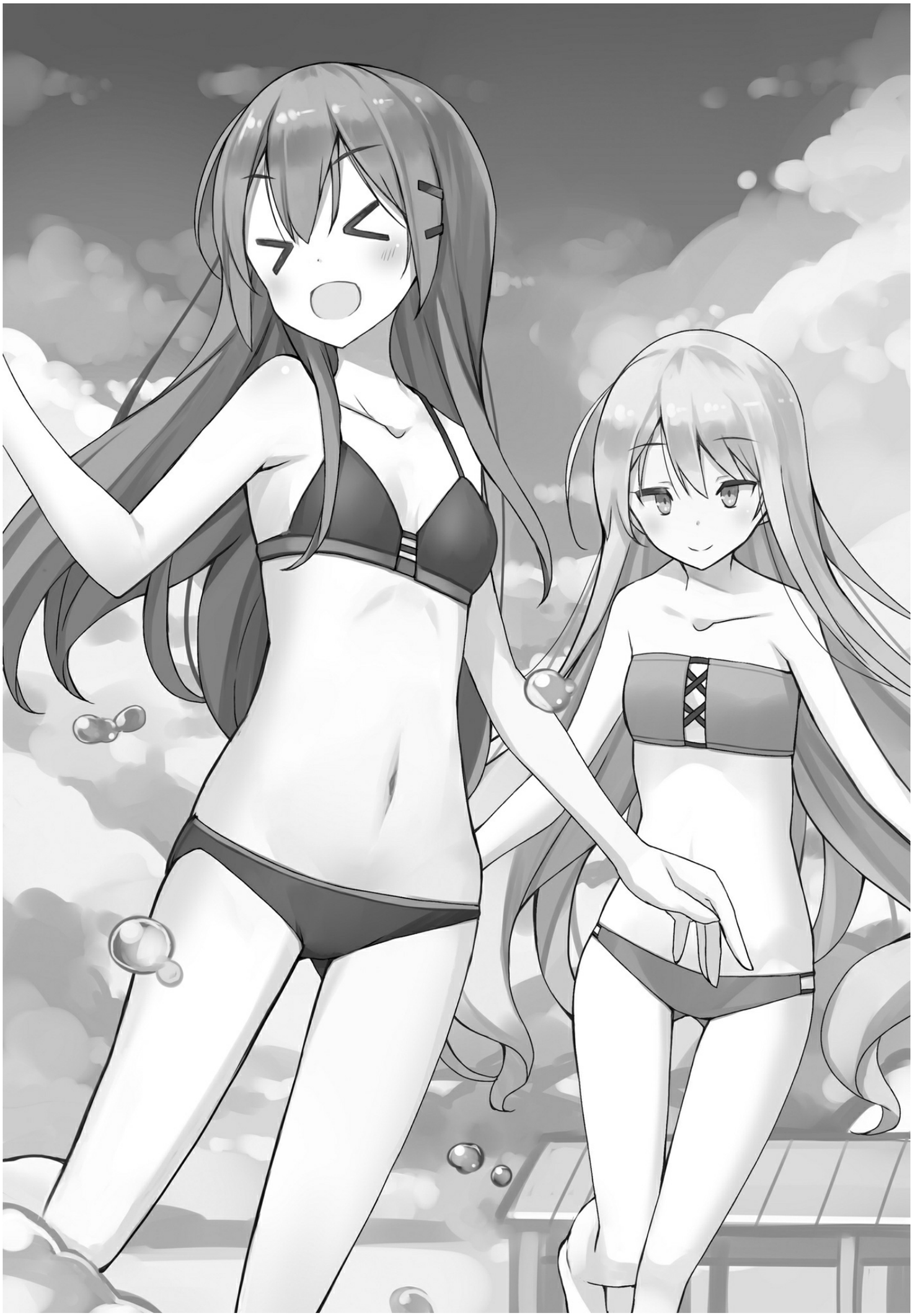
After dropping their luggage off at the hotel where they'd be staying, Koutarou and the girls all agreed to get changed. The first one ready was none other than Sanae, who was so overeager that she'd simply worn her swimsuit under her clothes. As such, she beat even the ever-hasty Theia out onto the beach. The crystal clear sky and gentle breeze made it the ideal day for swimming.

"First in!"

Splish! Running to the water's edge with light steps, Sanae jumped right in. The drops of water she cast into the air glittered in the summer sun.

"Hmph, I lost..." The second to appear was Theia. She was naturally hot on Sanae's heels, but she just couldn't make up the ground she'd lost by coming unprepared. With a frown on her face, she fixed her shoulder strap that had started sliding down as she ran. "Here I come!"

Splash! The frown, however, quickly disappeared. She was smiling again by the time she hit the water. Even if she was the second one out on the beach, the ocean was all that was on her mind right now.



“I won’t lose either!”

The third to appear was Shizuka. She refused to run at full speed for fear of how it would look, but she was still light enough on her feet that she reached the shore in no time. She jumped up high and made an acrobatic turn in the air before throwing her limbs out and landing a belly flop.

Sploosh! The splash she made was decidedly bigger than the other girls’ had been.

“Phew... How’d I do?” she asked when her sopping wet head poked up from the water.

Now equally soaked, Theia looked over and replied, “That was certainly impressive, but didn’t it hurt?”

“It sure did, but it’s not like we get this kind of opportunity every day, you know?”

Shizuka’s face was a little red—smacking into the water *did* hurt, after all. But even so, her expression was bright. She could only indulge in such childish antics because they’d rented out the entire place all to themselves. Shizuka wouldn’t do anything like it under normal circumstances, for she wouldn’t want to bother other beachgoers.

“Ah, I see. So it’s not about safety, really. You just don’t want to be an annoyance by being too rowdy,” Theia observed.

“Yup!” Shizuka replied with a nod. She then looked down at herself with a smile and said, “There’s also this.”

Her swimsuit was a subdued color, but it showed even more skin than Theia’s. Shizuka had only chosen it because she knew there wouldn’t be any strangers around on a private beach. Ordinarily, she wouldn’t dare to wear something like this.

“Do you think Koutarou will notice?” Sanae pondered aloud, her arms crossed.

Koutarou had a penchant for betraying the girls’ expectations. It happened less frequently nowadays, but there was still a possibility he’d disappoint

Shizuka.

“He can’t ignore it again,” she replied. “We all went bolder this time.”

“Yeah, you’re right! I tried to emphasize my breasts since they’ve grown a little since last year,” said Sanae.

“And I chose a swimsuit that better shows off my figure,” added Theia.

“See?! Besides, we’ve got the ultimate weapon over there... Satomi-kun’s *gotta* notice!” Shizuka declared, pointing toward the hotel with a confident expression.

Approaching from that way were Nefilforan and Kiriha walking side by side. Nefilforan wore a simple swimsuit reminiscent of what one might see at competitions, while Kiriha wore a one-piece suit with an elegant design and color scheme that didn’t stand out too much. Though their styles differed, they had one thing in common—their large breasts threatened to spill out of their tops. Kiriha in particular jiggled with each step, making it clear that she’d grown since last year. Nefilforan wasn’t quite as well endowed as Kiriha, but her toned figure made her look like a model. The other girls simply didn’t have that kind of ammunition.

“I see you’ve all gotten in already,” Nefilforan remarked.

“Can you blame them?” Kiriha asked.

The two girls reached the shore as the others were talking about them. When Sanae, Theia, and Shizuka saw them in their swimsuits up close, they couldn’t help exchanging a few choice looks.

“What’s wrong, you three?” Kiriha asked, detecting their strange behavior.

After exchanging one last look with the other girls, Shizuka spoke up as their representative. “We were just talking about what great figures you and Nefilforan-san have,” she answered honestly while still strategically, as a matter of pride, avoiding the subject of breasts.

“Indeed, Princess Nefilforan has such a beautiful figure that it’s enough to make another woman swoon,” Kiriha agreed.

“Oh, but not compared to you, Kiriha-san,” Nefilforan quickly replied, blushing

as Kiriha looked her up and down.

As a military figure, Nefilforan wasn't used to being praised for her beauty and had a tendency to deflect such attention elsewhere. She was also a little jealous of Kiriha's curves. Her personal ideal figure wasn't that of a model, but something more feminine like Kiriha's. Her praise wasn't just shallow courtesy —she'd meant what she said.

"It appears my lack of exercise is my undoing," Kiriha laughed.

She likewise idealized Nefilforan. She possessed considerable skill with naginatas, swords, and rifles herself, but not enough to fight by Koutarou's side. Genius or not, she just didn't have the physicality for it. Nefilforan did, however. Kiriha admired her beauty because of her single-minded devotion to the martial arts.

"Ahaha! I think we can all agree Yurika is really the one who's lacking in exercise," Nana jumped in.

She'd apparently arrived at some point with Yurika and Clan in tow. Nana had gotten changed quickly, but she'd waited around for her friends and they'd taken their time getting over to the water together.

"I've been exercising too!" Yurika exclaimed, looking down at her own stomach.

It was fortunately flat. It had stuck out a bit just a few short weeks ago, but Yurika had hurriedly adopted a diet just for this trip. She wasn't brave enough to wear a swimsuit knowing she'd gained weight.

"I might need the most exercise out of anyone..." Clan gasped.

She'd already worked up a light sweat. She spent her days holed up in her laboratory, so just the trip from the hotel to the beach had winded her. As for her stomach, it was naturally quite slim thanks to her light appetite, though that was unhealthy in its own way.

"Well, as long as you're aware of it," threw in Koutarou, who'd just arrived himself. He'd finished changing quickly, but he was tasked with carrying the parasols, cooler, watermelons, and other heavy things. The extra burden had slowed him down.

“That’s unusually forgiving of you,” Clan said, scrutinizing his face. Normally, he would’ve pounced on the opportunity to make a comment about her lifestyle. She wondered why he wasn’t saying anything now.

“We’re here to have fun, so why ruin the mood? Besides, you should get plenty of exercise today and tomorrow,” he explained.

He then reached for the towel around his neck and used it to wipe Clan’s forehead for her. She was surprised by the gesture, but didn’t shrink away.

“There! Now then...”

When he was done, Koutarou put the towel back around his neck and moved on as if nothing had happened. He still had the parasols and sheets to set up, so he couldn’t get in the water just yet. Clan silently watched him walk away, her eyes wide. The other girls could instantly tell what was on her mind.

“Lord Veltlion just did something incredible so casually...” Nefilforan muttered. Even she was astonished. The gesture was nothing special to Koutarou, but it meant everything to the person on the other end of it.

“That’s right, Nefilforan-san! Lately Satomi-kun’s been doing all kinds of stuff like that!” Shizuka piped up.

Unlike Nefilforan, she was ecstatic. She understood Koutarou only meant to keep spirits high on such a fun day, but at the same time, wiping a girl’s face like that wasn’t something that “just friends” did. Moreover, Clan was princess to a galactic empire. Not just any boy would dare to behave in such a way around her. Really, Shizuka was thrilled that Koutarou was starting to show his affection for the girls.

“Does this mean... it’s mating season?”

“No, Uncle! Gosh, you sound just like an old man when you say that!”

“S-Sorry.”

“Koutarou thinks of us as family. I don’t know if he realizes it or not, but that mindset alone is special,” Kiriha explained, summarizing the girls’ feelings.

In the past, Koutarou had subconsciously pushed everyone away. But at times like this, the girls got a glimpse of his efforts to change himself. He was doing his

best to open his heart to them, and because the girls understood that, they celebrated this development.

“What’s going on, everyone?” asked Ruth.

“It seemed something happened with Satomi-kun...” observed Maki.

The two of them had just walked up with Harumi. Kotori and Nalfa with her camera trailed shortly behind, although Nalfa was shooting for herself today rather than for the public. And with their arrival, all thirteen girls were now gathered.

“Koutarou was just being manly!” Sanae informed them.

“It’s happening more as of late,” commented Theia.

“Maybe that means that our charms are working,” Harumi suggested with a happy smile. As she bobbed her head, her dream-inspired ribbon swayed.

“Maybe. For both us and for Satomi-kun. Isn’t that right, Snoozy?” Maki asked.

“Meow!” the kitten cried as if it understood.

The girls’ “charms” were special tokens they each had as a reminder to take heart—to be a little braver in taking the next steps in their relationships with Koutarou. They subtly influenced the girls’ behavior in that regard, which had subtly influenced him as well. In that regard, the charms had been quite successful indeed.

“Heehee. Well, since magic is real, I don’t see why charms can’t be,” remarked Ruth.

It was a dreamy outlook, but the other girls wouldn’t argue. It was a nice way to think about things. Incidentally, Ruth’s own personal charm was a special outfit that she kept safely stored in her room. The hoodie she was wearing over her swimsuit today was from the same brand.

“I wish he’d noticed our swimsuits straight away, but oh well. I guess I have to forgive him since he’s setting up the blankets and things,” Shizuka said with a troubled look, despite the fact that she was smiling. Koutarou hadn’t done what she wanted, but he was making up for it in other ways. She knew she couldn’t

complain.

“Kou-niisan’s kind of inconsistent,” Kotori muttered. Since she’d known him for so long, she had a unique take on things.

“Really? I think he’s always wonderful,” argued Maki.

“I do too, but...”

“I don’t think I follow, Kotori.”

There, the girls all began griping about Koutarou in their own ways. But like Shizuka’s, their complaints were entirely superficial. It was disappointing he hadn’t commented on their swimsuits first thing, but in terms of the bigger picture, he was still working for their sakes. Deep down, they were all satisfied.

Nana’s artificial limbs had a great performance record, both in her everyday life and in battle. She’d also confirmed that they could withstand being submerged in water for limited periods of time, such as when she was doing dishes or bathing. She’d never gone so far as to test them in the ocean, however. Clan had designed them to be perfectly watertight, but they’d never had a trial run like this before. Since Nana would be moving a great deal while swimming, this was a much higher stress test than simple housekeeping or cleaning. As such, Clan was a little nervous when Nana prepared to enter the water.

“All right!” she called.

Unlike Clan, Nana seemed completely unperturbed. She trusted Clan’s handiwork, and even if there were a few hiccups, that was a small price to pay for being able to live a normal life again. She’d come to the beach knowing there were risks. In other words, even if anything *did* go wrong, she was more than ready to forgive Clan already. She didn’t have that many happy memories from her childhood, so she was just grateful to be here having fun with everyone.

“Let’s do this!” Koutarou called to her.

“Here I come!” she called back.

With that, she took off running. The sand slowed her down a bit, but she sped steadily toward Koutarou at the water's edge. He was waiting for her, crouched down with his hands linked together.

"Satomi-san!" she shouted, planting one dainty foot in his hands.

"I got you!" he shouted in time, and right on cue, stood up and threw his arms into the air. This sent Nana's small body rocketing into the air.

"Here we go!"

Utilizing the momentum she'd gotten from Koutarou, Nana began spinning both horizontally and vertically at the same time. She looked just like a gymnast. But rather unlike one, she wasn't concerned about landing. She spun around as fast as she could three times and hit the water with a torrential splash.

"How was that?!" she asked as she reemerged on the water's surface. She was beaming just like a little girl.

"That was most impressive! I hate to admit it, but I lost!" Theia answered.

"Ahaha, so the strategy was a huge success!"

Koutarou and the girls had been taking turns jumping into the ocean to see who could make the biggest splash. When Koutarou realized partway through that he could act as a springboard, the game had escalated in intensity. It came down to a showdown between Theia and Nana, who were both extremely athletic with a good sense of balance, and Nana had just been declared the ultimate winner.

"Theia, you were too concerned about getting height," Koutarou laughed as he walked up to the two girls.

"But going higher is cooler."

"You just love being flashy."

Theia had indeed focused on her vertical distance rather than her spin, so her splash wasn't as big as Nana's. Nana had strategically gone for maximum rotation to throw as much water as possible when she hit the surface.

"Nana-sama, I got a great shot of your jump. Would you like to see?" offered

Nalfa.

“Yes, please!”

Nalfa had been filming Koutarou and the girls playing, and she brought up the footage of Nana again before handing her the camera.

“I still have some more room for improvement,” Nana mused.

“Doesn’t spinning so fast make you dizzy?” Yurika asked over Nana’s shoulder.

“I’m fine when I do it on purpose.”

“I think I’d get dizzy even if I did it on purpose...”

Yurika wasn’t as interested in the jump so much as how Nana had handled it. She had sensitive inner ears—the slightest bit of spinning made her dizzy. She’d never be able to imitate Nana’s feat, so she couldn’t help admiring it.

“How is your body holding up in the water?” Clan asked.

“It looks fine. Only number seventeen is in the yellow— Oh, it just turned back to green,” Nana replied.

“Number seventeen should be around your waist, so I suppose it’s only natural that it’d give you a warning after spinning your whole body like that.”

Nana’s fierce rotation hadn’t just been for fun; she’d also meant to test her artificial parts. There was a risk of them taking on water at the joints—especially when she was moving so violently. That was why she’d spun as fast as she could. It was the easiest way to test the seaworthiness of her hybrid body.

“But we don’t have any leaks, Clan-san. It’s amazing.”

“Only one yellow warning light after all that? You should be fine for the day, then.”

Fortunately, Nana had come out on the other side of the test just fine. This was a relief to Clan. She didn’t want a fault of her workmanship to ruin everyone’s day at the beach. The other girls knew she’d been worried, so they were sympathetic. And while all of their attention was focused on her and Nana...

“You’re wide open!”

“What are— Aaaaaaaaahhh!”

The sound of Koutarou shouting, Nalfa shrieking, and water splashing came in rapid succession. When everyone turned to see what had happened, they saw Nalfa flailing in the water. The first to react was Kotori.

“What are you doing, Kou-niisan?!” she demanded.

There were lines even between friends, and suddenly tossing a girl in the ocean was crossing one. Now that she’d come to terms with her brother’s philandering ways, Kotori was much more strict about gentlemanly behavior.

“I was just thinking that Nalfa finally let go of her camera,” Koutarou explained.

“What kind of man throws a girl for that?!”

“Uh oh, I made Kin-chan angry!”

“You get back here, mister!”

Koutarou cut through the waves to escape. Behind him, an angry Kotori gave chase. She’d been running after Koutarou and Kenji since she was a child, and she’d built up a lot of stamina over the years. She swam with beautiful form and was gradually gaining on Koutarou, whose strokes were rather artless. Meanwhile...

“Bleh! Wh-What happened to me?!” Nalfa asked when she resurfaced.

“Master picked you up and tossed you in the water. It seems he was waiting for you to pass off or put down your camera,” Ruth recounted for her.

“Oh my...” Nalfa looked a bit surprised and stared off at Koutarou and Kotori in the distance, but then started smiling. “Haha!”

“What is it?” Ruth asked.

“That means that Koutarou-sama was watching me all this time.”

“In that case, it seems Master’s punishment might be worse than his crime...”

Kotori was angry for Nalfa’s sake, but Nalfa wasn’t upset about it at all. Ruth couldn’t help but find it funny that Koutarou was now being chased down for what he’d done.

“You might be right. But let’s leave them be for a while,” Nalfa suggested.

“You think we should?”

“Kotori almost never gets the chance to play with Koutarou-sama alone after all.”

“I see... You know Kotori-sama well, Nalfa-sama.”

“We’re best friends after all. Heehee.”

Nalfa happily watched over the two of them after that. She panicked a little when Kotori finally caught up to Koutarou and they disappeared under the surface of the water for a while, though it was all fun and games otherwise.

The transfer gate wasn’t the only technological advantage Koutarou and the others had on their beach vacation. Their Forthorthian cooler was also cutting edge, and it kept its contents nice and frosty. This was especially nifty for the watermelons. Nothing beat being able to crack open an ice-cold melon.

“Okay, Nefi,” said Theia. “I will now spin you around. After that, you will have to rely on our voices to guide you to the watermelon and split it open.”

“I see. I think I understand the game.”

The first to step up to the challenge was Nefilforan. She was blindfolded and clutching a wooden sword. The watermelon was on the ground about a dozen steps dead ahead of her, but after she was spun, it wouldn’t stay that way for long. That was where she’d need the guidance of the others, but it was still a challenge to walk straight while dizzy. The seemingly simple game was actually deceptively hard.

“So Princess Theia isn’t going first? I was sure she’d be raring to take a crack at it,” Nalfa mused aloud as she filmed Theia and Nefilforan.

“She’s grown up a little, but don’t be fooled,” said Koutarou next to her. “She and Sanae are watermelon-splitting experts. They want everyone to go before them so they can show off their skills.”

“Eeheehee!” Sanae couldn’t help laughing when she heard this.

When Nalfa turned her way with the camera, she got a shot of Sanae taking a

few practice swings with a wooden sword. It was rare for her not to be clinging to Koutarou when she had the chance, which only proved how fired up she was about the game.

“That *wasn’t* a compliment.”

“I know!”

Theia had a great sense of direction and keen hearing. And in Sanae’s case, a blindfold was practically pointless. Thanks to that, they never had trouble finding their targets. Koutarou had prepared a special course with pitfalls just for them, but that wouldn’t be revealed until later.

“Here we go, Nefi,” said Theia.

“I’m ready,” she replied.

“One! Two! Three!” The other girls counted as Theia carefully spun Nefilforan around. After two years on Earth, it was finally her turn to help bring someone else into the game. “Nine! Ten!”

When the count was over, Theia gently stopped Nefilforan. From here, she would be on her own with only voices to guide her. The game was about to begin in earnest, yet something unexpected happened...

“Um... Lord Veltlion, where are you?”

“Over here.”

“Ah, so it’s that way.”

Nefilforan steadily began moving toward the watermelon like it was nothing. Blindfold on or not, she was unfazed. She located the melon by determining its location with Koutarou as a reference point, then walked straight to it.

“I believe it should be around here...”

“Wow, talk about well trained!”

Koutarou was pleased to see Nefilforan’s performance. She was resistant to disorientation thanks to her training, as her greatspear moves involved a lot of rotation. A little spinning in place wasn’t enough to shake her. She was conditioned just like a professional figure skater. She also had military training

for zero-visibility situations—like blackouts and blizzards—so the blindfold wasn't too much of a setback in finding the watermelon. She knew how to handle herself even when she couldn't see.

"Now... take this!" She blushed a little at Koutarou's praise when she swung her sword. "I grazed it?!"

Unfortunately, her sword slid off the side of the watermelon. Her turn thus ended with it rolling off to the side.

"You almost had it!" Koutarou cheered.

"Ahaha, but I missed it in the end," Nefilforan said with an embarrassed laugh as she took off her blindfold.

Her failure was the result of nerves on her first try. Koutarou staring at her hadn't helped either. He had a special effect on Forthorthians.

"Getting that close on your first attempt is pretty impressive. Don't you guys think so too?" Koutarou asked the group.

"Well, she's not as good as me!" Sanae boasted.

"Hmph. I welcome a new rival, but I shall come out on top in the end," Theia declared.

"Can't you at least *try* to compliment her a little?"

"Just your praise is more than enough, Lord Veltlion."

"Why not give it another shot? I'm sure you'll pull it off this time."

"Are you sure? Wouldn't the others—"

"Forget them! Just put the blindfold back on!"

"O-Okay..."

Koutarou excitedly strong-armed Nefilforan into a second attempt at splitting the melon. He was so athletics-minded that he prized putting in effort above all else, and Nefilforan embodied that quality. He had high hopes for her, and she wasn't about to disappoint him. In truth, she was eager to show off a little herself.

After Nefilforan split the melon in half on her second go, the girls took turns trying their hand at it. A woozy Yurika had to drop out after getting spun around, Maki pulled it off without any trouble, Harumi hit the melon directly but wasn't strong enough to split it, and so on. When it was finally Kotori and Nalfa's turn, Koutarou helped out with the filming. But as the game continued, the girls began to notice something...

"Hey, have you noticed?" Shizuka whispered to the others. She'd been paying attention since before their vacation even started, so she was unsurprisingly the first to pick up on it.

"You mean Koutarou?" Kiriha asked. She'd realized what was on Shizuka's mind earlier in the day, so quickly understood what she meant and why she was

whispering.

“Yeah, it feels like our efforts are finally paying off!”

“Our efforts?” Maki cocked her head at Shizuka’s excited exclamation. She still didn’t get what she was talking about.

“Haven’t you noticed? Satomi-kun is fidgeting!”

Shizuka had detected that Koutarou was growing restless. His eyes would wander to his watch, his phone, the sky, and then back again. As time passed, his attention drifted away from watermelon splitting.

“He’s even wearing those sunglasses he never does. It must be to hide his eyes! Ugh, he doesn’t have to be sneaky about it, you know?”

Shizuka was certain his restlessness was because of them. He was a teenage boy surrounded by beautiful girls in swimwear. She couldn’t blame him for not knowing where to look. Her theory was that he’d been too distracted by the beach to really realize the position he was in, but as the day wore on, he’d grown more and more flustered.

“So Satomi-kun is fidgeting over me...” Maki looked down at her body. She’d followed Shizuka’s advice and chosen a brightly colored swimsuit that accentuated her chest and figure, so she was pleased that Koutarou had noticed. A smile blossomed on her face.

“If that’s the case, this is certainly a welcome development. It’s important he sees us as friends and comrades in arms, but if he sees us as women now too, that’s worth celebrating,” Kiriha said with a smile. She wasn’t entirely convinced yet, but the thought made her happy. She’d been thinking about him that way for over a decade, so it would mean a lot to her.

“It has to be! Our gang-up-on-him strategy is finally breaking through Satomi-kun’s dense defenses!” Shizuka declared.

“I highly doubt I’ve caught Veltlion’s eye looking like this...” Clan whined.

Unlike Shizuka, she was anything but confident as she awkwardly glanced down at herself. Her chest was flat enough to give Theia a run for her money, and she didn’t even have muscles to make up for it like Theia did. Clan had

worn a swimsuit as revealing as everyone else's to fit in, but she didn't think she had the looks to capture Koutarou's gaze.

"Don't worry, Clan-san. When you all made this body for me, Satomi-san did his best not to look. That means he's conscious of it, doesn't it?" Nana offered.

She was quite certain of that much. Koutarou had always treated her artificial body as the real deal, so she couldn't imagine that he would react any differently to seeing Clan—regardless of her figure.

"I think so too." Harumi nodded in agreement. "In Satomi-kun's case, he's only reacting to the swimsuits *because* we're the ones wearing them."

As far as Harumi knew, Koutarou wouldn't get flustered by just any girl in a swimsuit. The fact that he was responding to the girls was a sign of how he saw them in particular. In other words, he was interested in them.

"I hope you're right..." Clan sighed. She wanted that to be the truth, but she was so unconfident that she had a hard time believing it.

"Given how Master wiped your face earlier, I think you are underestimating yourself, Clan-sama," Ruth encouraged her.

"I'm sure Satomi-kun's heart fluttered when he saw your swimsuit!" echoed Shizuka.

"D-Do you really think so...?"

"You bet I do!"

Their reassurance put a reserved smile back on Clan's face. She still wasn't confident, but she wanted to believe they were right. Their opinion meant a lot to her.

Just about then, a beeping noise began blaring. It sounded like your typical smartphone alarm, so everyone stopped what they were doing to check their phones.

"Oh, it's time!"

It turned out the alarm was coming from Koutarou's. After looking at his phone screen, he grinned from ear to ear. His big, bright smile made his entire expression readable in spite of his sunglasses.

“Sorry, but I have to go for around two hours. I’ve got a date to keep!” he said.

He then happily ran over to the parasol he’d set up for himself. While the girls wondered what was going on, he pulled out a meter-long shoulder bag made of strong synthetic fabric. It contained all his precious tools.

“Ah, it’s high tide!” Kiriha said. She’d pulled out her own phone to figure out what he was up to.

“See you later!” Koutarou called out.

At this point, he was already running off, practically skipping down the beach. Watching him go, Kiriha finally realized why he’d been so fidgety.

“Koutarou, where do you think you’re going?!” Theia demanded.

“Wait up! I want to come too!” Sanae shouted.

“Then come on already!” he shouted back.

Even with the girls calling after him, he didn’t stop. He fled across the sand like it didn’t bother him at all.

“What’s this all about, Kiriha-san? Where is Satomi-kun going?” Shizuka asked with a puzzled expression.

She wasn’t the only confused one either. The other girls all crowded around. With a small sigh, Kiriha ventured an explanation.

“He’s going fishing,” she said. “It’ll be high tide soon.”

“What’s that mean?” Yurika asked.

“The water level isn’t constant. When it reaches its peak, that’s called the high tide. It’s typically ideal for fishing.”

“And that’s coming now?” Theia asked.

“Indeed. Which is why Koutarou ran off to go fishing.”

“What about the ‘date’ he was talking about?” Sanae asked.

“He probably promised to meet up with some of the fishers from Nefilforan’s unit.”

There were plenty of ways to enjoy the beach. The girls were having fun swimming, but fishing could be just as much fun. Kiriha suspected Koutarou had run off to meet some of the off-duty members of Nefilforan's unit to get some angling in too.

"That means..." Shizuka muttered, her voice flat and her face as grim as if she'd peered directly into hell. "You're saying Satomi-kun was restless because he was looking forward to going fishing?"

"Most likely."

"And he kept looking out to sea because..."

"He was trying to spot fish with the help of polarized eyewear. Perhaps he was watching the tide come in too."

"And he was looking at the sky because..."

"The weather plays an important role in fishing."

"And finally, he kept checking his phone because..."

"He probably couldn't wait for his alarm to go off."

The girls all fell quiet. They stood practically frozen in place. The only sound to be heard was the gentle lull of the waves rolling in and out. The silence was short-lived, however...

"Why'd you leave me behind?! You just earned yourself a scorpion hold!" cried Sanae.

"Wh-What did I put on this embarrassing outfit for...?" mumbled Clan.

"Why does that brute always trample all over our feelings?!" demanded Theia.

"Give us back all the excited hope we felt this morning!" roared Shizuka.

"That's a scary face you're making..."

The beach was soon filled with angry shouting. The girls had all been excitedly looking forward to this beach trip ever since they'd first made plans, and they'd all put in work to get ready for it. Their hearts had been pounding since they'd arrived this morning... and all their dreams were now dashed into the ocean.

Meanwhile, as Kiriha suspected, Koutarou was meeting up with a few members from Nefilforan's unit. Like him, they were fully geared up to go fishing. Some of them had even brought boats and autonomous drones to help find fish. But due to the tense expressions on all their faces, they certainly didn't look like they were friends about to go fishing.

"Lord Veltlion! Thank you for—" one of the men began.

"You can forget formalities! Theia and the others will be right behind me, and these little guys can't hide us from Sanae's spirit sight for long!" Koutarou interrupted.

"We're doing our best, but Sanae-chan's psychic powers are too strong, ho!"

"So we recommend that you make this quick and get fishing, ho!"

"Understood! First of all, the procurement of supplies is on schedule. The transport unit arrived at gathering point A at 1130 hours and received the shipment. At present, they're moving to gathering point B," the man reported.

"Update from the scouts! The commander is making her way here!" another man cut in.

"We're running out of time!" Koutarou shouted. "How are the bases coming along?"

"Base A and Base B are proceeding as planned, but Base C has fallen behind slightly. We should still make it in time for the exercise tomorrow, however."

"Well done! I think that's all we have time for, so forget everything we just talked about and let's get fishing!"

"Yes, my lord!"

Koutarou finished his discussion with Nefilforan's troops in a hurry and they all began preparing to fish. It was a pastime they all enjoyed, so once they got to it, they were single-mindedly focused on it. Sanae wasn't constantly using her psychic powers to read others' feelings, so Koutarou figured as long as they didn't act suspicious, no one would be any the wiser about their secret meeting.

After the girls stormed the rocky fishing area to politely protest Koutarou's behavior, peace returned to the beach. Everyone enjoyed casting a few lines

together, then they all returned to the sandy part of the shoreline. From there, they spent the afternoon swimming, playing volleyball, rowing boats, and so on. All in all, it was a leisurely day at the beach. They wanted to keep playing, but the sun was already starting to set, so Koutarou and the girls reluctantly returned to the hotel.

"Hey, I found something good, Koutarou!" Theia announced on their way back to their rooms after eating. She was still eager to have fun, so she dragged Koutarou along with her.

"What is it?" he asked.

"This thing! What was it called again?"

"Oh, a ping-pong table."

"That's it, ping-pong!"

Theia had discovered the hotel's rec room, which included an arcade, a ping-pong table, a dart board, and even a mahjong table. Hotel guests were free to use the facility as they liked.

"What's up?" Shizuka asked.

"Your Highness?" Ruth asked too.

The two of them followed along with the other girls shortly behind them.

"The hotel has a ping-pong table. You should play too," Theia insisted with a smile, handing Shizuka and Ruth paddles.

Shizuka was athletic and good at sports. While Ruth wasn't, she still enjoyed them nevertheless. But more importantly, like Theia, they were both eager to keep having fun.

"Shall we play doubles, then?" Shizuka asked as she took a few practice swings. She had great form thanks to all her practice during gym class and other school activities.

"I doubt anyone could beat them if we put Landlord-san and Theia on the same team, so why don't we pair up Theia and Ruth-san?" Koutarou suggested.

"Okay, then it's you and me, Satomi-kun," Shizuka agreed.

Theia had an innate skill with physical games. Her reaction time and kinetic vision were incredible assets. She was also a fast learner and quick to pick up tricks. As such, not even Koutarou was a match for her when playing normally. But when she was paired with Ruth, their team was on par with Koutarou and Shizuka's.

"Let's do our best, Your Highness."

"Indeed! We cannot tarnish the Mastir family's undefeated reputation!"

Theia and Ruth took their places across the table from Koutarou and Shizuka. The eyes of all four players were ablaze with motivation.

"Your referee and scorekeeper will be me, Sanae! And Kiriha will be providing commentary!"

"Not that I have any experience commentating on ping-pong."

"It's fine! You just have to *look* like you know what you're talking about."

"Heh, then leave it to me."

The other girls circled around to spectate. Like the players, they were smiling. They too were still eager to have fun, although Nalfa and Kotori specifically were now concentrated on filming. In their cases, they were mostly concerned about getting good shots.

"Let's say either side can score. First to six wins, then we can swap players," Koutarou suggested.

Sticking to the formal rules of table tennis would make the match take far too long, and it would put the less experienced players at a disadvantage. Koutarou wanted to set some house rules that would best facilitate a large group taking turns.

"No objections here. Let us begin!" Theia cried. And with that, she lightly tossed the ball up into the air and smashed it with her paddle.

Ping! A dry sound rang out as the ball went flying. It bounced from Team Theia's side of the table to Team Koutarou's. It was moving straight for him. Fortunately he was waiting for it, and returned it with a swing of his own paddle. Pong!

“What?!” he yelped.

Koutarou had aimed for Ruth on the diagonal, but the ball ended up sailing in a completely different direction.

“One point to Team Theia! Get it together, Koutarou!” Sanae called.

“It wasn’t his fault,” Kiriha interjected. “There was a really strong spin on that ball.”

“Oh, so that’s why it flew thataway?”

“It slowed down slightly when it bounced, so it must have been a backspin.”

Theia had dexterously scraped the underside of the ball when she served it, putting a spin on it that destroyed Koutarou’s sense of where it would fly when hit back. That was the reason his return had been unsuccessful.

“Don’t go all out right away!” he bellowed.

“Ahahaha! Tigers know no mercy, even when hunting rabbits!” she roared back.

“Oh yeah? If that’s how you’re gonna play this, then I’ll have to whip out a few tricks myself.”

“A few tricks, you say? Let’s see them already.”

“Don’t come crying to me later.”

“Here’s the ball, Ruth,” said Kiriha.

“Thank you very much,” she replied.

Each team was set to serve twice before switching to the other side. It was Ruth’s turn now, so she accepted the ball from Kiriha and adjusted her grip on her paddle. She only had a little experience with ping-pong from gym class, but her diligence ensured she had textbook form. Her textbook form led to a textbook hit—her serve bounced once on her side of the table and then just over the white line on the opposing team’s side.

“That was pretty good, Ruth-san!” Shizuka called, diving after it and extending her paddle.

Ping! She managed to catch the ball, which then flew in a wide arc and

bounced off Team Theia's side of the table.

"Urk?!"

The big bounce worked against Theia. Because she was so short, it took a great deal of effort to catch it. She jumped up high and threw up her paddle as high as it would go.

Pong! It sailed in another wide arc back to Team Koutarou's side of the table. It bounced up high in the same fashion too, but things played out differently from there.

"Now's my chance!"

Koutarou was much taller than Theia, so a high ball for her was a normal one for him. He saw the opportunity in front of him and swung his paddle hard.

"How's this?!"

Ping! Table tennis balls were light and quick to lose momentum, but Koutarou's smash seemed to defy physics. It roared through the air, almost seeming to speed up as it reached Theia.

"Did you think you could beat me with that?!" she shouted.

Pong! As expected with her keen eyes and superb reflexes, she managed to return Koutarou's smash by a hair. It just barely landed back on Team Koutarou's side of the table.

"I didn't think it'd be that easy—but don't forget I have Landlord-san on my side!"

"You can count on me, Satomi-kun! Hyah!"

Ping! Because Theia's return had been weak, there wasn't much force behind the incoming ball. Shizuka smashed it back with all her might. Theia was still off balance from her save, and Shizuka wasn't merciful enough to overlook that. The ball sailed right past Theia as she recovered. Ruth saw what was happening, but Theia was between her and the ball. She didn't stand a chance of reaching it.

"One point to Team Koutarou! Good job!" Sanae called.

“Theia-dono has the overwhelming advantage in terms of skill, but her height is a weakness. Koutarou and Shizuka clinched a strategic victory here.”

Theia’s eyes and hands were quick, but she had to move more than anyone to hit the ball back thanks to her size. If her opponent returned the ball too fast, it was hard for her to be in the right position—especially with Shizuka on standby, waiting to smash it. That was an unfortunate drawback of playing in pairs for Theia. If it had been one-on-one, she likely would’ve been able to save that ball.

“Hear that? You’re short, Theia,” Koutarou taunted.

“Arrrgh!” she growled. “You always take the low blow!”

“Please calm down, Your Highness. I am with you.”

“Th-That’s true... I almost forgot. Let’s work together!”

Theia’s excitability was working against her in a doubles game—after all, she was trying to play it like a singles match. With Ruth on her side, however, they could shore up their defenses and put up a good fight.

An intense battle unfolded from there. Koutarou and Shizuka largely relied on power, so they ended up backed into a corner against Theia’s and Ruth’s more precise play style. Still, there were times Team Koutarou’s smashes broke through. Since the teams had been hastily formed, they were both at a disadvantage in terms of coordination. So all else being equal, raw power was a huge asset to Team Koutarou.

“That’s another point for Team Koutarou!” Sanae called. “It’s now five to five, so the next round will decide the winner!”

“I hadn’t expected this, but the two sides are evenly matched,” remarked Kiriha.

This game of technique versus strength was now at match point. A win would normally require a two-point lead, but they’d agreed ahead of time that the first team to six points would be declared victorious.

“We’ve got this in the bag. Your serves are weak,” Theia teased.

It was Team Koutarou’s turn to serve, and their fierce offense was hard to put into play that way. Because they had to bounce the ball once off of their own

side of the table when serving, that meant they couldn't open by smashing the ball. Theia knew that and taunted them accordingly.

"Who cares? It doesn't change how short you are," Koutarou taunted right back—and it seemed to score.

"What was that?!" Theia cried, her face red with anger.

"Oh, so that's what this is..." Nefilforan muttered to herself, nodding.

"What is it, Nefilforan-san?" Harumi asked, noticing the gesture.

There, Nefilforan flashed a small smile and explained, "It's just like before. I was surprised that Theiamillis-san and Lord Veltlion behave this way, but now I think I understand why."

"And why's that?"

"I've never seen Theiamillis-san make that face before. I think it's a sign of absolute trust in Lord Veltlion."

Theia was born and raised a princess, meaning most people she'd interacted with throughout her life sought to use her position in some way. It had left her so guarded that she was denied a normal childhood. Nefilforan had grown up under similar circumstances, so she understood it quite well. Yet when Theia was around Koutarou, she behaved just like a child— and Nefilforan believed that was because Theia was comfortable letting her guard down around him.

"Theiamillis-san is the only one who knows the truth, but I must say I agree with you, Nefilforan-san." Harumi nodded with a gentle smile. She acted like a child herself around Koutarou at times, so she believed Theia's case was similar.

"You've done it now!" Theia shouted. "I'll never—"

"And while you're open, here," Koutarou interrupted, batting the ball her way.

"Your Highness!" Ruth shrieked.

"Nooooo!"

Theia had been angrily shaking her paddle at Koutarou, which he took advantage of. He'd served the ball while she was unprepared, leaving her

unable to react in time. The ball thus fell off Team Theia's side of the table, scoring the final point for Team Koutarou.

"Hahaha, looks like we win!" he declared.

"Satomi-kun, I don't think that was..." Shizuka hesitantly interjected.

"Landlord-san, all that matters is that we won," he argued.

"Silence, you coward! Do you really think I'll let my own knight get away with such a craven stunt?!"

"I can do whatever I want against you."

"What?!"

In the short moment that Harumi and Nefilforan had looked away, the match had concluded in spectacular fashion. Theia's excited shouting alerted them of this, and they both exchanged awkward smiles.

"But it certainly is intense, isn't it?" Nefilforan remarked.

"I'm a bit envious. I think this is Satomi-kun's way of doting on her," Harumi observed.

"Yes," Nefilforan agreed. "I think so."

By this point, Theia and Koutarou were already caught up in a wrestling match. It was so fierce that Maki immediately put up a barrier to keep people away and any sound from getting out. Yet in spite of the brawl, there were no hard feelings between Theia and Koutarou. They'd be on perfectly good terms once it was over. That was simply the nature of their relationship. It was their own special way of spoiling each other. Nefilforan, who'd finally come to understand this, watched on with a smile... albeit a slightly envious one.

Despite all appearances, ping-pong was a rather demanding sport. By the time everyone had played their fill, they'd all worked up a sweat. As such, the group decided to head to the baths after their game. They all wanted to wash up before relaxing.

The girls cleaned themselves up and got into the women's bath. The water was supplied from a hot spring some hundred meters underground. A good

fifteen-minute soak was recommended for healthy skin, and the girls spent that time chatting. They were currently talking about the evening's impromptu ping-pong tournament.

"Still, I was surprised by Nefilforan-san's performance," said Maki. "It was your first time playing, but you were so good at it."

Indeed, Nefilforan had struggled in her first match, but she'd learned quickly and demonstrated surprising competence in her second. The feat was so remarkable that several of the girls were astonished.

"We have racket-based sports in Forthorthe too, though nothing as compact as this ping-pong," Nefilforan explained.

Though she'd spent most of her youth training in martial arts, she wasn't a stranger to other physical activities. Depending on her training regimen and the season, she'd often take up hobbies like swimming, running, and a variety of ball games. Among them was a sport similar to tennis. It had been difficult for her to appreciate the difference between the smaller racket, ball, and playing area at first, but her experience still helped her out in the end.

"Forthorthian sports, huh? I admit you've got me curious," Shizuka remarked. She was athletically inclined, so the topic naturally interested her. She wanted to know how alien sports differed from the ones on Earth.

"Then I invite you to the Hazy Moon," offered Clan. She wasn't wearing her glasses in the bath, so she looked a bit younger than usual. "You can play whatever you like in the gymnasium."

"Really?! I'd love that! Though I am kind of surprised... You don't seem like the type to have a gym on your ship, Clan-san."

"It wasn't by choice. It's regulation."

According to Forthorthian regulation, ships equipped with space distortion drives were required to have exercise facilities relative to their size. It took a passenger ship fifteen to twenty days to reach Earth, and being cooped up on a ship for that period of time was both mentally and physically unhealthy. As such, both rec rooms and spaces that emulated the outdoors were mandatory. This stipulation dated back to the beginning of Forthorthe's space age, and it

was just as important now as it had been then.

“If you’d like to learn a few sports,” offered Nefilforan, “I’d be happy to instruct you.”

Shizuka had paired up with Nefilforan during their table tennis matches in order to teach her the basics. So if Shizuka wanted to try out Forthorthian sports too, Nefilforan thought it would be a good opportunity to repay the favor.

“Are you sure?! That would be great!”

“I look forward to it.”

“Me too!”

Nefilforan and Shizuka continued to chat away happily, but someone else in the bath looked rather unhappy. It was none other than Theia, of course, who was still stewing over her humiliating defeat.

“That Koutarou is so irritating! He should’ve waited until I was ready!”

Over an hour had elapsed since their match, yet her anger smoldered. She knew she’d let her guard down, but she just couldn’t let it go—a rare sight these days. She was also girlishly irritated by the way Koutarou had treated her. In other words, she was unhappy he’d said that he could do whatever he wanted against her.

“I know what you mean! Satomi-san is such a bully!” Yurika cried in support. She, too, lamented Koutarou’s insensitivity on a daily basis. She particularly hated his methods for waking her up, which were extreme, to say the least.

“But that’s your fault for not waking up on your own,” Sanae said matter-of-factly. Theia was one thing, but she felt like Yurika was a different story.

“I-I still think there are better ways!” Yurika insisted.

“Why not just set a whole bunch of alarms?” Sanae asked.

“I don’t have the money for a whole bunch of alarms!”

“Didn’t you finish repaying your debt the other day?”

“Erk...”

Sanae's remark was cutting, but true. If Yurika really didn't like how Koutarou woke her up, she had the means to do something about it now that she was earning a respectable income. She could move out if she wanted, or buy a sophisticated alarm among other things.

"You like Satomi-san waking you up, don't you, Yurika-chan? You just don't like the way he's doing it. But it's still better than an alarm, right?"

"N-Nana-san!"

As Yurika's mentor of many years, Nana could see through her. Nana currently looked a little older than normal—likely thanks to her hair up in a towel as she soaked in the bath. Despite Yurika's pleading, she wore a composed smile.

Kiriha stepped in to explain, "In reality, Koutarou has his reasons for his extreme methods." She understood why Koutarou couldn't just gently wake Yurika.

"And what might those be?" Maki asked. Knowing there were more complicated circumstances at play piqued her interest. Maybe it was something they had in common, after all.

"Primarily, well... anything less extreme doesn't work."

"That's true. Yurika doesn't wake up even when you shake her," Maki admitted. She was thinking of an incident where she'd been unable to rouse Yurika after she'd fallen asleep in class.

"That means that the usual method of poking her in the cheek won't work," Kiriha continued. "A greater stimulus is necessary, and that's where the problem lies."

"What do you mean?" Yurika asked. She too had taken an interest in what Kiriha was saying.

"It's a question of where to apply said stimulus."

"Anywhere would be fine."

"That's because you love Koutarou."

"Oh..."

A wave of understanding washed over the girls. "*So that's what it's all about*," they collectively thought.

"Yurika doesn't mind being touched by Koutarou. She'd probably be fine, or even happy, with a wake-up kiss. But from Koutarou's perspective, the acceptable places to touch Yurika are limited—basically to your hands, face, and head. Anything else goes beyond the bounds of friendship and crosses into lovers' territory."

“So that’s why Satomi-san...”

It was all starting to make sense to Yurika. It wouldn’t be a problem if any of the other girls did it, but Koutarou was a man. He was reluctant to do anything that might be seen as taking advantage of her.

“So until Koutarou decides who to go out with, there’s only so much he feels he can do. That forces him to extremes. To keep you from breathing, he only needs to touch your mouth and nose. And he doesn’t even need to touch you at all to dump water on you. Now, let me ask you all this: can any of you remember Koutarou ever touching you in a way that could be considered problematic for a male friend?”

“You’re right. I see... So Satomi-kun’s always been considerate about that.” Maki nodded along.

Barring special exceptions, Kiriha was right. Koutarou would pat their heads or hold their hands, but he’d never touch anywhere else like their chests or legs. That was reserved for lovers. Koutarou knew that the girls were more to him than just friends, but he would never abuse that. There was a line in the sand he refused to cross.

“So putting hot sauce in my mouth and stinging my nose is friend territory...” Yurika mumbled.

“Koutarou’s really getting creative, isn’t he?” Sanae commented.

Yurika was in a particularly sticky situation. A girl normally wouldn’t ask a male friend to wake her up in the first place, so she’d been forcing Koutarou to toe the line all along. Nana was worried about that. She had no desire to see him put in an awkward position.

“You’ll just have to start waking up yourself, Yurika-chan,” she said, hoping Yurika would resolve to buy an alarm clock.

“I have to disagree.” Unexpectedly, Kiriha shook her head. She had a serious look in her eyes as she touched her hand to her forehead and then placed it over her heart. “Considering our roles and desires, we’re going to need Koutarou to make up his mind soon. Now’s the time for Yurika to push harder.”

Koutarou’s sword was now bound to Kiriha and the other girls, who also

shared a strong bond with one another. That made it impossible for him to single any one of them out. Yurika pulling away from him would only make it harder, and Kiriha believed now was time to step forward rather than fall back.

“But how am I supposed to do that?” Yurika asked. She struggled to understand how exactly to do what Kiriha was asking of her.

“Since our daring swimsuits didn’t work out as planned today, we’ll need to consider even more drastic measures.”

The girls hadn’t worn bold swimsuits to the beach just for fun—it was an attempt to excite Koutarou. That was what Kiriha really meant when she talked about pushing him. But based on the day’s results, they were one step short of success, which was why she felt the need to go a little further.

“What would be more bold than those swimsuits?” Harumi asked, slightly blushing. She’d chosen an especially bold bathing suit by her standards, and she couldn’t imagine something beyond that.

“I believe we need to prepare lucky undergarments,” Kiriha replied.

At that, the other girls tensed up. Nefilforan, Nana, Nalfa, and Kotori weren’t especially involved in the conversation, but even they couldn’t ignore the gravity of the situation.

“Y-You mean for Satomi-kun?!” Shizuka nearly cried. She was the first to recover her wits and desperately wanted to know what Kiriha meant. A misunderstanding here would be grave.

However, Kiriha nodded firmly in response. “That’s right. It also means that all of us need to steel our resolve and prepare to act on it.”

The moment Kiriha said that, two moods overtook the room. Half of the girls became agitated, and the other half froze up completely.

“Then what are we waiting for?! Time to go on the offensive!” Theia shouted.

“It might not be very effective in my case, but I like this idea!” Sanae agreed.

“Sounds good to me. I was just thinking about getting some new ones,” threw in Shizuka.

“M-M-Master t-t-taking off my clothes...? Waaaaah!”

Theia and Shizuka were clearly in favor of Kiriha's plan. With her psychic powers, Sanae didn't personally see much of a point in it for herself, but she felt it was worthwhile for the others. Ruth, meanwhile, sounded like she was opposed, but the giddy smile on her face betrayed her true feelings.

"It's too early for that, Kii! We're still only teenagers!" Clan objected.

"Clan-san is right! We need more time to build up our relationships!" Harumi rallied.

"Wouldn't Satomi-kun be upset if we did that...?" Maki asked.

"I can't let him see me in my underwear, lucky or not! That would show off even more than my swimsuits! I need more time!" Yurika whined.

Clan and Harumi were staunchly against this plan. They were old fashioned in their ways and they believed in taking things slow. Maki's objections were less complex—she simply didn't want to go against Koutarou's wishes. As for Yurika, she wasn't willing to hop on the bandwagon until she was done dieting.

"I understand your concerns," said Kiriha. "In truth, I'm reluctant to proactively show off my underwear as well. It would probably only have the opposite effect on him."

"Then what are you thinking?!" Clan exclaimed.

"Two things. The first is to prepare ourselves. I'm sure you can understand that much."

"You mean giving ourselves the courage to take the next step, I imagine. What's the second thing?"

"Accidents can always happen—always."

With those words, Kiriha yet again spiked the tension in the room. The girls all froze.

"K-Kii, what kind of accidents are you talking about?" Clan asked hesitantly.

"For example... what would happen if Koutarou went to dump water down Yurika's shirt and pulled a little too hard?"

"So that's what you meant! That's our Kiriha!" Theia roared.

“We should use our numbers to our advantage,” Kiriha continued. “We can multiply the opportunities for accidents by nine.”

“That’s a really wicked grin, Kiriha-san!” observed Yurika.

“Oh my!” shrieked Ruth. “If it’s an accident, then there’s nothing anyone can do about it! Aaah, an accident with Master... Waaaaah!”

“N-N-No way, no how!” objected Clan. “That’s like adding fuel to the fire!”

“Kiriha-san is right,” argued Harumi. “Our relationships with Satomi-kun should be more romantic!”

Chaos ensued from there. The pro and anti factions clashed, and their peaceful bath time was overtaken by shouting. If there had been any other guests, there would definitely have been complaints. Fortunately, however, they’d rented out the hotel the same as the beach. The girls were so focused on the matter at hand that they were completely oblivious to their surroundings—the result of spending an entire relaxed day to themselves.

You have no idea what you’ve got coming, Koutarou!

As the heated debate continued, Sanae’s thoughts turned to the subject of the conversation himself. Unbeknownst to him, all manner of traps were being laid and she couldn’t wait to see the look on his face when he walked into them.

Wait... Where’s Koutarou? Did he already leave the men’s bath?

Sanae scanned for Koutarou’s presence, but it wasn’t anywhere nearby. She didn’t search any farther, however, as the current discussion seemed more important at the time.

Their second day at the beach was set to begin with the training exercise Nefilforan had invited Koutarou for. The group had come to the beach on vacation, but this was unfortunately the only time he could work it in. Since the training was ultimately for his benefit—and the girls’ protection—he had no complaints about it. If anything, he was happy to be working with Nefilforan’s unit. Nefilforan was personally supposed to come pick him up early in the morning to begin the exercise. Yet something strange happened when the girls gathered in the lobby for breakfast.

“Good morning, everyone. May I have a moment of your time?” called out Nefilforan, who should have been long gone for training.

“What are you still doing here, Nefi?” asked Theia.

“Well... have any of you seen Lord Veltlion?” Nefilforan asked in turn.

“Koutarou? Is he still sleeping...? He’s even harder to wake up than Yurika.”

“I checked his room, but he’s not there. He’s not answering his phone either.”

“That’s unusual for Veltlion...” Clan remarked.

According to Nefilforan, she’d gone to wake Koutarou up, but no matter how much she’d knocked, there’d been no answer. She’d heard from the other girls that he was a heavy sleeper, so she’d proceeded to the front desk and requested a spare key. She’d then gone back to roust Koutarou, but found his room empty.

“Did something happen?” Nalfa worriedly asked. Koutarou wasn’t the kind of guy to vanish for no reason, so his disappearance was cause for concern.

“I asked the front desk if he’d left a message, but they had no idea he was gone,” reported Nefilforan.

“Hmm, that is worrying. Clan, can you do something?” Theia asked.

“Give me a second. I’ll track the location of Veltlion’s cell phone... Here we go. This is strange, though. It looks like he cut the power.”

Koutarou had gotten a phone of a Forthorthian design, fitted with all kinds of functions and technology to protect him—including tracking. Clan defaulted to that, but it appeared he had his phone turned off at the moment. She couldn’t identify his current location because of it, and his last reported location put him in the hotel before dawn.

“Where were his last coordinates specifically?” Theia asked.

“In the front lobby,” Clan replied.

“Then he should be visible on their security footage,” said Kiriha.

“I shall request their assistance!” Theia declared, running off toward the front desk.

Guests weren't normally given access to security footage, but the hotel was likely to cooperate under the circumstances. They were aware of their current guests' prestige, and they'd already allowed Forthorthian security to be stationed within the building. As such, Theia quickly returned with good news.

"They've given me access to their files," she announced. "Here's the password."

"Let me bring it up. Just a moment..." Clan connected to the hotel network via her bracelet computer, then used the borrowed password to get admin access to all the security recordings. "It was before dawn... so here."

"Huh?" asked Sanae. "But there's no one there..."

As she said, the cameras showed an empty lobby. The lights were in night mode so the footage was quite dim, but there was clearly no one around

"His phone wasn't cut until a little later, so let's advance the footage."

Clan fast forwarded, and after a few minutes on the counter ticked by, there was movement at the elevator.

"That's Koutarou! Slow it down!"

"Okay, okay... That should do it."

"Karama and Korama are with him too. I was wondering where they'd run off to, but it seems they're with Koutarou."

Clan returned the footage to normal speed when Koutarou stepped into the frame. The haniwas were on either side of him. The dim lighting made it difficult to discern their expressions, but they seemed to be walking along happily.

"Hang on, what is Satomi-kun holding?" Shizuka asked when she spotted something odd.

She couldn't make out the two strange objects Koutarou was carrying because he was moving and the lighting was poor, but when he stopped in front of the camera and turned off his phone, Maki got a good look at them.

"That's Maximilian and Henrietta... but he doesn't have Geraldine," she observed.

“Maximilian? Henrietta? Geraldine?” Ruth cocked her head upon hearing these unfamiliar names, which was only natural since she’d never seen Koutarou with them before.

“Maximilian is his net and Henrietta is his cage. He also has a bottle for sap that he calls Geraldine. They’re the three tools Satomi-kun uses to catch bugs,” Maki explained.

Koutarou had given his treasured tools code names because a certain someone had an extreme reaction to them, but the names had stuck over time. He’d grown fond of them, so he still used them to this day.

“Heh, so first it was fishing and now it’s bug hunting,” Theia said with a thin smile, her voice steeped in fury. The strange combination was intimidating.

“Not to mention he’s skipping training,” said Ruth, who seemed calm, but her voice was ice cold. The other girls shuddered, wondering where the usual warm and fuzzy Ruth had gone.

“Listen, we don’t actually know he’s out hunting bugs,” Nefilforan reminded them.

She was skeptical that was the case. She felt it was more likely that he’d gotten in an accident. She was even worried he might be hurt and stranded somewhere. But even if he *was* bug hunting, Forthorthe owed the Blue Knight so much that she hardly considered it an offense.

“You’re being too naive, Nefilforan-san!” Shizuka shot back with lightning reflexes. “You don’t understand the kind of tunnel vision he can get when it comes to fun! That’s how he was able to ignore all our flashy swimsuits yesterday! Didn’t you expect *some* kind of reaction from him?!”

“W-Well...”

That was enough to make Nefilforan hesitate. As a Forthorthian woman, she naturally wanted to impress the national hero with her beach body. She didn’t want to do anything untoward, however, so she’d spent a tremendous amount of time picking out her wardrobe—swimsuit included—for this trip. But in spite of it all, he’d hardly looked her way. He was fixated on fish and bugs instead, and that was an undeniable disappointment.

“It’s interesting that Veltlion didn’t bring Geraldine with him, though,” remarked Clan. “Did he set up a trap in advance? Or does he have men from Nefilforan’s unit helping him out?”

If he didn’t have all day to spend bug hunting, the easiest way to capture a beetle was with a trap. That was where the bottle of sap came in. By pouring sap in spots where beetles were likely to gather, he could effectively lure them out. The beetles also held still while eating, making them easy to capture.

“Come to think of it, Koutarou wasn’t around last night either!” Sanae exclaimed, clapping her hands together in realization.

She'd realized during their bath that he wasn't nearby, so she'd gone looking for him after the fact. She'd wanted to play some more, but when she couldn't find him even then, she'd given up and gone to bed.

"So he did lay a trap in advance... That explains why he seems so happy," Kiriha commented as she reviewed the footage again.

Koutarou and the haniwas looked like young children full of excitement for the day as they left the hotel. They were eagerly chatting away as they bounded along with light steps.

"All right, ladies, let's chase down that fool!" Theia proclaimed with a dangerous gleam in her eyes.

"What? Aren't we going to play more today?" Yurika asked, but despite what it sounded like, she was a little miffed too. She wanted to remind Koutarou whose sake she'd really gone on a diet for.

"There are some things that are more important than playing! It's high time we show him what we're made of!"

After fishing, ping-pong, and now bug catching, Theia was starting to lose it. Just how insensitive could Koutarou be? Even his big, dumb grin on camera was grating her nerves. But who could blame her under the circumstances?

"Uh-oh, Theia never backs down when she gets like this..."

Sanae didn't particularly care that Koutarou had ignored their swimsuits, but she was unhappy that he'd run off to play and left her out again. She was ready to catch him and put him in a scorpion hold, but the roughhousing was the worst she'd unleash on him.

"He's left us no choice, Your Highness. We have our pride to consider as women, after all."

"Wow, even Ruth's on board?" Shizuka remarked. "There's no stopping this now."

Fury burned bright in Ruth's eyes. Whether it was fish or bugs didn't matter. She was irritated that they were more important to Koutarou than her. Really, her anger was a form of jealousy.

“Kotori-san, was Satomi-kun like this when you were children too?” Harumi asked.

She’d kept her cool and wanted to know if there was any basis for this behavior. Maki and Kiriha, who’d also remained calm, turned to her and listened intently for the answer.

“Hardly. I’ve never seen him like this...” Kotori had known Koutarou since she was a child, but she had no recollection of him ever acting this way. “If anything, I find it hard to believe that Kou-niisan shirked a promise to run off and play.”

“Agreed. I find his actions strange as well,” Kiriha agreed with a nod. There was actually something else that bothered her as well. *Why did Karama and Korama go along with Koutarou without asking me? It makes no sense...*

Karama and Korama were loyal servants of the Kurano family. They were automatic dolls made with spiritual energy technology, so their devotion was absolute. Kiriha found it rather odd that they’d run off like this. They should have at least left a message.

“What are you doing?! We’re moving out! We need to capture him as soon as possible!” Theia announced.

“Kiriha-sama, Princess Theia has departed,” Nalfa said, tugging on Kiriha’s sleeve as she pointed to the girls filing out the front door.

That snapped Kiriha back to her senses. “Ah, forgive me. Let’s go after them,” she replied with a smile as she began walking after them. “What do you make of all this, Nalfa?”

It was a pretty vague question for Kiriha, but after smiling for a moment, Nalfa didn’t hesitate to answer. “There’s so much we don’t know right now, but there’s one thing I’m sure of.”

“And what’s that?”

“Koutarou-sama loves everyone very much. It’s enough to make anyone envious.”

“True... Perhaps that’s a clue.”

Nalfa's answer was equally vague, but Kiriha was satisfied. She thus pulled out her phone and, as she and Nalfa chased after Theia and the others, made a call to a certain someone.

Meanwhile, Koutarou and the two haniwas were in the mountains just like the girls suspected—but they weren't alone, and they weren't catching bugs. They were currently surrounded by soldiers in a simple, makeshift command center. The soldiers all belonged to Nefilforan's unit, and they all wore very serious expressions.

"Report in from the reconnaissance unit! The princesses' party has left the hotel according to schedule and Lord Pardomshiha has deployed unmanned equipment to conduct a search," one announced.

"Have the reconnaissance unit fall back, then! Ruth-san can easily detect people at twice the normal range!" Koutarou ordered.

"Satomi-san, is that even possible?" Nana, who was standing at his side, asked. She understood the superiority of Forthorthe's equipment, but both sides in this instance should have the same technology available to them. Wasn't he being overcautious?

Nana had joined up with the rest of the Nefilforan unit the night before in preparation for the day's training exercise. She was more or less acting as Koutarou's adjutant. She served as the bridge between Koutarou and Nefilforan's unit in the name of facilitating teamwork. No matter how elite Nefilforan's men were, a change of commander was always a difficult shakeup. Nana was essentially present to mitigate the challenge, and the question she'd just asked was truly one on everyone's mind.

"Ruth-san is always analyzing input from multiple sources, so she's capable of discerning things from the tiniest bit of data—things that other operators would pass off as anomalies or noise," Koutarou explained.

"So her precision is greater even though she's using the same equipment we are," Nana mused in understanding.

"Worse yet, once Sanae's found us, she'll be difficult to shake. We won't be able to lose her without these two," Koutarou continued.

“Ho! We’ll need a spiritual energy field against Sanae-chan, ho!”

“Class II Stealth Mode would work too, ho! But either way, things will be tricky from here, ho!”

Unfortunately, the haniwas were Koutarou’s only resource against Sanae. If they’d been at Kiriha’s side, he would’ve been found and caught right away. That was why he’d preemptively asked for their cooperation. They’d left Kiriha in exchange for a few new RC parts.

“The others are just as much of a threat. Theia and Landlord-san have excellent vision. Make sure the retreating units are careful not to let any reflective surfaces flash light their way!” Koutarou ordered.

“You all heard him!” Nana echoed. “We’re up against the strongest units in Forthorthe, possibly even the universe. The goal of our training this time is to stop their advance and protect Lord Veltlion! So keep your eyes open! The smallest mistake today could be fatal!”

Theia and the others were their opponents for the sake of this exercise. Koutarou had joined up with the rest of his team early in preparation for it. They were up against a unit of ten girls, excluding the photography duo of Nalfa and Kotori and including Commander Nefilforan. Those ten girls, however, had all proved their mettle during the civil war. Between them, they’d defeated countless foes. They also had an array of magic, spiritual energy powers, and technology at their disposal. In the worst case scenario ahead of them, Ralgwin would appear similarly equipped, so the girls actually made for excellent practice enemies.

“Understood!” Nefilforan’s unit rallied in response to Nana. They were all taking this quite seriously. They knew how invaluable the day’s exercise could be and how many lives it might save in the future.

“Still, Satomi-san...” Nana whispered. “Won’t this seriously anger them?”

“It’s not training if it’s not serious,” Koutarou whispered back. He figured that the girls would indeed get angry at first, but that was a critical part of the process, so he stuck to his plan with steely resolve.

“You’re going to get it later...” Nana reminded him.

“Then I’ll just prostrate myself or do whatever else it takes. Besides, the real point of all of this is protecting them.”

“Satomi-san, don’t you think you could be a little less awkward?” Nana asked, smiling like a child.

She was starting to understand why Yurika had fallen in love with him. He never hesitated to throw himself into the thorniest of thickets for the girls. Nana figured that Yurika wanted to protect him from those thorns, or even pull them out for him.

“I’m like this because I really can’t, Nana-san,” he said.

“Ahaha! You really are going to get it later, Satomi-san,” Nana repeated, smiling just like before...

But this time, she was thinking that he might have it coming from more than just the nine girls.

Thirty minutes had passed since the girls left the hotel, yet they still hadn’t managed to locate Koutarou despite using every means at their disposal.

“It looks like Koutarou met up with someone here, but the aura gets really weak moving forward,” Sanae observed.

“That would be Karama’s and Korama’s doing,” explained Kiriha. “They’re cloaking auras.”

“He must have joined up with my unit. I’ve lost contact with them,” reported Nefilforan.

“Go figure. Satomi-kun *is* the commander-in-chief, after all,” remarked Shizuka.

They’d gradually come to an understanding of what had happened. Koutarou had woken up early and gone to meet Nefilforan’s soldiers, and they were now making their way across the mountainside with Karama and Korama’s help.

“Curse you, Koutarou! You’d go this far for beetles?!” Theia raged.

“Sanae-sama, can you follow Master’s aura?” Ruth asked.

“It’s not impossible, but it’ll probably take me a while. There’re a lot of phony trails around.”

With her psychic prowess, Sanae could undoubtedly track down Koutarou. It would be for naught, however, if it took her hours to do it. Koutarou would be back from bug hunting by then. They’d need a faster method to find him.

“It’s slight, but I’m detecting some mana,” Maki volunteered.

“It’s not from Signaltin. I’d know if he was using it,” Harumi added.

“Then it has to be Nana-san’s Encyclopedia!” Yurika exclaimed.

“You mean she’s in on this too?!” Clan shouted.

This was the most shocking reveal yet. The epitome of a just magical girl, the prodigy Nana herself, had teamed up with Koutarou for his shenanigans. The girls could hardly believe that she’d agreed to such a thing.

“Kiriha-san, do you have a moment?” Nefilforan quietly asked as she approached Kiriha. She was whispering so that the other girls wouldn’t hear her. Something was bothering her.

“Certainly,” Kiriha replied in kind.

“Given the commotion this has all turned into... do you really think it’s just a simple case of bug hunting?”

Kiriha looked surprised for a moment but soon smiled and shook her head. “No. It feels like Koutarou used fishing, table tennis, and bug hunting as bait to lure us into pursuing him.”

Koutarou had been acting strangely the previous day. Kiriha couldn’t imagine that he was really *that* insensitive—which suggested he had other intentions. She believed he wanted to rile the girls up.

“So you think so too... Perhaps this is the training exercise, then.”

“I’d say the odds are good. I can’t think of any other reason Nana would be cooperating with him.”

“In that case, they see us as the enemy here... An enemy equipped with magic and spiritual energy technology.”

“Indeed. If we assume that Ralgwin now has magic and spiritual energy technology in his possession, then we’re really the only people who could possibly serve as sufficient standins for training.”

Nefilforan was now fairly well acquainted with the girls, so she was accompanying them in Koutarou’s stead. Meanwhile, Koutarou understood magic and spiritual energy technology but didn’t have them himself, so he was a good instructor to teach Nefilforan’s men how to deal with both. Essentially, Nefilforan and Koutarou swapping places was the most effective arrangement for this training exercise.

“So, what’s our victory condition?” asked Nefilforan.

“To capture Koutarou within the allotted time. Theia-dono is essentially a ticking timebomb at the moment, so we need to brace ourselves.”

“Most excellent. This is exceptionally well thought out.” Nefilforan said, praising both Koutarou and Kiriha.

Koutarou had taken each of the girls’ abilities and personalities into account for the exercise. Kiriha had seen through his plans and intended to help move things along—proof of a mutual understanding between them and the strong bond they shared.

“Still, I can’t imagine that Koutarou came up with this all on his own,” Kiriha mused.

“I see... My two adjutants must be working with him,” Nefilforan offered up.

Koutarou knew the girls well, but it was hard to believe he’d come up with such an involved training program by himself. Nefilforan had two adjutants who would have been more than qualified to help him plan and implement something of this scale.

“Now, if this is training, they should be launching an attack on us any minute,” Kiriha warned.

“Why is that?” Nefilforan asked.

“Koutarou is under the impression that we’ll hesitate to make a move, so even if it’s for show, he’ll attack in order to force our hand.”

What Kiriha said made sense, but she was merely making an educated guess. There was a good chance that the more cautious members of the group would feel like they didn't have enough information to go off of and would thus adopt a wait-and-see approach. Kiriha predicted that Koutarou would use force to change their minds.

"I can under—" Nefilforan began, but was interrupted mid-nod.

"Kiriha, come quickly! Yurika and Theia fell into a pitfall trap!" Sanae yelled out.

Her shocking report made Kiriha's eyes open wide. "Nefilforan-dono, they're coming!" she shouted.

"Everyone, prepare for battle!" Nefilforan ordered. "Make sure your weapons are in training mode!"

As the girls were reeling from the news of what had happened to Yurika and Theia, a rain of bullets came streaming from the treeline. They were marking rounds that stained what they hit with orange dye. As Kiriha and Nefilforan expected, this was all part of the training exercise after all.

"Everyone, get down! The enemy already has us in their sights!" Theia called as she summoned her beam rifle from the Hazy Moon.

The rifle had a long barrel and a scope, making it useful for sniping. As marking rounds flew over her head, she pointed her gun in the direction the fire was coming from. The pitfall effectively served as a trench for her to take cover in. Otherwise, her face would have been orange by now.

"Your Highness, I've calculated the bullets' point of origin based on their trajectories!" Ruth reported, diving into the pitfall with Theia. She quickly transferred the data from her unmanned scouts to Theia's rifle.

"At last!"

Taking aim at the projected location, Theia repeatedly pulled the trigger. The enemy fire quickly ceased. Her rifle was in training mode, so she hadn't caused any actual damage, but the rules of engagement stipulated that participants stop moving once hit in training exercises. It seemed her shots had found their marks.

“This is getting interesting, Koutarou! You’re trying to fight us off to buy time to catch bugs, aren’t you?!” Theia’s eyes were blazing. Falling for a simple trap like a pitfall had done a number on her pride.

Seeing this, Harumi grew a little anxious and called out to the photography duo. “I’m afraid things are going to become quite chaotic soon, so please fall back. Satomi-kun wouldn’t want you caught up in this.”

“O-Okay.”

“Let’s go, Nalfa-chan!”

Kotori and Nalfa thus hurried away. Regardless of what Koutarou meant to accomplish with this exercise, having those two noncombatants around would only make things harder. Of course, Harumi had no intention of making things easier for him...

“Just what do you think you’re doing, Sir Knight?” she muttered as her hair started glowing silver.

She was gathering her mana in preparation for the next attack. But unlike Theia, she remained calm. She’d realized that this was likely all part of the training, but she still felt like it was rather out of character for Koutarou. Nevertheless, he clearly wanted a fight—so she decided to oblige.

The girls quickly turned things around and put their power on full display for Koutarou and Nefilforan’s unit. They’d started at a disadvantage—pitfalls and rifles trained on them—so the other side never expected them to recover and strike back so easily. The scene was pandemonium.

“They’re returning fire!”

“Daiger and Roundott are down!”

“Already?! We should still be out of range!”

“Explosive rounds or not, how can they hit at this distance?!”

“A message from Lord Veltlion! ‘Kiriha-san is most likely reading our position with Ruth-san, Sanae, and Sakuraba-senpai’s help. Theia will also shoot on instinct from above, so don’t intercept them at by-the-book locations’!”

“You mean they’re just using standard tactics against us?!”

“There she is! That’s Princess Theiamillis! She’s hiding against the sun just like Lord Veltlion said!”

“When did she get up there?!”

Nefilforan’s unit was getting one-sidedly hammered from outside their effective range. The veteran soldiers had found plenty of good cover on the mountainside, which was why they’d chosen to take up position here...

But unfortunately, Kiriha had used a detailed map provided by Ruth to mark such places they’d be likely to hide. Next, Sanae and Harumi had used their psychic powers and magic to search for signs of life in the suspicious locations Kiriha had singled out. Then Theia shelled them from the sky.

No matter how defensible the position, it was still vulnerable to attacks from overhead. Moreover, they couldn’t return fire because Theia was out of their range. They should have been out of her range as well—but she had an advantage firing down from above. As a result, Nefilforan’s unit had no choice but to abandon their position.

“They’re coming out, Aika-san!” Shizuka called. “It’s just like Kiriha-san said again!”

“She never ceases to amaze me,” remarked Maki.

“I’ll be going all out this time, so show me what you’ve got!” Nefilforan rallied.

The three of them were leading the direct assault against Koutarou’s team. Shizuka hadn’t transformed, but her fists still had the power of cannons. Maki was already brandishing her staff in the shape of a greatsword. Nefilforan was in her battle gear and armed with her greatspear. They were all outfitted for training purposes, but their energy was the real thing.

“Commander?!”

“Mobile infantry, to the front!”

Nefilforan’s unit was still in disarray after Theia’s bombardment, with their armored infantrymen who should have been leading the charge scattered all over the place. The commander on scene hurriedly tried to reestablish

formation when he saw Shizuka and the others appear.

“Short Teleport! Modifier: Effective Area, Minimum!”

“What?!”

“Is this the dreaded Yurika Attack?!”

“Shut up and get down!”

Before they could get into position, something strange happened. Eight grenades appeared out of nowhere. They formed a circle around the unit, effectively trapping them in place.

“The rest is up to you, Yurika,” said Clan.

However, the grenades didn’t explode. Instead, they disappeared just as suddenly as they’d appeared. They were actually just holograms Clan had generated. The girls really had no intention of resorting to grenades.

“Sleep Cloud! Modifier: Auto Homing!”

As Koutarou’s team dove for cover, the men left themselves completely vulnerable to Yurika’s attack. Since this was a training exercise, she’d chosen a sleep agent, and the barely visible cloud of gas blanketed the prone soldiers.

“I’m confident this was the safest play,” Clan assured her.

“I feel like I’m losing something important in exchange though...” Yurika whined.

“That’s true.”

The soldiers affected by the gas fell unconscious one after another. Fortunately, since they were already on the ground, they weren’t hurt in the process. Clan had intentionally incorporated the hologram grenades into the plan to be sure of that.

“To think we’d be bested this easily... We were prepared to make a counterattack, but this is insane...”

Yurika’s poison gas hadn’t put all of the soldiers to sleep. There were some who resisted its effects and some outside of its range, but the few of them that remained had no way to oppose the girls.

“This just goes to show everything they have going for them... We’ll be up against enemies like this in the future.”

“I finally understand why the commander said we needed this training... We were totally had.”

“We’ll have to consider this location a loss. We have others yet.”

In the end, the remaining soldiers surrendered. In all, it took the girls less than two minutes to take their position. It was an overwhelming, lightning fast victory—and this was exactly the kind of terrifying experience Nefilforan wanted her unit to have. She wanted them to know just how frightening magic and spiritual energy technology could be.

Shouting and tension filled the command center where Koutarou was stationed—and rightfully so. His team of Nefilforan’s troops vastly outnumbered the girls, but they were the ones being overwhelmed.

“There’s no response from position G-3! It’s been one minute and forty seconds since they reported that they were engaging!” an operator screamed.

Hearing this, Koutarou looked down at the map on the table in surprise.

“They only lasted a minute forty... I thought I knew how strong the girls were, but this exceeds even *my* expectations...”

An hour had elapsed, and several of the defensive positions Koutarou and his team had set up in advance were now overrun. The map showed their held territory in blue, and about 30 percent of it had already turned red. Theia and Nefilforan were particularly fierce opponents. Nefilforan had an incredible capacity to lead an offensive charge, and Theia supported her with deadly accurate cover fire. Harumi was also bolstering them with magic, so they made short work of smashing through enemy lines.

“They’re falling for the pitfall traps less often now,” the operator reported.

“That must be Clan’s doing...” Koutarou muttered.

Though it sounded like a joke, pitfalls were a surprisingly effective countermeasure against magic or spiritual energy users. If robots dug the holes,

they left no residual feelings or mana behind. Sanae could easily track any humans making traps, so relying on robots to do the digging was Koutarou's best plan to thwart that. If the girls were starting to avoid the pitfalls, however, he suspected that Clan had begun surveying for cavities in the ground. He'd have to do something to get a step ahead of them again.

"Okay, let's have the reinforcements move up," he ordered.

When up against enemies equipped with magic and spiritual energy technology, a critical element of strategy was to ensure that the soldiers knew as little as possible. They'd be taken to their locations via a transport vehicle and then relayed further instructions from the command center. That way, Sanae and Maki couldn't extract any information from them.

"Satomi-san, be careful not to move our troops in similar patterns. They're probably following in the footsteps of the last detachment we used."

"Ah, you're right! I'll be careful!"

Koutarou was devising strategies based on the girls, and Nana was offering oversight and advice. Under their guidance, Nefilforan's unit was putting up a good fight. They'd lost plenty of ground so far, but the girls had yet to find their base of operations. At this rate, they should be able to hold out until the time limit was up.

"Perhaps it's time I deploy myself, Satomi-san," suggested Nana.

"Kiriha-san is probably expecting one of us to make a move now," Koutarou responded.

"In that case, we'll likely be caught in Yurika-chan's or Ruth-san's web and the queen spider will attack."

The "queen spider" was none other than Shizuka. She possessed unparalleled physical power, but if the girls failed to dispatch her at the right moment, they'd suffer heavy losses for it. The worst case scenario for them would be if Nana showed up while Shizuka was busy elsewhere. Nana had once fought against all seven leaders of Darkness Rainbow on her own, and even without most of her mana now, she could still possibly defeat them. She was the reason the girls hadn't sent Shizuka out yet. Their plan was to hold her in reserve until Nana or

Koutarou appeared—that was why Nana referred to her as the queen spider.

“Make sure you never let Landlord-san hear you say that.”

“It’s just a figure of speech. But if you have the leisure to be worried about offending our enemies, then I suppose we’ll be all right for a while.”

Koutarou and Nana didn’t have a lot of experience fighting together, but they got along well. Koutarou figured that was thanks to having a close friend like Yurika in common. He felt like he’d known Nana for just as long. There was an amiable air between them in spite of the situation.

Meanwhile, a sense of dread began to overtake Theia and the other girls. They’d so far been unable to extract any critical information from their defeated opponents and pin down Koutarou’s location. They tried magic and spiritual energy, but Nana and the haniwas were interfering to keep them from getting any leads. It was getting under the girls’ skin even though the battle was largely proceeding in their favor. The pitfalls everywhere were another source of irritation. Clan was actively scanning for them now, so they were less of a problem than they had been at the start... which only made falling in one all the more grating.

“Grrr, how haven’t we found Koutarou yet?!” Theia growled with a sour look on her face as she crossed her arms. After having fallen in several pitfalls, her hair was now matted with mud and leaves.

“He’s not revealing himself,” Maki said calmly. As a former member of a paramilitary organization, she was experienced with this kind of endurance situation.

“Any clever ideas, Kii?” Clan asked, turning to Kiriha for help.

Kiriha, however, just shook her head. “There’s nothing we can do unless they slip up. Since their team is spread out all over the mountain, we can’t pinpoint Koutarou’s whereabouts.”

Ruth had sent out her drones to scout out nearby defensive positions, yet there was no sign of Koutarou. It was possible that he was hidden in with the other soldiers, but raiding each of the encampments would take too long. There

were plenty more of them around too. The girls needed some kind of clue to advance in the right direction, but Koutarou just wasn't yielding. It appeared that Kiriha was having a hard time getting a handle on the situation.

"I think we'll have a difficult time as long as Nana-san is with him," said Yurika.

"Indeed," agreed Kiriha. "Nana's knack for strategy is quite impressive. She was probably the one who came up with these positions."

"Heeheehee," Yurika giggled bashfully.

"What are you acting proud for?!" Theia scolded her. "How about trying to surpass your master instead?!"

"O-Okaaay!"

The girls were functionally at a standstill right now because, in truth, Kiriha was holding out on them. She'd received a report from her subordinates that contained critical information on the situation, and after debating about what to do with it, she'd decided to keep it to herself. She meant to push farther into the mountain before storming into Koutarou's main camp.

"Oh? Did something good happen, Kii?" Clan asked when she noticed Kiriha smiling.

She replied with a laugh, "Something good is *about* to happen."

"Huh?" Clan cocked her head at that vague answer.

Kiriha had uncovered Koutarou's true intentions and was now tacitly cooperating with him. In a sense, she'd betrayed the other girls to join his cause.

A few hours after the battle first began, the sun was now high overhead and the girls were closing in on Koutarou. They'd struggled to discern his location, but they were now about to reach the command center.

"Koutarou's here! There's no doubt about it!" Sanae called out.

"Using the haniwas to cover for Nana when she left was a terrible mistake! Let's storm the base!" bellowed Theia.

Koutarou had kept hidden all this time, but he'd eventually slipped up. When Theia and the others began moving toward the command center by sheer chance, he'd deployed Nana with the haniwas to keep her hidden from sight until she was as close as possible—which had inadvertently allowed Sanae to spot her with her spirit sight.

"But they know we're coming now!" Sanae argued. "Koutarou's falling back! I guess I stand out too much!"

"Shizuka-san, Maki-san! Advance with me and Theiamillis-san! Let's go!" instructed Nefilforan.

"I approve!" declared Theia.

"What should we do about Nana-san?!" shouted Yurika.

"She has a detachment in tow, so we're faster! We can capture Koutarou first!" responded Theia.

Koutarou had abandoned the command center and was now racing back down the mountain. The girls gave chase, with Nana in hot pursuit behind them. They ordinarily would have changed directions for fear of a pincer attack, but Theia chose to stay on the offensive. With Shizuka, Maki, and Nefilforan at her side, they had a powerful forward team capable of capturing Koutarou in one fell swoop.

"Satomi-kun's fleeing with a small group of people. Can we catch up to him?" Harumi worriedly asked.

Theia answered with unwavering confidence, "Not a problem! He's heading toward the private beach, and he can't retreat into the ocean!"

Koutarou was getting closer and closer to the water at this rate. Once he hit it, he'd be stopped in his tracks. He could try to flee up or down the beach, but it would cost him precious time. Theia was assured of their victory the moment he'd started heading for the beach, and it seemed she was on the money.

"Theiamillis-san, we're reaching the end of the forests!" Nefilforan cried.

"I can see him! There's Koutarou!" Theia cried in turn.

"Where, Theia-chan?!" Shizuka asked.

“In the middle of that group!”

“Over there, huh?!”

“I can see someone holding Maximilian!”

The first to spot Koutarou was, as expected, Theia. Shizuka and Maki then quickly picked him out. He was running toward the beach with a small squad around him, but the girls were gaining on him now. Theia’s lips curled into a grin now that victory over this extended game of hide and seek was within her grasp.

“Shizuka, Nefi!” she rallied.

“Leave it to me!” Shizuka answered.

“I’m charging in!” Nefilforan shouted,

Shizuka and Nefilforan closed in on the back of Koutarou’s squad. The soldiers were all carrying in excess of fifty kilograms, so they slowed considerably in the sand. The girls reached them in no time.

“Yurika!” Theia called.

“On it! High Mobility Flight!” Yurika called back.

“Here I go!”

Yurika cast her spell on Theia, whose running momentum now carried her into the air. Theia freely soared through the sky and shot toward Koutarou like a bullet. Shizuka and Nefilforan had already taken out the guards behind him, so there was no longer anything between them. The soldiers ahead of Koutarou turned and hurriedly took aim at Theia, but she was swiftly upon them.

“Koutarou!” she roared.

“Whoa!” he shouted.

Theia tackled Koutarou with a speeding hug that sent them both rolling across the sand. They finally came to a stop just as they hit the water’s edge... And so the girls’ team won the day’s training exercise.

“Jeez, don’t be so reckless,” Koutarou complained to Theia. Both of them were covered in sand. He felt her final attack had been excessively forceful.

Theia, however, completely disagreed. “This was your fault!” she yelled, all of her frustration from this trip coming to a head. First there was the swimsuits, then ping-pong, then bug hunting... She’d simply hit her limit.

“But—” Koutarou continued to complain, but he was stopped mid-sentence.

“It’s! Your! Fault!” Though Theia had been wrapped up in the thrill of the chase just moments ago, there were now large tears welling in her eyes.

I guess I did say I’d prostrate myself or whatever else it took... Recalling what he’d said to Nana earlier, Koutarou abandoned the idea of complaining. Instead, he reached over and hugged Theia.

“I’m sorry...”

“It’s too late to apologize now!”

Theia turned away, clearly still angry... yet she didn’t try to break free from Koutarou’s embrace. Rather, she hugged him right back. She was acting like a child.

“It’s okay to be angry, but would you look over there for me for a sec?” Koutarou said, pointing behind her.

If she won’t forgive me after seeing this, then I really will have to prostrate myself...

“What are you saying?! Nothing could possibly make me— Wait, what’s this?!”

When she looked behind her like Koutarou asked, Theia saw large homemade signboard that read: “Thank-You BBQ to Celebrate Commander Nefilforan & Friends’ Hard Work.” Just past the sign was a full spread for a barbecue meant for hundreds of people.

“Wh-What’s all this?! What is the meaning of this, Koutarou?!” Theia turned back to Koutarou in shock, her body trembling. She couldn’t process what was happening.

“Please give us an explanation, Lord Veltlion!” insisted Nefilforan.

She and the others were just as confused. They ran up to Koutarou with hurried steps.

“The short version is that I was a diversion to distract you from all the party prep,” Koutarou explained to the puzzled girls.

In truth, Nefilforan’s unit hadn’t contacted him just about the training exercise. They’d also wanted to hold a surprise party for their commander in order to express their gratitude. They were worried that she’d been overworking herself ever since the coup. However, she was their superior officer and a princess. Holding a party for her without proper consideration for the political climate might net them the censure of higher officials. That was why they’d asked for Koutarou’s help. As the supreme ruler of Forthorthe, no one would dare criticize him for holding a simple party.

After hearing the soldiers out, Koutarou had decided to lend them a hand. When he thought about it, however, he realized that Theia and the other girls had been overworking themselves too. And so he increased the scale of the party to accommodate everyone with a full-blown barbecue. He and Nefilforan’s unit had then gone about meticulously making plans so that none of the girls would notice. Part of those plans involved Koutarou playing the role of a decoy, distracting their attention from the events going on behind the scene. He agitated them on purpose, saying inconsiderate things and ignoring them to draw their ire and attention. Thus the prep work had all gone off without a hitch.

“So was the training another diversion, Lord Veltlion?” Nefilforan asked.

“Partially. It had the added bonus of keeping you all busy, but the training itself was the real deal. Aside from the excuse of the setting, it was all serious. I hope you all learn from what went down here today,” he replied.

“So that’s how it is...”

Koutarou’s mysterious behavior had all been for the sake of the party. He hadn’t really abandoned the girls to go fishing or bug hunting—he was just trying to goad them. He’d also arranged things so that Nefilforan would be separated from her unit that morning. As the truth slowly sank in, the tense atmosphere between the girls relaxed and their expressions returned to normal.

“It seems like Kiriha-san figured me out halfway through, though,” Koutarou

admitted.

“What makes you think that?” she asked.

“There’s more food and drink here than there should have been. You pulled some strings behind the scenes, right?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“I’m never a match for you, jeez...”

“I trusted you from the start, Koutarou!” Sanae chimed in.

“Nuh-uh,” said Yurika. “You said you were gonna put him in a scorpion hold for leaving you behind.”

“You’re imagining things.”

All the hostility directed at Koutarou softened into something sweeter. Not one of the girls was still angry. The revelation made them all rather thankful for him and Nefilforan’s men.

“All right,” said Koutarou. “Let’s go, Theia.”

“Hmm? O-Oh, yeah.”

Still holding on to Theia, Koutarou stood up. He then set her down on the beach and used the towel around his shoulders to wipe the sand off her face.

“That should do it. Also... I’m sorry for my rudeness today and yesterday, Your Highness.”

Koutarou couldn’t deny that he’d picked on Theia in particular to incite the girls. His plan wouldn’t have worked without repeatedly provoking her, and he understood how taxing that had been for her. That was why he felt the need to apologize.

“I won’t forgive you.”

“Give me a break.”

“I won’t forgive you unless you escort me today. I’ll consider that sufficient punishment.”

“Understood. Let’s start with getting some food, then. I’m starving.”

“That’s what you get for throwing yourself into things you’re not used to.”

“You can say that again.”

Theia ran up to Koutarou, who’d started walking ahead of her, and clung to his arm as she peered up at him. He started to tease her, but recalling the events of the last day or so, he thought better of it. The other girls followed after them. They were all hungry too.

“Sakuraba-senpai, you were awfully calm the entire time,” remarked Shizuka. “Did you know what Satomi-kun was planning or something?”

“Well, you see, Kasagi-san... I just believed in Satomi-kun without putting any more thought into it than that. I didn’t know anything until we got here either.”

“I get that. I just wanted to do whatever Koutarou wanted,” Maki replied.

“You could stand to want a little more for yourself, you know?” commented Clan.

“Master had me completely fooled. But now that I’m thinking about it calmly, of course it wasn’t real...”

“You just have a jealous streak in you!” threw in Sanae. “There’s no way Koutarou would like fish and bugs more than you.”

“You were the one threatening to put him in a scorpion hold, Sanae-chan.”

“I told you that you’re imagining things... Anyway, when did you figure it all out, Kiriha?”

“When I learned that Karama and Korama betrayed me.”

“We didn’t betray you, ho!”

“It was all for your sake, ho!”

“That’s why I suspected something of this nature.”

“Ah, of course,” said Sanae. “The haniwas would never turn on you.”

“Our loyalty is unwavering, ho!”

“But we did get some parts for our RC, ho!”

“We sure did, ho! We’re going to do some modifications, ho!”

“You’ll probably just end up selling it later,” laughed Shizuka.

“We got some great footage this time, didn’t we, Kotori?”

“Yeah! But it’s a shame we can’t show it to anyone.”

“We get to keep it for ourselves. It’ll be a great memory.”

“Then let’s film even more!”

“Yeah!”

The large handmade sign also served as the entrance to the party. The girls cheerfully chatted as they passed under it... All but one of them, that is.

“To think the men would do this for me...” mumbled Nefilforan. She was bewildered that all this commotion had been for her.

While the soldiers were worried about her overworking herself, they’d never had the opportunity to do anything about it. There weren’t many officers who outranked Nefilforan that they could ask for help planning something either. They’d patiently been awaiting a day like this for a long time, and when Nefilforan realized that, she was so moved that she struggled to keep her tears back.

“I think it’s okay for you to cry today, commander,” said Nana.

“Nana-san...”

“You all think so too, don’t you all?” she asked everyone else present with a smile.

The soldiers began shouting in agreement and encouragement.

“I’ll be able to brag about seeing my oh-so serious commander crying for generations to come!”

“I was reluctant to deceive you, but it’s a privilege to see you happy!”

“We were really on edge the last two days, so I’m relieved it all worked out!”

“Forget about your worries and enjoy the party!”

“I brought in local specialties from my hometown just for this occasion, so please try some!”

The soldiers opened their hearts to Nefilforan, honoring her with smiles and salutes. They had the utmost respect for their hard-working commander. With that, she was finally unable to bear it any longer.

“You’re right... I think I’ll forget about being a commander and princess for just a day.”

Tears trickled from her eyes. She tried to wipe them away, but more kept coming. So she gave up and let them overflow. It was a glimpse of the young girl Nefilforan really was.

“Okay, guest of honor coming through!” shouted Nana as she pushed Nefilforan along.

“N-Nana-san?!”

“It’s fine! Everyone, make sure she has a good time!”

“Gladly!”

Nefilforan’s unit cheered for her as they gathered around. Nana dragged her right into the heart of the part. She would enjoy herself to her fullest, just like her subordinates wanted.

The barbecue started early that afternoon and lasted well into the night. The adults ate and drank to their hearts’ content, while the younger group ate, relaxed, and played around. Everyone was having fun, but the party also ran so long because the soldiers were trading off security shifts throughout the event. They couldn’t just abandon their guard duties.

“Nana-san, what kind of food is this?” asked Nefilforan.

“It’s a local dish called yakisoba,” answered Nana. “It’s beloved by everyone from children to adults.”

“Yakisoba, hmm? Let me have some.”

“Here you go. Help yourself.”

The soldiers weren’t concerned primarily with having fun themselves. They just wanted Nefilforan to have a good time. And in that sense, the party was a huge success. Even if they all had to work, they got to see her smile, so it was

well worth it to them.

“Koutarou-sama! What is this? What kind of dish is this?” asked an excited Nalfa.

“It’s called Pagalona... Oh, wait, that’s the name of the sauce. Two thousand years ago, you would grind up long and thin potatoes and then...”

The menu for the party was extremely diverse. The main course was both Earth and Forthorthian-style barbecue, but there were also tents set up where everyone could try various dishes from different planets. The most popular one was the tent serving dishes from past Forthorthe. There had been a long line outside of it since the party started.

There were also people lined up to get a commemorative photo with Koutarou, so he and Nalfa had their hands full with that. Nalfa was having the time of her life shooting, however, and Koutarou was happy as long as the soldiers and the girls were happy.

“Boys really are awkward...” Shizuka muttered to no one in particular as she watched Koutarou run around. In her eyes, he’d worked the hardest over the past two days alongside Nefilforan’s unit. Preparing all this must have been a lot of trouble, she thought.

“Mmm, this is delicious!” she then said with a smile after popping a piece of deep-fried fish into her mouth. It was part of yesterday’s catch, courtesy of the fishers in Nefilforan’s group—and even Koutarou, who’d snagged quite a few himself.

Harumi, who was eating together with Shizuka, gave her a calm smile. “Is it awkwardness, or is it really just an earnest kind of kindness?” she asked.

“Fair enough,” Shizuka giggled as she went for seconds of the fish. She knew what Harumi was trying to say, but she still thought it was fair to call it awkwardness. And she was content to enjoy every delicious bite of it.

“But with the way Satomi-kun is now...” Harumi trailed off.

She was softly staring at Koutarou, however, so Shizuka could read between the lines.

“Sakuraba-senpai, does that mean what I think it does?” she asked.

“I think the answer is already clear. Don’t you?” Harumi replied.

“You mean... getting lucky underwear?”

“N-No!”

The surprise party that Koutarou and the soldiers had worked so hard to set up would go on for a while longer. They’d all take the energy it gave them and apply it to their duties, both the following day and beyond.

Afterword

Long time no see. Takehaya here. This marks the thirty-seventh volume of the series. The world can be a bit gloomy right now, so I hope this book helps brighten your day. This volume consists of three previously written short stories and a new half-volume story. I'd like to start with the latter.

It's a simple story about everyone going to the beach over summer vacation. We've had nonstop fighting from volume 34 to 36, so I wanted to do something more relaxed. I'm sure there're quite a few of you who've been waiting for a story like this too. At the same time, this will also be the last summer vacation in our characters' high school lives. The girls' intentions and Koutarou's are slightly out of alignment, making for a tumultuous time when Nefilforan and her unit join in for the fun. If you're reading this, does that mean that you've finished the book already? I hope you enjoyed it!

The previous short stories unfold in pairs, focusing on Clan and Harumi, Theia and Ruth, and Shizuka and Sanae. Clan and Harumi are mutually worried that Koutarou doesn't see them as women. He teases Clan and regards Harumi as a princess. Their treatment is opposite, but their worries are basically the same, so their story is about working together to resolve that. Theia and Ruth look back on how they met the Blue Knight when the public wants to know more about him. Their story is a nostalgic one as they reflect on their past selves and everything that's happened since they came to Earth. The third story is about Shizuka and Sanae doing some spring cleaning. It tends to be a slow process as you uncover things like old books you used to love, so what will come up as these two girls spruce up Corona House? And what kind of effect will that have on them?

Now that I've briefly touched on the contents of this volume, I'd like to move on to the next. We ended last time with Sanae falling from the sky. Timeline-wise, this is right after summer vacation and everyone's had a chance to recharge their batteries a little. So just what is Sanae up to? Was she flying around for fun? Or is there more to it than that? Volume 38 will answer these

questions.

Now then, since the next volume is centered on Sanae, I'm sure there's something that's been on your collective minds: why is Sanae the only one of the original four invaders who hasn't gotten more than two feature volumes? Kiriha, for example, had volumes 6, 10, and 15 (plus 16). Theia and Yurika's counts are roughly the same, but Sanae only had volumes 3 and 11. The answer is because her third feature volume needed to be strategically placed for story reasons. I think I'll expound upon that more next time. If the series had ended up shorter, I would've put it out much sooner. Now I can finally reveal the secret, however, and I no longer need to play it off when asked about it. As such, you can all look forward to volume 38 moving the story forward in a big way.

I still have some space left for the afterword, so I thought I'd give you all an update about what I've been up to lately. As a writer, I tend to stay at home, so my life personally hasn't changed much with the worldwide emergency. However, since I haven't been able to go out as much, I haven't been getting much exercise, so I started training with *Fitness Bo*ing 2* on the Switch.

On my first try, I was told I have the fitness age of a 51-year-old. I had a harder time with the steps than the punches. But with enough training, I've come down to 43 years of age. I sweated a lot and my muscles ached, so it really felt like working out. I think I've finally reached the starting line since I'm able to keep up with the steps now. I'll gradually increase the intensity from here. What's that, you ask? Who am I using for training? Well, it's *those* on rotation, haha.

Speaking of video games, I've also started playing the PC game *Escape fr*m Tarkov*. It's the first Russian game I've played since *Tetris*. I haven't played a lot of FPS games before, so it's new and fun to me. You can put together the parts how you like to customize your gun to your preferences, and when you die, you can lose it permanently. It's a system that always keeps you on edge.

I'm struggling to handle a mouse and keyboard since I'm not big on PC games, so I still need some more practice. Most of the time, I get shot while I'm struggling. I'll get used to it eventually, but I'll have to be careful until then. I won't die if the enemy never finds me, after all. In general, I feel like games are

really helping me out. It’s a lot of fun to mess around with friends over voice chat. Thinking back on the epidemics of centuries past, people must have felt even more isolated then than we do now. Ebooks are another great comfort we have thanks to all kinds of advancements. What a strange time we live in.

That just about fills up the space I have, so I’d like to end with the usual. Allow me to express my gratitude to everyone in the editorial department for their assistance, to Poco-san who nicely drew Nefilforan in casual wear when I asked for it, and to all of you readers all over the world who’ve stuck with me and this story.

Let us meet again in the afterword for volume 38.

February, 2021

Takehaya

Article 31
The signatory parties of the Corona Convention are to regard the discussion that took place in the bath on August 1st, 2011 as classified.

Article 31 Postscript
Wait, Sakuraba-senpai, did something happen that night? Nothing of interest! Really? Yeah, she's right! Everyone's opinions were split and we never got anywhere on the und— Mhmhhhmmm! Nothing happened! Nothing at all! Really, it was nothing! Mmmhmmhhhmmm!

Corona Convention

New! August 8th, 2011

Bonus Short Stories

Side: Maki

Maki's mornings started early thanks to her kitten, Snoozy. He was smart for his age and would put his front paws on her face to rouse her with the sun. Once she was awake, he'd stop and sit down in front of her.

"Good morning, Snoozy..."

Maki smiled at the kitten as soon as she opened her eyes. Snoozy had only recently started waking her up like this. It had surprised her at first. She wasn't used to having someone wake her, so knowing she'd grown accustomed to it from a cat put a grin on her face.

"Meow!" Snoozy let out a satisfied cry now that he had Maki's attention. He then spun around and headed for the kitchen.

"Heehee," Maki giggled when she saw this. She then quietly got up, careful not to disturb Shizuka, and followed after him.

"Meow!" Snoozy was sitting by the kitchen sink, in front of his water bowl and empty food dish.

"Yes, yes," said Maki. "Just a moment."

Since Snoozy wasn't drinking water, it was clear that he wasn't thirsty. Instead, his business was with the food dish. Maki pulled a cardboard box from the cupboard, and from it came the dry, rustling sound of its contents. Snoozy's eyes lit up when he heard the noise.

"Meow!"

"Hold on a little, Snoozy."

"Meow!"

Snoozy restlessly began to rub against Maki's leg. She'd nearly stepped on him a couple of times by accident in the beginning, but she was used to this

behavior now too. She dipped a plastic cup into the box and pulled it back out half full with brown lumps the size of her pinkie nails. This was the prize Snoozy was after.

“Meow!”

He ran back to the empty bowl and sat down again. He was clever, and he trusted Maki not to tease him with food.

“Here you go,” she said. “Eat up.”

“Meow!”

Once Maki filled the bowl, Snoozy became so invested in eating that he seemed to forget she even existed. Maki, meanwhile, was just happy that he was eating healthily.

“Heehee.”

Watching Snoozy eat had long become part of Maki’s own breakfast routine.

Side: Shizuka

There was now a hole large enough for a person to pass through in the wall between rooms 105 and 106. Since it was the result of an accident, Shizuka wasn’t especially angry about it. The other day, Koutarou had even fixed it up some by installing a wooden frame so it would look nicer. Today, however, Shizuka was pensively staring at it.

“What’s the matter, Landlord-san? You got a scary look on your face,” Koutarou said in passing.

“Thanks for noticing, Satomi-kun... But couldn’t you find a nicer way to say that?”

“Okay, um... You look like you’re worried about something, Landlord-san. It’s a shame not to see you smiling.”

“That’s more like it! You can’t talk to just any girl like that though, you hear?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Now, what were we talking about...? Oh, right, the hole in the wall,” Shizuka

said, pointing at it.

Koutarou turned to look at it himself. “Is something wrong with the job we did?” he asked, cocking his head.

The hole had been squared off with a wooden frame that was neatly painted and finely polished. Koutarou had done the former, and the latter was Shizuka’s handiwork.

“I’m not talking about the frame,” she said. “I’m talking about the hole itself.”

“What about it?”

“We’ve got a curtain hanging over it, but I don’t know that I like it.”

That was what had been on Shizuka’s mind. The curtain functioned as a door to protect Koutarou’s and Nalfa’s privacy. It served its purpose, but it bothered her from an interior design perspective.

“What do you mean?” Koutarou asked.

“The blue curtain suits your place, but not Nalfa-san’s,” she explained.

“Oh, so that’s it.”

Koutarou and Nalfa had rather different decor in their apartments. His was minimal while hers was on the cute side. That was why Shizuka felt the curtain clashed.

“That’s extremely kind of you, but you don’t need to be so considerate of me,” Nalfa said with a smile and took a sip of tea. Since it was snack time, she’d come over to room 106.

“I won’t hear of it, Nalfa-san. That kind of thoughtlessness can make a girl miserable, you know?” Shizuka pressed Nalfa with a most serious look on her face.

“I see...”

Overwhelmed by the strange pressure Shizuka was exuding, Nalfa faltered. Seeing this, Koutarou decided to throw her a lifeline.

“I’m not hung up on the curtain personally, so we can pick out something the two of you like more,” he offered.

Yet, for some reason, Nalfa was the one who put her foot down this time. “But yours has to be blue, Koutarou-sama! It can’t be anything else!” she cried.

“I see...”

Koutarou now found himself faltering. Nalfa was rarely this intense. He really did think it was a shame not to see her smiling, just like Shizuka earlier.

“That’s right! You get it, Nalfa-san,” Shizuka piped up.

“I absolutely cannot relent on this matter!” Nalfa insisted.

“That’s what’s been puzzling me, honestly,” Shizuka admitted with a nod.

In fact, that was the real crux of the matter she’d been debating internally: what kind of curtain would be appropriate to hang between a boy’s room and a girl’s room?

“Why not use a two-sided curtain?” Koutarou asked.

It was a rather simple idea—they could just make a curtain with a different fabric on each side. The girls, however, refused to accept it.

“No! That would ruin its splendor!” Nalfa shouted.

“See? You just don’t understand how girls feel, Satomi-kun!” Shizuka followed suit.

“Huh...” he relented.

Women really are too complicated... How in the world do you manage this, Mackenzie?!

Now that the girls had set their sights on Koutarou, Kenji was the only person he could turn to for help... But without his best friend there, Koutarou would be stuck suffering the girls’ onslaught alone for some time.

Side: Yurika

Yurika’s favorite Kanto seaweed-flavored instant noodles were seventy-eight yen a package. They’d first hit shelves a year ago, and she’d picked them up because she enjoyed the taste for the price. That held true even now, as evidenced by the five packets in her shopping basket.

“Like, didn’t you finish off paying off your debt?” Sanae asked curiously.

“Sanae-chan! Shhh!”

“Don’t worry. Koutarou’s stuck in the sports drink corner right now.”

Even with Sanae’s assurance, Yurika couldn’t help glancing over to make sure of it for herself. She desperately wanted to keep Koutarou from learning of her financial situation at all costs.

“My debt may be gone, sure, but...” she mumbled.

“So why do you keep buying the cheap instant noodles? You could buy these nicer ones instead. You know, the kind that moved you to tears that one time?”

Sanae wanted to know why Yurika was still living like she was dirt poor even though she wasn’t anymore. She understood that Yurika didn’t want Koutarou to know the truth, but she couldn’t understand why Yurika’s diet hadn’t changed.

“You’re being too naive, Sanae-chan!” Yurika objected with a surprisingly serious expression. She had her left hand on her hip as she waved her right in the air.

“What do you mean?” Sanae asked.

“Money can disappear on you in the blink of an eye. You never know a mistake might cost you.”

“That’s eerily convincing coming from you...”

“I can’t even begin to tell you the wretched despair of buying a manga you don’t like in bulk!” Yurika cried, pale-faced as she recalled her past horror.

She’d once bought the entirety of a popular series that turned out not to be to her tastes. She’d then rushed to a used bookstore to offload it, but since it was in such wide circulation, it didn’t sell for much. It was a huge loss for both her and her wallet. So even with her finances stabilized now, she wasn’t about to let her guard down again.

“I buy books one at a time, though,” said Sanae.

“Don’t you want to know what happens next?” asked Yurika.

“Sure I do, but I like going to the bookstore with Koutarou.”

Sanae didn’t just enjoy manga; she loved the whole book-buying experience. She’d been getting a small allowance from Koutarou ever since she was a ghost, and she loved going shopping with him to spend it. Swinging by the bookstore on the way home after school and reading manga together was one of her favorite pastimes.

“That sounds great...” sighed Yurika.

“Then you should give it a try,” suggested Sanae.

“Unlike you, Sanae-chan, Satomi-san and I don’t have the same tastes.”

Sanae read all kinds of manga, whereas Yurika had very girly tastes. There was no way that she and Koutarou would enjoy the same kind of series.

“Then why not do it with ramen? Instead of buying a pack here and there, you can buy a box with Koutarou. Then you can make it together and everything.”

“Hmmmmm...”

Yurika pondered this plan. Instead of buying a little at a time, she could buy a whole box and ask Koutarou to carry it. As thanks for the favor, she could even offer to treat him to some. It was sounding better and better to her.

“What are you thinking about so hard, Yurika?” asked Koutarou, appearing with a basket full of sports drinks. “Did you find some new instant noodles?”

“Hwah?!” Hearing his voice all of a sudden made Yurika jump. She was too surprised to give a proper answer.

“Welcome back, Koutarou. Yurika and I were just talking about how she should buy in bulk instead,” Sanae said for her, making sure to leave out the parts Yurika wouldn’t have wanted her to share.

“You’d probably save money that way, yeah.”

“But carrying a whole box would be heavy. Come on, Yurika, just ask him to do it for you.”

“U-Um, would you mind?”

“Sure. It’s no big deal.”

“Th-Thank you, Satomi-san!”

In the end, Yurika got exactly what she wanted. But she wasn’t the only one who demonstrated growth that day; later, she’d quietly thank Sanae for everything she’d done.

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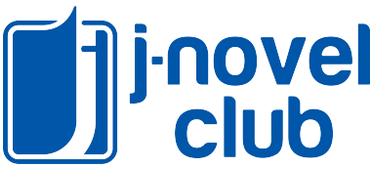

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Invaders of the Rokujouma!? Volume 37

by Takehaya

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