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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.

RESIDENTS OF CORONA HOUSE







NIJINO YURIKA

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

HIGASHIHONGAN SANAE

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

CHOSTS



RUTHKANIA NYE PARDOMSHIHA

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

THEIAMILLIS GRE FORTHORTHE

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



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...

SAKURABA HARUM

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.



FASTIONS MAP

KASAGI SHIZUKA

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



KURANO KIRIHA

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

UNDERGROUND DWELLERS
(OF THE PEOPLE OF THE EARTH)

SATOMI KOUTAROU

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



MATSUDAIRA KOTORI

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



MATSUDAIRA KENJI

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

(COUTAROUS)
CHILDHOOD FRIENDS

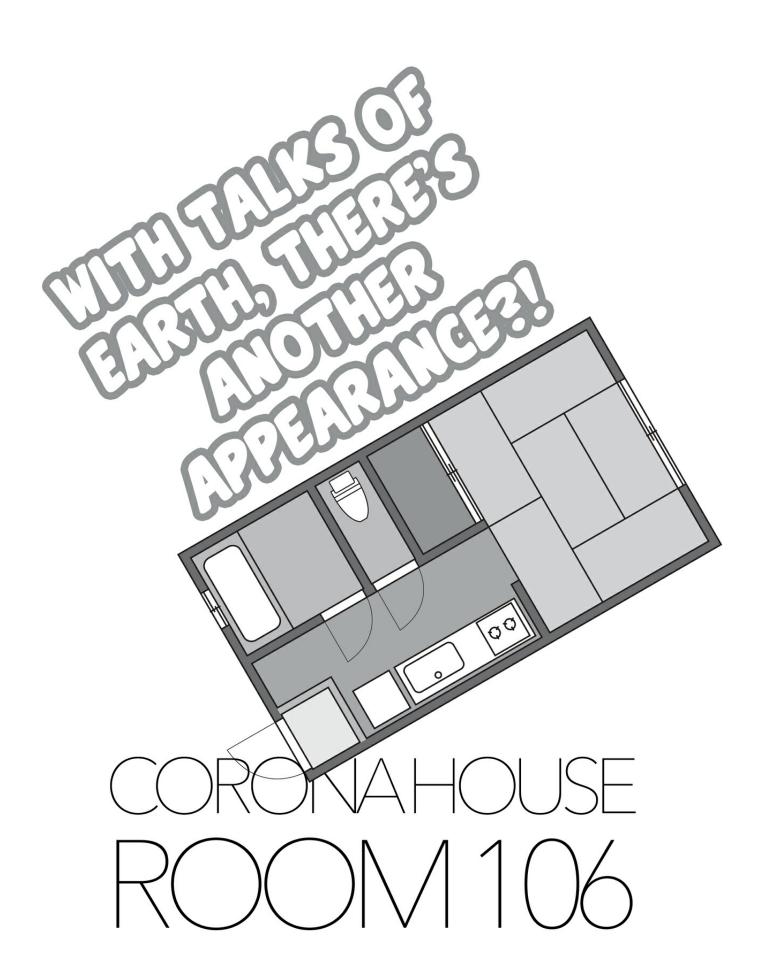


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Episode 1: The Capital Board Game Session

The battle against Vandarion had come to a close, but Forthorthe's royalty had no time to take it easy. They needed to rebuild and reform the empire, as well as hold memorials and celebrations for the end of the war. However, the imperial physicians objected, saying it would destroy Their Majesties' bodies, and the royals would therefore be taking a day off on a rotating basis.

Today it was Theia, Elfaria, and Ceilēshu's day off. But since it had been such a sudden decision, they didn't have anything in particular to do, so they had gathered to drink tea, which Ruth had poured for them.

"That reminds me, it's been so busy that I haven't been able to thank you, Theia-chan," Ceilēshu remarked after taking a sip of the tea and putting her cup on the table. They were inside the greenhouse in the courtyard of the Imperial Palace. The season was still cold, but the light of the sun made the tea sparkle.

"Hmm?" Theia was in the process of enjoying her own drink and acknowledged Ceilēshu with her eyes. It was a little rude, but nobody there would rebuke her for it. That said, she had matured, so she soon put down her cup and spoke to Ceilēshu. "Is there something you need to thank me for?"

"There is." Ceileshu smiled and lowered her head. "Thank you for saving my father."

Ceilēshu's father had been afflicted by an illness that couldn't be cured even with Forthorthe's technology. But it had been possible to treat him with technology based on magic and spiritual energy. Once the war was over, he had received treatment, with both means being used in parallel. As a result, although he was still far from being fully recovered, his life was no longer in danger, and his condition was improving with each passing day.

Theia smiled and shook her head. "I haven't done anything. You should give your thanks to the others."

It was Maki and Yurika, as well as Sanae and Kiriha, who had been in charge of

his treatment. Theia hadn't done anything but watch, so in her mind, it was they who should be thanked, not her. Even so, she was happy about her friends being praised.

"Theia, at times it is necessary to accept the gratitude directed to you," Elfaria said and laughed at her daughter. At the same time, she was happy that her daughter had made friends she could be proud of.

"I am willing to accept thanks for bringing them here, mother."

"In that case, thank you very much for doing so, Theia-chan."

"Indeed, it was worthwhile to bring them with me."

"By the way, when Her Highness was coming back, she begged Layous-sama and the others to lend her their strength while in tears," Ruth interjected.

"Oh my?!"

"Ruth! You didn't have to say that!"

Not much time had passed since the war had ended, but since things were going well, Theia and the others had bright expressions. It would surely not be long before Forthorthe as a whole recovered from the civil war.

Ruth was the one pouring the tea, and thanks to her meticulous personality and training since childhood, the taste and aroma were superb. After a few sips, Ceilēshu looked into her cup in confusion.

Seeing that, Ruth asked her with a worried look, "Was it not to your taste, Ceileshu-sama?"

"Oh, it was! I just haven't had something like this before. I believe I am quite knowledgeable about tea too," Ceilēshu answered with a smile. She felt that the taste and aroma were great, and Ruth's skill was admirable. She was simply bothered that she hadn't tasted this type of tea before. Tea was her hobby, so she had all kinds of knowledge about the subject. Yet she knew nothing about the tea that Ruth had made for her.

"This is actually a tea that I brought with me from Earth," Ruth clarified.

"From Earth? No wonder I can't recall it. So, this is the taste of tea from Layous-sama's homeland..." Ceileshu peered into her cup again before taking

another sip to enjoy the flavor and aroma. It was a rather unique and acrid taste, but she quite liked it.

"Do you like it, Ceileshu-san?" Elfaria called out to her.

Ceilēshu was rather mature, unlike Theia, so the childish expression she was wearing was quite rare. "Yes." Ceilēshu nodded. "I would like to try all sorts of tea." Her tea-loving heart was stirring. How could she sit still at the thought of unknown teas from an unknown planet? "Do you have any more, Ruth-san?"

"I do believe I have another two or three teas that I brought with me. I will serve them next time."

"Please do!"

Ruth knew that she had brought roasted green tea and black tea with her. She remembered making those since coming to Forthorthe. She should also have brought oolong tea with her, but since she hadn't made any yet, she couldn't be sure. That didn't matter to Ceilēshu, though; she wanted as many teas as there were.

Seeing that, Elfaria chuckled. "Once diplomatic relations are established with Earth, and especially Japan, you can get as much as you want."

Elfaria had already decided to open a dialogue with Earth at this point. Once that was done, they could get as much tea as they wanted, which Ceilēshu should be happy about.

Of course, there was risk involved, and that's what Theia was worried about. "Mother, is it really necessary to establish diplomatic relations right now?"

Trouble with another world was a constant worry, especially when there were such large gaps in both technology and economy between them. In this scenario, there was a high risk of Forthorthe's technology and funds flowing directly to Earth. With that in mind, Theia felt that there was no need to rush.

"There is a reason. It will be dangerous if we don't hurry." Elfaria was of the opposite opinion. She believed there was another danger lurking and concluded that it was riskier to hold off on this next step.

"What danger are you talking about, Your Majesty?" Ruth, having finished her

duty of pouring tea, asked with a serious expression. Seeing that Elfaria wasn't smiling as she usually would, she had a bad feeling about this.

"All citizens know that Layous-sama and his allies fought. A lot of attention is naturally being focused on magic, psychic powers, and spiritual energy. If left alone, some will illegally land on Earth to try to get their hands on those things. Establishing diplomatic relations is the best way to prevent that."

The people of Forthorthe's attention was currently on the Blue Knight and his band of knights, as well as the strange techniques they used, such as Yurika's and Maki's magic, Sanae's psychic powers, and Kiriha's haniwas. Even if the details were unclear, the people understood that these were superb techniques and technology. Naturally, many would want to get their hands on them even if it meant illegally smuggling themselves onto Earth, and many would inevitably belong to dangerous terrorist organizations.

"Earth doesn't have the technology to prevent Forthorthians from illegally entering," Theia remarked. "So you are worried that a terrorist organization will go there to look for magic and spiritual energy technology and bring it back here to perform acts of terrorism, is that right, mother?"

"That's right. Establishing diplomatic relations is necessary in order to move the army and enforce the border. Because of the galactic treaty, we can't let the military into a country we don't have diplomatic relations with."

Forthorthe and its neighboring nations had a treaty that forbade them from intervening with any country or planet they didn't have diplomatic relations with, even to prevent illegal entry. If they were going to enforce the borders, they would need to follow the rules.

"Magic, psychic powers, and spiritual energy... It would certainly be a problem if those were brought to Forthorthe. It is definitely a difficult situation, Your Majesty," Ceileshu said while furrowing her brow.

If such things were used for terrorism in Forthorthe, they would have no means of preventing it or pursuing the perpetrators. A sudden influx would be problematic for both worlds, and Elfaria felt that they couldn't afford to fall behind on the matter. It was also why she was exempting Darkness Rainbow from responsibility and trying to recruit them instead.

"That's why there is a need to do this soon," she explained. "However, it will mostly be a human and cultural exchange at first. Anything else will be shut out."

"Which means that I will be able to drink this tea again!" Ceileshu replied.

Although trouble was expected, it wasn't all bad, since Ceileshu would be able to explore Earth's tea culture. There were parts of this political move that would be very welcome.

"Does it interest you, Ceileshu-san?" Elfaria asked.

"Of course. It is something from Layous-sama's homeland..."

"I am sure people will want to experience the culture that created the Blue Knight."

This decision would likely align with the public's desires. Earth was the planet where the Blue Knight was born. Koutarou had defeated Vandarion and saved the royal families, earning him immense popularity, and the people would surely love to know more about his culture, especially the things that Koutarou enjoyed. They would likely want to experience it for themselves as well. Since a human and cultural exchange would allow for that, the people would rejoice.

"Ruth-san, did you bring any cultural items from Earth aside from tea?" Ceilēshu asked.

"I do have board games we brought along to kill time."

"A board game?"

"It is a classic type of game where you use a board and pieces to play," Theia interjected. "On Earth, it lost momentum due to the appearance of computer games, but it is seeing a sort of revival as of late."

"Hmm... I see."

"Theia, this is a good opportunity, so why don't we play?" Elfaria suggested.

"I understand, mother. Ruth, if you would."

"Very well."

Theia and the others had initially worried about how they would spend their

day off, but fortunately, they had found a solution during their discussion, and ultimately spent their time casually playing a game.

The first game Ruth chose was a simple one that used a large twelve-sided die, with players moving the number of spaces the die showed.

"Theia-chan, what does this say?" Ceileshu asked.

"It says, 'The Turnabout Game of Life.' Hold on a minute; I will send the Japanese translation to you," Theia answered.

"Ah, there it is. Thank you very much. I see, now I can understand this box."

"Indeed. To summarize the game, you experience a virtual life where you overcome hardships, and the person who has the most money at the end is the victor."

"That sounds fun."

"It always causes a big uproar."

"Is that so?" Ceileshu chuckled as she stared at the package and board. Everything was written in Japanese, but the computer she was wearing projected a translated hologram over it, so there was no problem. She was very interested in Earth's culture.

"Ruth, why did you choose this game?" asked Elfaria.

"This game is based on luck, Your Majesty, so even beginners can play it easily enough. It also features Japanese culture."

"I see, then it should fit in with Ceileshu-san's hopes."

Ruth and Elfaria chatted while taking out the pieces and cards from the box. Since Elfaria had been on Earth for a while, she had some experience with board games and was therefore unsurprised, but Ceilēshu's reaction was very different.

"Theia-chan, your piece is a vehicle with wheels. Is that a vehicle from Earth?" she asked.

"That's right. Most vehicles on Earth still use an internal combustion engine."

"I would love to ride in one..."

"I'm sure you will get a chance eventually."

"I will look forward to it," Ceileshu said with a laugh. She was typically the one doing the explaining to Theia, but their positions were reversed when it came to Earth. The advantage of having lived there for two years was significant, and right now, Theia was the most—or second most—knowledgeable on Forthorthe.

Suddenly, a thought came to mind. *Did mother foresee this when she sent me to Koutarou's side?*

Theia was an expert on Earth. Her two years of experience would naturally put her at the center of attention should diplomatic relations be established. In a sense, it was a card more powerful than becoming Empress. Earth was more than just a planet; it was the Blue Knight's homeland. Theia stared at her mother, wondering if Elfaria had foreseen that much when she had sent Theia there.

"Ruth, what was this red bill again?" Elfaria asked.

"That is a debt," Ruth explained "You will lose money equivalent to the note."

"Oh, right."

Seeing Elfaria carefreely prepare the game, Theia felt like she was making too much of it. *Not even mother could have predicted this much... Good grief...*

She laughed, and after that, she completely forgot about it. And with that, the truth would forever remain in darkness.

The Turnabout Game of Life began at childhood. The players attended either regular or elite kindergarten and various types of grade schools. They also collected talent cards that would affect their income after finding a job. It was ideal if talents and work overlapped, but since the game was so reliant on luck, it wasn't that easy.

"Agh, I have a talent for drawing, but I ended up becoming a baseball player!" Theia griped.

"That's a shame, Theia. You were just one away from becoming a manga artist," Ruth answered.

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"Baseball... Ruth-san, what is baseball?" asked Elfaria.
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The board split when searching for a job, setting a general future course. Theia gained a talent during grade school and chose a route that had a lot of professional creative jobs. But that route also featured athletics, which she unfortunately got instead.

"Oh, it appears I am a salaryman," Elfaria commented.

"I have never imagined you as an office worker, mother."

"Ceilēshu-sama, a salaryman is an employee who works for a company," Ruth explained.

"That is the opposite of Her Majesty's life."

"I will aim for the top, no matter what life," Elfaria announced.

"I am sure that mother would be the same regardless of her job," said Theia.

Elfaria had become an employee for a trading company. She had also acquired a talent for logical thinking, which, while not as effective as a talent for negotiation, would help her as an employee. She could still aim to win.

"Oh... It looks like I am an idol singer," said Ruth.

"That is a good job, Ruth-san," Elfaria answered.

"I don't think it suits Ruth well, though."

"Theia, you are talking about reality, aren't you?" her mother replied with a chuckle.

"But I have a talent for handicrafts, so I don't think it suits me."

"See!"

"Oh, Theia..."

Ruth had become an idol singer. It was one of the jobs that had the most random income. It was relatively stable if one had a talent for beauty or

[&]quot;It is a sport on Earth. Master loves it, so we play it from time to time too."

[&]quot;I would love to try it for myself one day."

[&]quot;By all means."

charisma, but Ruth unfortunately had neither. Even so, she looked at her job card with joy. While she herself didn't think it suited her, she was still happy about it. Being able to become something unimaginable was just another thrill of playing a game.

"I am, uhm...a tuna fisherman. But what is a tuna?" asked Ceilēshu.

"Oh, you've gotten the most dynamic job!" Theia exclaimed.



"A tuna is a large edible fish on Earth. Many people in Japan like it, and Master loves it too," Ruth explained.

"Then I will do my best to make Layous-sama happy."

"Mother, it might be best to import tuna eventually."

"You love it too, don't you, Theia?"

"Ehehehe."

Ceilēshu had become a deep-sea fisherman and was happy about it. Like the idol job, it was a very random one, but she had the fishing talent so her income would be relatively stable. At the moment, she might have been the most likely player to win, but that wasn't why Ceilēshu was smiling. Her heart was drawn to the unique food culture of Earth, as well as the Earth-style boat illustration on the card.

"So, we have a baseball player, a salaryman, an idol, and a fisherman. These jobs are all very varied," Theia pointed out.

"It's only natural—there are a lot of jobs on Earth too." Ceileshu flipped through the job cards that hadn't been used this time. Many were in fields that she had no familiarity with, and even the jobs she did know looked different in the game. The cards made the difference in the culture between Forthorthe and Earth very clear, and much of it fascinated her.

"I would love to go to Earth one day..." Ceileshu murmured.

"Bear with it for a while. Mother will open it up eventually."

"I look forward to it."

"Leave it to me..." Elfaria laughed.

Before long, the Blue Knight would sneak home, prompting public opinion in Forthorthe to favor establishing diplomatic relations with Earth. Ceilēshu's desires would quickly be fulfilled, but she had no way of knowing that now.

The Turnabout Game of Life truly got started once everyone had a job. Until then, players only received income from allowances or events, but once they were employed, their income increased dramatically. There were also unexpected expenses such as stock market crashes and natural disasters. And so the rankings, which had been nearly equal until now, started shifting rapidly.

"At this rate, Ceileshu will be able to run away with the win."

"Ceileshu-sama has been having nothing but big hauls lately, after all."

"I am only getting lucky," she protested.

Elfaria chuckled. "Be it luck or ability, the winner is always right, Ceileshusan."

Ceilēshu was currently in first place. At first, she'd struggled with the loan for the ship, but she'd been getting big hauls for years and was now leaps and bounds ahead of the others. She still wasn't sure what a tuna fisherman really was, but she was enjoying herself.

"Hmm...I will lose if I don't do anything." Theia was in second place, and her talent didn't match her job, but she was being held up by her team's performance.

"Now then, what should I do?" Elfaria, who was in third, was strangely happy. Her income was stable because of her job as a salaryman, but it wasn't increasing as much as she wanted. However, she wouldn't go down quietly, and the other three were filled with trepidation, wondering what she would do.

"It seems I really wasn't suited to be an idol. Continuing would be a mistake; I should change jobs." In last place was Ruth. Her idol profession was a complete mismatch with her handicraft talent, and it wasn't enough for her to make a living. She also had to work part-time to support herself. Right now, she was looking for a way to change jobs in order to make a comeback.

"I will need to bring out my last resort." Theia cackled as she threw the twelve-sided die. She then moved her car piece, not along the main route but a special side road.

"You've made a bold choice, Your Highness." Ruth smiled as she looked at her; it was very like Theia.

"Naturally. I will be first, or I will be last!"

Having concluded that she wouldn't be able to beat Ceileshu at this rate,

Theia had made a gamble to try a big turn of fortune. The game allowed for players to gamble everything they owned just once. If they won, they would be rich, and if they lost, they wouldn't have any money to their name. It was a typical decision for Theia to make—to her, any position but the top was the same as last place.

"Theia, it says to specify the multiplier."

"Ceileshu will get her income another two times after this, and considering it might be over average with her talent...hmm, a double multiplier won't be enough... Mother, I will go with three times!"

"I see, so this is what a 'turnabout' in life means," Ceileshu pondered.

"Yes," Ruth explained, "it is possible to turn things around from any position as a final gamble, although there is criticism about the game being too reliant on luck."

"Playing only games of skill will result in the same people winning all the time, so these kinds of games are necessary too."

"I agree, Ceilēshu-sama."

"Hahahaha, here I go!" Theia vigorously threw the twelve-sided die. It rolled across the table, and since she was aiming for a triple multiplier, she had a one-in-three chance of success. Specifically, she needed to roll a one to four.

Theia and the others held their breath as they stared.

"Stop it! Don't! Noooooo!"

As the die stopped, Theia screamed. She had rolled a five, and unfortunately, her gamble had failed. Theia was now bankrupt, and that was one of the turning points of the game. Everyone set their objectives and headed for the goal.

"Ugh, I lost!"

When the game came to an end, Theia collapsed over the table. With her bankruptcy, she had come in last. She'd recovered somewhat afterward, but it hadn't been enough to catch up to the other three.

"This was the result of your aggressiveness, Your Highness," Ceileshu

commented.

"And you weren't aggressive enough," Elfaria chimed in.

"I should have given up on the idol path sooner." Ruth was third. She'd changed her job to entrepreneur and created an apparel brand. It suited her talent, but it had been done too late. She had been defeated by her conservative personality and adoration for idols deep within, which had left her unable to throw her original job away sooner.

"It appears I was sitting on a big haul for too long. I should have been thinking of my next move while things were in my favor."

"It was your first time playing, so that can't be helped."

"I will do better next time."

"That's the spirit, Ceileshu-san."

Ceilēshu had come in second. Her fishing had worked great for her until halfway through, but she'd fallen behind on managing her funds. She hadn't narrowed down her management methods, eventually not having enough income to make a profit.

"Still, I didn't think Her Majesty would be so good at games, Theia-chan."

"Mother is always like this. She will make a fortune before you know it."

"It would appear Her Majesty had it planned from the start."

Elfaria chuckled. "The moment I became a salaryman, I needed a plan to win." Although she hadn't particularly stood out midgame, in the end, she had finished in first place. The moment she had become a salaryman, she'd begun gradually buying stocks in the company she worked for. Moreover, her company had performed well thanks to her talent, so her stocks hadn't dropped. So, even though she hadn't stood out, she'd been sitting on high-value stocks. A large part of that was the result of her becoming CEO, and thanks to her skillful management of her assets, she'd managed to eke out a victory against Ceilēshu.

"Still, Her Majesty sure is strong, isn't she, Your Highness?" asked Ceileshu.

"That's what makes it worth challenging her!" cried Theia. "Let's move on to

the next one! I won't let this end here!"

"Oh, are we going to play more?"

"I won't let you run away with your victory, mother!"

"Wow, what game are we playing next?!"

As a sore loser, Theia wouldn't let it end there. She hurriedly cleaned up after the Turnabout Game of Life and started looking over the games piled up on a nearby table. Their battle had only just begun.

Thanks to the first round, Ceileshu was starting to get a grasp on analogue games. Sensing that, the second game Theia picked was a card game called Divine Punishment Professionals. The rules were simple, and compared to the Turnabout Game of Life, it had more leeway for player tactics. It would be a good follow-up for Ceileshu now that she'd gotten the hang of things.

"Theia-chan, what is this unique hairstyle these gentlemen are wearing?!"

"That is called a topknot."

"Top...knot?"

"It originated when warriors shaved the tops of their heads before putting on their helmets. Bundling their hair like that was the proper etiquette for samurai, which were like our knights."

Once again, the illustrations on the card fascinated Ceilēshu. Since they featured figures from the Edo period, they showed a completely unknown world to her. Moreover, samurai were an interesting concept to someone from Forthorthe, where knights still existed.

"Is Japan a feudal society too?"

"It was in the past. It's not anymore, but that spirit is still alive in its people."

"Like Layous-sama?"

"That's right. This game is about becoming like that idiot and defeating villains."

"Ah, that makes it easy to understand."

The connection to a feudal society made the concept of the game easier to

swallow. They were warriors of justice defeating the villains lurking in the shadows. Knights and samurai were different, but Forthorthe had stories with similar motifs. Thanks to that, Ceileshu was able to understand the context.

"So, how do we play, Theia-chan?" she asked.

"Well..."

Ceilēshu's eyes sparkled as she urged Theia to explain the rules. Theia had never seen her act so childishly before. She normally behaved like a calm, grown woman.

I understand that feeling of wanting to learn more about the culture that gave birth to the Blue Knight. I must have been the same myself...

Theia had been a huge Blue Knight fan in the past. She got along well with the real Blue Knight now, so she didn't react like Ceilēshu did, but she could understand the other's feelings. If not, she wouldn't have written a play. So Theia couldn't help but feel a little nostalgic when looking at Ceilēshu.

The game began by dealing a character card to each player. The players would play as the character on their card. Theia got the gunner called Shinpachi, Ruth got the sword cane-using Daruma, Elfaria got Ayame the Poison Flower, and Ceilēshu got the master swordsman Monko. During the game, they would gather weapons, traps, and helpers, and whoever defeated the villain would win.

However, each character had different strengths and weaknesses when it came to weapons, tools, and situations, and weren't guaranteed to win if they did the same thing every time. If there happened to be an overlap in what characters were good at, there would be a scramble for cards. Moreover, players could prepare until they were certain they would win, or make a snap decision and rely on luck, making it the kind of game you would want to play over and over.

"Ah, a helper card! Fūma Ninja... What is that?"

"A ninja is something like our spies, referring to illegal personnel. What was Fūma again, Ruth?"

"Fūma refers to a specific school, and its strength lies in launching surprise

attacks from covert actions," Ruth replied.

"Does that mean it is a good match for my Monko's assassination sword?" Ceileshu asked.

"It is just as you've guessed, Ceilēshu-sama. You get another three attacks during a surprise attack."

"All right!"

Ceilēshu's eyes sparkled with each new card she drew. Cards that caught her attention, such as geishas, katanas, and nightingale flooring, came one after another. She stared at the cards, alternating between happiness and anxiety as she read their effects.

"Next is my turn," Elfaria announced. "Oh, I drew a good card."

"What did you get, mother?" Theia asked.

"A famous sword forged by Monzaemon."

"Your character, Ayame, is a poison user, so it's not a very good card for her..."

"Ruth, why don't we trade this sword for your hidden scroll of poison?" Elfaria asked.

"A trade, eh? That's not a bad deal."

"Hold it, Ruth! Don't be in such a rush!" Theia warned her.

"Don't worry, this katana has a bigger plus."

"Then—"

"It's a trap! Mother has a different goal! You have a card in your hand that will be nullified by the katana!"



"Ah."

Elfaria had a firm grasp of the game and was making progress in her preparations for the showdown. She kept track of everyone's hands and how they would want to use them, and manipulated the situation in her favor. Before they knew it, she would be fully armed, which had happened several times already. That was why Theia had objected to her sweet-talking Ruth into an unbalanced trade.

"You can hold back a little, Theia," said Elfaria.

"There is no need to hold back against you, mother. I have lost more than enough times against you!"

"How harsh."

"There's no letting my guard down around you. Right, it is my turn now."

"What card is that, Theia-chan?" asked Ceileshu.

"A bribe. It delays the magistrate's office from mobilizing."

"The magistrate's...office?"

"A magistrate's office was this time period's police force," Ruth explained.

"And they are taking bribes...which means they are corrupt officers. How lamentable."

"Hahaha, it is all in the past, so you can forgive them."

Theia was good at the game. Her aggressive personality worked well with it, and she liked the setting. But out of consideration for Ceileshu, she had pulled her punches the first few games, which had allowed Elfaria, who was quicker on the uptake, to snatch a few victories. However, she was gunning for victory herself now.

"It's my turn," Ruth said. "Um...I got the epidemic event card. All enemies and allies lose five defense points."

"Urgh, what a frightening card."

"Ruth-san, was the hygiene situation during the Edo period that bad?" asked Ceilēshu.

"There are records that say that it wasn't. Compared to other countries of the time, Japan had good hygiene. However, their knowledge of medical treatments was lacking, so they suffered from diseases at the same rate as other countries."

"I see. Your Majesty, if we establish diplomatic relations with Earth, should we not offer them medical equipment?"

"It is a difficult situation. I would love to supply some right away to save human lives, but it would be bad if it disrupted current medical practices. It would be best to slowly introduce new technology while Forthorthe treats critical patients itself."

"We're in the middle of a game, you two," Theia reminded them.

"Ah, yes, my bad," Elfaria answered.

"I'm sorry, Theia-chan."

"Go on, Ruth; it's still your turn."

"Yes. I will increase my defense by selling supplies on the black market."

Ruth played with a focus on defense, squashing her own weaknesses and aiming for a guaranteed victory. As a result, she tended to fall behind the other three, but she always won when she made her move, so her results weren't all that bad. She also observed and analyzed how the other three played. The plan was to change her offensive strategy in accordance with their tactics toward the end of the game.

Her Majesty is surprisingly considerate of us while playing... Ruth realized in the process of her analysis that Elfaria would win when the other three were on the verge of consecutive victories. To her, it looked like Elfaria was controlling the game so that nobody would run away with all the victories. Ruth believed she was doing it for the sake of her daughter and her friends. She couldn't quite show her true intentions, but Elfaria was genuinely kind.

"Is something the matter, Ruth?" asked Elfaria.

"Not at all. I was just thinking that Your Majesty is beautiful today too."

"Oh my, you are quite good at flattery."

"Oh not at all..." Ruth chuckled.

In the end, she kept her analysis to herself. Elfaria wouldn't admit to it even if Ruth pointed it out, and nobody would benefit from that either. So Ruth just stuck to playing the game.

Since each game was short, the group ended up playing over twenty times. Surprisingly, Ceileshu came first with six wins.

"Congratulations, Ceileshu-sama," said Ruth.

"Very impressive. It seems this game suits you," Theia added.

"It's only because you all held back."

"That's not true. You should be proud of yourself, Ceileshu-san," Elfaria insisted.

"Thank you very much, Your Majesty."

With some beginner's luck and everyone explaining and giving hints, Ceileshu had made it through the early confusion and ended up with the overall victory. Behind her were Theia and Ruth with five wins each.

"Just one step short..."

"That is because you only think about attacking, Theia."

"You say that, but offense is the best defense, mother. The best plan is to win without letting the opponent do anything!"

"And you were being a little too cautious, Ruth."

"You're quite right, Your Majesty. I keep choosing the safe paths. Perhaps that is simply my personality?"

"Ahaha, you two are always together, and together you might strike a perfect balance."

Theia holding back in the beginning and putting too much emphasis on attacking had worked against her, and she had been unable to reach Ceilēshu. As for Ruth, her defensive personality had resulted in letting victories slip through her grasp and she had been unable to catch up in the end game. Surprisingly, Elfaria had come in last.

"Still...that is an unusual position for you, mother."

"That's because you all teamed up to bully me."

"Your Majesty is too strong, so naturally everyone would be on guard."

"You are the only one who didn't bully me, Ruth."

"I just wanted certain victories; I was still cautious."

"So I have no allies. Being the empress is lonely."

Elfaria was skilled at negotiating trades for cards, but unfortunately, the other three were wary of her. And in many cases, Theia or Ceileshu had made a gamble before she could finish her preparations.

"But Her Majesty..." Ruth began before trailing off.

"What was that, Ruth?"

"Ah, no, Her Majesty won the last game by a landslide, so that is an overall positive result."

"I can't let myself be satisfied with that. Overwhelming victory in anything is the Mastir way, isn't that right, Theia?"

"Yes!"

Ruth had realized that Elfaria was controlling the game for the other three, but even so, she kept quiet about it. Overwhelming victory in anything might have been the Mastir family motto, but "victory" to Elfaria was her daughter and friends enjoying themselves. There was no need for Ruth to sully that by making a pointless remark.

The last game the four played was a board game called Trade Road. This one was more difficult than the previous two, but it was a popular game with a lot of fans, so Theia wanted to introduce Ceilēshu to it.

"I got a cold snap. Now, whose place should I send heavy snowfall to?" Theia used the event card she'd just drawn as a fan while looking at the other three.

Ruth looked away, Elfaria faced her defiantly, and Ceileshu smiled happily. After enjoying their varied reactions, Theia made her decision.

"I'll slap this down right on the intersection of Ruth's trade route!"

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"Your Highness, how could you!"

"Ahahahaha!"

"I expected as much," Elfaria commented.

"You did, Your Majesty?"

"That's the place I was going to use later on."
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"I see what you mean. So it is not just an attack on Ruth-san, but also a check on Your Highness," Ceileshu answered.

Theia had used her event card to attack a crossroad on Ruth's trade route. Since northbound and eastbound roads passed through there, her move would slow the trade of wheat from the north and gold from the east. It was also the direction that Elfaria was developing in preparation for her endgame, so that would be delayed as a result as well. It was a very Theia-like attack.

"Master once did the same thing to Her Highness, which frustrated her to no end."

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"Ruth!"

"He also said the exact same thing when he did it."

"Ugh..."
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As payback for Theia's attack, Ruth exposed her past. That moment had been very frustrating for Theia, so she tried to strike back.

"What an unnecessary thing to say..."

Theia blushed after having her childish side exposed. Seeing that, Elfaria and Ceilēshu exchanged looks and laughed.

"Ahahaha, Layous-sama can do drastic things, then," Ceilēshu remarked.

"He has a very strong sense of responsibility and is very cautious, but it seems that when it comes to games, he will do what he pleases," Elfaria mused.

"When it comes to Her Highness, he can be especially childish."

"I guess you can call my Theia and Layous-sama fighting friends, or rivals."

"That's so nice...Theia-chan," said Ceileshu.

"What, are you interested in him?"

"There is nobody in Forthorthe who isn't."

Every Forthorthian, Ceileshu included, wanted to know what the legendary hero, the Blue Knight, did when he wasn't being a hero. However, Ceileshu had a sad expression, which caught Theia's attention.

"If you'd like, you could come play with us next time."

"But I tried to betray all of you."

"And you stopped just before doing so."

"But..." Ceileshu cast her eyes down. Her expression was dark because during the civil war, she had tried to betray the royal families and the Blue Knight. She had done it to treat her father, but she felt unbearably guilty about it, so she couldn't laugh it off.

Theia smiled in her place. "Didn't you hear that Clan and I tried to kill him in the past? Compared to that, an attempted betrayal is nothing special. I'm sure he would forgive it and welcome you."

"Theia-chan..."

Ceilēshu had heard about that from Clan. It was shocking, but it had been a natural confrontation due to the course of events. Moreover, they hadn't known that Koutarou was the Blue Knight at the time. Ceilēshu felt the situation was different from her own, as she had known but tried to betray him anyway.

"Besides, he is the Blue Knight. Why do you think he wouldn't forgive you if you regret your actions?"

Even if Ceileshu had actually betrayed him, Koutarou would probably still forgive her as long as she truly regretted it. Especially since it had just been an attempt, and all for the sake of saving her sick father. There was no way he wouldn't forgive her; Theia was absolutely sure of that.

"I think...I can't forgive myself for trying to betray someone I know I never should have. I was tempted, after all..."

The source of Ceileshu's worries wasn't Koutarou, but herself. As a Forthorthian, she had special feelings for the legend of the Blue Knight. The way

she saw it, the present only existed because Alaia and the Blue Knight had protected Forthorthe. In a sense, it was like she was trying to deny the world she lived in. She couldn't forgive her own betrayal.

"That idiot doesn't hold that kind of perspective at all, so it's a waste to think about it."

"Really?!"

"Indeed. From the very top of his head to the bottom of his feet, he is made of chivalry. He is the Great Idiot Blue Knight."

"So you fully believe in Layous-sama, then."

"He is my knight. Who would believe in him if I didn't?"

"I'm very envious of you, Theia-chan."

Never since meeting with Koutarou had Theia betrayed the one thing she never should. Many mistakes might have been made, but that one part deep within had never wavered. Ceilēshu found her strong heart almost dazzling and felt it was a quality an empress needed. It was why Theia would never turn her back on her people.

"What will being envious help you with? If you did something wrong you need to accept that side of yourself and make it right! Face your rival and overcome them!"

"That makes it sound like you're telling me to overcome you," Ceilēshu replied.

"That is exactly what I am saying. This incident has made me realize that large incidents are too much for the Mastir family alone to handle. We need your and Clan's help. Strength that rivals ours."

Hearing those powerful words, Ceileshu realized what she was lacking. At the same time, she felt she wasn't a match for Theia, yet that couldn't be the end of it. She needed to accept the truth and fix it. She needed to surpass Theia so that next time, she wouldn't turn her back on someone she should never betray.

"The galaxy is too big. Earth is too far. The time when a princess or empress could handle everything on their own has passed. It is vital that we cooperate

with those we know are allies. Your strength will be needed for Forthorthe and Earth."

"For the sake of a world that has become too large...you're right! I will do it!" Ceilēshu promised.

During Alaia's era, Forthorthe had been a small country on the corner of the continent, so there had been no issue with a single princess taking the helm. But now that the borders were defined on a galactic scale, and that they would be establishing diplomatic relations with Earth across the sea of stars, it was too much for one person to manage. They needed more like-minded people to help guide the nation.

"That's the spirit. For starters, try winning this game. It's your turn."

"Yes, I will do my best!"

Ceilēshu felt that once she had overcome her weakness and could be proud of herself, she would go to Earth and meet with Koutarou, who would likely have returned by then. And once they met, she would like to play a game with him, similar to what she was doing now, just like Theia did. And then, with her head held high, she would tell him that Forthorthe had allies he could trust.

The average playtime of Trade Road was around one hour. But for some reason, they kept drifting off topic, so it took three hours for them to finish. The sun was starting to set, and it was almost time for dinner.

"Still, to think we all went bankrupt..." Surprisingly, the outcome was a draw. It was the kind of vague outcome that Theia hated the most.

"It happened when we all expanded into the ocean..." Ceileshu smiled.

When all of the players expanded into the ocean, a raging storm event hit. It didn't kill their characters, but the sunken ships caused huge losses. In the end, none of them were able to make up for the loss and had all gone bankrupt.

"I never imagined even you would go bankrupt, Elfaria-sama," said Ruth.

Elfaria chuckled. "I tried to ride that big wave as well."

"It would seem that Master's sickness has spread."

"It certainly feels that way."

Elfaria had gone bankrupt along with the other players. They had all gone out to sea for the final showdown, but Ruth had thought Elfaria had other ideas. She had been at the top, and if she had gone on the defensive without expanding, it probably would have been a very boring development. Even if the other three had succeeded, it was likely they wouldn't have reached her. Since that wouldn't have been interesting, she had sent out a ship as well—or at least that's what Ruth thought. Everyone had unexpectedly gone bankrupt in the end, but that was fun in its own right.

"Ceileshu, could you bring me that small bag?" Theia asked.

"Here you go."

"Thank you. By the way, how do you like the games from Earth?"

As it was almost dinnertime, Theia was cleaning up the game. Ceilēshu was helping out.

"It was very fun to get in touch with Earth's culture. I think we should import them right away," she answered with a smile. She was very satisfied with her day off. The culture of a planet she didn't know anything about was fascinating. It helped to experience it through games. Moreover, the Blue Knight himself liked such games, and the citizens of Forthorthe would no doubt want to play them too.

"I am happy to hear it; then it was worth us bringing them back." Theia was happy that someone liked something she did. So she was thinking of bringing more games with her next time.

Seeing Theia like that, Ruth posed Elfaria a question. "By the way, Your Majesty, if you establish diplomatic relations with Japan, would you be able to import these sorts of games?"

"I imagine games would count as a cultural exchange, although they would no doubt want to import Layous-sama more than anything."

"That is true." Ruth nodded. Koutarou was still just an Earthling. The people of Forthorthe wanted nothing more than to welcome the Blue Knight as a citizen of Forthorthe.

"But will that idiot really agree to it, mother?" Theia folded her arms and

furrowed her brows. She could easily imagine Koutarou insisting that he was an Earthling.

"We will use whatever means necessary to make him agree, no matter how dirty!"

"Yes!"

Elfaria's words brought a smile to Theia's face. As long as Koutarou didn't hate her, she would do whatever it took. The Mastir family style was to win no matter what.

"Your Majesty?! Your Highness?!" Ruth's eyes opened wide in shock. As for Ceilēshu, she looked exasperated.

"You will have to help too, Ceileshu-san. You are one of the few princesses with sex appeal. You can't afford to be talking about betrayal!" Elfaria stated.

"I-I see..." Ceileshu murmured.

"What are you talking about, mother?! Are you saying that I don't have any sex appeal?!"

And with that, their games came to an end. However, another game was beginning—the new game that Elfaria had started already had several plans in motion, including one related to Clan, who wasn't present. With Koutarou returning home of his own accord, the first plan had been a failure, but they had used it as a springboard to launch their next move. Their game would continue for a while longer.

Episode 2: It's Tough to Be a Leader

Kisshouharukaze High School had a cooking research society. The society was categorized as less than a full-fledged club. Societies received fewer funds, but they had no obligation to report on their activities, nor were there any restrictions. As a result, their presidents would frequently change. For the sports-oriented societies, there were usually tournaments in the autumn, which were generally triggers for the changeover. For others, changes would happen around the beginning of the year. That was also the time to begin preparations to recruit new members.

"...and so, as of yesterday, I am the new president of the cooking society."

"Congratulations, Kasagi-san. It can be challenging, but it is worth it, so good luck."

"Thank you very much. By the way...I'd like to ask you for advice, Sakurabasenpai."

"Ah, so that's what you wanted."

Yesterday, Shizuka had become the cooking society's president. But since she knew next to nothing about it, she was anxious, so she'd turned to Harumi, who had been the president of the knitting society.

"That's okay, I will teach you what I know."

"I am in your care, Sakuraba-senpai!"

Naturally, Harumi wasn't against helping. The idea of rejecting an important friend's request for advice never even occurred to her. She wanted to do what she could.

"So, right off the bat, how do I recruit new students?" Shizuka asked.

"Um, as I recall, you need to report to the student council."

The two girls were sitting across from each other at the tea table in room 106. There was still quite some time before the sun would set, and nobody else

would be back for a while. They figured they would have more than enough time to talk.

"I'm pretty sure that there will be a meeting explaining it shortly."

"So that's how they do things... Thank goodness."

"There will be a penalty if you try to recruit new students without reporting it, so be careful."

"A penalty?"

"Like a reduced budget or activities being shut down for a week. If the infraction is really bad, the society could even be disbanded."

"That's scary! I'd better play by the rules."

Shizuka asked about everything on her mind one by one, and Harumi politely answered. Both of them were diligent, so the questions became quite detailed. Shizuka was a landlord, and Harumi was being influenced by Alaia. Both of them had a strong sense of responsibility, and they couldn't relax until they'd discussed everything on their minds.

"...so it would be best to do it with three people, but everyone aside from me was just a member on paper, so I had to do it on my own," Harumi concluded.

"But you managed to hook Satomi-kun in the end, so it all worked out, didn't it?"

"I wasn't... I wasn't trying to hook him..."

"I would love more details on how you managed to hook him."

"Jeez, everyone's being so mean lately!"

"That's because you've really gotten healthier lately, so everyone can be a little tougher with you, Sakuraba-senpai."

Once the conversation reached Koutarou, the two started to derail. They switched from the important points and preparedness of a society president—in other words, a leader—to an intimate discussion about Koutarou. When it came down to it, they were teenage girls, and these types of digressions were inevitable from time to time.

"I'm not sure if I should be happy or vexed..."

"Ahaha, even without that, there's something I want to know. Alaia-san was the last one to meet with Satomi-kun, so she got desperate and came to find him first, right?"

"Well...yes..." Harumi said, her voice getting quiet. It was like she'd turned back to her previously shy self from before she met Koutarou. However, unlike back then, her cheeks were red. She wasn't being quiet because she was bad at dealing with others, but because the topic embarrassed her.

"That's why I want to know, as a girl and as someone who fell for the same person. So how was it really?"

"I-In that case...I understand..."

Alaia became Harumi and appeared before Koutarou due to a fundamental function of Signaltin. However, as Signaltin's tuner, if Alaia unconsciously found it unnecessary, that function would disappear. The reason it hadn't was because of the love Alaia felt for Koutarou.

Since her appearance was practically a physical manifestation of love, it was impossible for Harumi to talk her way out of this. She could also understand what Shizuka wanted to say. Moreover, Harumi herself was also interested in how the other girls had formed a bond with Koutarou.

"But once I'm done with my story, I want to hear yours, Kasagi-san."

"Ugh...r-right, that's true. I-I understand. I'll tell you." Shizuka blushed alongside Harumi. What had happened between her and Koutarou was very precious to her. It was something she didn't want to reveal, but since she'd requested the same from Harumi, she couldn't refuse.

Once that was decided, the series of events from meeting Koutarou to when she'd fallen in love with him flowed through Shizuka's head. The same was happening in Harumi's mind, so the two were completely silent with red cheeks, and time passed very awkwardly.

"At... At first..." Harumi broke the silence. Since the awkward atmosphere would continue forever, the only way to stop it was for her to start speaking. The courage she'd mustered over two years helped her make her decision. "I

didn't know anything."

"You mean about Satomi-kun?"

"Yes. A boy I didn't know was hassling me, so I couldn't think of anything. I wasn't really good with people, especially boys...so I was panicking, wondering what to do, when Satomi-kun noticed what was going on and saved me."

As Harumi spoke, she recalled what had happened back then. It was two years ago, on the first of March, the day when new students had been recruited for clubs. She had desperately tried to raise her voice, but it was erased by the more passionate voices trying to recruit people. That was when a boy who was more interested in girls than clubs had shown up. Even though she'd rejected him, he wouldn't back down, and when she'd tried to run away, he had grabbed her arm. She'd been really scared at the time. There was nothing she could do—her body was frozen with fear while it felt like her heart was being crushed.

That was when Koutarou had passed by.

"So, a prince on a white horse appeared. That's so romantic..."

"At first I was surprised by Satomi-kun's appearance too, but once I was able to calm down and think about it, I felt a strange sensation. For some reason, I didn't feel any wariness around him. If anything, I felt relieved. I thought it was just love at first sight."

She honestly couldn't remember what Koutarou had done, but she remembered that the boy had run off and that she'd felt relieved. Thinking about it calmly, though, a troublesome man had just been replaced by another man, so it wasn't a situation in which she could fully relax. But for some reason, she'd felt that it was okay, that this person was fine. That was why even the shy Harumi had been able to talk to him.

"In reality, it was love at first sight as well as a reunion, and a great love could continue thanks to a fateful encounter. That's so nice; it's like you're a heroine from a movie..."

"That's why I think it was Alaia-san's strong emotions that brought our meeting about rather than anything I did."

Alaia's feelings had created the meeting, while Harumi herself had just been

flustered; or at least that was her view of it. If not for Alaia, it probably wouldn't have worked out.

Shizuka had a different opinion. "But capturing him was your achievement, Sakuraba-senpai."

"Eh?" Harumi's eyes opened wide at the unexpected words.

After smiling at her, Shizuka continued. "If not, then Alaia-san would have succeeded two thousand years ago. Both her longtime love for him and your love at first sight were what managed to capture Satomi-san."

Alaia alone had failed, but Harumi and Alaia together had succeeded. At least, that was how Shizuka interpreted it.

However, Harumi wasn't very confident. "But in the end, it wasn't just me and Alaia-san who caught him. For example...you caught Satomi-kun with Corona House."

"There's not much I can say when you point that out. At the time, I was just hoping Satomi-kun would live in that room for a long time so the rumors that it is haunted would go away. I didn't really feel anything for him back then; I just wanted to keep everything running. Ugh, I wish I could go back in time to give myself a scolding."

"But Corona House is your parents' keepsake, so you can't be blamed for that."

"Do you really think so?"

"Yes. Besides, Satomi-kun didn't join the knitting society for my sake, but to learn how to knit to finish his mother's sweater."

"Then I'll think of it as something I'm doing in my parents' memory."

"Personally, I think it's much more ominous if it's all intentional. It wouldn't feel good if everything was calculated."

"Hm, I can kind of agree with that."

"Ahaha, I'm glad."

"That goes for you too, Sakuraba-senpai."

"Huh?"

"If we call unintentional things fate, there's a lot that's happened between you and Satomi-kun. We all captured him. Hehehe..."

"You're right. I should stop being so negative about myself too."

Both girls had their feelings about what they'd been like before, but as they spoke, their emotions settled in their rightful places as they laughed together with refreshed expressions.

"Ah, so this is where you were, Sakuraba-senpai, Landlord-san."

"Gyah?!"

"Whoa?!"

Suddenly, the person in question—Koutarou—called out to them, giving both Harumi and Shizuka a scare, and they screamed. Had he heard them? For a moment it felt like their hearts had stopped.

However, Koutarou was even more surprised than they were. "Wh-What? What happened?!"

Koutarou had only come home as usual, so he hadn't thought anyone would be surprised. He'd even announced his return at the entrance. But the two had missed it, being so invested in their conversation. Since they'd both screamed, Koutarou could only think that some kind of trouble had happened. Naturally, he had no way of knowing what they were talking about.

"N-No, it's nothing, Satomi-kun! We're okay! We're completely okay!"

"We just didn't notice that you were back and were surprised by your voice. That's all!"

"Oh, then that's fine..." Koutarou tilted his head with a sigh. The two girls were acting strange, but he knew that girls sometimes acted in ways that he couldn't understand. And whenever that happened, he knew he would only get burned if he tried to push his luck.

Sensing that kind of peculiar aura to them, he gave up on questioning them. Lately, Koutarou had learned to become more considerate of girls' needs.

"S-So, what's the matter, Satomi-kun?!"

"Yes! You sounded like you were looking for us..."

"Oh yeah! I almost forgot!"

Harumi and Shizuka were desperate to change the topic, which fortunately worked out for them. Koutarou had been looking for them in regard to a serious matter, so he immediately forgot about their strange behavior.

"The Sun Rangers were asking if Sakuraba-senpai and Landlord-san could be their instructors," he announced.

"You mean they want us to teach them something?"

"I think the only things we could teach them are cooking and knitting..."

"They want to learn how to fight enemies using magic," he explained. "That kind of thing might come up, you know."

"They want us to be magic teachers?!" the two shouted out in unison, and then exchanged looks. Of all things, the Sun Rangers wanted combat training with magic involved.

The Sun Rangers were seeking instruction in magic combat because they had been promoted. At first, they had been called "salary thieves," but now they had encountered invaders, undergone many battles, and become an elite unit. As a result, they were no longer mere soldiers and were in a position to be in command of operations, with the lives of many in their hands. They had even more of a reason to exist as the Holy Forthorthe Galactic Empire established diplomatic relations with Japan; now they were like a cornerstone in space diplomacy. But when they compared their current status to their capabilities, they discovered a large flaw: they lacked the ability to deal with magic.

"Since we don't want magic and spiritual energy technology to leak to Forthorthe, we're naturally accounting for enemies who do use those things. But spiritual energy aside, when it comes to magic, the Sun Rangers have no information."

"Now that you mention it, they only caught a glimpse of magic during the incident in the underground," Shizuka mused.

"Taking the lead in that state would be suicidal. It's very impressive of the Sun Rangers to realize that," Harumi agreed.

They nodded at Koutarou's explanation. They had fought alongside the Sun Rangers, so they had an idea of what kind of information the group had. The equipment they were using was based on spiritual energy technology that the People of the Earth, who'd escaped to the surface in the past, had brought with them. So although outdated, they had knowledge of spiritual energy technology.

But they knew next to nothing about magic. They'd seen Koutarou and the others use magic on occasion, as well as the moment Tayuma had been swallowed by the whirlpool and transformed into a monster. Yet they had no idea what kind of power it was. If they were to try to stop the smuggling of magic, they could end up getting wiped out by a magic counterattack, so they needed to immediately acquire intel in order to protect their lives and those of their subordinates.

"So they came to ask if we could teach them about magic," Koutarou concluded.

"I see... Now that you mention it, that makes sense. I study my opponents during karate matches too, and my coach tells me which school they practice or what moves they're known for."

"If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles. As long as they have the correct knowledge, the Sun Rangers, with spiritual energy technology, won't be on the back foot against magicians."

"That's why I was hoping to ask you two, if you're up for it."

The pair understood where the Sun Rangers were coming from, and it felt like the obvious thing to do. But they were a little confused as to why Koutarou had asked them. They could think of a few people who were better suited to the task.

"Wouldn't Aika-san be a better choice, though?"

"Not to mention Maki-san comes from a military organization, so wouldn't she be able to teach them better?"

In particular, they were thinking of Maki, an expert on magic battles. Her spells might not have been as varied as Harumi's or Yurika's, but she was unmatched when it came to stringing them together, so surely she had the techniques the Sun Rangers wanted to know. On top of that, she came from Darkness Rainbow, a military organization, so she knew what was necessary in combat training. If someone were to go to the Sun Rangers, Maki would surely be the right choice.

"Aika-san is currently guarding the delegation from Forthorthe."

Koutarou understood that too, but Maki had an important job to do. She was currently guarding the delegation that had come to Earth to negotiate. A magician who specialized in illusions and mind manipulation was perfect for guarding a delegation on the move, where the situation constantly changed. However, the matter of the Sun Rangers was urgent, and they couldn't afford to wait. By the time Maki's schedule was free, the negotiations would be more or less complete and it would be too late.

"I don't think we would be able to stand in for her at her job..." Shizuka murmured.

"Knowledge and experience are really important when it comes to protection," Harumi added.

Guarding VIPs was something that they couldn't do. It required knowledge and experience far greater than teaching magic. So the two steeled their resolve.

"In that case, Sakuraba-senpai and I will have to do something about it," Shizuka stated.

"Yes, we will do our best."

They decided to accept Koutarou's—or rather the Sun Rangers'—request.

"Really? Are you sure?" Koutarou had been certain he would need more time to convince them, so he was a little surprised—or perhaps it would be best to say it felt anticlimactic.

"I'm not very sure of myself, so I can't be saying that."

Shizuka chuckled. "You've properly taken on the role of president, Kasagisan."

The two understood the situation, and the dangers, so they decided to do what they could. If not, a lot of lives would be at risk: the people of the city, and even the Sun Rangers themselves, whom they'd fought alongside. They weren't sure they would be able to smile again if those lives were lost for no reason.

After a small sigh of relief, Koutarou smiled. "Thanks a lot. I'll let them know." I didn't have to say anything. Of course not... It's Sakuraba-senpai and Landlord-san...

Harumi and Shizuka were two of the most personable and thoughtful among their allies. Koutarou had thought of all kinds of things to try and convince them, but it was like preaching to the choir. How could he help smiling?

"By the way, Satomi-kun," Shizuka asked. "Will Sakuraba-senpai and I be getting a reward from you?"

"Ugh...I-I'll see what I can do."

She chuckled. "I'll look forward to it."

"I don't have those kinds of negotiating skills, so this will be great reference material," Harumi added.

"Please spare me from anything too big..." Koutarou murmured.

"Oh what should I do?"

As personable and thoughtful as they might be, they were still two teenage girls. He might not have struggled to convince them, but Koutarou foresaw a different kind of struggle ahead.

The pair visited the Sun Rangers' facility on the Saturday after Koutarou talked with them. While the day of the week didn't matter to Harumi, who'd graduated the other day, it was still before spring break for Shizuka. The Sun Rangers had little leeway when it came to time, so they had avoided a weekday so as not to interfere with school activities. The Sun Rangers did have a secret facility in Kisshouharukaze High School as well, but the two girls headed for the

one in the middle of the city. It was the only close one where they could hold combat training.

"Hello, it has been a while, Harumi-san, Shizuka-san. I'm glad to see you in good health."

"I'm glad to see you haven't changed either, Megumi-san," said Harumi.

"Is everyone else doing well?" asked Shizuka.

"Yes, too well if anything. And thank you for coming, you two," said Megumi.

"It's for everyone's sake," Harumi replied.

"I only hope it will amount to needless worry."

"Me too. Peace is the best."

They were greeted by Pink Shine, Megumi. As Shizuka and Harumi were girls, the group had decided it would be best to leave things to their only female member. Normally, Kotaro was in charge of greeting any guests, so today was special.

"Could you two sit down on the sofa and wait here? I will bring everyone over."

"Okay." Harumi followed her instructions and sat down on the sofa in the corner of the office. As she stared at Megumi, who casually left, Shizuka, sitting next to her, whispered into her ear.

"Sakuraba-senpai."

"Yes, what is it?"

"It's nothing special, but has Megumi-san always been like that? I thought she was a little more..."

"Harsh?"

"You thought so too? It's like her previous harshness has been replaced with kindness."

"Yeah, I wonder if something happened..."

It felt like something was slightly off with Megumi. Compared to how she'd

been in the past, she'd mellowed out overall. She had grown as a woman. The two were perplexed by that, but when she returned they soon understood why.

"Megu-chan, I will go make some tea."

"Thank you, Daisaku-kun. Your tea is always amazing."

After calling for the others, Megumi had returned with Daisaku, who had happened to be nearby. But instead of heading for the sofa, he headed for the water heater on the opposite side of the office to make tea for Harumi and Shizuka. Among the Sun Rangers, Daisaku's tea was the tastiest.

"Still, I can't leave our guests to you alone."

"Wow, you have no trust in me."

"That's... That's not what I meant."

"I know, I was just teasing you a little bit."

"Megu-chan, not in front of the guests. Please."

"Oh shoot, I'm sorry, you two, and you as well, Daisaku-kun."

After seeing Megumi's interaction with Daisaku, Harumi and Shizuka understood why she had changed. Megumi and Daisaku were dating, and the new relationship had stabilized her mind and softened the impression she gave. It was an example of love changing people.

"That sort of thing is so nice..." Shizuka let out an envious sigh at the sight of Megumi and Daisaku. It was the kind of situation she admired.

Harumi put a hand over her mouth and giggled. "You are like that from time to time too, Kasagi-san."

"R-Really?"

When Harumi pointed that out, Shizuka blushed. She hadn't been doing anything like that consciously, so she was both surprised and embarrassed. At the same time, she searched her memories.

"Like when you begged Satomi-kun for a reward."

"Ahhh..."

"Or when Satomi-kun praised your lunch."

"Whoaaa, please stop it already, Sakuraba-senpai!"

"Hehehe, maybe I should try it too... I bet Satomi-kun would be surprised."

As the two chatted, the door to the office opened and a few men stepped in. They were Kenichi, Hayato, Kotaro, and Professor Roppongi, the commanding officer. With that, everyone on the Sun Rangers had gathered.

Since it wasn't their first meeting, they casually greeted each other and moved right on to the main topic. First off, Professor Roppongi explained the particulars of their current situation. Since they would be managing magic, they wanted to experience it beforehand. Harumi and Shizuka had heard as much from Koutarou, but the professor had more to add.

"Incidentally, this is being kept secret from the government. Everyone, myself included, is on paid leave."

"You are all on paid leave?!"

"Why?!"

Harumi's and Shizuka's eyes shot wide open at Professor Roppongi's words. They couldn't understand why there was a need to do that.

"Unfortunately, the government is not a monolith. If information on magic is carelessly spread upward, things could take an unexpected turn."

"That said, we don't want to die either. So we will need to learn how to handle magic on the field."

Professor Roppongi and Kotaro bitterly explained the situation. The government's opinions on Forthorthe's technology were split, so it was possible the same would happen with magic. The ideal was that no information was leaked at all, but if that happened, the soldiers on the field, the Sun Rangers and the men in black, would be exposed to danger. But if they happened to get information on the occult while on paid leave, there was no need to report it.

"On paper, we are borrowing this place to hold a get-together."

"So even though you've been promoted and become more important, heroes of justice still have a hard time."

"Now that everyone has been promoted, you are stuck between the conveniences of the people on the field and those of the higher-ups. I understand your pain."

With their paid leave, the Sun Rangers were making their position and intention clear. They had been promoted and now had more responsibilities and duties, but they were doing their utmost to protect the peaceful world of the people.

"With that in mind, we ask you two for your cooperation," the professor concluded. "How about it, Harumi-san, Shizuka-san?"

Even in this kind of situation, they were still modest. After explaining the situation to Harumi and Shizuka, they lowered their heads. After hearing that, the girls couldn't say no. They exchanged looks, nodded, and smiled.

"I understand, please allow us to help."

"We will do anything we can! You got that, uncle?"

"Indeed, I have taken a liking to your aspirations. I will gladly lend my aid."

"Wow, what is this cute lizard?!"

"Ugh, what are you doing?!"

Harumi and Shizuka once again realized that the Sun Rangers were heroes of justice, and that they were precious allies of Koutarou and the others, which was why they didn't hesitate to help them. It was no longer a matter of being good or bad at something; they would tell them what they could and do their best to be of assistance.

With Harumi and Shizuka helping out, the Sun Rangers moved right on to training. First, they sat before a whiteboard and had a lesson.

"As far as I know, there are two types of magic. One is the ancient language magic that I use, and the other is the modern language magic that the people of Folsaria use," Harumi explained as she wrote on the whiteboard. She wrote fast, and her words were easy to read. Her characters were graceful and feminine; it was very Harumi-esque writing. "Ancient language magic is improvised on the spot, whereas modern language magic simplifies and speeds

up the procedure by combining standardized sentences. However, that can make it difficult to fine-tune nonstandard spells, with the process sometimes needing a lot of tools."

"Instructor...by tools, what do you mean specifically?" Kenichi asked, raising his hand. If the tools were distinctive, they would be easier to manage.

For some reason, it took Harumi a few seconds to answer. "Er...right, I am the instructor. Dear me." That was how long it had taken her to realize that Kenichi was talking to her. Her cheeks turned red, but now wasn't the time to blush. Harumi shook her head and pulled herself together.

"Please remember what Yurika-san and Maki-san look like. The staffs they wield and the outfits they wear have a portion of the magic's execution formula. Without them, the spells they use would be less powerful and slower to activate."

"To the level of ancient language magic?"

"No, a little more than that. The staff and outfit have a lot of meaning in modern language magic."

"Then ancient language magic would be scarier when it comes to terrorism..."

Hayato pondered the discussion as he listened to Harumi and Kenichi talk. Ancient language magic was harder to use, but it wasn't reliant on tools, so when it came to undercover operations or terrorist attacks, ancient language magic was scarier.

"For better or worse, I am the only one who can use it at the moment. I am a bit of an unusual case. So you will primarily be up against users of modern language magic—just remember that they could use ancient language magic too."

"That's good news, then. But since it can be used to some degree, even without a staff or outfit, it would be the same either way."

Because of the complexity of ancient language magic, it was very reliant on talent, so very few could use it. Folsaria had modernized magic and made it easier to use. As Folsarians had been sent to another world, it had been a necessary change in order for them to survive. As a result, those who used

ancient language magic had disappeared from Folsaria, and it was very unlikely that one would appear as an enemy of the Sun Rangers. If one searched through all of Folsaria, one could perhaps find a few users, but they might not be willing to sell ancient language magic, and even if they were, there were still obstacles in the way. So the more generalized modern language magic was more suitable.

"Now, I would like to explain the procedures for how magic is cast with a demonstration."

Harumi explained the steps for casting magic. Magic was created through incantations and gestures, reforming the mana inside the body to alter reality. Time was necessary to complete a spell, and the more powerful the spell, the longer it took. Since it required focus, casting powerful magic on the move was difficult.

Once she'd explained the process, Harumi showed off an example by casting a spell. "Gather, spirits of wind. Embody yourself in my arm and destroy my enemy!"

She gestured while incanting, and a blue light filled her left arm, which transformed into a vortex—a hammer of compressed air.

"Roar! Sledgehammer of Air!"

Harumi swung her arm down, and a target the size and durability of a human a few meters in front of her was blown into pieces. Remnants of the attack were blown across the training facility.

"That is tremendously powerful, Hayato. It looks like you'd need several grenades to do the same level of damage."

"But in return, you need to stand still for a couple of seconds. It would be more effective to fire a rocket launcher on the move."

The Sun Rangers were committing what they saw to memory and exchanging opinions. Since this concerned the lives of the people as well as their subordinates, they were taking it very seriously.

"That's correct. When it comes to each individual spell, they are less powerful than weapons, even when cast by a genius magician like Yurika-san. But that's

not the true strength of magic." Harumi was serious too. If she didn't properly convey something, somebody might die. It was unlikely that magic would leak, but they couldn't let their guard down. "Gather, spirits of water. Dance, spirits of wind. Combine the two pillars and appear, spirits of thunder! Dominate the sky, and with the anger of the god of thunder, judge my enemy!"

Next, she used a thunderbolt spell. A blinding white flash appeared and struck her target, which exploded from the inside, unable to withstand the internal current.

"A thunderbolt, huh? That's very powerful too," Kenichi said as he wiped a bead of cold sweat from his forehead. The idea of it being used by a terrorist sent chills down his spine.

Harumi nodded to Kenichi. "Yes, like you just saw, the true strength of magic is its ability to adapt to any situation, as well as the potential to suddenly launch an attack without anything that looks like a weapon."

"So that's what you mean... Someone can launch different attacks with the same power. And even if they have a weapon, it would be a staff... No, it would be foolish to think it would have the shape of a staff. And there are cases where they might not even have weapons, right?"

"Yes. They could implant the execution formula into something other than a staff."

"That degree of freedom is troublesome. It's so suitable for ambushes that it more than makes up for the weakness of having to stay still," Hayato groaned.

The clearer the image of their enemy became, the clearer the danger that enemy posed. As the one in charge of the Sun Rangers' plans, Hayato understood the threat better than the rest.

"So I believe that your challenge will be how to block the first attack," said Harumi.

"How to stop an ambush, huh? That's a troublesome challenge. Hayato, don't you have any ideas?"

"Maybe a device that can detect an incantation. It would be an absolute necessity for ancient language magic, and modern language magic without a

staff or outfit would have a longer incantation too."

"I think that would be a good idea. I will send the data on magic language to you later."

"I would prefer it if you sent it to my home while I am on leave," the professor added.

"Yes, I will tell them to arrange that."

But it wasn't all bad news. The Sun Rangers had been able to learn about magic thanks to Harumi and were now coming up with countermeasures. That was a large step forward.

"Exceptions would be people like Kasagi-san," Harumi noted. Now that they had been taught about standard magic, it was time to teach them about irregular magic.

Once she heard her name, Shizuka took a step forward. "It's finally uncle's and my turn."

"How far should we go?"

"About how far we usually go when fighting. That should be around the level they want to know too."

"Very well."

With that, Shizuka's body was engulfed in fire without any incantation. She had not used any gestures either. Despite the distance between them, the Sun Rangers could feel the heat coming off of her.

"What kind of magic is this?!" Kotaro raised his hand and asked. He was in charge of their technology, and he was curious about Shizuka's appearance, which deviated from Harumi's previous explanation.

"Magic is always working inside of Kasagi-san's body. Since it stays inside, it's stronger, and since it's always working, she doesn't need any incantations or gestures."

"Like this." While smiling, Shizuka walked up to the metal plate that had been set up as an obstacle in the training facility and casually slammed her fist into it. A fist-sized hole opened in the plate, and with the speed and power behind the

punch, a perfectly fist-shaped piece of metal had been cleanly punched out of it. Even at the edge of the hole, there was no warping whatsoever, which meant the blow had been so fast that there hadn't even been time for the metal to bend and soften the impact.

"Daisaku-kun, a girl just punched through a metal plate bare-handed!"

"But you don't have to learn how to do that, Megu-chan."



"If I ever catch you cheating, I think I'll be able to copy that move," Megumi warned Daisaku.

"That just means you won't be able to," he answered.

"Yeah, you're right."

"Megumi-neechan, Daisaku-niichan, stop flirting and listen," Harumi instructed them.

"This is how creatures born with mana typically use magic," Shizuka continued.

"So...magical beasts?" Kotaro asked, using his knowledge from games. Creatures that could spew fire from their mouths were typical enemies in games.

"Yes, you can think of it that way. It's not exactly a technique as much as it is an instinctual power."

"Us instinctive types have our own techniques."

"Uncle, please don't make things more complicated right now."

"Sorry."

"Their weakness is that they stand out, since their power is always active; moreover, they don't have too much freedom in reforming their mana."

When Harumi said that, they understood that she wasn't referring to the appearance of magical beasts, but rather how mana leaked out from their bodies like the fire around Shizuka's body. Just as heat escaped from an engine, the stronger the mana, the more remnants would leak out. And since it was used on an instinctual level, it tended to be uniform in its usage. In Shizuka's case she could only really use it to increase her offense, defense, and speed, as well as to spew fire.

"She certainly looks like she'd be easy to pick out using a heat sensor. It's like the type that prioritizes power over versatility and stealth. Like Daisaku, in a way."

"It's the type that would be very powerful when defending a base or

suppressing the enemy. If that's like Daisaku, the normal magician would be more like Hayato."

The Sun Rangers deepened their understanding of magic by listening to Harumi's lecture and watching the demonstrations. There were many surprises, but it was best to get them out of the way now. That way, they would be able to respond calmly when facing these abilities for real, and better protect everyone's lives. It was clear at first sight, and might even be for nothing, but they were taking their learning seriously. Their efforts convinced Harumi and Shizuka that this was what heroes were like.

Once the study session was over, it was time for the Sun Rangers to practice facing off against Harumi and Shizuka. They wouldn't use any weapons or spells that would do damage, and Shizuka would limit her physical enhancement, while the Sun Rangers would have their own suit enhancements turned off. Aside from that, it would essentially be a serious fight.

"Kenichi-niichan, we're supposed to be heroes of justice, right?" Kotaro was dressed in a green suit and devoting himself to warming up. He was motivated, but he felt a slight discomfort with their mock battle.

Kenichi stopped warming up and nodded. "Yeah, I hope to be. You too, right?" After the battle underground, the sense that they weren't just soldiers but heroes of justice had gotten stronger.

"Yeah. That's why teaming up, five grown-ups against two girls, doesn't really feel very heroic." Kotaro had a problem with their numbers. Five adults—despite Kotaro's looks, he was still an adult—against two delicate girls was more like something villains would do. He was questioning if that was really okay.

"If losing face can save lives, I'll gladly do it."

"Yeah, you have a point there." Red Shine's—Kenichi's—firm determination helped to remove Kotaro's hesitation. The Sun Rangers had been called "salary thieves" for so long, they were fine with being ridiculed if it would protect their ideals.

"Besides, we can't win even if all five of us take them on, so there's no need to worry."

"Please don't boldly say something so pathetic."

"Everything starts by admitting it."

"Yeah, I really get that now."

The Sun Rangers had grown stronger thanks to their experience. That was why they knew how strong Harumi and Shizuka were. And the purpose of this fight was to absorb even a fraction of that strength. Taking one small step at a time, they had evolved from salary thieves to heroes. Today would be no different.

Since they were assuming that they would be guarding VIPs, Professor Roppongi was taking part in the training too. The Sun Rangers would be crossing the training facility while protecting the professor. If the professor was attacked before then, it would be considered Harumi and Shizuka's win.

All kinds of buildings and obstacles had been set up in the training facility, creating scenery reminiscent of a destroyed city. Harumi and Shizuka had a five-minute head start, so the Sun Rangers didn't know where they were. The point of the training was to protect the professor from their ambush.

When the Sun Rangers entered with the professor in tow, a sound rang out to signal the start of the training. Anything could happen from here on. Leaving Daisaku and Professor Roppongi behind, the Sun Rangers slightly spread out, assuming a defensive formation.

"How does it look, Kotaro?"

"No response on the sound or movement sensors. It doesn't look like magic will come flying right away, at least."

In the front were Kenichi and Kotaro. Kotaro had specialized equipment, and Kenichi would cover him. At the moment, Kotaro was using a sensitive microphone and a radar to look for the girls. These would hopefully detect any incantation or gestures, or possibly even the girls themselves. But right now, there was no reaction. Harumi and Shizuka were hiding somewhere.

"Based on the rules of this excursion, they will use magic after the siren sounds, but they might have been using an illusion beforehand. It will probably be much tougher than this in real life." Behind Kenichi and Kotaro was Hayato.

He was slowly advancing while peeking through the heat sensor scope attached to his rifle.

There was no heat response in the scope. Harumi and Shizuka were behind the thick obstacles. The rifle was also loaded with rubber bullets that wouldn't do any damage.

"Just knowing that makes a big difference." Megumi was next to Hayato, covering his blind spots.

"I think so too. Not knowing about that would be like waving your hands and legs around in a fog." Daisaku was in the rear, vigilant, studying their surroundings in relation to Professor Roppongi. If need be, he would use his large body to protect the VIP. It was the most important and dangerous role.

"We have suddenly been thrust into practice without data verification or logical constructions. This isn't very scientific. As a researcher, it's a little painful." Professor Roppongi was the one who'd thought up this division of roles and formation, but he was a little bothered by the fact that it wasn't scientific.

Kenichi laughed.

"What are you talking about, Professor? Experience is the foundation of science. Besides, you're the one who thought this plan up."

He consoled Professor Roppongi—and then it happened.

A warning signal rang out and Kotaro hurriedly reported the situation. "Kenichi-niichan, I have a reaction on the sound sensor! At your ten o'clock! The sound pattern is that of an incantation!"

The sound sensor had picked up on noise, and it appeared that Harumi was casting behind an obstacle to the left.

"Everyone, brace yourselves!"

"There are two types of incantations! It seems they're casting two spells!" The sensor had picked up two incantations.

The moment after Kotaro reported that, Shizuka flew out from the shadows. Her fist glowed red and her body was covered in a yellow light. She was literally flying, drawing an arc from her hiding place straight toward Professor Roppongi. The red glow on her fist was an attack spell, and the yellow light was a flight spell. It was an ambush using two spells.

"Here we gooo!"

"You won't get past us!"

Kenichi and Megumi opened fire on Shizuka. Rubber bullets flew out, but Shizuka swiftly dodged them. She was too fast to be hit by guns. But the Sun Rangers' goal was to get her to dodge.

"I've got you now!"

When she dodged, Shizuka's movements became linear for a moment. In that instant, Hayato sniped her with his rifle. The rubber bullet shot straight for Shizuka's body—and missed.

"Whaaat?!"

"That's a fake!" Kotaro yelled.

Shizuka disappeared in front of the Sun Rangers. It had been a fake, an illusion cast by Harumi.

"How scary! That's professionals for you! But it's not enough!" Shizuka sneaked up without a sound and attacked Professor Roppongi. Like Kotaro had said, there were two spells. But it wasn't an attack spell and a flying spell; it was illusion and stealth instead.

"Hayaaah!"

"Daisaku-kun!"

"There's no way I can stop this!"

When Daisaku had seen the illusion of Shizuka, he had instinctively moved forward to protect the professor. With his back wide open, Shizuka pressed her fist against him with a smile.

"That can't be helped at first. This is a copy of a plan Kiriha-san carried out once in the past."

"I-I give up."

Using the peculiarities of magic, Harumi and Shizuka had used an illusion as a decoy to launch an ambush. Having watched Kiriha over time, they had copied one of her plans, and it had worked wonderfully.

Professor Roppongi's shoulders dropped as he surrendered. The first match was an overwhelming victory for Harumi and Shizuka, but as the training continued, the Sun Rangers became more experienced, and in their fifth round, they were able to fully protect Professor Roppongi. Hayato and Megumi had taken clean hits and were out, but the professor was safe.

They continued to train even more, adding victories and defeats until the training came to a close for the day. Then, it was time to reflect.

"What should we have done to stop the final 101 Harumi-chan rush?"

"Megu-chan, how about using grenades to hit all of them? Since there were so many, the spell couldn't have been very durable."

"But, Daisaku-niichan, that might work in training, but what if it was in the city?"

"In that case...sweeping across them with gunfire wouldn't be realistic either. Hayato, do you have any ideas?"

"Hmm, well...why not use something like flashbangs to apply a light shock to everything in a wide area as a countermeasure for illusions?"

"That is a good idea. Nonlethal weapons will get approval through the application more easily and if we say that they are countermeasures for Forthorthe's holograms or micro-drones, the other units would be able to deploy them too."

The Sun Rangers were having a heated debate. They weren't just considering how to benefit themselves, they were also thinking of what to do when sharing their experiences with other units or subordinates. The conclusions they reached here could influence the lives of many, so it wasn't an easy topic.

"Hehe..."

"What's the matter?"

Shizuka and Harumi were asked for their opinion from time to time, but for

the most part they were just watching over the meeting. When Harumi noticed Shizuka suddenly smiling, she looked at her. In response, Shizuka's smile turned a little self-deprecating as she looked back at Harumi.

"When I'm watching them, I can't help but feel stupid worrying about becoming the president of the cooking society."

Everything she'd experienced since coming all the way to the Sun Rangers' facility made her own restlessness over becoming the president of a society feel pathetic. The Sun Rangers were acting without hesitation despite being saddled with such a heavy responsibility. She didn't know if that would improve the situation, but it was clear that things would only get worse if they did nothing. Shizuka wanted to do the same herself, but it wasn't that easy. The hazy feeling welling up in her chest wasn't going away.

Harumi didn't agree with Shizuka's impression of herself. "The responsibility on their shoulders is clear and heavy, so there's no time or need to hesitate. Anyone would hesitate when in a leadership role, so I don't think it's stupid at all."

For better or worse, the Sun Rangers had a clear goal of protecting the lives of their friends and the citizens around them. But the role of president of a society was less defined. Moreover, each person in the group had different things that were important to them. It was different from saving lives, which was important to everyone. Being able to strike a good balance was a necessary quality for leaders, so it was natural for someone who'd only just become one to worry about their choices.

"You're the only one who could say that, Sakuraba-senpai. Thanks to Alaia, you really do have an eye for the bigger perspective."

Alaia had carried a nation on her shoulders and been reborn as a normal girl in Harumi. Once she'd become aware of her past life, Harumi had discovered the advantage of having two perspectives. She had a more special point of view than even the Sun Rangers, and it wasn't something Shizuka could ever hope to copy, so the latter smiled self-deprecatingly once more.

"Not at all," Harumi disagreed. "Alaia-san and I actually happen to share the thing we treasure most, so my outlook isn't as broad as you might think. And

you share the same thing, don't you, Shizuka-san?"

"Share... Ah!"

It was clear what Harumi and Alaia shared. And Shizuka shared it too. Harumi was able to avoid any hesitation, as she was always trying not to betray that fact, and Shizuka realized that she could do the same.

"So, in our case, we just need to do what he would do," she mused.

"Yes. That way he won't get angry at us."

"I can already imagine everyone in the society calling me overly stubborn."

"You will just have to resolve yourself to deal with that," Harumi stated.

"Regardless of the situation, 'these feelings will always be with you,' right?"

"Hehehe, well, that's right."

The pair exchanged looks and giggled. They couldn't raise their voices and interrupt the Sun Rangers, but having addressed her concerns, Shizuka unconsciously laughed louder. Fortunately, the Sun Rangers weren't thrown off by that.

"By the way, senpai, have you decided on what reward you want from Satomi-kun yet?" she asked Harumi.

"Not yet. Satomi-kun will be coming here for us soon, so I'll have to decide by then."

"I wonder what he would want in a situation like this." Shizuka thought back to what they'd just talked about. What exactly would the person Harumi and Shizuka treasure the most want? Perhaps she could use that as a reference to decide.

"I don't think he would want anything," Harumi answered with a smile. She knew exactly what Koutarou desired and that he agreed with their principles.

"You think so too?" Shizuka asked.

"Yes."

"Then let's go with that."

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"Yes, let's."
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The two girls answered the questions the Sun Rangers posed while wondering between themselves how to trouble that certain someone when he showed up. As with the Sun Rangers, a heated debate between the two ensued. After all, this was what they treasured most—their ideal was the interaction they had seen between Daisaku and Megumi when they first arrived.

[&]quot;But don't you want to trouble him a little?"

[&]quot;Oh, of course; let's do our best," Harumi answered.

[&]quot;Then we'll need to take action."

[&]quot;Hehehe, that's true."

Episode 3: Two Childhood Friends

Kotori's support for Nalfa was working out well. Thanks to her, Nalfa was able to manage her life in an unfamiliar country, and their exchanges on that matter helped to progress their relationship. As a result, they now had new friends, which was a good outcome for the shy Kotori. But that came with its own problems for her.

"Matsudaira-san, could you attend next week's class committee?"

"Whaaat?!"

It came like a bolt from the blue. The class committee was a group of representatives from all the classes that gathered to discuss matters of Kisshouharukaze High School. Kotori wasn't a class representative, but her homeroom teacher had asked her to attend, which was a shock. As shy as she was, she couldn't help but ask for an explanation in a panic.

"What... What do you mean by that?!"
"You get along with Nalfa-san, right?"
"Well, yes..."

"You don't have to be so modest, Kotori. You're doing great," said the teacher.

Nalfa smiled next to her. That embarrassed Kotori, who blushed and cast her eyes down.

"Nal-chan... Jeez..."

Nalfa chuckled as the teacher continued.

"The class representatives have been watching you two and asked for your presence at the committee meeting. As you know, more transfer students are coming in the fall. So they want to see how you and Nalfa-san are doing."

"I see..."

Kotori was starting to understand what her teacher was talking about. At the start of the semester, four transfer students had enrolled at each school, but that wasn't the end of it. More would be coming once the facilities to receive them were built. Before that, the students wanted to know what perplexed Forthorthians about Japan.

"Hehe, like me waiting at the green signal forever," Nalfa.

"Green signal?" asked the teacher.

"As you know, the green signal is called 'blue' in Japan, so Nal-chan was confused about why it never turned blue," Kotori explained.

"I see. That's the kind of information that the committee wants. There will be more transfer students this fall, so there will be fewer problems if they know about that kind of thing ahead of time."

"So the committee is trying to take the initiative." Nalfa smiled brightly. The class committee—in other words, the students—were taking the lead to welcome the new transfer students. As a fellow transfer student, that made her happy. This kind of thing was only happening because she was being welcomed herself.

"Well, I suppose that's true. So...will you be going to the meeting, Matsudaira-san?" The homeroom teacher stared at Kotori.

Nalfa did the same next to her. Both were hoping that she would say yes, and Kotori could tell.

"I... I understand. I will attend." Kotori nodded with a sober expression. Truth be told, she wanted to turn it down. She was shy and introverted and would have preferred to avoid talking to the committee. However, there was no logic in refusing. She was Nalfa's friend and a guide for the transfer students, so she endured her discomfort and decided to participate.

Kotori's first hurdle was entering the classroom where the meeting was being held. She'd confirmed the location on the paper in her hand, Class 2A, over and over again, but for some reason briefly walked past it. After confirming that there was no one in the hallway, she stood before the door to the classroom. Finally she took deep breaths before knocking.

When she knocked, a voice came from the other side of the door. "I will be right there."

Before long the door opened and a female student showed her face. Kotori had seen her before. She was one of the members of the student council who had greeted the new students at the entrance ceremony—the vice president.

"U-Uhm, I'm Matsudaira from 1A," said Kotori.

"Ah! You're Nalfa-san's guide!"

"Oh, yes, that's me."

The vice president remembered her name, and she smiled as soon as Kotori introduced herself. The nervous expression on Kotori's face relaxed. All kinds of worries had been swirling in her mind, such as what to do if they didn't know who she was, but that had been for nothing.

"But you're pretty early," said the vice president. "There's still twenty minutes left before the meeting starts."

"Uhm...I'm not very good with attention...so I thought it would be best to be here from the start."

"That's a wise decision. Come on in."

The vice president led Kotori into the classroom. The desks had been arranged into the shape of a U to make it easier for the meeting. In the open section of the U were the teacher's lectern and blackboard. To the left were two special seats, one of which was reserved for Kotori.

"Is there somebody else coming?" she asked. There were two seats, yet Kotori was alone, so the committee must have called for someone else. She wondered who it was and hoped that it wasn't someone scary.

"Hehe, that's my seat, Kotori-san." a voice answered from behind, but it wasn't the vice president.

Since it was a voice she knew, Kotori was surprised only by suddenly hearing the voice behind her.

"Is that?!" Kotori hurriedly turned around and looked at the other female student. It was a girl with black hair and a rational light in her eyes wearing a

school uniform—Kurano Kiriha. "Kiriha-san!"

"Hello, Kotori-san." Kiriha wore a graceful smile as she greeted her. At school, she played the role of an honors student with a gentle manner and tone. As Kotori had been told this ahead of time, she wasn't necessarily confused by seeing Kiriha behaving so normally, but it was still surprising.

"Why are you... Oh, there's a Forthorthian in class 3A too."

"Yes, Theia-san and Ruth-san are in our class."

Theia and Ruth had been attending Kisshouharukaze High School for the last two years, and now that the truth was out, Kiriha was yet another person with information on transfer students. The reason she had been chosen out of all of the people the two got along with was simple: she was reliable, and her awareness and ability were highly valued.

Kiriha lived up to those expectations and answered the committee's questions without faltering. With two years of experience, she wasn't going to trip over her answers. "Based on my experience, it's easy for emotional differences to occur, especially when using colors in expressions."

"Colors? What do you mean by that?" someone asked.

"For example, the color blue in phrases like 'feeling blue' is used in a negative sense. In Forthorthe, it's different since blue is connected to the color of a legendary hero, so it is more a symbol of pride, justice, and compassion."

"So, feeling blue would have the opposite meaning in Forthorthe?"

"Yes. White also has a special meaning to them, but since it is used in a positive sense in Japan as well, that won't be a problem."

"Hmm...then perhaps we should use blue-and-white banners instead of redand-white ones..."

"Strictly speaking, yes, but going overboard could make the transfer students shrink back, so it would be best to try to avoid using colors that have negative connotations."

"Different cultures sure are difficult..."

As Kiriha spoke with the committee, Kotori watched her with admiration.

Being shy and introverted, it was surprising to her that others could speak so boldly in front of people. Imagining herself doing the same made her shudder.

"Matsudaira-san, do you have anything to add?" Kiriha asked her.

"Uh, m-me?! Uhm, well...that's right, Forthorthe's seventh princess loves the color red, so using red-and-white banners shouldn't be a problem."

"That's good to hear. It means we don't need to change our banners. Thank you."

"You're welcome... Pheeew..."

A single question was nerve-racking to her. What would have happened if she hadn't had Kiriha there to take on the bulk of the questions? She shuddered even more at the thought of that and was exceedingly thankful to the other girl.

Kiriha also had the consideration to notice Kotori's state. "Calm down. If you ever need it, I will help you."

"Thank you very much. That's, uhm, very reassuring."

There was only a two-year difference between them, yet the gap was huge. Kotori thought herself pitiful, but at the same time, she wanted to know how Kiriha could be so confident.

Eventually, Kotori's visit to the committee meeting ended without incident. Thankfully, Kiriha had answered most of the questions on her own. Since she was older and had a long relationship with Theia and Ruth, most questions had been directed to her anyway. Some had been posed to Kotori, but she had been able to squeeze out the answers, and Kiriha's presence had been a big help.

"Uhm, thank you very much for today. I don't know what would have happened if I had been by myself..." Kotori was aware that Kiriha had saved her, so as they walked side by side, she offered her thanks.

They were currently heading back to Corona House from school, which was to be expected since they'd been at the meeting together, and Nalfa had gone to room 106 to hang out.

"It's nothing to concern yourself with," Kiriha assured her. "Everyone has things they are good at and bad at. If I ever struggle with something you are good at, you can help me."

Now that it was just the two of them, Kiriha spoke as she usually did. Her articulate words and clear eyes demonstrated her strong will. The way that her smile was lit up by the setting orange sun was beautiful.

Seeing that right in front of her, Kotori couldn't help but think, I'm no match for her... There's probably nothing she's even bad at...and yet she's so humble. She really is amazing.

Kotori admired Kiriha. She couldn't help but wish she could become like her. Even more so since Kotori was aware of the problems with her own personality.

"Is there anything you are bad at, Kiriha-san?" she asked.

"I'm actually not very good at physical labor."

"Me neither, but I'm sure that having me there would be better than nothing, so if it comes to it, I will help out."

"Then I will be relying on you when that happens."

"Yes." Kotori nodded and smiled at her.

Kiriha might have been a genius, but she wasn't all-powerful, so Kotori was happy to find a way to perhaps repay the favor. Having relaxed with that realization, she recalled that there was something she wanted to ask Kiriha.

"By the way, Kiriha-san, can I ask you something?"

"By all means."

"You act differently in school, right? Why is that?"

Kotori wanted to know why Kiriha acted like an honors student at school. She was still as reliable, yet behaved very differently. At school, she was like any other female student. Kotori knew that Kiriha was of the People of the Earth, and understood that she needed to hide her identity. But she couldn't imagine there being a need for such a large change in mannerisms.

"How much have you heard from Kenji?"

"He told me where you're from and what your duty is."

Her origin was the underground, and her duty was to serve as the commander

for the surface invasion army. But since somebody could be listening in, she couldn't say that out loud, so she'd stated it in a more roundabout way.

"Hmm...if I were to put it simply, it's not just to conceal my origin and duty. At first, it was to quickly pursue a personal connection with Koutarou, so I chose to act more personable."

"Oh, I see! In order to get Kou-niisan to leave without using force, you planned to get along with everyone around him!"

"And now I'm unable to retract the original lie."

Her relationship with Koutarou was close to being finalized. The problems underground had all been cleared up as well. So there was almost no reason for her to continue playing a different character. At best, it was a cover for her identity, but if she were to quit, that would stand out, risking exposure. So she'd missed her timing to stop.

"Standing above others is a tough job," Kotori noted.

"Not to mention, despite my efforts, the person I wanted to fool the most saw through me," Kiriha said with a self-deprecating smile. But for some reason, it seemed like a happy smile to Kotori.

"The person you wanted to fool the most?"

"I'm talking about Koutarou," Kiriha explained, and the joy in her expression grew stronger. It was clear that she was happy that she'd been seen through.

"So you were acting like an honors student in front of Kou-niisan too?"

"Not exactly, but I was lying to Koutarou about why I had come to this city. In half a year, he saw through my lie." Kiriha smiled as if recalling receiving a present from her lover. Seeing that, Kotori was convinced that contrary to her words, having Koutarou see through her lie had made Kiriha happy from the bottom of her heart. And Kotori felt a deep connection with her.

"I told Koutarou that I came to this city for evil reasons."

"Evil..." Kotori was puzzled by the word for a moment, but then she understood. Saying that you were there to invade the surface wasn't a statement easily made.

"It was just an excuse to keep the radical elements from my hometown from running rampant. I had no intention of doing anything bad."

"So what was your real goal?"

Kotori's impression and experience from the class committee was that Kiriha could swiftly answer any question. But this time, the other girl hesitated for a moment. She also blushed ever so slightly and squeezed out an answer.

"That's...uhm... To find...my first love..." Kiriha admitted with a very emotional but pure expression so unlike her usual rational self. It was the first time Kotori had seen the true Kiriha.

"Oh my!"

"So fighting was the furthest thing from what I wanted. In fact, I wanted to get along with the people here."

"If not, your reunion would have been the worst..."

Kiriha had come to find her first love, so she wanted peace with the surface and had had no intention of invading or attacking. If not, she'd known she would never be able to get along with her first love if she found him. However, there had been multiple plans to reach the surface among the People of the Earth, and they couldn't completely abolish the invasion plan because of their position. By threatening invasion, Kiriha had stopped the radical faction.

"Indeed..."

Kiriha was very embarrassed by revealing her circumstances. While she was going with the flow of the conversation, it was uncomfortable to reveal how she felt deep down to someone else. If it hadn't been Kotori, she might not have mentioned it, but since she knew that Kotori wanted fate and purity in her own love, she was able to tell her the truth. She also knew that Kotori wasn't the type to tell others.

"But Koutarou was able to see that I wasn't planning anything evil in around half a year. And I was pretty confident in my acting too..."

Kiriha had met Koutarou in the spring two years prior. By the time autumn came around, Koutarou had sensed a contradiction in her actions and begun

thinking that, contrary to what she was saying, she had no intention of invading the surface. By the time the winter winds came, that hunch had transformed into conviction.



"Kou-niisan has always had that side to him."

"Since childhood?" Kiriha leaned in to ask.

Her behavior surprised Kotori. Acting or not, Kiriha had always appeared mature, but when the discussion turned to Koutarou, her usual manner disappeared. Instead, she started acting her age. She didn't have the same composure, wore her emotions on her sleeve, and had a look of desperation.

Kotori came to a realization. *Ah, she really does love Kou-niisan from the bottom of her heart...*

Kotori had feelings on the matter, but since she wanted fate and purity in love, she couldn't make light of Kiriha's feelings. Therefore, she started speaking of her memories of Koutarou like Kiriha wanted.

Kotori had met Koutarou when she was in the early years of grade school. Her brother, his friend, had brought him home.

"So, this is Mackenzie's little sister that I've heard so much about."

"She's called Kotori."

"Mackenzie?" Kotori had asked.

"Well, his name is Matsudaira Kenji, so Mackenzie for short."

She'd chuckled. "I see. What a weird name."

Their first meeting had been almost ten years ago, so Kotori's memories weren't all that clear, but she still had some strong impressions from it, like him saying stupid things, but there had been a dark light in his eyes.

He seems lonely... she had thought at the time. She clearly recalled feeling that way when she'd looked into his eyes. He had appeared aloof but friendly, yet deep down, he didn't accept others. Kotori hadn't understood all that back then—it had taken years and an explanation from her brother. Even so, she'd felt that something was wrong from a young age.

When Kotori told Kiriha that she felt that Koutarou seemed like a lonely person, Kiriha was surprised. She hadn't noticed that when first meeting him. "Your insight is very impressive, Kotori. It took me some time to notice the

same."

As Kiriha said that, she appeared a little sad to Kotori. She was sad that she hadn't been able to do the same thing Kotori had. Even more so since it concerned her beloved. But Kotori didn't agree.

"Back then, Kou-niisan wasn't as good at hiding his feelings as he is now, so insight wasn't particularly necessary."

Getting a read on Koutarou's feelings now was far more difficult than it had been when he was a child. So it made sense that it would take more time for Kiriha to notice. Kotori didn't think of herself as particularly exceptional. Of course, her personality probably also played a part in her awareness of others.

"I'm sorry for making you worry about me, Kotori," said Kiriha.

"That's not... I'm sure that if you had met Kou-niisan at the time, you would have noticed it immediately, Kiriha-san."

"Thank you. I'll think of it that way."

Kotori's words brought a smile back to Kiriha's face. Kotori felt a closeness to her, since she was acting more feminine and emotional than usual. Kiriha wasn't perfect at all times. She was a normal girl, and once Kotori sensed that, she felt like she'd be able to get along well with her.

Kotori had been proved right about her initial impression of Koutarou on the same day. When he left, Kenji had told her what had happened with his family.

"He thinks it's his fault that his mom died. So he won't get along with anyone to avoid screwing up and letting someone else die. He doesn't want to feel that way again."

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"I feel sorry for him..."

"That's not good, though."

"Yeah..."
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"So if you ever see him alone, you should follow him. You don't need a reason for it."

"Won't he hate me?"

"He didn't hate me for it."

"Then I'll try."

Kotori hadn't just been following Kenji and Koutarou around because she liked them. She had also been doing it because Kenji had asked her. That would become the foundation for the respect Kotori had for her brother. She had been moved by Kenji caring for his friends.

Because of that, when Kotori heard rumors about Kenji's relationships with women, she found it unforgivable. Just where had that considerate brother who'd asked his little sister to support his hurt friend gone?

"I can never accept how he goes from girlfriend to girlfriend like that..." she said.

"I am not trying to excuse him, but in Kenji's case there are so many women coming at him that he can't determine who his destined partner is," Kiriha countered.

"Even so!"

"You've started seeing that for yourself since you became a high schooler, no?"

"Well..."

Kotori was actually starting to understand Kenji's situation. Since she'd begun supporting Nalfa, she'd been speaking with others more, and more boys had started calling out to her. Although they were few, some confessed their feelings for her. It was far more common than when she'd been in middle school, and if there was a fateful encounter among them, she had no way of telling.

"I still want to believe there will be someone where I can tell *this is the one for me*." Kotori could logically understand the situation, but her heart wanted to believe that fate would bring her together with the one meant for her. And that when the time came, she would be able to tell. She knew that was a girlish desire, but even so, she couldn't give up on it.

"I know how you feel. I believed the same and waited for ten years," Kiriha

answered.

"Um, really?"

Kotori was puzzled. Kiriha had supposedly come to the surface to find the older guy who was her first love. But right now, she was clearly showing affection for Koutarou. Since the man in question was older than her by quite a few years, it couldn't have been Koutarou, but her words made it sound like her first love had been fulfilled.

Confused, Kotori looked at the other girl questioningly.

"What is it?"

"Kiriha-san, you came here to find your first love, right?"

"That's right."

"Did you find him?"

"Indeed. It was a struggle but I did."

"But you love Kou-niisan, don't you?"

"Hm? Ah, that's what you mean. Hehehe, I wasn't clear enough in my explanation." Kiriha could understand why Kotori was so confused. In order to explain, she pulled a card out of her pocket. "My relationship with my fated beloved is a little complicated. I guess that's why you can call it 'fated'..."

It was an old hero trading card, its color dulled. Letters were scrawled on the surface. Kiriha looked at it with great affection, as if to say that it was proof of fate itself.

Kotori had been told that Koutarou had gone to the past. However, it was a very long and complicated story, and when Kenji had told Kotori about it, he had missed some stuff. Kiriha's meeting with Koutarou was one such detail.

"Wow, how did you get this?!" Kiriha had asked.

"I got it a while back. I'll give it to you, Kii-chan."

"Really?! It's a sparkling card, you know?!"

"Yeah. You wanted one, right?"

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"Yes!!! Thank you, Onii-chan!!!"
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Kiriha's first love was actually Koutarou on his way home from the past. When Kiriha had run out to the surface and gotten lost, Koutarou and Clan had helped her. The People of the Earth's radical faction had been trying to murder Kiriha and pin the blame on the surface dwellers to sway public opinion. However, thanks to Koutarou and Clan's efforts, Kiriha had been safely returned to the underground.

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"Take care, Kii-chan."

"Yeah. You too, Onii-chan."

"I'll be okay..."

"That's a lie. Kii knows that you're weak, Onii-chan."

"And as long as you know that, I will be okay."

"Aha, this is almost like a confession!"

"It's pretty similar. I'm exposing my weakness, after all."

"That's true."
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During the process, Kiriha had learned how Koutarou felt, and she had accepted the darkness within him and forgiven it. At the same time, she felt like she had to save him, just as he had saved her.

"Here, Onii-chan. Think of this as Kii and take good care of it."

"Are you sure? Isn't this precious to you?"

"Yes, this is my thanks for the card! From today, it will protect you instead of me! And...I would be happy if you looked at it from time to time and thought of Kii."

When they parted ways, Kiriha had given Koutarou her mother's necklace as a keepsake. She had said it was as thanks for the card, but she'd actually had a different reason for it. She had hoped that her mother would watch over Koutarou, and that necklace and card had guided him and Kiriha. Following that, they were reunited and understood how important they were to one another.

Kotori thought that Kiriha had first met Koutarou two years ago, but shockingly, it had happened twelve years ago. The effects of Koutarou going back in time had affected more than just Forthorthe.

"So your first love was Kou-niisan, who happened to be on his way back..."

"Yes, it surprised me too. I never imagined that he had traveled through time."

"But thanks to that, you were able to stop an invasion, so that's a big win."

"I think so too. In short...it was a fateful meeting."

"Yeah, it absolutely was."

"And I believed in my childish impression for more than ten years."

"That's fine. I like that too!" Kotori nodded. Kiriha's fateful encounter and her earnest, pure feelings lasting for over ten years was the kind of thing Kotori idealized. Her eyes sparkled and rejoiced as if it had happened to her directly. "Awww, that is just an amazing love. It really is fate. I'm so happy for you, Kiriha-san!"

"Indeed! Thank you, Kotori."

It seemed like Kotori's feelings had spread to her companion, or perhaps Kiriha had remembered her old feelings, as tears formed in her eyes. She very rarely showed her tears in front of people, but like Kotori, she believed it was fate.

"As Kou-niisan's little sister, I thought I'd have to do something to keep strange women from approaching him..." Kotori mused. Since she had set that precedent with Kenji, she didn't want Koutarou, who was like a brother to her, to have a haphazard love life as well.

"To be honest, I am aware that I am a strange woman," Kiriha admitted.

"That's just because it's hard to believe where you're from. Kiriha-san, you pass. You get a full score, so you can go out with Kou-niisan!"

Upon hearing what Kiriha had to say, any reservations Kotori had about her disappeared. She believed in her own fate and therefore respected other people's fates. She recognized not only Kiriha's personality, but also her destiny,

and wholeheartedly approved of a relationship between her and Koutarou.

"Thank you, Kotori."

"Fate is guiding you, Kiriha-san! Please make Kou-niisan happy!"

"The problem is that there are another eight being guided by fate."

"That certainly is troubling." Kotori furrowed her brows. Through all kinds of experiences, Koutarou had developed a deep bond with nine girls, including Kiriha. And since Kiriha was saying it, none of them had a half-baked relationship with Koutarou.

"That's what's bothering him."

"Aha, that is just like Kou-niisan." Kotori wasn't very worried, and she soon smiled again.

Koutarou had said that he was looking for an ending that would bring smiles to the most people. And Kotori was planning on waiting for that. Hearing what Kiriha had to say, she once again reassured herself that Koutarou wasn't strong or weak enough to irresponsibly date someone.

Upon returning to room 106, the first thing Kiriha and Kotori heard was the heavy sound of two large things colliding.

"Urk!"

They also heard the sound of someone having the wind knocked out of them, at which they kicked their shoes off and rushed inside.

"Koutarou?!"

"Kou-niisan?!"

Nalfa lay collapsed with her limbs spread out. Moreover, there were potato chips scattered across the room, and a bowl lying in the corner. And below Nalfa was Koutarou with his head pressed against a pillar. It was clear what had happened.

"Sanae, Clan-dono, take care of Nalfa!"

"I understand!" Clare cried. "Sanae!"

"Yeah! Glasses, you get her hands."

"On three... One, two, three!"

Nalfa, who'd brought in snacks from the kitchen, had tripped on the bump leading to the inner room and fallen. Koutarou had caught her, so she was unharmed, but his head had struck the pillar. At least, that was how Kiriha interpreted the situation. Given the circumstances, she felt it would be best to leave Nalfa to Clan and Sanae while she looked after Koutarou, so she jumped down to his side and carefully held him up.

"Ow ow ow..." he grumbled, frowning as he stirred, but Kiriha stopped him with a stern stare and a warning.

"Don't move. A head injury can be dangerous."

She slowly laid him down on the floor, then looked over his injury with the utmost care.

"You look a lot more dangerous, Kiriha-san," he replied. "I'm fine, so you don't have to worry."

"How do you feel? Any nausea?"

Kiriha was serious. Even with Koutarou cracking jokes, her expression didn't waver. Normally, his reply would be enough to make her smile, but she knew how careful one had to be with head injuries. No matter how strong a person was, an impact to the brain could bring down anyone.

Overwhelmed by Kiriha, Koutarou answered her question just as seriously. "I'm fine. I don't feel ill."

"Is your vision narrowed or blurry?"

"No."

One step at a time, she looked over his head, acting like he was a valuable, one-of-a-kind treasure.

It looks like there's no need for me to step in...

Kotori looked at Kiriha and smiled. She had actually been trying to do the same thing, but because of her personality, she had been a little slower to act

and Kiriha had taken the initiative. The most Kotori could do was give her a hand.

But when I look at her like this, I can tell that Kiriha-san really does love Kouniisan... Kotori thought as Kiriha carefully looked Koutarou over. Even if she'd hit her own head, Kiriha probably wouldn't have been so thorough. She was going to such lengths because she loved him. There was nothing more precious to her than Koutarou. That much was clear just from looking at her, and the depth of her feelings moved Kotori.

Will I be fated to have an encounter and experience that kind of love too? I hope so...

Kotori longed to one day experience the same kind of love that Kiriha felt. She had yet to find her destined loved one, or perhaps she had but had not realized it yet. Although she didn't know which one was true, this was something she sincerely longed for—even if she did feel a little guilty for thinking about it while Kiriha was desperately looking after Koutarou.

After her rough diagnosis, Kiriha concluded that Koutarou's injury wasn't serious, but there was still the off chance that something could be wrong, so she didn't let Koutarou move until Clan could bring over her medical device to draw a final conclusion.

"Kiriha-san, I'm really okay," Koutarou protested.

"Please just lay still a little longer."

"I... Okay..."

Lying on the tatami while Kiriha was peering at him from so close was strangely embarrassing. He wanted to run away, but with her looking so worried, he couldn't bring himself to do it. Koutarou knew that she was truly worried about him, and since acknowledging that would mean acknowledging her love for him, he was all the more desperate to hide his embarrassment. It would have been so much easier if Kiriha had just been teasing him.

"Kii, the medical device says that Koutarou doesn't have a serious injury," Clan confirmed.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. There's no need to worry."

Clan had brought a small and simple medical device, but it was in no way inferior to the cutting edge of Japan's medical technology. And if her device said that it was okay, there was no cause for concern.

"Hah...finally..." Koutarou let out a sigh of relief. Once Kiriha heard the results, she had returned to normal. With that, relief washed over Koutarou. Kiriha might be mischievous or tease him again, but that was preferable to her looking at him like she was about to cry.

"I am so sorry, Koutarou-sama." As if she'd waited for the atmosphere in the room to relax, Nalfa came up to him.

Kiriha made room for her, and Nalfa came forward, apologizing while she bowed.

"You were hurt because of my carelessness!"

"You don't have to shrink back like that. I'm just glad nobody was hurt," he replied.

"I will be more careful next time! If I ever were to hurt you, I would never be able to go back to Forthorthe!"

Since Koutarou had hit his head as a result of protecting her, she had been just as worried about him as Kiriha was, and there were tears in the corners of her eyes. She continued to apologize profusely. Even though Koutarou had said that there was no need for that, it was such a serious incident for a Forthorthian that Nalfa could do nothing else. Kiriha smiled, finding her behavior cute.

"You looked just as cute worrying about Kou-niisan a few moments ago, Kiriha-san," Kotori observed with a smile. To her, Kiriha and Nalfa were two birds of a feather—being cute and teasing were rather similar.

"Is that so?"

"Yes, that's what made me think that you really love Kou-niisan."

Nalfa wasn't just worried about Koutarou because she knew him personally, but also because he was a legendary hero to all Forthorthians. However, that wasn't the case for Kiriha. All of her concern came solely from her affection for

Koutarou.

"But in that regard, you are the same," Kiriha replied.

"Huh?" Kotori's eyes opened wide as Kiriha's words caught her off guard. For a moment, she interpreted the response as being told that she loved Koutarou too.

"You looked quite worried yourself. That was very cute as well."

With her misunderstanding swiftly corrected by Kiriha, Kotori was able to accept the explanation.

"Oh, of course! He's been a childhood friend and like a brother since I was young."

"A childhood friend, huh..." Hearing that term, Kiriha smiled and slightly narrowed her eyes. In that moment, Kotori felt like she was able to peer into the depths of Kiriha's heart. "Kotori, how do you really feel about Koutarou?"

Kiriha had posed a question that seemed to support the misunderstanding Kotori had had a moment earlier. Kotori's eyes opened wide once more.

"How do I..."

"I mean it just as I said. I can tell that you love Koutarou, but is it as a childhood friend, or is it..."

Kiriha didn't finish her question, but Kotori knew what she was going to say.

As a man. Kotori even asked herself that from time to time.

"I don't know." She shook her head. She didn't really know how she felt about Koutarou. While she admired the idea of love, she had no experience with it herself. Maybe she did love Koutarou as a man, but she had no conviction in that. She'd treated him as a brother for too long, and she was also worried about the cold part deep down in Koutarou's heart. "Kou-niisan is Kou-niisan, and I can't really think of it any other way right now. But..."

"But?"

"But I don't think it's clear that Kou-niisan is not my fated partner."

Koutarou was Kiriha's destined partner. She knew that much. However, there

was no guarantee that the same wasn't true for Kotori, and she felt like she couldn't outright dismiss that possibility. Kotori loved Koutarou enough that she didn't want to reject it.

"There are a lot of precedents. Conversely, very few have rejected it."

Kiriha smiled wryly. As far as she knew, there were nine girls who felt that their fates lay with Koutarou, herself included. And she couldn't ignore the possibility of it becoming ten. It wouldn't surprise Kiriha. But like Kotori had said, there was no need to reach a conclusion right now.

"Well, anyway...you can hold your head high, Kiriha-san," Kotori told her. "It's fine if he's your fated partner, for now."

"For now, huh? You're strong, Kotori."

"Hehehe, I believe in fate more than anyone."

It was important not to force her feelings. Otherwise, she might miss the destined moment when it came. Kotori wanted to believe that there was a person fated for her too, and that was fine. After all, that was how Kiriha had been reunited with Koutarou.

Episode 4: A Mother's and Daughter's Conclusions on Stubbornness

The commotion brought about by Danesford Laren's question to the House of Commons still hadn't settled down by the next day. As expected, the citizens of Forthorthe always had the Blue Knight on their minds, even more so when it concerned his spouse.

If the Blue Knight were to marry a Forthorthian, he would at the very least obtain permanent residency. And if he were to marry royalty, he would likely become a citizen as well, which meant that any children he had would definitely be citizens.

The populace was hoping that the Blue Knight would officially become a citizen of Forthorthe, but one obstacle was that he was a very serious and sincere individual. There were multiple girls he was especially close to, and it would take time for him to choose one among them to become his spouse. The primary reason was that the Blue Knight was still young, and he didn't want to do anything haphazardly with the girls, which was delaying his decision. As a result, although the Forthorthians thought highly of the Blue Knight, they also had mixed feelings about his failure to choose a spouse.

Those emotions brought forth a conflict among the people. Some said that he should marry Princess Theia, others Princess Clan. Still others spoke in favor of Princess Nefilforan, and so discussions began shifting to the idea of the Blue Knight's marriage being thwarted by rivals. Factions regarding his potential marriage partners were in turmoil, with conflicts and debates heating up.

That was when Danesford Laren appeared and presented another possibility. As a news journalist, the conflict had caught his eye, and he'd begun gathering materials. In the process, he'd started questioning the Blue Knight's special privileges, which had been set by Empress Alaia herself. He wondered if those privileges would protect the Blue Knight's right to the ancient law of polygamy —in other words, not having to choose only one girl.

He directed the question to Marclay from the House of Commons, whom he'd interviewed in the past on a different matter. When Marclay received the question, he realized its importance and formally asked the Ministry of Justice. And the response was that the Blue Knight's privileges were protected, and he still had the right to take multiple spouses, as was legal thousands of years ago.

That answer thoroughly shook Forthorthe. The Blue Knight could become a Forthorthian right away and marry the princesses. Once the citizens learned that, the festivities began and the prior conflict died down accordingly. After all, there was no longer any need to pick sides among potential spouses. All factions reconciled and rejoiced as one.

"Are they seriously all right with something so half-baked?"

Koutarou himself, however, was displeased. His common sense dictated that he only take a single wife, so to him, it felt like Forthorthe had bent reason in order to get the Blue Knight to marry. Many Japanese would feel the same.

"It's not like I don't understand how you feel...but frankly, we are relieved." Kiriha gave Koutarou a wry smile. The People of the Earth also practiced monogamy, so she could understand Koutarou's response, but at the same time, she couldn't help but feel relief.

"Relieved? What do you mean?"

"Now we don't have to worry about thinking of each other as obstacles."

Kiriha and the other girls saw each other as irreplaceable friends. Even if Koutarou were to choose only one as a wife, that wouldn't change. And even if she wasn't chosen, Kiriha planned to stay by his and the others' sides.

The other girls felt the same. But Kiriha worried that if only one was chosen, it would torment that girl. They were all kind and gentle, and it was easy to imagine one would suffer, worrying if it was okay that only they got to be happy. But now those concerns had been resolved, and Kiriha, as well as the other girls, wondered if it was okay to be so forceful. At the same time, they were relieved that they could maintain the same relationships as before.

"Say, Theia-chan, what do they think about a man taking multiple wives in Forthorthe? In Japan, there used to be a lot of wars, so it was okay," said

Shizuka.

Kiriha had said everything she wanted to say, so she had stayed quiet so far, but now Shizuka wanted to know how a Forthorthian saw the matter. Since they were from a gigantic empire in a different galaxy, the Forthorthians must have had different feelings about it. In fact, they were in the middle of celebrating.

"Hmm, it depends on the region, so they should think it's good that there are different ways of thinking."

"What do you mean it depends on the region?"

"Typically, we impose monogamy. You understand that, don't you?" Theia clarified.

"Yeah, that was why the people of Forthorthe were arguing in the first place."

"But when looking at the Forthorthe Galactic Empire in its entirety, there are regions, or solar systems, where that is not the case."

"Even though it's the same country? There are different rules for regions?" asked Shizuka.

"Indeed. For the past few hundred years, when Forthorthe took over other countries, they didn't forcibly assimilate them. Those countries were given autonomy and welcomed as part of a confederation of nations. That way there was no need to change their organizations, and there was less resistance. Or if the country wanted, they could be fully assimilated into Forthorthe. Either way, it took a lot of time."

When a country on a different planet was put under Forthorthe's control, their local history and culture were typically respected, and no changes were made to their government or culture. As long as they followed a general framework, they were granted autonomy and could live on as they had before. Of course, if the people there wanted to, they could fully integrate with the empire. But even at the fastest, such a chance would be decades after first contact. Since Forthorthe was already so big, they could take the time to wait.

"So there is polygamy in some of those countries that haven't fully assimilated?"

"That's right. In many cases, it's for political or religious reasons, but in others, that's simply how those beings exist."

It had been hundreds of years since Forthorthe had entered their Space Age. Many planets had been colonized and new cultures encountered. Those planets' politics and religions weren't necessarily the same as Forthorthe's. They had developed in accordance with each planet's individual circumstances. For example, in the early pioneering days of a planet with a poor environment, it wasn't uncommon for people to be allowed to have more than one spouse because the population needed to be increased quickly. But there were also cultures where that wasn't the case, such as civilizations founded by different life-forms—for example, those similar to ants or bees, who swarmed around a queen.

"Ahh...you're right. On planets with harsh conditions where the population needs to increase, telling people they can only have one husband or wife sounds rough. Even more so when it's a planet with a different species." Shizuka was surprised by Theia's words, but she nodded in understanding. There was the saying that when in Rome, do as the Romans do, but with so many planets there were many different situations to consider.

"So," Theia continued, "while we prefer monogamy, that is only because of our own culture. We can't force it on anyone else."

For Forthorthians, it made sense to have only one spouse, but that was only at the center of the empire, where life was stable. It was foolish to force the same rules on all civilizations.

"I see...so these kinds of problems can happen when a country is too big. I learned something new today." Shizuka repeatedly nodded. This was a problem unique to an empire half a galaxy large, which explained their line of thinking.

"So, my answer is that it depends on the region," Theia concluded. "With that in mind, I believe the citizens have all kinds of thoughts on the matter."

Naturally, there was some opposition—some just didn't think it was fair. However, more thought that it was inevitable. That was just how vast, varied, and harsh their universe was.

"Then what about in Satomi-kun's case?" Harumi asked in Shizuka's place.

Even she was interested in the topic.

"There might be some opposition, but most will be supportive. The desire to have Forthorthe officially welcome the Blue Knight is pushing them forward."

"So that's why they're acting this way," Harumi said with a giggle and looked at the hologram on display. On it was the news, featuring the citizens celebrating the Blue Knight's marriage. Despite there being no official announcement, they were already reveling in the moment.

"When I saw Princess Theia and the Blue Knight doing martial arts, I knew they had to get married!"

"You say that, but when Princess Clan and the Blue Knight were playing with RC cars, she was so cute. When I saw that kiss on the cheek at the end, I was completely captivated by them!"

"You're right, brother! But it doesn't matter anymore!"

"Yes, either is fine! Hooray for Forthorthe!"

As Theia said, public sentiment toward marriage in Forthorthe was varied, even more so when it concerned the legendary hero. Moreover, the Blue Knight marrying a princess meant that he would become a citizen, so they were willing to overlook some things for the sake of that goal. And the general consensus was that it was clear that he wasn't the kind of person to do something bad.

"The days of conflict are over! All is well!" Theia was in high spirits upon seeing the news.

"But, Your Highness, they have started up a strange new discussion in its place." Although Ruth was smiling next to her, she furrowed her brows a little.

"A new one? What do you mean?"

"Yes. Apparently, they are talking about the order in which Master will marry." Ruth used her computer to show more news programs on the hologram. On it were bar graphs with Theia's and the others' names.

"Number one: Princess Theiamillis, twenty-three percent? What is this?"

"This is the result of an urgent survey that a private investigation company conducted, showing who is worthy of being the Blue Knight's first wife."

"Whaaat?!" Theia hurriedly looked over the graph. The title was indeed "Who Is Most Suitable to Be His Excellency the Blue Knight's First Wife." Next to her own name was "twenty-three percent." In other words, that percentage of the people believed she should be his first wife. "Ohoho! I am first!"

"Clan-san, look at that. You are second," Maki announced, pointing out an interesting truth.

Right below Theia's name was Clan's. She was just barely below the princess at twenty-two percent. Clan was known for having gone to the past and fought with the Blue Knight. Lately, she'd been standing out for her development of the PAF, so she was very popular.

"Oh my..."

"At just a one percent difference, the results could change depending on the time and place the survey is done," Maki continued.

"Please don't tease me too much, Maki."

"Hehe, I'm sorry."

"Meow." Unlike Theia, who was puffing out her chest, Clan looked embarrassed. Happy and proud as well, but embarrassed to think that people were looking at her that way.

"The point to pay attention to is that Her Majesty Elfaria is third."

"Elle is?!" Koutarou hadn't been very interested in the graph until then, but when Elfaria's name was brought up, he hurriedly got up to look at it. Elfaria's name was indeed there.

"It's true! Mother is third!" Theia cried.

"At nineteen percent... That is rather considerate," Clan observed.

They were equally surprised. It was easy to imagine that Clan and Theia would be ranked highly, since the general image was greatly impacted by the civil war, when the Blue Knight had had two princesses by his side. However, Elfaria was only a few percent behind them, which would have surprised anyone.

"What is the meaning of this?" Koutarou asked. He wasn't sure what to make of the situation.

That was when Kiriha looked up from her computer and addressed his doubts. "It would appear that your close relationship with Her Majesty is well-known. Not to mention that Her Majesty is still young. She is well within marriageable age."

In Forthorthe it was known that Theia and Clan were close to Koutarou. That was in large part thanks to Nalfa's videos, but since Koutarou's return to Forthorthe, his relationship with Elfaria had started to gain attention—also thanks to Nalfa's videos and footage of reports that had happened to catch them together. Footage of Koutarou and Elfaria drinking tea and Koutarou chasing Elfaria around after she'd played a prank on him were very popular.

Elfaria being of marriageable age further spurred on the people's hopes. Although she was Theia's mother, she was still in her thirties and looked very young. Her position as empress was another reason she was seen as a worthy choice for his first wife.

"And, Koutarou, the Blue Knight's name carries more weight than you think. Some people believe only the empress is worthy of you."

When asked who they thought was worthy to be the Blue Knight's partner, many people on the street would name Theia or Clan, that much was clear. However, even those who answered thus could not immediately say "no" when asked if Empress Alaia was the Blue Knight's ideal partner, and after thinking it over for a while, they came to their own conclusions. As expected, Empress Alaia was seen as the Blue Knight's partner among the people of Forthorthe, so when their existing relationship was brought up, many thought that only the empress was worthy of being his first wife. That was how much influence the Blue Knight's name carried.

"Incidentally, if mother were to marry you, her being the second wife or lower would lead to some difficulties," Theia continued.

"You mean it would be a problem if the empress wasn't the first wife?" he asked.

"Indeed. For example, if I were to be your first wife, mine and mother's positions would be reversed in that regard, which would be hard to handle politically. However, that is only a matter of political convenience—the people

are supporting my mother because of how well you get along with her." It was clear that taking Elfaria as his first wife would cause the least offense.

"Huh, so that's how it is. I get the idea behind it...but that's only if Elle and I want to get married, right?" Koutarou understood how the people and politicians thought. But since this was a matter of marriage, the thoughts of the people involved took priority. In that respect, he was skeptical about a marriage with Elfaria.

Theia blinked and tilted her head. "Koutarou, do you hate my mother?"

"That's not it." Koutarou shook his head. He didn't hate Elfaria; if anything he thought of her as more than just a friend.

"Then can you not see her as a potential bride because she's older?"

"If that was it, everything would be easier."

He did see Elfaria's feminine appeal. If anything, he felt that she had the most womanly charms of all the girls around him. When he was with her, there were times he was captivated by her.

"I don't get it. In that case, what is the problem?"

Koutarou didn't hate Elfaria, and he found her attractive, so Theia didn't understand his hesitation.

"She's the empress! The ruler of an empire that spans half a galaxy! Her marrying some random high schooler is..." He didn't think someone in a position as high as hers should marry a normal student like him.

"The hero who saved the galaxy is just some random high schooler?! You are in more history textbooks than one could count! I don't think there's a 'random high schooler' better known than you!"

Theia and the others saw it the other way around. The title of Blue Knight carried far more weight than Empress. There had been over a hundred emperors and empresses in Forthorthe, but only a single Blue Knight.

"Urk, but you still need to consider her feelings!"

"I don't think there's any reason to think about it."

Theia's words and stare were sharp. Although it hadn't been made public, Koutarou was the only person who could freely enter Elfaria's private room. The scary part was that he didn't even need to wait for her permission. That had been the case from the start with no agreements being made beforehand, yet nobody even questioned it. There were all kinds of privileges like that between the two of them. Like Theia said, that was only possible if Koutarou was someone special to Elfaria.

"Even if it's not a problem, she's going to end up waiting a long time," he protested. "So her precious time will—"

"With Forthorthe's current technology, mother will look as she does for decades. And having children won't be a problem."

Elfaria was youthful and beautiful at present, and it wasn't hard to stop aging with Forthorthe's technology. If the strain on the body was ignored, it was even possible to rejuvenate her. While it was hard to accept that particular risk for the empress, merely stopping her aging would buy enough time to wait for Koutarou's decision.

"That's not the problem!" he cried.

Elfaria had her own life. As empress, she was in a difficult position and deserved to live a life without regret. Even if she loved Koutarou, he couldn't ignore the time she would lose waiting on his decision. Truth be told, he wanted to say the same thing to the other girls around him, but he'd more or less given up on that.

"Hehe, I'm relieved to hear that." Theia smiled happily.

"Huh?"

"It sounds like mother has a good chance too."

Based on his words, Koutarou wasn't worried about Empress Elfaria, but rather Elfaria as a woman, which meant that she had a chance. If he'd only been worried about the empress, that wouldn't have been the case.

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"That's not—"
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[&]quot;Will you deny it?"

Koutarou couldn't refute it. He was even imagining what it would be like to marry her. Starting off the morning with tea together, followed by taking care of the plants in the greenhouse after dealing with the official business of the day...

Despite how busy they were, Theia and Elfaria always made sure to spend time together. Support for Elfaria had soared upon the restoration of Forthorthe after the civil war, and opposing factions had been weakened. Thanks to that, she had some downtime now. Naturally, Theia growing and being able to help played a big part in that.

"So it was the right choice to send you to Earth."

"Of course, mother! My perspective has expanded and I've found friends for life!"

Right now, the two were drinking tea in the palace courtyard's greenhouse. The plants that Elfaria was growing there were blooming brilliantly, and the pair was able to enjoy a relaxed moment together.

"Hehe, you also found the person dearest to you, no?" Elfaria asked in a mischievous tone. The biggest thing Theia had found on Earth was the heart to love people. And much of it was directed toward a single boy.

"Yes, you're right." She nodded firmly in response. She didn't blush or try to play it off; instead, she looked proud. She knew that being able to love people was precious and a sign of her growth.

"You sure have grown, Theia. Being able to boldly agree is proof that you've become an adult."

"It's true. Before going to Earth, I would have denied it in a panic."

An image of Theia's past self appeared in her head for a moment. In the past she had called her beloved a Neanderthal, but it had been the other way around. Back then, she had tried to solve everything with force, like a Neanderthal pretending to be cultured. She'd even tried to kill her current allies. Theia had been truly dangerous back then. When she had been standing against the military, Theia was at risk of being tricked and used, but over the

past two years, she had greatly matured. She was no longer Elfaria's Achilles' heel, but a sword to protect her.

"I'm both happy and sad to see my daughter grow. It's a complicated emotion." Elfaria softly smiled. While it was reassuring to see Theia mature as an imperial princess, she also wanted her to be a daughter she could always dote on. But Theia wasn't able to stay that way because Elfaria was the empress, and Elfaria did feel bad about that.

"You say that, but when are you going to become an adult, mother?" Theia suddenly said with a strangely serious expression.

"What do you mean?" Unable to discern the true meaning of her expression and words, Elfaria tilted her head.

"You are always hiding your true feelings, mother."

Theia had truly grown, acknowledged what she could and couldn't do, and learned to respect and rely on others if necessary. But Elfaria hadn't, and that was always on her mind.

"An empress acting on their real feelings would cause the nation to slip," Elfaria replied.

The leader of a country couldn't just do as they pleased. Unless there was a logical reason to change things, Elfaria would uphold the rules put in place by her predecessors even if she didn't personally like them. That was what kept a nation stable. It would quickly tilt if every leader changed the rules, so she suppressed her own feelings and served for political stability.

However, Theia shook her head at those words. "Mother, I am not talking about your work as the empress. I am talking about something more personal." She was thinking of Elfaria's true feelings as a woman.

"My personal, true feelings..."

"Why are you hiding your feelings from Koutarou?"

Theia's intuition told her that Elfaria had feelings for him but never let it be known. At best, it showed in her gestures and behavior. Only her own daughter and Kiriha, who was good at reading others' feelings, were aware of it. Theia

could understand not letting others know how she felt because of her position, but why wasn't she showing it to Koutarou directly? She couldn't help but wonder about that. Her frank words left Elfaria speechless.

"As I thought, you love Koutarou even now."

Her mother's reaction convinced Theia that the situation was just as she thought and that Elfaria had feelings for Koutarou.

"That's not—"

"I can tell even if you try to hide it, mother. That expression is the one that girls make for boys they like."

Elfaria was so shaken by Theia's words that her usual mask of calm fell away. She had turned into a girl trying to hide her feelings for a specific boy after having it pointed out by others.

"Besides...it was strange from the outset. You wouldn't have entrusted your only daughter to a man you felt nothing for, even if he is a legendary hero."

That had been Theia's first question upon hearing that Elfaria had interfered with the trials for royalty and sent Theia to Koutarou's side.

"If you didn't love him, he would just be someone you spent a few days with, no?"

Twenty years ago, Elfaria had been with Koutarou for less than ten days. Even if he was a legendary hero, that was far too short of a time to trust someone. And since it concerned her own daughter, she had to have a clear reason for trusting him. Theia believed it was because Elfaria had special feelings for him.

"That's..." Elfaria grasped for words once more. When she thought about it calmly, Theia was right—she wouldn't entrust her daughter to someone she'd only been with for a few days. It was unthinkable unless the situation was extraordinary. Yet Elfaria had never questioned it before. She'd been sure that Koutarou was safe to be around.

"The same goes for how you use the Blue Knight's name," Theia continued.

"These are all things you wouldn't do unless you were convinced that he would absolutely be an ally. You would never make such a risky gamble, mother."

Elfaria had used the name of the Blue Knight to put restrictions on the logistics industry, which was starting to get rattled by operational rules. That helped to confirm the legality of the tax system as well as proper employment and working conditions. Everything had gone just as Elfaria had planned. But there was a large hidden pitfall: since her strategy made use of the Blue Knight's renown, everything would go to waste if that renown were ruined. It required Koutarou to always be an ally of Forthorthe and continue to live like a hero. So she must have had some basis for believing in him, or it would have been an extremely risky gamble, and Theia didn't think her mother was the gambling type. In other words, Elfaria must have had stronger feelings toward him than admiration for a hero.

Nothing in the world was a certainty, so when it came to politics, the word "absolute" was unusable. A politician could only take actions toward their desired goal and pray. Despite that, Elfaria had believed in Koutarou, convinced that he would never betray her. That was definitely strange.

"The same goes for this tea. It was grown from the seeds that Koutarou and Clan brought back," Theia said, picking up her teacup and showing it off.

The Rubustory tea leaves that Elfaria preferred had gone extinct a few hundred years ago due to a natural disaster. Elfaria was the one who had revived the plant, and although it hadn't been made public, Koutarou and Clan had brought the seeds to her twenty years ago. As an archeologist, she would naturally have loved to bring back the tea that Alaia enjoyed, but Theia didn't think it was unrelated to Koutarou. He had brought it back because he liked it enough to want to drink it in the present, and Elfaria knew that. It would be unnatural to think that her motive for reviving the Rubustory didn't factor in his desire for it.

Where did her feelings come from, to allow her to entrust her daughter to him, to use his influence in her work, and to bring back the tea? These were all emotional, not logical, decisions. There was something deep down in Elfaria's heart that allowed her to do all this.

Elfaria was aware of it as well and finally resigned herself. "I have become much older than him. I can't hold him back."

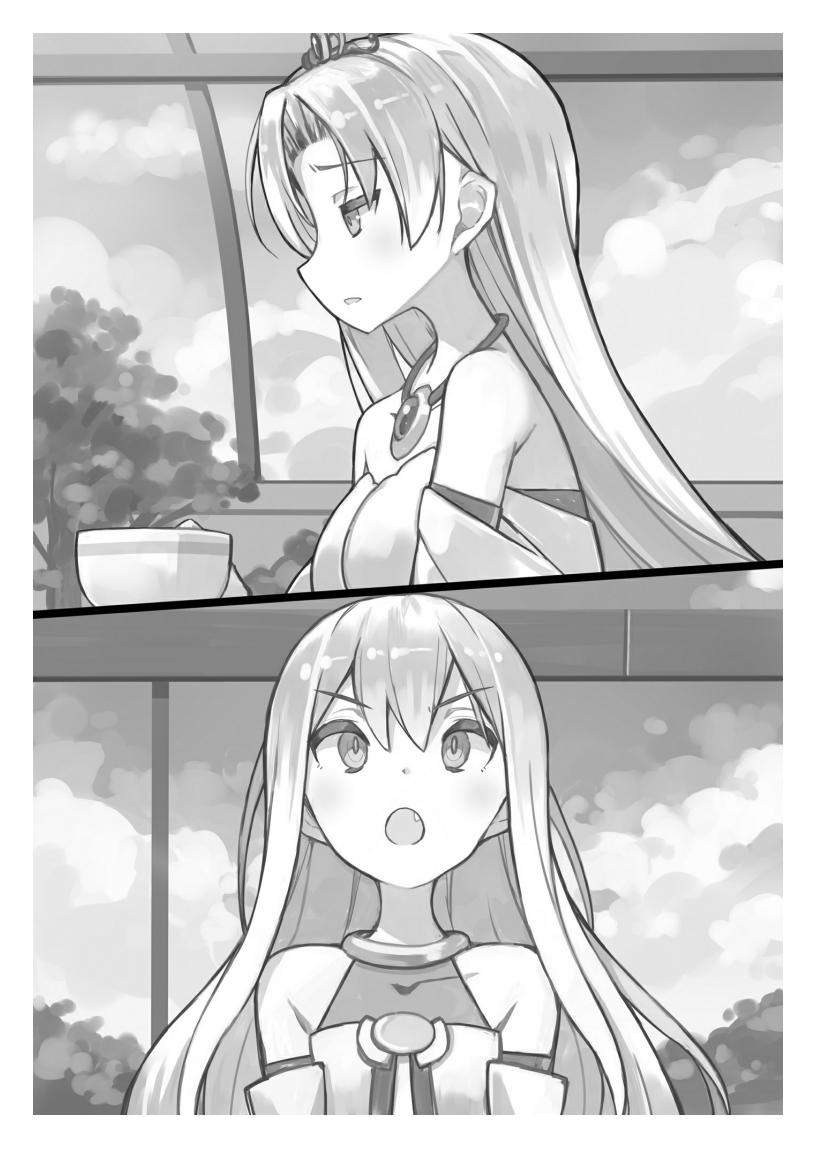
She was older and an empress. Both were significant negatives when forming a relationship, and she couldn't bring herself to push something like that on the boy she loved. At the same time, he was her weakness, which was why she was fine with Theia and Koutarou getting married, and was willing to settle down as their mother.

"Nothing good will come from suppressing your feelings, mother." Theia remained strong. She understood how Elfaria felt. When she'd fallen in love with Koutarou, she had experienced the same problem, albeit with their roles reversed. There was far too large of a gap between a princess of Forthorthe and a commoner alien, yet she'd blown through that to get where she was today. Theia didn't want her mother to go through the same ordeal.

"Even so...I am reluctant to trouble him," Elfaria answered with a sad expression. She understood what Theia wanted to say, but that option had only been possible twenty years ago when she was a princess. Now, her age and title as empress weighed on her heavily.

"Mother, stop being stubborn! Such things are of no use in creating happiness between people! Even the other day..."

Theia went on to explain how she and the others lived day-to-day, hoping to help Elfaria understand that it was better not to be stubborn when it came to what was truly precious.



Koutarou and the others, who were wedged between Earth and Forthorthe, were constantly swamped with work. Being in a position to mediate between the two sides, they didn't have time to play like high schoolers usually did. That was even more true lately due to Ralgwin's forces acting behind the scenes. However, nonstop work without rest would ruin both mind and body, so they decided to spend the summer like proper high school students.

"Still, we can't use up all of our vacation here, and every day, more work will pile up, so we'll only have one day off," Ruth explained with a sad smile to Koutarou and the others. She was in charge of scheduling and had managed to secure a day off for everyone, but it was a task fraught with difficulty.

Since they each had their special talents, they were very popular at their places of work. For example, Yurika and Harumi were very popular with the Imperial Army and Clan was getting plenty of calls from the technology and information departments. As for Kiriha, everyone who knew of her existence was fighting over her, so it was hardly surprising that Ruth would struggle—even getting them a single day off was worthy of praise.

"Then let's do everything we want to do on that day."

With that knowledge, everyone readily agreed to Sanae-chan's dynamic proposal. They were very busy but still teenage girls, and they wanted to play from time to time too.

"That sounds like it will be a terrifying one-day trip," Kenji said with a shrug. The meeting to discuss what they would do on their day off was being held in room 106, but he was involved today too. Since it was a simple matter of going out to play, he had been approached as well.

"You make it sound like it has nothing to do with you, Mackenzie." Koutarou gave him a grudgeful stare.

"Well, of course. Unlike you, I'm just a normal high schooler. I'm enjoying my last summer vacation, as I should be."

Among the gathered members, Kenji was the only one with plenty of time on his hands. He'd already been relieved of his position in the drama club and wrapped up his homework. He could sleep all day every day without a problem.

"You traitor!" Koutarou replied.

"It's your fault for going and becoming a hero. Besides, if anyone's a traitor, you're the one who betrayed the Unpopular Boys Alliance!"

"Forget about that."

"Those who've been betrayed can never forget. Lately, they've been making a scene over how Kou's gotten some alien woman."

Because of Forthorthe's visit to Earth, the Unpopular Boys Alliance had been far less active, but even so, they were vigilantly looking for an opportunity to purge the traitor. As expected, the betrayal by their charismatic leader had left a deep wound on them.

"Hmph, it's not like I can't understand how they feel. We are beautiful, after all," said Nefilforan.

"Ah, well, they seemed to be talking about someone tall with big breasts, so it was probably about Princess Nefilforan."

Although Koutarou hadn't made any official appearances on Earth, Nefilforan was already well-known. She'd also been seen speaking with Koutarou from time to time at Kisshouharukaze High School, and it had earned him the ire of the unpopular boys alliance.

"Mackenzie, spit out their location right now. I'm going to beat the crap out of them," Koutarou announced.

"You would do well to confess. I wouldn't mind hacking your phone and looking into your call records, you know," Kenji retorted. But his words ended up wounding Theia and Clan. They kept their princesses' smiles on their faces, but there was a dangerous glint in their eyes.

"Mackenzie, you better take responsibility. This could turn into an international—no, an interstellar problem," Koutarou warned him.

"You live in a terrifying environment..." Kenji muttered.

Forthorthe, the People of the Earth, Folsaria... Many of the girls were in positions of leadership in those factions. It was like a permanent state of being in a summit. If anything happened, it would be an international problem, and it

was a miracle that no issues had occurred yet.

"Just spit it out already!" Nefilforan cried.

"You heard her! Tell us without hiding anything!"

Thus, despite some dissonance, Koutarou and the others came together to enjoy their vacation.

Their first destination of the day was the movie theater because the time of the showings just happened to line up with their plans. Koutarou and the others split into three groups, which watched one movie each. It was a simple matter of interest. The first screening for each of them was around nine in the morning. Since the films were of different lengths, subsequent screenings would throw off their schedule, so the movie theater had become their first destination.

"So, what did happen to the Unpopular Boys Alliance?" Koutarou asked.

"I haven't been able to get in contact with them for a while now," Kenji admitted.

"Congratulations, Mackenzie. Now you're a traitor too."

They were in the action movie group. Sanae-chan, Shizuka, and (unexpectedly) Kiriha were also part of the group.

"Say, Shizuka, why is Glasses-kun so friendly with the unpopular boys alliance?" asked Sanae-chan.

"Mackenzie-kun bribed them with Valentine's Day chocolate," Shizuka answered.

"He tried working with them to put down Satomi Koutarou. And they've supposedly been getting along well since," Kiriha added.

"So they weren't friends so much as cooperating, but that dark connection has been destroyed now that he's tipped off Theia and Glasses," Sanae-chan observed.

"So it seems."

The five of them headed toward the fifth theater together. The cinema had a total of ten theaters, and around them were other people headed for the fifth one. The other groups had already taken their seats—their own screening just happened to be ten minutes later than the others'.

"It's just now that I understand that losing male friends hurts more than losing a girlfriend," said Kenji.

"You only got that just now?" Koutarou answered. "In your case, that's just because you break up with girls on a daily basis, isn't it?"

"Koutarou, let's forget about all that and go to the fifth theater!" Sanae-chan urged them.

"You hear that? She said 'all that.""

"Can't you at least look like you're trying to console me, Kou?!" Kenji cried.

In front of the fifth theater was a poster for the movie they were going to see. Its title was *Beetle King Kabutonga the First*. Kabutonga had a long-enduring popularity as a hero show, having existed for over ten years, and this was its adaptation. As the title suggested, it was a remake of the first *Kabutonga*, an attempt to recapture the original using the rapid advances in video technology. The series had been burned into Koutarou's mind from repeated viewings, so upon hearing that the battle between Kabutonga and Scarab King would be remade using modern technology, he couldn't help but go see it.

"It sticks to the original design while being detailed enough for adults to watch. I look forward to it."

Kiriha stared at the poster and seemed to be enjoying herself. Kenji had been feeling a little down, but when he saw her profile, he couldn't help but speak.

"Still...I'm a little surprised. I didn't think you were the type to be interested in this kind of movie, Kurano-san."

He thought it was a little strange that Kiriha was here. She acted like an honors student at school, so it didn't really fit her image. And it fit her image even less considering the *real* her, so he wondered why the intelligent and graceful girl would watch this movie.

"It might sound strange coming from me, but in the past I was something of a tomboy. I preferred hero shows like this over ones geared toward girls."

"I see, so you were sucked in as a child, like we were."

"Indeed. Not to mention I have some attachments related to this series." Kiriha slightly nodded and put her hand over her chest. Beneath it was her treasure.

Seeing her face, a thought struck Kenji. I'm guessing a childhood friend or her first love is associated somehow... That would make sense for Kurano-san...

Kenji was able to connect Kiriha and Kabutonga in his mind.

"Glasses-kun, aren't you going to ask us?" demanded Sanae-chan.

"Hahahaha, why do you want to see this movie, Higashihongan-san?" he asked.

"Uhm, well, it's so cool! Transform!" Sanae-chan shouted and struck a pose. She liked heroes even now. Seeing how perfect her transformation pose was, it was likely that she'd be making Koutarou play pretend heroes with her afterward.

"That's an easy reason to understand," he replied.

"Right?! I'll be the one to take down Scarab King!"

"What about me, Mackenzie-kun?" Shizuka said. It was her turn next. They spoke in class every day, so she was acting the same as usual.

Kenji answered in kind. "Why do you want to see this movie, Kasagi-san?"

"I want to see it for research."

"That's right, you help out with hero shows."

"Yeah! It should be worth watching the latest movie."

"I know how you feel."

"Oh yeah, you were in the drama club."

"Yes, I used to watch a lot of movies for acting."

Shizuka helped out with hero shows as a part-time job and was likely to play

pretend heroes with Koutarou afterward too, but for a different reason from Sanae-chan. As she looked at the trio, Kiriha thought of something and called out to Koutarou.

"So, why do you want to see this movie, Satomi Koutarou?"

"You already know why. I love Kabutonga too."

"And you have no other reasons at all?"

She whispered the last part so that only Koutarou could hear. At the same time, Kiriha held her hand against her chest. Koutarou knew very well what that gesture meant. After a dozen or so seconds of silence and three cheek scratches, he answered with an embarrassed look.

"Well...I can't say that I don't."

"I see."

Kiriha's answer was simple, yet her expression was very bright, with deep emotion lying beneath it. Realizing what that emotion was, Koutarou looked away reflexively. She was far too bright to look at directly, and he was troubled by the fact that the same emotion existed within him.

"Hmmm." Kenji gave Koutarou a cold stare. He hadn't heard what the two were talking about, but it was easy to imagine the exchange of emotions going on based on how they were behaving.

"Ohh?" Shizuka also gave Koutarou a cold stare. She felt the same as Kenji, but with a hint of envy or an intention to do the same later.

"Mmm." Only Sanae-chan had a different reaction. Unlike Kenji and Shizuka, she could directly feel Koutarou's and Kiriha's feelings, which was why she had a question. "Say, Koutarou..."

"Hm?"

"Why are you being so stubborn when that's how you feel?"

Koutarou's and Kiriha's spiritual energies were gently intertwining, giving off a warm aura. There was no need whatsoever for him to look away. In Sanae-chan's opinion, he should be pulling Kiriha in for a kiss.

"I have my own circumstances to consider."

"Circumstances you say... Hmm..."

With Koutarou's attention directed at her, their spiritual energies started to intertwine. The result was an aura not much different from the one between him and Kiriha, so she gave up on pursuing any more questions.

"Boys have it tough, huh?"

"You can say that."

Koutarou looked away again. However, spiritual energy was still floating around Sanae-chan, so she reached out to touch it with a soft smile.

"This is unfair..." Kenji muttered.

"Now, now, Mackenzie-kun, let's just enjoy the movie today!"

Kenji looked a little unhappy as Shizuka pushed him into the fifth theater. Koutarou wasn't the reason they'd come to the cinema, and the movie was about to begin.

"Wait, hold on! I'm coming too!" Sanae-chan borrowed a cushion for children at the entrance to the theater, and hurried after the two. Behind her were Koutarou and Kiriha.

"We should go too," Koutarou noted.

"Yeah."

They walked after the other three. Shortly afterward, Kiriha intertwined her arm with his and pulled herself closer.

"Ah...uhm..."

Koutarou thought about stopping her for an instant. But before he did, he recalled what Sanae-chan had said, as well as what had happened in the past, ten years ago. And he reconsidered.

"Yeah, well, okay..."

"Hehehe."

Kiriha noticed the conflict within him, which caused Koutarou's expression to

rapidly change, but she simply squeezed his arm tighter.

Once their respective movies ended, the groups reconnected and headed for an amusement park. Three minutes from the movie theater was an amusement park famous for its cat character. However, said cat wasn't what the group was going there to see. Instead, they were headed for the park's new attraction.

"Satomi-saaan, can't we go somewhere elllse?" Yurika whined.

"What are you talking about when we've come this far? We all agreed on making memories for the summer," he answered.

"But what's the point in going to get scared?!"

The attraction in question was a haunted mansion. It was a realistic one that used an abandoned hospital as its theme and had gotten rave reviews. It had even come up in discussions between Koutarou and the girls, so there was no reason not to go when the opportunity presented itself.

"You say that, but you're always fighting zombies and the like," Theia quipped.

"Real zombies don't try to scare you!" she protested.

That said, it wasn't like everyone was happy about their choice of activity. Namely the cowardly Yurika. She was throwing a tantrum over visiting the haunted mansion.

"Why do the zombies and ghosts in these places hide around corners?!" she demanded.

"Because it's their job."

"The undead don't need jobs!"

"Quit complaining about stupid things and come over here already!" Koutarou insisted.

"Noooooo! I'm going to get killed! They're going to eat meeeeee!"

"Cut it out. People are listening."

"But... Buuut..."

Yurika desperately resisted with tears in her eyes, but in the end she was no match for Koutarou's strength and was dragged along. Kotori and Nalfa watched over the noisy pair. They couldn't all go into the haunted mansion together, so they had split into groups of four.

"Kou-niisan isn't showing any mercy today," Kotori said with a bitter smile.

She'd had a similar experience once before. Kotori was an introvert, but it used to be worse before, and when she couldn't muster the courage and shied away from doing something, Koutarou would grab her hand and pull her along. That was technically the right call, but the problem was that she didn't get the time to mentally prepare. Since this was their chance to make memories during their last summer vacation of high school, it was the right choice to pull Yurika along. Once she participated, she would be able to look back on these memories with everyone else.

That said, as a coward, it was a big trial for Yurika.

"Haaah..." In contrast, Nalfa left out a small sigh. As she did, she stared at the palm of her hand, then looked back at Koutarou and Yurika.

Seeing that, Kotori grinned. "Nal-chan, are you thinking that maybe you should have said that you're scared?" Kotori asked, causing Nalfa's expression to freeze over.

Nalfa hurriedly denied it. "Not at all!"

"No? Really?"

"Uh, well, I... Maybe a little..." She blushed in embarrassment at Kotori's questioning and nodded. Like Kotori said, she felt a bit of regret. She was more on the scared side too, but she'd endured it for the sake of everyone making memories. However, if she'd been like Yurika and thrown a tantrum, maybe Koutarou would have pulled her by the hand too.

"If you act stubborn around Kou-niisan you're only going to lose out. He can be pretty careless, so unless you say something seriously strange, he'll overlook it. Showing your emotions is okay." Based on Kotori's experience, that was a fact. Koutarou would forgive and laugh off anything unless it was particularly mean. He wouldn't mind some selfishness or pranks. In fact, even though Yurika

was scared and crying, he didn't think any less of her.

"That's only something you can say as a childhood friend. Normally, a girl doesn't want to look bad in front of the boy she likes..." Nalfa disagreed.

Kotori might have been right, but that was merely as a childhood friend. Other girls would want to show the boy they liked their cute side.

"I know how you feel, but it's not like you want to stay just friends, right? Are you really going to push forward while hiding the real Nal-chan?" Kotori pressed.

Nalfa's goal should have been to form a bond stronger than that of a childhood friend, so Kotori felt like Nalfa had to be able to do anything a childhood friend would.

Nalfa nodded timidly. She agreed that Kotori was making a good point, but... "That's... I don't think it would work..."

"Then you will need to show off. Besides, you have to aim for more than that." Kotori nodded over her shoulder and pointed at Yurika, who was clinging to a streetlamp by the entrance of the haunted mansion, resisting as best as she could.

"Satomi-san, you pervert!"

"Yurika, you should have tried that plan sooner. After all the screaming you've done, it's not going to work. Look, the cast are wearing forced smiles," said Koutarou.

"Oh nooo!"

"Just give up already. You can't escape anymore."

Although their voices didn't reach all the way to Kotori and Nalfa, it was clear that it was more than just an exchange between friends.

"You can't afford to be picky about methods," Kotori concluded.

"I'll... I'll do my best..."

Despite the disgraceful behavior, Yurika and Koutarou's relationship was unharmed. Their relationship was so sturdy that an incident of this level was no

concern. If anything, it seemed to be bringing them even closer. Nalfa was aiming for a relationship like that, so she didn't have the time to be reserved.

Yurika continued her performance even after entering the haunted mansion. It was designed to look like an abandoned hospital, and she was fearfully walking down a hallway dimly lit by exposed light bulbs.



"Why is it like this? Ghosts suddenly attack and the light bulbs are blinking."

"That's what their business is. The blinking light is probably not a real light bulb, but an LED."

"I know that! But it slows down my reaction, which is scary!"

Several paranormal phenomena had already happened, and Yurika's knees were buckling from the repeated attacks by the undead. She'd been scared even before entering, but her legs were now shaking and she was close to her limit. What scared her the most was a ghost or zombie appearing while the lights were flickering. They would attack when the lights went out, but even then, there was still the emergency lighting, so it wasn't pitch-black. Of course, they were wearing dark clothes and were practically invisible, so when the lights came back on, they were right in front of the visitors. The repeated use of this tactic was close to making Yurika throw in the towel.

"You look calm, Kou-niisan. You don't mind this kind of thing?" Kotori asked, walking up to him. Since it was dark, she had to get close to see his face, and her expression was rather stiff. That was unusual for her, so she was probably scared.

"No. They're not real, and it's easy to tell when they'll come," Koutarou answered with a shrug.

"You can tell?" Kotori asked with wide eyes.

"Well, for example, they'll be coming from the left now."

At that, there was a loud sound.

"Gyaaaaaah!"

"Eek!"

An impaled human jumped out from the pillar on the left side, and Yurika and Kotori screamed in surprise.

"I see. You would be troubled if you couldn't tell, Koutarou-sama," Nalfa said with a smile next to Kotori. But even as she did, she was holding a hand to her chest, so she must have been surprised too.

"You can call it an occupational disease." Koutarou was calm and kept his eyes forward as the impaled human moved back behind a pillar. It was an animatronic that automatically scared anyone who walked past. He wasn't surprised because he'd heard the sounds of it activating before it showed up.

"Is being a legendary hero an occupation?"

"Maybe commander is the occupation."

"Ah, you have a point."

Koutarou's wealth of experience was holding him back and preventing him from being scared by anything in the haunted mansion. He could hear the sounds of any mechanisms in play and feel the presence of any performers who were hiding. He tried to hold those senses back to enjoy himself, but much of it was unconscious.

"But that video before surprised me. The one where a person's face was coming out of the wall," he noted.

"Ahaha, not even you could do anything about that, Koutarou-sama."

"There's that, and the real deal would probably scare me."

The zombies and ghosts here either had the aura of normal humans or were animatronics with no aura. Because of that, they didn't feel as realistic to him.

"That's not true. Satomi-san doesn't get scared by the real things either," Yurika said with a reproachful stare. She was unhappy that she was the only one who was frightened.

"Well, that goes for you too," he replied.

"Yes, but..."

A legendary hero and magical girl were practically fated to have a weak reaction to real ghosts and zombies.

"But I do get surprised when you suddenly scream," he added.

"That's nothing like this!"

"By the way, you seem rather calm, Nalfa-san," said Koutarou. "Are you okay with this kind of thing?" He had noticed that Nalfa's aura was strangely calm.

Yurika's and Kotori's auras were disturbed any time there was a scare, but that wasn't the case with Nalfa; it was just slightly more disturbed than usual.

"Ahahaha, it looks like there's a slight difference between what the Japanese and Forthorthians are scared of. So the atmosphere doesn't have the same connotations. Sure, it's scary when it's dark and they suddenly appear..." Nalfa explained with a wry smile. The way people felt fear was in large part due to differences in culture. And that difference was more pronounced with people from another planet. For example, if a ghost dressed in white stood under a willow tree, Forthorthians would wonder what it was. The Japanese knew about the connection between ghosts and willow trees, so they would feel fear.

"Well, you'll eventually be immersed in our culture like Theia and the others," he warned her.

At first, their sensations had been different from Earthlings too, but that wasn't the case anymore. Over time, that problem had been resolved.

"Does that mean...that you want me to be scared like the others?" Nalfa asked.

"Well, that would mean that we could enjoy it together."

Rather than looking around with interest, she would be able to enjoy the attraction the way Yurika was. In that sense, Koutarou did want her to make a racket.

"Then I will do my best to become like that," she stated.

"You want to be scared?" he asked.

"Yes." Nalfa understood what Koutarou was trying to say. Being able to share the same moments and experiences as everyone was what she wanted more than anything.

Yurika, however, disagreed. "You should reconsider! I mean it! Being happy about being afraid just isn't a thing!" Perhaps she simply hadn't realized its value.

"But I—"

"Ah." Koutarou noticed something and started to warn them, but before he

could, the mechanism moved. The dinner on top of the table transformed into a dead body, making skillful use of lighting to conceal the change.

"Gyaaaaaa?!" Yurika jumped and ran to hide behind Koutarou's back.

"Noooooo!" Kotori raised her voice and held her chest. Although she'd been surprised, she hadn't really jumped. Her true introverted nature showed itself.

"Yooowww!" This time, even Nalfa was surprised. Since it was a jump scare, Forthorthians could be startled too.

Oh, I just... At some point, Nalfa had grabbed Koutarou. It wasn't something she'd done intentionally; it had been purely on reflex. However, she was happy that she'd been able to do it, and cheered in her mind as she continued holding on to him.

In total, there were three Sanaes. There were Sanae-chan and Sanae-san, who shared a soul and body, as well as Sanae-Oneechan who came from another world. Next to Koutarou at the moment was Sanae-Oneechan.

"When you three split up, it's awfully unfair."

"Ehehehe, that's three times the value!"

Since they could use their psychic powers to share information, Sanae-Oneechan could share what she experienced with the other two, which meant they could visit three attractions at the same time.

"I'm watching a show while riding a coaster at the same time I'm racing here!"

Koutarou and the others were split into three groups at the moment. They were trying to make memories, but they didn't have the time to fully accommodate everyone's wishes, so they had set up times to go their own ways.

"Ohohoho, can you really focus like that?" Theia said in a somewhat arrogant way.

Koutarou was currently at the attraction that took up the most area in the theme park: the go-kart racetrack where they could ride miniature cars and

enjoy a real race. The four participants were Koutarou, Sanae-Oneechan, Theia, and Clan. As a competitive person, Theia loved races, so she'd been waiting for this moment.

"Racing is fierce," she said, her eyes glinting. She was aiming for the win.

"Hehehe, I've got a plan for today! I'm going to set the track record!" Sanae, meanwhile, loved festivities, so she was planning to win. But it was unclear if she was that serious about it.

"So, they have deliberately shrunken race cars... What an interesting idea." Unlike the other two, Clan was interested in the karts themselves. Her eyes were sparkling as she examined a nearby one from different angles. She loved tinkering, so miniature race cars were right in her wheelhouse. "At this size, it should be easy to prevent accidents."

The group before Koutarou and the others passed by in their karts. The karts' top speed was very limited, as even then, they moved at around the speed of a quick bike, so when it came to safety, they only needed to account for that. The racetrack was cushioned with discarded tires as well, so even if someone crashed into them, it wouldn't do any damage. This was more than enough for the speeds the karts were going.

"At these speeds, even if you run off the course, you won't end up getting blown away. At the same time, the perspective is so low that it feels very fast. What a wonderful mix of entertainment and safety!"

The speed was low, which might have felt boring, but there was a trick to it. Compared to a bike or car, the driver was very close to the ground. Because of that, it felt like the karts were going more than twice as fast. The center of gravity was also low, making it very hard to flip the karts over. Those innovations created an attraction where one could easily experience the feel of racing.

"Which means that I can just keep the pedal to the metal!" Theia cried.

"Yeah! Pedal to the metal!" Sanae agreed.

The pair with no consideration for the consequences was already getting excited. Their eyes were sparkling with their intent to set a new track record.

"You two better not overdo it. There might be no risk to life or limb, but if you crash into the tires, they'll still have to do maintenance on the go-kart," Koutarou warned them, glancing over at Clan just in case. She nodded in agreement; it seemed he was correct.

"I know that! Why don't you believe in your princess?!" Theia replied.

"Boo! You're always so serious!" added Sanae.

"Are they going to manage this okay?" Koutarou looked worried.

"Now, now, Veltlion. They won't be like children forever," Clan attempted to console him. Since they were here, they might as well enjoy themselves before going home. It was a mindset that she had gradually started to learn.

Before long, it was Koutarou and the others' turn. After putting on some protective gear, they each climbed into a go-kart. The vehicles were arranged in a square, with Clan and Sanae at the front, and Koutarou and Theia in the back since they were good at these sorts of things.

"This time has finally come!" Theia said.

"But I'm the one who's going to win! I'm definitely going to be first!" Sanae proclaimed.

"I won't let you! It seems you might have some sort of plan, but I will pull past you in the blink of an eye!"

Sparks flew as Sanae and Theia exchanged looks while the operator headed for the front of the track. It might have been a small-scale version of a racetrack, but they still used a signal and flag at the start for the atmosphere. When the signal turned green, the flag would swing down and the race would begin.

"Are you all ready?"

A different worker who had stayed close did a final check for Koutarou and the others. They'd already gone over the controls and put on their seat belts. The last step was to see how they were feeling.

"We're okay. Please start the race," Koutarou told him.

"I understand. Have a good time!"

The worker stepped off the track and signaled to his partner by the starting line that everything was ready to go.

"I'm beginning to get worried." Clan looked back with an anxious expression.

"Oh, yeah, you've never really driven anything yourself."

"Still, automating the controls would be rather dull." Clan tended to remotely control or autopilot vehicles, so she was a little nervous about driving one manually. But it wasn't like she hated it. Handling a simple machine like this was fun in its own right. It was similar to building a vacuum tube radio or amplifier.

"Just drive the way you like," Koutarou advised her.

"I didn't expect you to say something so kind."

"It goes against my morals to mentally destroy a competitor before a match."

"I don't hate that side of you."

Huh?

That was when Koutarou realized that the tone of Clan's voice was slightly different from normal. He tried to look at her face again, but just then the signal for them to prepare for the race rang out over the speakers and the worker at the starting line raised the flag. In the end, he was unable to check her expression.

Theia took off as soon as the flag swung down. Her excellent reflexes and good timing put her half a kart ahead of Koutarou.

"Victory goes to those who make the first move!" she cried.

In a race, the other karts became obstacles, so being able to pull out to the front at the start was exceedingly effective. Although it was initially only a half kart's difference, by the time they rounded the first corner, Theia was ahead.

"You're pretty good, Theia!"

"From here on, you will only be staring at my back!"

This is bad. Falling behind at the start hurts... Koutarou used his driving skills to follow the other three, but Theia was blocking the route that would have been easiest for him to use, so it didn't work out as well as he'd hoped.

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"Still, this isn't looking good, Koutarou," said Theia.

"Why not?"

"Sanae is faster than expected!"

"What?!"
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Koutarou was in a position where he'd need to overtake everyone one at a time, so he was strictly looking at Theia's back at the moment. But at her words, he looked farther up ahead and saw Sanae racing off.

"That girl... Now she's really done it!" Koutarou was astonished when he realized what Sanae was doing.

"What do you mean?!"

"Sanae is using her Spirit Vision to find the fastest route! I don't know whose it is, but at this rate she might set a new track record!"

Sanae was using her psychic powers to race. A driver's spiritual energy was left on both the kart and the track. She had picked out the spiritual energy of an excellent driver and perfectly read their controls to imitate them. The way she handled the steering wheel, braked, and even shifted her weight was that of a pro. Normally, even if one could read the route and controls a person took, it would still require the skills to copy it. However, Sanae-Oneechan had taken the other driver's spirit energy inside of her and turned their skills into her own. It was a method unique to her and toed the line of cheating.

"Grrr, so be it! Koutarou, let's call a temporary truce!" Theia yelled.

"What do you mean?!"

"Even if we fight her, we won't catch up! First we need to overtake her! We can settle things after that!"

Koutarou tried to pass Theia while she blocked him, which meant that neither of them was driving optimally. Even if they passed Clan, they wouldn't reach Sanae-Oneechan, so Theia suggested that they give up on fighting to chase after the leader.

"What will you do?! There's no time to think!" she cried.

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"You're on!" he agreed.
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Right now, they couldn't waste even the slightest bit of time. Koutarou started following Theia's route. She was pushing herself very hard to catch up to Sanae-Oneechan, causing the kart to shake roughly as she accelerated and took the turns at high speed. It was working, and they were gradually catching up.

Clan had never expected to win, so when Koutarou and Theia came flying in with extraordinary speed, she let them pass instead of trying to block them.

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"Sorry about this, Clan!"
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"Koutarou, you don't have the time to look away!" Theia warned him.

"I know, I know! See you, Clan!"

And with that, they passed by at the same speed they had come, or perhaps even faster.

"Be careful!" Clan saw them off and continued on at the pace she had before. Will they be all right driving like that?

The engine might give out, but the drivers would probably be safe.

"Hmm, unlike remote control with VR, there're all kinds of sensations."

Clan restarted her analysis of the entertainment and technological aspect of go-karts. In the past, she'd controlled an RC car in VR, and due to how low her perspective had been, the sense of speed there was even higher, but here, the sensations from the wind and acceleration put the go-karting experience above it.

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"Hmph, so you're here, Theia!"

"Hahaha, I've finally caught up, Sanae!"

"Then I'll be going on ahead!"

"Koutarou?!"
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[&]quot;Good, then follow me, my knight!"

[&]quot;As you wish, my princess!"

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"Our cooperation ends here!"

"Tsk!"

"I'll just run off while you're fighting!"
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"Hmm, as expected, RC and go-karts are their own unique experiences," Clan mused.

Forthorthe had all kinds of races of their own, but because of their technological advancements, they used normal cars or planes to race. Clan thought racing with small karts would make for a viable business.

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"I've caught up to you now, Sanae!"

"Then you leave me with no choice! Spirit Possession! Super Racer!"
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"Hey! Sanae's racing changed!"

"That's unfair, Sanae! That's going too far!"

"Ohohoho, you can just use magic then, Koutarou!"

"If I were to introduce this to Forthorthe...I suppose the kart track would come first," Clan said to herself. "I have a feeling that if I go for the RC, it'll be like the PAF all over again..."

Forthorthians had a great interest in Earth's culture, especially hobbies that the Blue Knight loved. So naturally, she thought about introducing go-karts and RC cars to Forthorthe, but based on her experience with the PAF, it would be best to sell it as an experience rather than a product.

"Get out of the way, Koutarou! I will win as myself!"

"You make it sound cool, but you're really pushing it!"

"Did I hear you say you want to lose?!"

"You're on!"

"That's more like my knight! Let us go!"

"Nyahaha! Spirit Possession Sanae has more to give!"

"Well, the hobby industry might unite and enter the market as well... I should consult with Elfaria-san first," Clan continued.

Elfaria's policy was that of a human and cultural exchange before a technological one. Karts and RC cars would fit that approach. If the promotion of this activity could keep pace with the industry, it should lead to a good outcome.

"This is my final gamble! I will turn that corner at full speed!"

"But you're too light; you won't be able to make it!"

"If I don't, we will lose! So I WILL take the corner!"

"Nyahaha, there's no use! There's only one route to take that corner at high speed!"

"Do it, Theia!"

"Haaaaaahh!"

"Oh?" Clan gasped.

That was when an accident happened in front of her on the last corner of the track. Theia had tried to turn at a reckless speed and failed, causing her to spin out. Koutarou and Sanae-Oneechan were also caught up in the accident and run off the track. All three crashed into the tire barricade.

"Oh my... Are you all okay?" Clan asked.

"Somehow... Ouch..." Koutarou replied.

"So I couldn't make the turn. A shame," said Theia.

"But it was fun! Let's do it again!" Sanae added.

"I should put in more safety measures for the people who tend to get competitive..." After confirming that the three were okay, Clan took the final turn at a safe speed and crossed the finish line in first place. The others ended up having to drop out.



When the three groups met back up, the first to notice the scratch on Koutarou's forehead was Maki.

"Satomi-kun, what's with that injury?"

Koutarou had gotten hurt while she wasn't there. That was a large problem for her. Instead of her usual kindly gaze, she had a pointed one as she stared at him.

"You don't have to look so scary. I just crashed my kart and rubbed against the tires."

Because the impact had been cushioned, a scratch was the worst injury he had. It could have been much worse if he had hit something else. Aside from that, nobody was injured. The racetrack was perfectly safe.

"I see. Then that's fine." Maki's expression softened as she learned the truth. She hadn't actually been directing her stern stare at Koutarou, but rather at herself for failing to see a risk for him, or perhaps at the managers of the karts. Fortunately, it was neither's fault.

"Maki-san, here," Harumi said with a smile and handed something to her.

"Ah..." Maki blushed as she received it. "Thank you, Sakuraba-san."

"Hehehe, please put it on him."

"Okay."

Harumi had given Maki a bandage. She was prudent, so she'd sneaked it into her bag. That said, such considerations made her think she needed a bigger bag, but she couldn't choose a cute one.

I'm still no match for her... Maki raised the white flag in her mind. She had decided to live a proper life, and her womanly charm was gradually growing, but she wasn't at Harumi's level yet. Sensing the gap between them in situations like this made Maki embarrassed.

"I know how you feel," Sanae-san whispered to Maki. They were similar in that regard. Like Maki, she only had the bare minimum in her bag. That was in part because Sanae-chan had been the one to prepare it. Not much could fit inside the straw-hat-shaped backpack chosen for its cuteness.

"What are you talking about?" Koutarou looked at them in confusion. Women's feelings were a mystery to him, and he didn't try to read their thoughts with psychic powers.

Maki smiled at him in return. "We were talking about how we still have a long way to go as women." She then plastered the bandage onto Koutarou's forehead. If possible, she wanted to have one in her bag next time.

"I don't think you have any problems with that." Koutarou tilted his head. Maki had noticed his scratch and her expressions had changed wildly, which Koutarou found cute.

"Ahaha, I'm happy to hear you say that...but I want to become a woman like Sakuraba-san, someone who has bandages in her bag just in case."

"Just having a cute bag with snacks and juice is no good!"

Maki and Sanae-san were putting up an unusually strong objection. It appeared they sensed danger and had no intention of relenting.

"But I should just have all that prepared myself so you girls can dress up cute." As a former member of the baseball club, Koutarou had carried a small first aid kit with him in his sports bag. If he were to walk around with that, the two girls could keep their bags as they were. He didn't need a cute bag in the first place, so it was a proper division of labor.

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"That's..."

"No, but..."
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Maki and Sanae-san were shaken by his words. He did have a point, but something felt wrong. But they couldn't really put it into words. As expected, it was Harumi who gave them a helping hand.

"You can't do that, Satomi-kun. You ruin girls' dreams with logical answers like that."

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"What, Sakuraba-senpai?"
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"It's not a matter of easy solutions. Isn't that right, you two?"

"Yes, I yearn for that fuzzy feeling around everything..." said Maki.

"It would be sad if Koutarou-san was hurt and he had to get a Band-Aid from his own bag," Sanae-san clarified.

"Is that really how it works?" Koutarou truly really didn't get it.

Isn't it the same no matter who's carrying the first aid kit?

While he tilted his head for the umpteenth time, people started cheering. The event everyone had been waiting for had finally begun.

"Ah, there it is! The parade!" Koutarou was the tallest and the first to see it. A dazzling parade was on its way, and that was what everyone had come to see. Koutarou and the others had simply been talking while they waited for it to start.

The amusement park had a parade for its characters. It also had a night parade during the summer. Not only did it avoid the sunlight, but it was also lit up in beautiful lights and the night sky was colored by fireworks. It was a step more extravagant and fantastical than the one during the day. Fireworks went up above the castle in the center of the park as the parade arrived, and the people around them started to cheer. Koutarou and the others did the same.

"It really feels like summer, watching fireworks like this," Koutarou observed as he looked at Harumi enjoying the fireworks. Suddenly, he recalled something. Two thousand years ago, he had gone out to the harvest festival. The person he had gone with had the same expression on her face as she watched the celebration.

"Is something the matter, Satomi-kun?" Noticing that Koutarou was looking at her with a smile, Harumi looked up at him in confusion. To her, it seemed like Koutarou was staring at something else.

"No, it's nothing. You just looked so cute, I couldn't help myself, Sakurabasenpai."

Lately, Koutarou had become comfortable speaking with Harumi like he did with others, in a way that was both praising and teasing. It was a special kind of speech he used only with those he was particularly close to. He was able to speak that way to her now because Harumi had been able to enter his heart.

"Jeez, you always dodge the question like that!" Harumi replied.

Koutarou had indeed dodged the question, but the way she puffed up her cheeks was without a doubt cute.

"More importantly, the first group has come out!" Sanae-san was more interested in the parade than Harumi and Koutarou's back-and-forth. When she caught sight of the group in the lead, her excitement exploded, and she called over the others.

"What do you mean by 'more importantly'?!" Perhaps because of the topic being dismissed, Harumi's words came out unusually harsh. But in the end her expression was cute, so there was no force behind it.

"Uh...sorry." Being introverted, Sanae-san's excitement died down a little.

Koutarou looked at the two and grinned. "That's not very mature, Sakurabasenpai."

"It's your fault, Satomi-kun!"

"Ahahahaha."

Seeing Koutarou laughing like it had nothing to do with him, Harumi fiercely objected. However, she was not good at expressing aggressive feelings, so it ended up being somewhat cute and funny instead. Koutarou looked at her and continued to smile.

I always admired things like this... Harumi thought to herself while continuing her objection. Laughing, getting angry, and fighting with the boy she loved over trivial things... Having become able to reach the dynamic she admired was bliss. Feelings also helped remove any aggression from her objection.

"So, who's in the first group?" Maki called out to Sanae-san.

With that, Sanae got more excited and spoke rapidly. "It's Mermaid Princess Lalaina! Do you think it's a campaign to promote the movie coming out next month?!"

Sanae-san was the shyest and most introverted of the three Sanaes, but right now her eyes were sparkling and her breathing was ragged. She was acting almost like Sanae-chan. Maki looked at her and nodded. Sanae was Sanae.

"Oh, how wonderful..." After explaining to Maki, Sanae-san turned back to

the parade. She was more passionate than usual.

Maki was curious about that and asked her, "Sanae-san, do you like the mermaid princess?"

"Huh?! Well, um...yes! I don't really know where she comes from, though!" Sanae-san was shaken for some reason and couldn't think of anything to say immediately. She then hurriedly nodded.

"The origin, huh? I think it comes from an old story from Denmark." Harumi gave Sanae-san a hand by displaying her mermaid princess knowledge. Her anger from before had already subsided. Then again, she wasn't the type to stew.

"I'm surprised you know, Sakuraba-senapi," Koutarou noted.

She even smiled at Koutarou as usual. "I may not read as much now, but in the past I loved books, especially ones with princesses."

"I see. Wahahaha!"

When she'd been weaker, Harumi had often spent time reading books. She'd read almost all the books the hospital library had to offer, and her knowledge about the mermaid princess came from that.

"By the way, there are mermaids in Folsaria," Maki commented. Unlike Harumi, her knowledge came from real experience.

"Is that true, Aika-san?!"

"Yes, although they're not as glamorous as that," Maki answered with a wry smile. She seemed to be enjoying herself. To Koutarou, she looked like a mischievous child.

"What?! Well, I guess that makes sense. There would be normal mermaids too."

In Folsaria, there were many species apart from humans. Koutarou had experience fighting against some of its hostile monsters too. However, not all were hostile toward people, and mermaids were one such friendly species.

"They make a living from fishing and underwater mining, among other things."

"Oh, so they can get gems and ores and such from underwater caves rather than just fish."

The mermaids in Folsaria didn't typically live as glamorously as those in picture books or amusement parks. There might be a few who did, but most lived and worked normally, which would be about the same as royalty and civilians for humans. Koutarou was impressed by this concept of normal mermaids.

"I guess society wouldn't work if there weren't normal ones." Harumi nodded profoundly.

"I didn't want to know that." Sanae-san, on the other hand, was a little disappointed. Her excitement had peaked with the appearance of Mermaid Princess Lalaina, so learning the truth was a bit of a shame.

"Haaah! I finally made it out!" came a cry from within her.

That was when Sanae-chan astral projected herself from Sanae's body. She seemed to have been choking as she took deep breaths.

"Huh, I was wondering where you were! So, you were still inside your body..."

When it came to situations like this, Sanae-chan was always jumping up and down in excitement. Since she was previously nowhere to be seen, Koutarou had figured she was somewhere else.

"Her will was so strong that I couldn't come out," she explained.

"Huh, she loves the mermaid princess that much?" Koutarou said with a wry smile.

Two souls inhabited Sanae's body, but they weren't completely separate, as they shared a portion of it. So when the will of one was too strong, the controlling force was so powerful that the other couldn't astral project. Sanaesan's fixation with the mermaid princess had prompted that block, but once Sanae-san had calmed down a little, Sanae-chan was able to come out.

"No, she doesn't really love the mermaid princess," Sanae-chan replied.

"What?! Sanae-chan!" Sanae-san cried.

"Hm? What do you mean?" asked Koutarou.

"Well, it's not like she hates her, but there's something else she's after."

"Stop! Don't say any more, Sanae-chan!" Sanae-san was panicking, reeling in her astral projection to chide Sanae-chan up close. It must have been an inconvenient topic for her, since she was desperate.

"I don't mind, but then you have to ask him yourself. I won't ask in your place, you know?" Sanae-chan calmly responded. Her words and stare seemed to have a hint of mischievousness.

"Ugh..."

It appeared Sanae-chan was right on the mark, which left Sanae-san shaken. However, Sanae-san had been so fixated on the matter that Sanae-chan hadn't been able to come out for a moment, so she eventually started speaking with a heavy tone.

"Um, Koutarou-san, I want to ask you something..." she began, though she didn't look at him. She was embarrassed and was looking away, blushing.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Um..." Sanae-san stopped for a good few seconds before continuing. "I want you to help me take a picture. I'm short...so...please let me ride on your shoulders..."

Sanae wanted to take a picture of the parade, but she wasn't very tall, so if she tried to take one, it would only end up showing the crowd. But if she were to astral project and take the photograph, it would be viewed as a paranormal phenomenon. That was where Koutarou came in. He was tall, so if she sat on his shoulders, she would be able to get a wide shot without the crowd blocking the view.

"You could just casually ask me without reservation," Koutarou noted, accepting her request and crouching down. Sanae-chan rode on his shoulders on a daily basis, so it was nothing special.

"Right? You'll only lose out if you're stubborn," Sanae-chan added.

"Well, a girl has a lot of things to consider..." Sanae-san slowly got onto Koutarou's shoulders with a blush.

After making sure that she was holding on tight, Koutarou stood back up. Sanae had gained some weight since having been admitted to the hospital, but she was still light. He had no problem carrying her.

"There they are."

Just then, the sparkling carriage carrying the mermaid princess passed by. It had been designed to look like a horse-drawn carriage, but it was actually a motorized vehicle. The mermaid princess waved a hand and her long tail at the crowd. Koutarou adjusted his position to make it easier for Sanae-san to take the picture.

"Um, Koutarou-san, could you turn a little more to the right?"

"The right? But the mermaid princess is in front of you."

"Like I said, she's not after the mermaid princess," Sanae-chan interjected.

"I don't know what's going on, but will this work?" Koutarou turned a little to the right, which put the carriage behind the mermaid princess's right in front of her.

"Sha... Shark Knight-samaaaaaa!!!"

In that moment, Koutarou heard what sounded like a scream from atop his shoulders. It was without a doubt Sanae-san's voice, but it was so different from how she normally behaved that Koutarou was taken aback.

"That's Shark Knight, the one she's after. He's a villain who appears in Mermaid Princess Lalaina."

"I see... I'm starting to get it."

The Shark Knight was a young man wearing armor made from scales. Sanaesan had been so excited because she knew he would be in the parade. And she'd mustered her courage to ask Koutarou for a favor because she wanted to take a picture of him. The reason for that was clear: Shark Knight was handsome in both the story and the parade.



"Koutarou-san, can you slowly turn, please?" Sanae-san instructed him while excitedly snapping picture after picture. Considering how shy she normally was, this was unusually proactive of her.

"Sure, leave it to me." Koutarou slowly turned to keep up with the carriage that Shark Knight was on. Now that it was easier for Sanae to take pictures, she didn't stop. He continued to help her for a while. There were several other handsome characters in the parade, and because of that, the photography session continued for over ten minutes.

"I'm not one to say, but...you have a really childish side to you." Once Sanaesan was done taking pictures, Sanae-chan gave her an exasperated look.

"You meanie, Sanae-chan! You know how I feel!"

"That's the most childish part..."

It was complicated, but Sanae-san's love for handsome characters was just a hobby. She had another man she loved. Or, more accurately, to her that person was a sparkling handsome man too. Like Sanae-chan, she could see other people's spiritual energy and feelings, and appearance meant next to nothing to her in reality. But she was more particular when it came to the beauty of their spiritual energy and feelings, so the difference was minimal. She loved sparkling, beautiful souls.

"I can kind of understand that too." Harumi happily smiled as she looked at the two.

"Huh? I didn't think you would be interested in handsome people, Sakurabasenpai." Koutarou's eyes opened wide. He hadn't expected something like that to come from Harumi's mouth.

"Hehehe, all kinds of things happened between me and Baron Demon, after all."

"Oh yeah, that did happen."

The hero show at the shopping street was always shorthanded. Koutarou and the others had helped them out before, resulting in Koutarou playing the villain Baron Demon. Meanwhile, Harumi had played the role of the young woman he

captured with the intent to marry.

"But, senpai, the baron wasn't handsome."

"The premise is that he is."

"Oh, so that's why they put on makeup and accessories for me!"

"You're talking about when Satomi-kun was in the hero show, right?" At the time, Maki had still been opposing Koutarou and the others, so she'd only heard about it later.

"I have a photo of it, so I will show you when we get back," Harumi promised.

"I look forward to seeing Satomi-kun in his handsome role."

"Just don't expect too much," Koutarou warned them.

"Don't worry, you're handsome enough as you are right now, Satomi-kun. Isn't that right, Sanae-san?"

"Yes."

After getting along with Koutarou and the others, Maki had learned that nothing good would come from holding herself back. By fixating on being their enemies, Maki had missed several fun events. That's why Sanae-san thought that she should pursue her love of handsome men as much as she wanted, because a day would surely come when she could happily talk about today's events.

The amusement park that they had all gone to had a large public bathhouse in it. After playing their hearts out, they went there to wash off the sweat. Its main selling point was that it was a natural hot spring from a thousand meters underground, and it was said to be kind to the skin, making it popular with the women. Having sniffed out that rumor, the girls in the group insisted that they go on their way back.

"Well, it's not like we hate baths." Kenji looked over at Koutarou as he washed his hair.

His friend was in the process of washing his body, so he was covered in bubbles. "I was surprised. I didn't imagine this sort of thing would be next to an amusement park."

"That's just a preconceived notion. Apparently, you can get a hot spring anywhere in Japan if you dig a thousand meters down."

"Seriously?!" Koutarou exclaimed in surprise, and Kenji calmly nodded.

"Yeah, if you dig that far."

Famous hot spring areas near the surface were abundant, but since Japan had a lot of volcanoes, it was relatively easy to dig up a hot spring if one went deep enough. That said, there were always exceptions, so one should conduct a proper survey before actually digging.

"So if you have the money and the facility to attract customers, you can build a public bath next door and make bank," Kenji explained.

The problem was having enough land and money to build one in the first place. It cost a lot just to secure a site and conduct an exploratory survey. If the amusement park didn't make enough profit, the hot spring wouldn't have been dug out.

"You could attract entire families on their way home," said Koutarou.

"There's a big hot spring in the Tokyo Bay area, right? That's not next to any particular facilities, but it attracts visitors to the area."

"So that's how it works," Koutarou replied in admiration as he washed his body. Once he was done, he thought of something and grinned. "By the way, Mackenzie, let's have an endurance competition in the sauna."

It was too dangerous for him to suggest it to anyone else, but Koutarou would always do these sorts of games with Kenji when they went to a place with a sauna.

However, Kenji looked exasperated. "You never grow up."

"So are you doing it or not?"

"I accept your challenge."

"Then let's go."

They made their way to the sauna. As they did, they could hear cheers from the women's side. To ensure proper ventilation, there was a slight gap between the wall and ceiling, which was where the voices were coming from. It was impossible to tell what they were saying, but the chatter was coming from girls.

"It sounds like they're having fun." Koutarou glanced over the wall before looking right back at the sauna. That was his main interest right now.

"You don't get how dangerous your situation is, do you?" Kenji asked him.

"It's certainly dangerous. There've been a lot of problematic incidents lately."

Koutarou shrugged as he opened the door to the sauna and the hot air from within blasted out. They went inside. Fortunately, no one else was there, and after sitting down, the pair continued their conversation.

"That's not what I'm talking about. You're planning on choosing one of those girls, right?"

"Well, yeah." Koutarou had no intention of hiding that. Because they were so precious to him, he wanted to face the problem head-on, and believed that he would have to choose only one.

"If you do, what do you think will happen to the faction they belong to?"

"Hm? What do you mean?"

"If I were to put it simply... For example, the balance between Mastir and Schweiger will change. It will be a serious matter no matter who you choose."

"Ah..."

That was something Koutarou hadn't considered. The only thing on his mind had been the girls themselves, not the factions behind them. There was the Forthorthian royalty, the next head of the People of the Earth, and Folsaria's archwizard. Many of the girls by Koutarou's side were in important positions. Shizuka and Sanae were just about the only exceptions. Choosing any of them would have a big influence on each organization. And Kenji was pointing out that the balance of power would change.

"I don't have any intention of—"

"You and the girls might not. But that's not how the people around you will feel. Do you think you can take any strict action against your wife's organization?"

Koutarou couldn't answer. That was certainly something that could happen. His choice would change society. Even if he didn't have any intention of showing favor, that's what would happen. It was a painful problem.

"Then you'd have to choose either Kasagi-san or Higashihongan-san—"

"That's not right. I could never choose one of them for a reason like that."

"And there you have it. Do you really think it's possible for you to choose just one of them? Without having any influence on society?"

"Ugh..."

"That's why... Well, you'll just have to think about it."

In the end, Kenji chose not to finish his sentence. But Koutarou could imagine what he wanted to say. It was a difficult problem and not something that was easy to come to a conclusion about. He ended up with a lot of things to think about, and in the end, he won the endurance competition.

Public baths typically only allowed the human body to enter, but there were exceptions to everything, and thankfully this public bathhouse was one of them.

"I'm glad the people here are so understanding."

"Yes, really. I'm glad I could get in with everyone."

Yurika and Nana spoke with smiles. Much of Nana's body had been replaced with artificial objects, and she was faced with the difficult problem of whether to remove her artificial limbs or enter the bath with them on. She didn't want to be unfair, so she had asked the manager, who gave her a direct response.

"This store does not ask its customers what their bodies are made of. Please enjoy our hot spring to your heart's content."

The girls had cheered because Nana had shown up and told them that story.

"However...this hot spring seems to be a little alkaline, so please come over for some maintenance afterward," Ruth said with a smile. Nana's artificial limbs were waterproof, but it was better to be safe than sorry. So it was good to let her wear spares while the other parts were being cleaned. "Thank you very much. I will come over later."

"Yes."

"I do feel some inconvenience with this body when taking a bath, but I'm glad the people here are so understanding, and to Yurika-chan and Ruth-san so that I can get in with everyone. Thank you very much."

Nana thanked everyone. Her gratitude was overflowing from her smile; she was like an angel.

"Please call for me whenever you need me."

"Yes, this is just a disciple's duty."

The other two didn't think that helping someone with a handicap whenever they needed it was a burden. Ruth saw it as her duty as a knight, and Yurika believed that was how a magical girl of justice should act. This was perfectly natural to them.

"But... But...it must be hard when you're in the military, right, Nana-san? You can't ask any of the men."

"Yes indeed. Even if they are comrades in arms that you can trust with your life, you must have some resistance to having a man help you bathe."

"Yes, to be honest. I'm a little scared...and worried about all sorts of things..."
Nana nodded. When she removed her artificial limbs, she was completely defenseless, so even if she trusted them, being around men was a little scary.
Meanwhile, she was also scared that they would lose interest if they saw her true state. It was a confusing problem.

"That said, I couldn't ask Princess Nefilforan."

The solution was to ask a woman, but Forthorthe had few women in the army. A frontline force like the one Nana was in had particularly few, and the only woman she was close enough to to ask for help in the bath was Nefilforan. However, Nefilforan was royalty, and it was hard to ask someone of that status to help.

"It shouldn't be a problem. You can ask me or Clan, so Nefi would help too," Theia interjected.

Theia and Clan had helped Nana bathe several times before, so she didn't think there was any need for Nana to be so reserved around Nefilforan, and Nana was certainly worth enough to behave that way. Surely, Nefilforan would love to help in the bath in order to get an invincible adjutant.

"Princess Theia and Princess Clan are special. I can't really put it into words, though."

"Well, it's not like I don't understand that. It's true there is a difference between me and Clan versus Nefilforan," Theia said with a smile. That feeling of difference might not last forever, but for the moment, it was the truth.

"Maybe it would be best to consult with Master." Ruth wanted to talk about the matter with Koutarou and come up with a solution. It might end up looking like preferential treatment, but Nana was worth it.

"Satomi-san, huh? Maybe I should..." Nana had a different thought. She was thinking about asking Koutarou to help her whenever they were together. Nefilforan's unit would often fight as Koutarou's support, so whenever she needed to bathe on the battlefield, Koutarou was often nearby. And even if she couldn't ask Nefilforan, she felt like she could ask him. Not to mention there was something else on her mind. She wanted to confirm if Koutarou, or perhaps men in general, would find her body, which had artificial parts, attractive.

"But... But...whenever I'm nearby, I will do something about it!"

"Thank you. You're so reliable, Yurika-chan."

"Ehehehehe, I need to act like a disciple from time to time too."

Right now, she was with Yurika and had slowly started to become more reliable. Moreover, Nana had started to understand that being able to rely on others at times was something to be happy about.

"By the way, Ruth, we've started bathing together again, but...we did stop for a while. Why was that?"

"I recall that it stopped shortly before Your Highness came to Earth. If I am not mistaken, I believe you said that you wanted to be more independent. But after losing to Shizuka-sama, you slowly restarted."

"Right, that was it; after losing to Shizuka, I realized that I shouldn't be getting so full of myself."

Just before coming to Earth, Theia had wanted to become independent and had reconsidered her relationship with Ruth. But after her defeat by Shizuka, her relationship with Koutarou and the others started improving and she came to the conclusion that friends were friends. If she would bathe with Sanae and the others, it was strange for her not to bathe with Ruth, so her relationship with Ruth returned to what it had been in the past.

"In the end, nothing good will come of being stubborn. Not for us, nor Nana, and probably not"—Theia looked over at the wall separating the men and women's bath—"for him either."

"He is a very serious person, so it will take time."

Ruth wiped her face and smiled. "Hehe, so it will."

The biggest shared problem between the girls was when Koutarou would resign himself to choosing one of them. However, seeing as he was so serious and reasonable, it would take a lot of time, like Ruth said. But to Theia, it seemed like he'd already reached a conclusion. After all, he was hesitating even now. In other words, he was looking for a way to make everyone happy, and he'd realized that choosing one wouldn't lead to that.

After talking about what had happened over summer vacation, Theia talked about the surprise party at the beach. In order to finish discussing Nana's bathing problem, it was a necessary story.

"I see... I'm sure it would be okay to leave everything to Layous-sama."

When Nana had ended up covered in mud while preparing for the surprise party, she'd asked Koutarou to help her get into the bath. That decision had been the right one, and Elfaria had nodded. If she'd been in Nana's position, she would have asked Koutarou too.

"But...what did Layous-sama do?"

Even if it was the right decision, Koutarou would have been troubled, so Elfaria had worried over the matter.

"He was apparently reluctant at first, but when she talked about how she was a little scared of other men and brought up the problems with security, he ended up agreeing."

"I see... So Layous-sama..."

Koutarou had gone against his principles for Nana's sake. That held a lot of meaning for Elfaria. Nana was older than Koutarou, and she had a severe handicap as well. While their handicaps were different, Nana was in more or less the same situation as Elfaria.

"He's not very honest, but don't you think it's time for you to be honest with yourself, mother?"

Becoming honest, in other words, meant relying on those like Nana.

Even so...I want to give him the warmth that he lost...and in order to do that...

It wasn't like she didn't want to rely on him like Nana, but Elfaria felt there was something only she could accomplish.

"Nothing good will come of being stubborn, mother!" Theia continued, too impatient to wait for an answer.

Elfaria smiled at her daughter. "Even so...I am the only one who could be Layous-sama's mother."

Elfaria knew that while Koutarou never let it show, deep down, his mother's death was still eating away at him. And she was the only one who could be his mother. That was what Koutarou marrying Theia would lead to. A big reason she wanted him to marry her daughter was that she believed she was the only one who could heal the wound hidden in his heart.

But Theia shook her head. "Then why not become both mother and wife?!" she boldly proclaimed while looking straight at Elfaria. She was serious.

"Huh..." Elfaria was left speechless. The idea of being mother and wife in one had never occurred to her. She'd only been thinking about Theia becoming a wife so that she could become a mother. "Hehe, I am envious of your ability to entertain such a reckless idea, Theia." Elfaria shook her head. Theia was only able to have such ideas because of her youth.

"Mother." That was probably the first time Theia had ever directed such a stern expression toward her elder.

"In the past, Empress Alaia also held herself back and stepped aside due to being logical. Will you do the same?" Theia knew how long a time and distance Alaia had traversed to meet Koutarou once more. She couldn't let Elfaria do the same thing. But since she didn't have the protection of Signaltin, Elfaria only had one chance.

"You've become so strong and kind, Theia." Elfaria knew why her daughter looked so strict. She cared about her that much, and she wasn't satisfied being the only one who was happy. There had to be another way. That was the deep and proud love of a daughter who wanted her mother to be happy.

"I would have preferred to be a child forever, but since mother is being childishly stubborn, I have no other choice."

"Phew..."

With Theia's powerful look on her, Elfaria finally resigned herself. She exhaled and smiled brightly, as if she'd gotten over something.

"You're right, Theia. As an adult, perhaps there are times when we need to be selfish like a child..."

Children were selfish. But those who were trying to be grown-up would hold it in. And adults needed to be able to reasonably manage both sides of themselves depending on the time and place. It wasn't healthy for somebody to either only do whatever they pleased or always hold it in. And most of all, the knight in blue armor whom Elfaria trusted more than anyone wouldn't allow such an unhealthy lifestyle. So she decided to stop being stubborn.

"Yes, please do." Theia happily smiled and nodded. This meant another rival joining the battle, so it might have been a negative for her, but she had no regrets. When climbing a mountain, blowing it up to make it easier to climb was foolish. If one loves the mountain, one must climb foolishly.

Afterword

Hello everyone, it's the author, Takehaya, here. Lately, the problem with my eyes has been resolved and much of my life has returned to normal. However, it's not all back to the way it used to be, and my room is a little dusty. Intraocular lenses aren't all-powerful, and it's hard for me to see between different shades of colors, so I can't see the dust until it piles up a bit. That's why I've taken to cleaning before I can see the dust as of late, haha. So anyway, I'm doing fine.

But enough about my recent situation, and on to this volume. This one contains three short stories from *Invaders of the Rokujouma!? Hercules!* as well as a newly written half volume. One of the short stories, as well as the half volume, centers around Theia and Elfaria, so it's a rather Forthorthian royal family-centered volume. And your impression of Elfaria in particular might change. Those of you who have read the volume, what did you think?

The next volume will be a continuation of volume 43. Maxfern has been revived, using Ralgwin as a sacrifice. Supporting him are the loyal Grevanas and the Gray Knight with an unknown purpose. Since they were unable to prevent his resurrection, Koutarou and the others will need to stop his attack in some way. Maxfern ignored the rules two thousand years ago, and there's no way he will follow them this time. Moreover, there's no script to follow now, so the battle will be exceedingly difficult. They will only get one chance.

After this, I will begin my work on the next volume. I will continue to do my best to write an entertaining story, so I hope for your continued support.

Ah, yes, I was going to talk about another thing. There is actually an English translation of *Invaders of the Rokujouma!?* At first, there was only the digital version with no print edition, but the sales of the digital version were strong, so there was a crowdfunding campaign to publish paperback versions. The goal was 50,000 dollars, which is around 7.5 million yen. However, that goal was easily reached in less than a day, and it ultimately hit 165,000 dollars—roughly

25 million yen. Thanks to this support, the paperback edition was published. Thank you very much.

Now then, there was an interesting reward for the campaign, which was to have dinner with the author. I didn't think it was going to happen, but there were two people who received the reward, with the backers coming to Japan. However, because of COVID, travel restrictions were imposed and the trip was in jeopardy. Two years later, they made the journey to Japan. I'm so glad the series is still going on (IoI). For the sake of anonymity, I won't write their names, but to introduce them, they were the student J-kun and the engineer J-kun. Both of their initials began with J. We went out to eat sukiyaki together. Since we couldn't understand each other, a staff member from J-Novel Club, who arranged the crowdfunding campaign, accompanied us to translate. A few people from HJ Bunko also came with us, so it was quite a large party, not to mention the restaurant was pretty expensive. I wonder if they were okay. During the meal I received questions that I answered, and I asked them things like what characters they liked. Ruth and Maki, if I recall. I also talked about inside stories for the characters.

For Ruth, I discussed unmanned crafts or what you would call drones nowadays. The method of using unmanned crafts to attack like Ruth did years ago is now something used in real wars, and I'm currently thinking about a new kind of special attack.

For Maki, I talked about her cat. Since she doesn't speak much for herself, I thought it would be best for her to have a pet to help portray her kindness. There's also the image of magical girls and witches having cats as familiars, which is why Snoozy was introduced.

I told them that since they'd come all this way, I considered talking about this series's secret, but since that might make the story boring to follow, I decided against it. I was very curious about talking with people from a different culture and how they saw my work. I had a very good time and learned a lot. Thank you to the JJ pair, and best wishes in the future. Thank you to all of my fans, not only from Japan but around the world.

During the dinner, I got a question from J-Novel as well, which was interesting, so I would like to bring it up here. It was as follows: the parallel

worlds in Rokujouma are in the structure of a mesh, where did that idea come from?

The idea for the mesh structure came from imagining a two-dimensional world. Inhabitants of a two-dimensional world would only be able to recognize width and length, not height. They might consider the third parameter to be a parallel world. Meanwhile, we live in the third dimension, so the fourth parameter might be like a parallel world. But in reality the third parameter is height and not a notion of a parallel world. So the fourth parameter might not be a sign of a parallel world either. But I decided to think of it as a parallel world. It's more convenient for the story that way (lol).

In comparing the second and third dimension, an idea was born. For two-dimensional people, the Big Bang happened vertically and horizontally, but it also happened heightwise as well, which is the direction they would consider parallel worlds. In that case, wouldn't the Big Bang be expanding in the fourth dimension too, which would be our parallel world? The idea is that just like space is always expanding, so, too, are the parallel worlds.

That leaves one final step. According to modern science, there are two ways for the universe to end: either it will expand infinitely or its expansion must reverse after reaching a certain point and return to being a single point. For this series, I chose the latter. It's hard to imagine something continuing forever. It also feels like it would use too much energy, and that contraction would apply for parallel worlds too, meaning they wouldn't just increase, but decrease too. In three-dimensional space there is a constant struggle between expansion and contraction, and right now expansion has the advantage. So parallel worlds split and merge, with splitting having the advantage, creating a meshed universe. And so the setup for *Invaders of the Rokujouma!*? was complete.

I wasn't sure I could give a proper explanation when I talked about it, but I'm sure it will be conveyed by writing it here. And that was my private message (lol).

Speaking of private messages, I've mentioned my X (formerly Twitter) before, but lately I've started a YouTube channel too. It's called Takehayaojisan and you can find it by searching for @takehayaojisan on YouTube. There you can find me streaming games. I'm approaching my late forties, and at this age my friends

are giving up games one after another. Well, they're forming families and having children, so it's only natural. In an attempt to resist, I want more people to enjoy the thrills of my games. In other words, it's a channel to make up for my dwindling comrades in arms. I would be happy if you would think of it as watching your friend play. I would be even happier if you subscribed (lol).

Next year will be the fifteenth anniversary of the novel and the tenth anniversary of the anime. In celebration of that, a Blu-ray with all of the episodes will be sold. With it you will be able to watch all of the episodes in one sitting by pressing the play button once. So let's all get excited for the anniversary next year!

I have just about run out of space, so I would like to give my usual thanks.

I offer my heartfelt thanks to everyone in the HJ Bunko publishing department and related companies for their help in publishing this volume, to Poco-san for the beautiful first colored illustration of Ceilēshu, to the JJ pair and J-Novel Club, who came all the way to Japan, and to everyone who purchased this volume.

Let us meet again in the afterword for volume 45.

October, 2023

Takehaya

Bonus Short Story

Ruthkhania

If someone asked who was the strongest in a war, it was very likely that Ruth's name would come up. She was great at making arrangements, and she was the one who created the path to carry out the plans Kiriha made. Without her, Koutarou and the others wouldn't be able to move. For the same reason, she was skilled at handling a large number of automatic weapons, and those under her command showed an almost artistic level of coordination. She was constantly able to display overwhelming power in both strategy and combat. Her ability to control the battlefield was worthy of being called "the strongest."

"For fourteen people, it would be best to go with a little less water than the recipe says..."

But right now, her invincible power was being put to use for cooking. Her abilities could even be used to make meals for a large number of people. While Shizuka and Kiriha surpassed her in making quality food for individuals, there was nobody who could cook for a large crowd better than Ruth.

"I'll help, Ruth-san." Koutarou came to help.

She gave him a happy smile but shook her head. "Master, I will handle the cooking, so why don't you spend your time leisurely with Her Highness?"

As the vice captain of the band of knights, Ruth had no intention of bothering her beloved captain and wanted to cook on her own.

"That depends on you, Ruth-san," Koutarou said.

"Huh?"

"If you think of yourself as nothing but my subordinate, I will leave everything to you. But if not, I will help."

While Koutarou felt like he might get in the way because of the difference in their cooking abilities, he didn't want to force everything onto her. Even if that's

what Ruth wanted, he couldn't let someone carry the burden all on their own. Even more so for somebody that he got along with.

"Ah...uhm...then, please help me..." After a mere few seconds of hesitation, Ruth blushed and nodded, accepting Koutarou's help. To her, he was far more than just the captain of her band of knights. She also wanted him to think of her as more than the vice captain. So she gladly accepted his offer.

"I understand. Despite how I look, I can handle myself around a peeler." Koutarou picked up a potato and skillfully peeled it with a knife. His skill surprised even her.

"Oh yes, I guess you know how to handle a blade," she remarked.

"Besides, two thousand years ago, everyone needed to know how to cook for themselves," Koutarou explained.

"So you returned better trained as a cook." Ruth smiled.

"It's mostly rough cooking, though."

Koutarou's culinary skills were from two thousand years ago. Most were techniques to be used while on a march, so it was more like the type of cooking one would do while camping, which meant it wasn't well suited to daily cooking. However, he could still help to prepare the ingredients.

"I will leave the cutting to you, Ruth-san."

"In that case, you can mash the boiled potatoes, Master."

"Good thing you still have more jobs suitable for me."

"There are a lot of things that require you to use strength in cooking."

"I'm in the middle of experiencing that."

"Hahaha..."

The pair continued to cook alone for a while. It only lasted until Sanae and Theia came to get a taste, but it was a moment that made Ruth happy.













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Invaders of the Rokujouma!? Volume 44

by Takehaya

Translated by Warnis Edited by Tess Nanavati

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