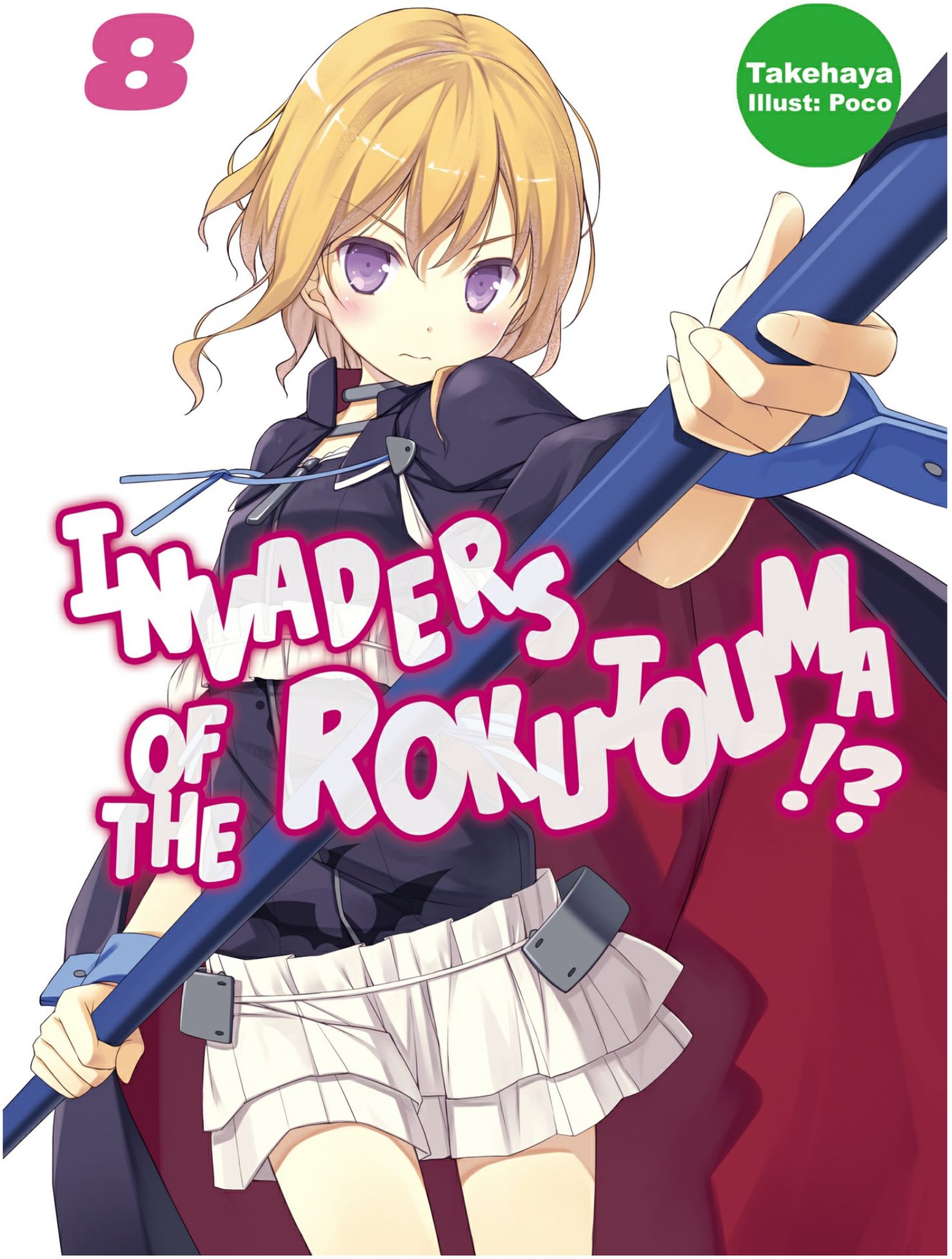
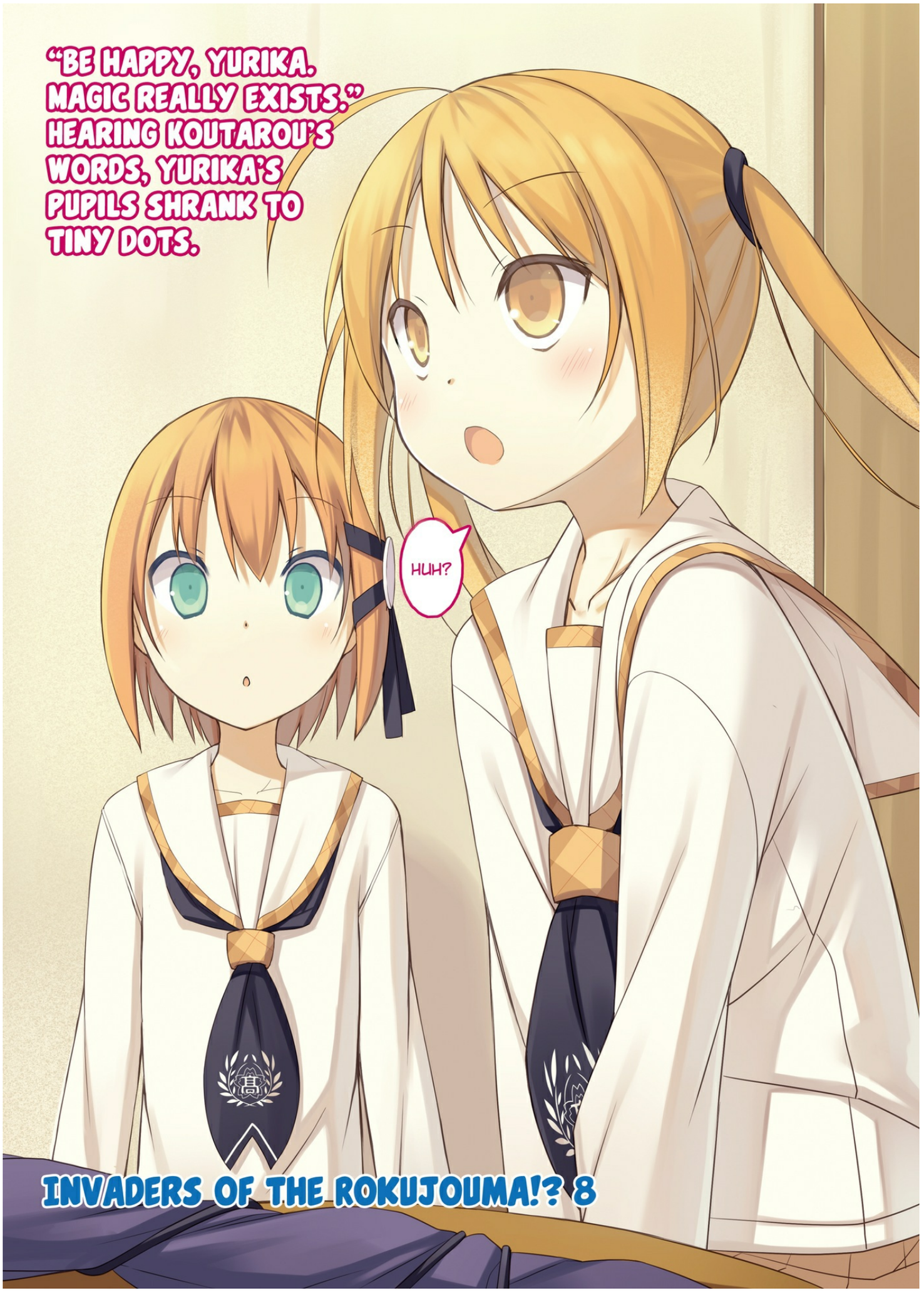
8

Takehaya
Illust: Poco



Invaders of the Rokujouma!?


"BE HAPPY, YURIKA. MAGIC REALLY EXISTS." HEARING KOUTAROU'S WORDS, YURIKA'S PUPILS SHRANK TO TINY DOTS.
HUH?
INVADERS OF THE ROKUJOUMA!? 8


1. THEIA CAUGHT A COLD?!
BLUSH
AA...
NADE
PAT
NADE
PAT
FWAAAH...
2. MAGICAL GIRL KIRIHA IS HERE!
WOULDN'T A MORE DIRECT APPROACH WORK BETTER?
NIYA
GRIN
NIYA
GRIN
A WHIRLPOOL OF LOVE AND HATE?!
A FULL SCOOP OF VOLUME 8 AS WELL!
3. SENPAI IS ACTING STRANGELY?
FIDGET
MO
JI
FIDGET
MO
JI
A-ACTU-ALLY...
4. SANAE IS CHEERFUL AS ALWAYS!
NOT AS MUCH AS ME THOUGH.
HA
HA
HA


KOUTAROU STANDS AT THE
CROSSROADS OF FATE...

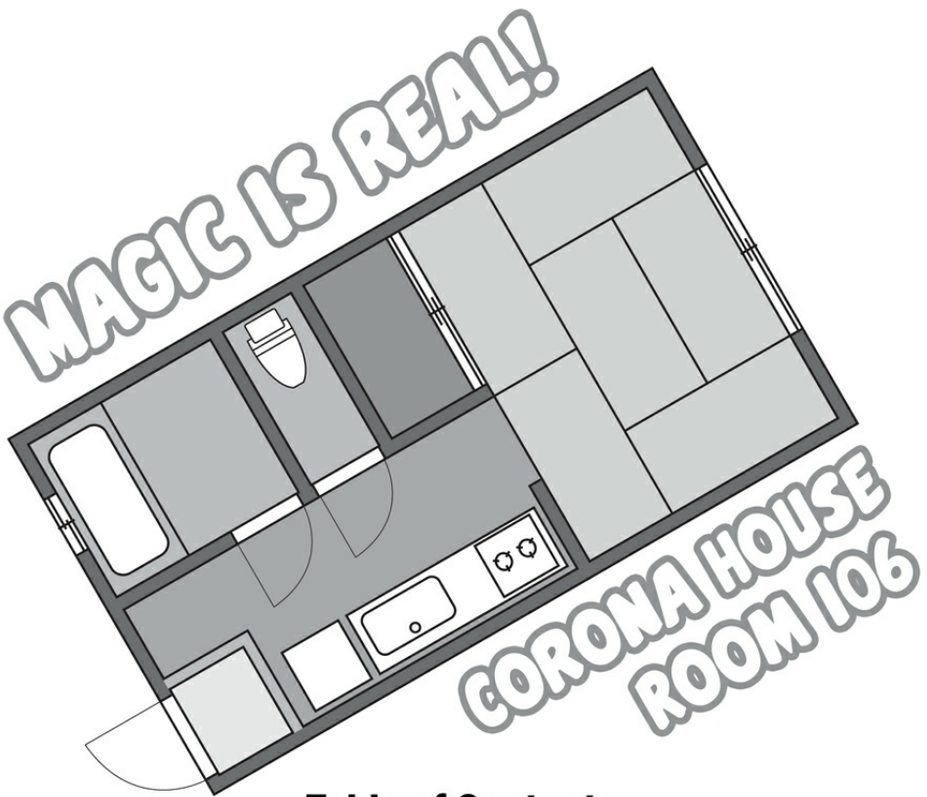


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An underground dweller seeking control of room 106 so she can use it as a base for a surface invasion.
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The Witches' Scheme

Sunday, January 31st

Several months had passed since Maki first came to Kisshouharukaze City.

During that time, she had been staying in a room of an apartment building. And though she'd been using it for months now, it still didn't look like anyone was living there. There was next to no furniture, and there were no clothes or any personal effects a girl her age would normally have. There was only a simple table and chair, and a bed to sleep in. It was a dull room, almost like a prison cell. The winter cold only served to make the room feel even more desolate.

"Come, Nightwalker!"

Maki's sharp voice echoed in the lonely room, and a blue light appeared before her outstretched right hand. The next moment, something mysterious happened.

The lights were off, and the room was dark. However, Maki's hand appeared even darker, and a deep indigo mist began to spread sideways from it. After a few seconds, the indigo mist that had grown over a meter in length turned into a staff.

This staff had been given the name "Nightwalker." A staff had the ability to amplify mana, making it a necessary tool for a magical girl like Maki. She grabbed the staff floating in the air and held it overhead.

"Magic Communication Gem: Activate. Open Channel."

Maki recited the words to activate a certain set of magical devices set up in the room. She had several like it, but this one in particular let her communicate with her allies from far away.

Responding to Maki's voice, the gems embedded in the walls began glowing. In total there were six of them: red, orange, yellow, green, blue, and purple.

With Maki in the center of the room, the glowing gems surrounded her. The gems were emitting a dark light similar to Maki's staff, but the light gradually grew stronger and eventually took the shape of a person. Girls wearing outfits matching the colors of the gems they stood before appeared one after another. The gems were convenient magical tools that allowed users to talk face-to-face by creating holographic images.

"Oh, Maki. Is that your new staff?"

Before her image fully stabilized, the girl in red called out to Maki. Maki lowered her staff and nodded at the girl.

"That's right. It took a while longer than I expected, but it's finally finished."

In her last fight with Yurika, Maki had sacrificed her previous staff. Nightwalker was the replacement that she had made herself.

"Navy-chan, you should've made a cuter staff."

The one calling Maki "Navy-chan" was a girl in orange. Unlike Maki and the girl in red, she had an angelic, bright smile.

"A staff is a tool for fighting. There's no need for fancy decorations."

Maki furrowed her brow in dissatisfaction. She didn't like being called Navy-chan.

"Your staff is dull, your room is desolate, and you have no makeup. Navy-chan, you're wasting your youth!" The girl in orange smiled as she pulled out something small from her bosom. "Navy-chan, use this! I accidentally bought an extra just yesterday, so I was thinking of giving it to someone anyway!"

The girl in orange tossed the item to Maki. When she did, it passed through the gem and came flying towards her. The magical gems also had the power to transfer objects if they were small enough. Maki snatched it out of the air and looked at it.

"Nail polish?"

"You're wrong, Navy-chan. It might look similar, but this is liquid lipstick. You're a girl after all, so you should look the part."

The girl in orange sighed. She was amazed at Maki's absolute indifference on

the subject.

“That should do the trick. Use it to make yourself a little cuter, Navy-chan. You’ve already got great features, so with just a little touch-up, I’m sure the boys won’t leave you alone.”

“That’s none of your business! I don’t want anything to do with a man whose attitude changes just because of some makeup!” Maki shouted in an irritated voice and tossed the lipstick aside.

Why would I want to hide how I really look?

Maki hated deceit and betrayal, so she scorned things like makeup and fashion. She considered them to be convenient methods of deception designed to make people look different.

“My, my...”

The girl in orange smiled wryly as she watched the lipstick roll across the floor.

“Navy-chan, you’re so steadfast.”

“What does it matter? I didn’t contact you to discuss this kind of thing!”

Maki irritatedly turned away from the girl in orange. She didn’t just hate being called Navy-chan. Maki couldn’t stand the way the girl in orange adorned herself with makeup and fashion.

“Calm down, Navy. You can’t make a proper report in that state.”

“I know, Purple.”

Admonished by the girl in purple, Maki closed her eyes and took a couple of deep breaths. When she opened her eyes again, she had returned to her normal self.

“I contacted you today because there are three things I wanted to discuss.”

“One is that your staff is finished, correct?”

“Yes. As you can see, it’s finally complete. I can now start taking action again.”

Maki had lost her staff in a fight with Yurika at the end of November. It had taken over two months to create a new one. During that time, she had been too

busy working on her staff to do much of anything else. But now that it was complete, she could return to her original mission.

“What’s the second thing?”

“That would be the main subject,” Maki said with a serious expression. “It seems the mana in that room—Corona House room 106—has greatly increased.”

“It’s... increased?”

The girl in purple’s eyes narrowed. They’d known each other a long time, so Maki could tell how the girl in purple was feeling just based on that subtle change in expression.

“Yes. I confirmed it via some passive analysis magic when I completed my staff. There are some fluctuations, so I can’t get a precise reading, but it’s increased by at least 30 percent overall.”

Maki had finished her new staff just yesterday, and the first thing she’d done with it was investigate the mana in room 106. That’s when she’d noticed the difference.

“You’ll have to wait for a more accurate analysis. It’s hard to examine without Rainbow Yurika and Satomi Koutarou noticing.”

In order to perform a thorough examination of the mana, Maki had to cast some powerful spells in the vicinity of room 106. That meant there was a pretty high risk of Yurika or Koutarou noticing. That’s why Maki was biding her time until a good opportunity presented itself.

“Navy, do you know the reason why the mana’s increased?”

“I do know of one possible cause.”

Maki carefully chose her words as she spoke. She wasn’t completely sure of what had happened herself.

“In the second half of January, they were performing a play at their school. Around the same time, there seems to have been a large-scale battle. I wasn’t there, but I could sense that Rainbow Yurika was using magic.”

“A large-scale battle?”

Without her staff, Maki's ability to sense magic had weakened. The fact that she could still tell something had happened even in her weakened state meant that it was probably serious.

"A few days afterward, I completed my staff and determined that the mana pool in room 106 had grown stronger."

"That battle does sound suspicious. Either their opponent was the cause of the mana increase, or they had no chance of winning without increasing the mana..."

"I'm thinking the same thing, Purple."

As far as Maki knew, Yurika had fought in two battles since Maki had lost her staff. Once at the amusement park by the coast, and once during the play. It seemed likely that either of those events was the trigger for the change in room 106, but considering the timing, Maki suspected the play.

"That said, we can't determine the exact reason with so many people gathered in that room. Further investigation is needed."

"Two foreigners and a woman with black hair. That's what you said before, right?"

"Yes. It's possible that any one of them could be the reason too."

Maki nodded at the girl in purple. That was when the girls in red and orange interjected.

"Maki, what about the martial arts expert?"

"Yeah. Wasn't there a ghost too?"

"I don't think there's much of a chance of either one of them being the cause." Maki shook her head at the suggestion. "A manafist or a lich would be one thing, but those two girls are just a normal martial artist and a ghost."

Maki hadn't sensed any mana from the martial artist or ghost in room 106, so she couldn't imagine either of them being the reason for the increase in the mana pool.

"Navy, regardless of who caused it, we need to investigate it as soon as possible."

“That’s the third thing I wanted to discuss. My new staff is complete and I’ve investigated what I wanted to, so I want you to let me do a more in-depth investigation now.”

Soon, the seven evil magical girls of Darkness Rainbow would launch an all-out attack. The battle for room 106 and control of the mana there was drawing near.

Up until now, Maki had been conducting her reconnaissance covertly. But now that she’d realized the mana had increased, she wanted to do a more thorough investigation. The risk for Maki would increase, but with the battle so close, she wanted to eliminate any uncertain variables. They couldn’t afford to fail like they had in the fight against Rainbow Nana.

“I agree. If a mere fraction of that mana was enough to fire off ten Inferno Fires, and the mana in question has now increased by 30 percent, I’d want to avoid a direct confrontation too.”

“Oh, that’s rare coming from someone like you who’s always itching for a fight.”

Maki smiled. The girl in red practically lived for the thrill of combat, and despite that, she was now agreeing to a more conservative approach.

“Don’t get me wrong. I still want to fight. I’m especially interested in a battle of great powers, but it’s no fun if the enemy is the one using them all.”

The girl in red wanted a fight where either both sides used the mana pool, or neither did.

“I can’t keep up with you.”

“That goes both ways.”

Despite saying that, both girls were smiling.

“I agree too. Our numbers are about the same, and there’s the mana to take into consideration, so it doesn’t look like we have much of a chance unless we wait for the right opportunity.”

The girl in orange agreed with Maki’s suggestion as well. The remaining magical girls followed suit.

“What about you, Purple?”

The only one who hadn’t voiced her opinion yet was the girl in purple, the most mature looking of the girls present. She looked at Maki discerningly.

“Navy, this isn’t about the investigation, is it?”

“Huh?”

Maki was caught off guard by the girl in purple’s question. And while Maki was stammering for a reply, the girl in purple exposed Maki’s true intentions.

“This is because you’ll end up fighting that man if you conduct a large-scale investigation, isn’t it?”

That man was the current owner of room 106, Satomi Koutarou. He looked like a normal boy at first glance, but he was the mastermind who’d been toying with Maki all along. He was also a powerful enough magician that he could repel her attacks, and he had access to the power of room 106. To the girl in purple, it looked like Maki was more interested in a fight with him than scouting or investigating.

“Yes, that’s right!”

Maki nodded and confessed to her true feelings. Part of that was because Maki hated lies and deception, but it was also because of the nature of the organization that was Darkness Rainbow. Their ultimate goal was to be able to freely use magic to realize their own dreams.

“If I could perform my investigation *and* fight that man, I couldn’t be happier!”

“Wow, Maki, look who’s talking.”

The girl in red smiled. Maki had laughed at the girl in red because she only wanted to fight, but in the end it was Maki herself trying to pick a fight. It was most amusing.

“I can’t agree to that. Your magic isn’t suitable for direct combat.”

“A direct clash isn’t the only way to fight. Have a little faith in me.”

“If you insist, but...”

Though she was still worried, the girl in purple relented. It was true that they needed a thorough investigation, and knowing that Maki wasn't planning on a direct confrontation was enough for her. She decided to leave the rest to Maki's discretion. Freely using magic to fulfil their desires was the Darkness Rainbow way, so Maki's desire to fight Koutarou had to be respected.

"Maki, if you're going to fight, make sure you win."

"Navy-chan, you can do it."

"Thank you, everyone. I'll bring good news with my next report."

With those words, Maki powered down the communication gems and the images of the other magical girls vanished.

"Heh... Heh heh heh..."

Maki's quiet laughter echoed in the otherwise silent room.

"Finally... Finally the time has come..."

Maki didn't care if she used a trap, blackmailed him, or fought him directly. She just wanted to give Koutarou a taste of defeat. She wanted him to experience it the same way she had.

"Don't think you can fool me over and over again, Satomi Koutarou."

Beneath her calm exterior, Maki was all fired up. During the past two months she had spent focused on making her staff, her feelings towards Koutarou had been brewing inside. And now the time to release those feelings had finally come.

"This time it's my turn. I'll make you regret crossing Dark Navy."

Maki felt more humiliated about being fooled than she did about losing in a fight. She scorned all forms of deception, and having it used against her burned her blood. All she could think about now was thoroughly beating Koutarou to a pulp and subjecting him to the same humiliation she had felt.

Maki put her strength into her empty left hand and made a fist, almost as if she was trying to crush Koutarou.

The High School Life of the Blue Knight

Monday, February 1st

It was tradition for the first-year students at Kisshouharukaze High School to take a school trip during their third term. It was a major event that rivaled the third-years' annual school excursion.

This year's destination was going to be a ski resort. With winter sports slowly losing their popularity, it was supposedly quite easy to book for a large group. The trip was scheduled to take place over three days and two nights, between February 3rd and February 5th. Since today was the 1st, the trip was right around the corner.

"Theiamillis-san, can you ski?"

"No. This will be the first time for me and Ruth."

"In our country, skiing isn't very popular."

"What about you, Kurano-san?"

"I've done it before, though I was a child then. Maybe I should teach you, Theiamillis-san."

"Skiing, huh? Mackenzie-kun, you look like you'd be good at it."

"Yeah, I know how to ski."

"I knew it... It's a good skill for winning over girls, after all."

"Kasagi-san, that's a baseless accusation!"

"But Satomi-san said that the reason you're good at sports is because you want to be popular with girls."

"Kou! What the hell are you telling everyone behind my back?!"

With the trip just two days away, class 1-A was in a festive mood. They were in the middle of a special homeroom session to discuss the details of the trip,

but most of the class wasn't listening to the teacher.

"Koutarou, Koutarou! Glasses-kun is calling for you," Sanae whispered into Koutarou's ear while clinging to his back.

"..."

However, there was no answer from Koutarou. He had his elbow on his desk and was silently gazing out the window.

"Hey, Koutarou."

"Hmm?"

After Sanae called his name a third time, Koutarou finally noticed.

"What's up, Sanae?"

"Don't give me that! Glasses-kun is calling for you."

"Oh."

Koutarou turned his head around towards Kenji. Kenji, however, seemed to have already moved on. He was talking to another classmate and gesturing wildly. Seeing that, Koutarou turned his gaze back outside the window again.

"What's wrong, Koutarou? You're spacing out."

"Just thinking."

Koutarou stared out the window without saying anything else. He was thinking about the conversation he'd had with Clan a few days ago.

It was January 24th. Right after the play, Koutarou had called Clan to the empty school roof. There was something he wanted to discuss with her.

"So, what did you want to talk about?"

Clan's long hair reflected the light of the setting sun. The bright orange color contrasted with Koutarou's blue armor.

"There are two things I want to ask of you," Koutarou began seriously.

"You want to ask me for something?"

Clan had had a faint smile on her lips, but hearing Koutarou's voice now, her

expression turned more serious.

“Yeah. Of course, I’m not asking you to do it for free. I’ll do anything I can for you in return.”

“You’re being awfully reserved, Veltlion.”

“Really? We were mortal enemies just an hour ago, you know.”

“Well, that’s true.”

Koutarou and Clan smiled at each other. Just an hour ago in Earth time, the two of them had been locked in a deadly battle. But for some reason, they were now talking to each other on friendly terms.

“Tell me. Based on what it is, I might hold off on killing you.”

An indirect threat slipped Clan’s still smiling lips, but Koutarou knew that she was joking. Koutarou knew her well enough now that he could tell that much.

“Okay. For my first request... I want you to keep everything that happened in the past a secret.”

“By ‘the past,’ which do you mean? Two thousand years ago? Twenty years ago? Ten years ago?”

“All of it.”

Koutarou stared into Clan’s eyes with a serious look on his face. This was an earnest request, and he was intent on getting Clan to listen to him.

“Why is that?” she asked.

“The reason is... Well, there’s two main reasons.”

After thinking for a while, Koutarou tried to explain how he felt to Clan.

“The first reason is that I don’t want to ruin Theia’s dream. You know how much she loves the Blue Knight, right?”

“Yes, I am well aware.”

“The Blue Knight is her emotional support. If she knew that we disturbed the legend, it would break her heart. I want to avoid that.”

Theia drew strength from the legend of the Blue Knight. She tried her best to

follow his example in order to become a splendid noble. She wanted to be a strong leader like the Blue Knight so she could help her mother.

But Koutarou and Clan had altered the legend she so loved, and Koutarou wanted to keep that a secret from Theia. He wanted to keep the legend the way Theia knew it. If she found out the truth, it could devastate her.

I wonder about that...

Clan wasn't so convinced. She turned her eyes to the two swords at Koutarou's waist. One was the greatest treasure of the Forthorthian royal families, Signaltin. The other was the blade that Theia had personally given Koutarou, the treasured sword Saguratin.

I think she would actually rejoice.

Clan gazed at Saguratin, shining gold in the evening sun. To her, just the fact that it was hanging from Koutarou's waist was proof enough of how Theia really felt. That said, keeping what had happened a secret would lower any associated risks, so Clan wasn't against Koutarou's request.

Unaware of how Clan felt, however, Koutarou continued his explanation.

"And the other reason is the same as the Blue Knight's."

Koutarou took Signaltin in its sheath from his waist.

"Both my existence and this sword could make Forthorthe's political situation unstable. It's exactly why the legendary Blue Knight vanished and left everything behind. So in our case, keeping it a secret would be better. This is also for your sake."

It was said that the Blue Knight had disappeared after the war because he understood that the existence of a national hero like him would inevitably tip the political balance in Forthorthe. For Koutarou who had gotten mixed up in things, just being seen in public with Signaltin could cause similar problems in the present. That's what Koutarou wanted to avoid.

"My, are you worried about me?"

"It's a strange feeling, really."

Koutarou smiled wryly. Clan felt the same way, and the two of them smiled at

each other once more.

“The same thing goes for the events of twenty or ten years in the past, so I want to keep it all a secret.”

“I understand. I want to keep it a secret too.”

Clan decided to agree to Koutarou’s request. As a princess of Forthorthe, she too wanted to keep information that could shake the royal families a secret.

“Thanks, Clan.”

“I don’t want to put myself in danger either. So, what’s your other request?”

“Ah, the second request is related to this,” Koutarou said as he knocked on the blue armor he was wearing. “I want you to erase any records of what happened. If you don’t, Theia and the others will find out.”

“That’s true. I’ll wipe the data right away.”

Clan stepped over to Koutarou and touched her bracelet to bring up the armor’s systems. She was planning on erasing the contents of the armor’s database, but she paused as she went to press the button to confirm the wipe.

Should I really just erase it? Maybe I should make a backup, just in case...

Clan linked her bracelet with the onboard computer in Koutarou’s armor and gradually erased the data as she copied it over to her bracelet.

“Hey, Veltlion...”

The whole procedure would take a couple of minutes. Once she was done inputting the related commands into her bracelet, Clan looked up at Koutarou.

“Could you stop it with the ‘Veltlion’ thing? Trying to keep it a secret will be pointless if you keep calling me that even after we go to the trouble of erasing the data.”

“That’s true. Can I call you Koutarou then?”

“Yeah, I don’t mind.”

Koutarou nodded and leaned back against the handrail around the rooftop as he looked at Clan.

“Koutarou, there’s something I want you to tell me.”

“Sure. You listened to my requests, so I’ll answer anything.”

“Then tell me...” As Clan spoke, she slightly tilted her head and smiled. “Did you love her? Alaia-san, I mean.”

It was the gentlest smile Koutarou had ever seen from Clan. In that moment, he felt like he could tell her anything.

“I’m not sure... It’s true that I wanted to help her more than anyone.”

Following his feelings, Koutarou gave Clan an honest answer. He didn’t want to hide anything from her.

“You could have just stayed then.”

“The one who Her Majesty Alaia loved wasn’t me, but the Blue Knight.”

Koutarou smiled wryly as he put his weight on the handrail. He still believed that he had gotten in the way of the real Blue Knight. And since Koutarou had just played the part of the Blue Knight, he believed that he wasn’t really the one Alaia loved. She had fallen for the Blue Knight.

“I’m not so sure about that.”

Clan saw it differently. Though she hadn’t yet told Koutarou because she didn’t have any real evidence to prove it, Clan believed that Koutarou was actually the Blue Knight himself. There were too many things that didn’t add up otherwise, and she certainly didn’t believe that the legendary Princess Alaia could be fooled by a superficial act. In the end, Clan thought Alaia’s feelings for Koutarou were genuinely for him.

“Even if it’s as you say... If she truly was in love with me... both of us still had obligations. It would have turned out the same way.”

Koutarou leaned back over the handrail and stared up at the sky. Scenes of his days in Forthorthe two thousand years in the past, including their final farewell, flashed through his mind. They were memories he would never forget.

“To think you’d throw away your status and honor for a simple high school life...”

“There’s still plenty of things I have to do here.”

Clan sounded incredulous, but she had a smile on her face.

“Besides, I swore an oath.”

“Then I suppose, as a knight, you had no choice but to return.”

Clan leaned over the handrail and looked up into the sky as well.

“That’s what the Blue Knight would do, right?”

“Yes... You’re absolutely right...”

Clan smiled now out of amazement.

Despite practically being the embodiment of the Blue Knight, he’s still not conscious of it. I can’t believe this man...

Shortly after that, Clan began to laugh.

“Pffft! Ahahahaha!”

“What are you laughing for all of a sudden?”

“Nothing really. It’s just too funny... Ahahahaha!”

“...Clan?”

“Ahahaha! Oh, it’s too much! Ahahaha!”

Koutarou often made fun of Clan for being sly and vengeful. Looking at her bright smile now, however, Koutarou felt nothing of the sort about her.

By the time Clan finished laughing, the data from Koutarou’s armor had been wiped clean. After confirming it had been copied over to her bracelet, Clan nodded.

“It’s all done.”

“Thank you, Clan.”

With that, Koutarou’s business was concluded and he could return to his normal life. The life he lived before he traveled back in time with Clan.

I managed to make it back...

Koutarou finally felt like he had returned home.

“You’re welcome.”

Clan lowered her right arm to her side and looked up at Koutarou.

“By the way, Koutarou, rather than another request, I have a suggestion.”

Clan withdrew her smile and stared intently at Koutarou.

“What is it?”

“Won’t you serve me?”

“Wh-What?!”

Koutarou’s eyes opened wide in surprise. Just a short while ago, they had been enemies. As such, he could barely believe the words that had come out of Clan’s mouth.

“Y-You... Are you serious?!”

“I am.”

Clan looked dead serious, but Koutarou still couldn’t believe it. Nevertheless, Clan nodded. She was definitely serious.

“Don’t be stupid! If I do that, Theia won’t be able to complete her trial!”

Koutarou had no intention of serving Clan, but it wasn’t because she had been his enemy. It was simply because if he did, Theia would fail her trial. He simply couldn’t do that to her.

“Please calm down. I don’t mind if you wait until after Theiamillis-san’s trial is complete.”

“Huh?!”

Clan’s follow-up didn’t make any sense to Koutarou either. Clan had originally come to Earth just to get in the way of Theia’s trial. That’s why she’d fought against Koutarou in the first place. Despite that, she now seemed to be suggesting that she wanted Theia to succeed. Koutarou just didn’t get it.

“If you serve at my side, I won’t mind giving up my right to the throne. That will even put Theiamillis-san one step closer to becoming empress herself.”

“J-Just wait a minute, Clan! Do you understand what you’re saying?!”

Now Clan was even talking about relinquishing her claim to the throne. Koutarou’s confusion reached its peak.

“You’re the one who doesn’t understand, Koutarou.” With a soft sigh, Clan gently dragged her finger across the sword in Koutarou’s hand. “It’s almost as if you can’t appreciate the value of this sword.”

“This sword’s value?”

Koutarou lifted the sheathed sword up in front of him—the holy sword Signaltin, the sword given to him by Alaia.

“The greatest treasure of the royal families, a relic of history, the sword of kingship: Signaltin. Just how meaningful do you think a person who can wield this might be to the royal families?”

With those words, Koutarou finally sorted out what Clan was getting at. By making Koutarou her vassal, she was planning on returning Signaltin to the royal families of Forthorthe.

“Of course, it holds meaning for me too,” Clan said as she put her hand to her chest.

“In other words... you want a royal heirloom like this to stay in the hands of the royal families. You also want to study me and this sword, don’t you?”

“That’s about right. My claim to the throne is a small price to pay for that.” Clan smiled with her hand still on her chest. “Do you understand?”

“Yeah.”

On top of obviously wanting to reclaim the royal families’ ancient heirloom, Clan, as a scientist, wanted to study it. That’s why Clan had requested that he become her vassal. That way, she’d have access to the sword. That much made sense to Koutarou.

“In your position, I think it’s only natural for you to want to keep this sword close.”

“Since you seem to understand now, I hope you can give me a serious reply.”

Of course, those aren't the only reasons...

While that was a big part of why Clan wanted Koutarou to be her vassal, she also had an ulterior motive.

There are countless royals who have become empress, but there has only ever been one to make the Blue Knight her vassal. Even then, he was only her vassal for a few months. If I can make Koutarou my vassal, I will be the true, sole ruler of the Blue Knight! I'd gladly give the throne up to Theiamillis-san for that!

Clan wanted the ultimate title of being the Blue Knight's master. Making the Blue Knight their vassal would be a dream come true for any of the royal families, and it was something that not even the Silver Princess had truly been able to do. And since she was the only one that knew his secret, Clan had a chance to do it right now for herself.

"I'll hear your answer another time. Please think long and hard about it until then."

"...Yeah."

However, despite feeling in control of the situation, Clan was somewhat oblivious to her own motives. She didn't mind that employing the services of the Blue Knight—whose existence couldn't be made public—was only for her own self-satisfaction, but she hadn't yet realized the true meaning behind those feelings.

"Are girls really everything to you, Mackenzie-kun?"

"Girls aren't my only reason for living, no."

"But Satomi-san said they were."

"He's just having fun making me look stupid!"

Koutarou eventually stopped staring out the window, but the rest of the class was still swept up in the exuberant atmosphere. Thanks to that, the homeroom meeting had barely made any progress.

That Clan... She sure gave me some troublesome homework...

Koutarou let out a small sigh as he looked at the bracelet on his right wrist.

Clan had given it to him. Koutarou had left Signaltin in her care. Since it was the most valued treasure of all Forthorthe, he couldn't just leave it lying around. However, leaving it to Theia would be problematic since she didn't know about it. That made leaving it with Clan the most convenient option, and she'd readily agreed to it since she wanted to study it anyway.

In return, Clan had given him the bracelet. Clan would be spending most of her time studying the sword, but in the event of an emergency, he could use the bracelet to call for it. It was actually an uncommonly considerate gesture for Clan.

At least she's easier to understand than Ruth-san. Clan being so calculating makes her easy to read.

This wasn't the first time Koutarou had been asked to become someone's vassal. Theia had demanded it from the start, and lately Ruth wanted him to serve Theia as well, regardless of how her trial went. They were all under quite different circumstances, but this made for the third time Koutarou had been asked to become a vassal by someone from Forthorthe.

I'm fine sticking with Theia until she completes her trial. The problems come after that. Do I remain on Earth, or do I serve Theia or Clan...?

And as Koutarou was about to enter into deep thought again...

"Koutarou."

Sanae's face appeared in front of him.

"Whoa!"

Surprised, Koutarou reeled back and stopped his train of thought.

"Wh-What?"

"You've been strange lately. You have this deep wrinkle on your forehead whenever you're not doing anything."

Sanae used her hands to try and wrinkle her brow the same way in order to show him.

"What's wrong? Are you turning into a hardboiled high schooler?"

“No, that’s not it.”

Koutarou finally realized that he’d made Sanae worry.

Sanae’s particularly sensitive to this kind of thing...

Sanae was always by Koutarou’s side, and she could somewhat read his emotions through his aura. Koutarou thinking about something so hard was making her worry, and that wasn’t something he wanted.

It’s not like I have to make up my mind right now, so I’ll just focus on having fun skiing with everyone for now.

Koutarou was stuck, but there was no pressure to make a decision immediately. He couldn’t let Theia complete her trial until Kiriha’s problem was solved anyway. And since he’d just gotten back to Earth, it would be a shame not to enjoy his normal life for a while. Having decided on that for the time being, Koutarou changed gears and smiled at Sanae.

“I was just thinking that going skiing is probably expensive.”

“What... Is that all? I feel like I wasted my time worrying.”

Sanae quickly returned to her usual smile and clung to Koutarou’s back the way she always did.

“You could always borrow money from Kiriha.”

“I’m scared of what a loan from Kiriha-san would really cost me.”

“You’ll be fine. Kiriha loves you after all.”

“You think so?”

“Not as much as me though.”

“Hey, Sanae, I can’t see anything with you like that.”

“I’m looking for you, so you’ll be fine!”

And so things returned to normal between Sanae and Koutarou. It was such a small part of his everyday life, but it was a small part of it that he truly enjoyed.

“Kou, I’ve been going through hell because of you!”

“You’ve been going through hell because of your own behavior, Mackenzie.”

“Satomi-kun, tell me the truth!”

“It *is* the truth, Landlord-san. Mackenzie is just awful.”

“Don’t just make up random crap! This is all your doing!”

And with that, Koutarou jumped back into his normal life.

As February rolled in, winter was at its worst. The club building, positioned in the shadow of the school building, was particularly cold. It affected all the clubs, but the knitting society’s club room was all the way in the corner of the building. It was so cold there that when Koutarou entered the room after school, he could see his own breath.

“Brrr, it’s freezing!”

Koutarou walked straight over to the kerosene heater. It was an old model that had been used in the club room for generations, but it was their last line of defense against the dwindling temperature. After pressing the ignition button a couple of times, there was a visible flame inside. But since even the metallic heater was cold and needed to be warmed up, it had no immediate effect. It would take a few minutes before Koutarou could feel anything from it.

“It’s finally getting warmer...”

Once he was sure the heater was working, Koutarou sat down in his usual chair. Koutarou and Harumi would always sit down by the heater to knit. Since it was just the two of them in the club, it was easier to go knit by the heater rather than to wait for the entire room to heat up.

Not long after, the second member of the club knocked on the door before entering the room.

“I’m sorry I’m a bit late, Satomi-kun.”

It was Sakuraba Harumi, a girl with porcelain skin and long, black hair. She was the current president of the knitting society.

“No worries. The heater’s just started to heat the room up.”

“Thank you, Satomi-kun.”

Harumi smiled and thanked Koutarou before sitting down in the chair next to him. Since they scooted as close to the heater as possible, they would naturally end up shoulder to shoulder. It was an arrangement that made her somewhat happy.

“By the way, Sakuraba-senpai, did something happen today?”

While preparing his knitting tools, Koutarou struck up a conversation with Harumi. Rather than being upset that she was late, he was mostly curious as to what had kept her.

“Uh...”

Harumi’s expression suddenly froze and her face gradually turned red. It was obvious even to Koutarou that the reason for it wasn’t the heater.

“Hahaha, from the looks of it, it must have been something fun.”

“Oh you, Satomi-kun!”

Harumi puffed up her cheeks in a pout. It was a special expression she only made around Koutarou. Since Harumi was always so calm and mature, Koutarou thought her pouting made her look even cuter than normal.

“It’s rude of you to laugh. This is quite serious.”

“Then what happened?”

“Uh...”

Harumi’s cheeks slowly deflated. At the same time, her shoulders slumped and she turned her face down.

“A-Actually...”

Harumi shoved her hand into her bag and pulled out an envelope. “Sakuraba Harumi-sama” was neatly written on the front.

“Actually, I was given a love letter...”

Harumi presented the envelope to Koutarou and turned her face away as if to escape his glance.

“A love letter, huh? That’s pretty old-fashioned these days.”

The envelope was made of a high-quality Japanese paper. The writer had used a pen, and though the handwriting wasn't the best, it was obvious the sender had written with great care. Just from how it looked, it seemed pretty clear that it was a serious love letter.

I see. So that's why she was unhappy when I laughed.

Koutarou received the envelope from Harumi and carefully took out the letter within. If it was a genuine love letter as Harumi had said, he should treat it with respect.

"Let's see here..."

Koutarou unfolded the letter and skimmed its content. The carefully written words expressed the earnest feelings of the sender.

"I see."

After reading halfway through the letter, Koutarou folded it back up. The letter was intended for Harumi, so Koutarou hesitated to read any further once he realized it was indeed serious.

"You're right. I can't really laugh at someone's honest feelings."

Koutarou returned the letter to the envelope and handed it back to Harumi.

"Yes... That's why I'm somewhat troubled."

With the envelope back in her hands, Harumi blushed and looked up at Koutarou. She was overwhelmed with embarrassment, but she was interested in Koutarou's reaction.

"Troubled? Why?"

"I've received such a serious and thoughtful letter, but I can't think of any way to turn it down without hurting the writer's feelings..."

Harumi stared at Koutarou as if asking for help. She wanted him to tell her what she should do. On top of that, she was hoping he might be a little jealous. All kinds of emotions were swirling in Harumi's pleading eyes.

"So you're going to turn them down?"

Koutarou put his hand over his mouth and laughed a little. This actually

wasn’t the first time this had happened. After her performances in the school plays, Harumi regularly received confessions from the boys at school.

“That’s because... I don’t really know the person... and it was so sudden...”

However, Harumi would always turn them down. Though she had grown a little more confident after being on stage, she still lost her nerve around people, so sudden confessions scared her.

“But this time I’ve gotten such a polite letter... and I can understand how this person must feel, so I’m not sure if I can turn them down without giving a reason like I usually do...”

As an avid reader and a shy girl, Harumi had an easier time understanding a person’s feelings through a letter rather than being told to her face. Because of that, she wasn’t sure how to turn down the sender of the letter.

“In that case... it might be a bit expected, but what if you say you already have someone you like?”

That was all Koutarou could come up with on the spot. It seemed like the easiest way to turn someone down without hurting their feelings.

“Even you must have one or two people you’ve liked, right? So this wouldn’t be a complete lie, and that kind of answer shouldn’t hurt their feelings.”

“Th-That’s true, but...”

Koutarou thought it was a brilliant idea, but Harumi’s face turned even redder than before when he suggested it. That’s because the person Harumi liked was Koutarou.

“But what if... What if they ask who that person is?”

“Then you could just tell them.”

Just tell them. That was Koutarou’s simple idea that would put an end to it all.

“I-I couldn’t!” Harumi shook her hands and head. “I would feel badly if what I said caused that person trouble!”

“It’s okay, Sakuraba-senpai. I don’t think anyone would be troubled to find out you like them.”

Koutarou smiled. It only looked like Harumi was overthinking things to him.

“D-Do you really think so?”

“It would be one thing if it was someone you didn’t know, but there’s no way anyone who knows you would be upset about it.”

Koutarou couldn’t think of a single boy that would be unhappy to hear that Harumi liked them. If anything, if there was such a guy, he probably wouldn’t be a good match for Harumi anyway. So either way, there was no need for Harumi to worry. Or at least, that was how Koutarou saw it.

“Besides, this is a good opportunity.”

All else aside, that was the part Koutarou really wanted to stress.

“An opportunity?”

Harumi’s eyes opened wide.

“Yeah, to tell the person you like how you really feel.”

“Th-That’s way, way too soon! There’s no way!”

After Koutarou explained what he meant, Harumi shook her head even more vigorously than before.

“I think it’s a good time for it though.”

Koutarou desperately suppressed his urge to laugh. He thought it was adorable how worked up Harumi was getting over this.

“But *I* would be troubled if it didn’t work out! I don’t want to face that reality right now! And I’m still not mentally prepared!”



“Pfft... Th-That is troubling, hahaha!”

Koutarou eventually couldn’t keep it in. Seeing Harumi panic like a baby chicken, Koutarou couldn’t help laughing.

“Oh you, Satomi-kun! Please don’t laugh! I’m serious!”

Harumi clenched her hands into small fists. She looked so determined, but Koutarou knew she couldn’t hurt anybody like that even if she wanted to. It only made the whole thing funnier to him.

“S-Sorry, b-but it was... just so funny! Ahahahaha! Ack!”

“You don’t have to laugh so hard you choke! Jeez!”

Koutarou coughed repeatedly and finally managed to get ahold of himself. But he knew if he let his guard down even a little, he would just burst out laughing again. He looked away from Harumi to try and keep his cool. Her brow knitted in frustration, she was currently staring him down.

“...E-Excuse me.”

“Jeez... Stupid Satomi-kun.”

Harumi hurled her adorable insults at the back of Koutarou’s head.

What kind of face would Satomi-kun make if he knew that he’s the one I like?

Harumi, with her cheeks still puffed out, lost herself in thought for a moment. All sorts of feelings were bubbling up inside her, but those feelings gave way to a certain doubt.

Does Satomi-kun not care about who I like...?

Despite giving her intimate advice on how to handle her problem, Koutarou hadn’t really shown any interest in who it was that she liked. That made her worry about whether or not Koutarou even saw her as a woman.

Maybe... I should try asking...?

Harumi made up her mind and decided to ask him. After taking a deep breath and preparing herself, she called out to Koutarou in a low voice.

“Um, Satomi-kun...”

“Yes?”

Koutarou turned back towards Harumi. By now he was no longer laughing. He’d had a chance to recollect himself, but he could also tell that Harumi’s voice and expression had gotten serious.

“This is just a hypothetical question, but... if you fell in love with a girl, Satomi-kun, and that girl loved a different boy instead of you, what would you do?”

Harumi didn’t have the courage to ask Koutarou directly if he was interested in her, so she was careful about how she worded her question. Even though it seemed like Koutarou had no interest in Harumi, she still wanted to confirm whether or not he liked her. It was vague, but that was all she could muster right now.

That’s the situation you’re in, right, Sakuraba-senpai?

Someone liked Harumi and had given her a love letter, but Harumi liked another boy. How would that make the person who sent her the letter feel? That was how Koutarou interpreted Harumi’s question.

“Hmm, if it was me...”

Koutarou began imagining himself in that situation. As he did, images of Harumi and Alaia overlapped in his mind.

Your Majesty...

At that moment, Koutarou realized exactly what he would do in that situation.

“If it was me, I think I would cheer for her. I would cheer her on so that her love would come true, no matter who it was.”

“Really? Would you be fine with that?”

Harumi’s eyes opened wide in surprise once more. It was a most unexpected answer. She’d anticipated him saying he would give up or steal her away or something along those lines.

“We’re talking about the woman you love, you know?”

“Yeah. So I’d want her to be together with the person she truly loved.”

Koutarou answered without hesitation, and the reason he could answer that

way was Alaia. Despite loving the Blue Knight, she devoted herself to the well-being of her citizens. After meeting her, and after getting in the way of her meeting the real Blue Knight, Koutarou knew he wanted the woman he loved to be together with the person she truly loved.

“Of course, if her love goes unrequited, I’d take my chance and confess.”

If he happened to be the one she loved too, that would be ideal, but that kind of coincidence rarely happened. He would only confess when her heart didn’t already belong to someone else. That was how Koutarou felt.

“I see...”

Hearing Koutarou’s answer, Harumi felt a sense of relief.

Good... I have a chance... But based on what he just said, he’s just going to cheer for me while I ask him for advice like this...

While she was relieved for now, Harumi also knew that she couldn’t allow things to stay the way they were.

“Thank you, Satomi-kun.”

“I don’t know if my answer will be of any help though.”

Koutarou understood that his answer was a special case. There weren’t that many people who’d met real princesses and gotten in the way of true love.

“No, it’s very helpful.”

However, that was enough for Harumi. What she’d really wanted to know was how Koutarou felt.

I should properly turn down the writer of this letter. And I’ll make sure to resolve anything like this on my own from now on. I’ll show Satomi-kun that he’s the only one for me. I’ll confess after he’s understood that...

Having found her path forward, Harumi went back to smiling in her typical fashion as she began moving her knitting needles once more.

“By the way, the school trip is right around the corner, isn’t it?”

“Yes. It’s been a long time since I last went skiing.”

Koutarou quickly followed suit, and the two of them took to knitting side by

side.

“Are you good at skiing? You look like you would be.”

“I don’t have a lot of experience skiing, so I’m just average. How about you, Sakuraba-senpai? Can you ski?”

“Heehee, actually, I’m quite confident in my skiing.”

This was a completely average afternoon of normal club activities for the two of them. They spent their time at leisure, cheerfully talking to one another.

“That’s surprising.”

“I hate that mean part of you. As punishment, I demand that you bring me back a souvenir.”

“As you wish, my princess.”

With winter at its worst, the temperature had dropped even further outside. However, the cheerful, warm atmosphere heated up the club room more than the antique heater.

The Birth of a Magical Girl?!

Monday, February 1st

“I’m back... Oh, there’s no one here.”

When Koutarou returned to room 106, he found that it was empty. The other girls were all out for various reasons, such as shopping for dinner, and no one had returned yet, so Koutarou’s greeting went unanswered. Koutarou took off his shoes by the entrance, passed by the kitchen, and entered the inner room. With the lights off, the room was dark and quiet.

“That’s pretty unusual.”

Koutarou put his backpack in a corner of the room and turned on the lights. While that made it brighter, the room was still silent. It made Koutarou feel surprisingly lonely.

“Oh, that’s right. This is a good chance.”

However, there were things he could only do with no one else around. When that thought occurred to him, Koutarou brought the bracelet Clan had given him closer to his mouth.

“Cradle, can you bring out my belongings?”

“As you wish, my lord.”

Following his order, a black hole appeared in front of Koutarou. It was the same kind of space-time hole that Theia and Clan used when they summoned their weapons. However, what came out of this hole wasn’t a weapon, but instead a plastic container several dozen centimeters long.

“All right, let’s do some organizing.”

Inside the container were Koutarou’s private belongings. They were items he’d collected during his travels with Clan, which included several things he couldn’t show the invaders. That’s why times like this, when he was all alone,

were the only chance he'd get to organize them.

"I need this... I don't need this..."

Inside the container were necessities like clothes and things he'd used, but there were also knives and whetstones mixed in. Though they were all his belongings, it was a collection of all sorts of items.

Koutarou flipped the container upside down and emptied it. Then he returned only what he didn't need to the container, leaving the things he actually wanted on the tatami mat.

After he was done, Koutarou was planning on storing the container back on Clan's spaceship. He had considered throwing away the things he'd determined he no longer needed, but the truth was that each and every one of these items —however mundane or useless—was irreplaceable. And since he was quite attached to a great deal of it, he decided he couldn't throw any of it away.

"Hmm? This is..."

After working his way through the pile for a while, Koutarou's hand unexpectedly stopped. He had come across something interesting among his belongings.

"I guess... I'll keep this close by."

It was a necklace with an odd design. It consisted of gems and beautifully polished animal teeth, strung together by threads of several colors. Since it was something he rarely saw in the city, Koutarou had taken a liking to it.

"If I lose this, I'll never hear the end of it."

Deciding to hold on to the necklace, Koutarou set it back down on the tatami mat. He recalled the face of the person who had given it him.

Now that I think about it...

There, Koutarou stopped moving once more. There was something in particular he'd remembered about the person who'd given him the necklace.

"...No, that can't be right. It's not possible."

However, Koutarou shook his head at the thought and began organizing his

belongings once more.

Since the container wasn't very large, going through it didn't take all that long.

"Cradle, return the container to its original position."

"As you wish, my lord."

At Koutarou's behest, the plastic container passed through a black hole and was returned to Clan's spaceship, leaving several items behind in the room. It wasn't just the necklace. Each of the things he'd picked out was special to him in some precious way. That included items like Charl's handmade badge. It had absolutely no use, but it was something he wanted to keep close. In fact, there were very few things he'd chosen to hold on to for any practical reason.

"All right, I guess this is good enough."

After stuffing the items into a paper bag, Koutarou put them away in the wardrobe with his half-knit sweater.

"I'm baaack!"

"Me too!"

Just then, he heard Sanae and Yurika's energetic voices from the front door.

"To the TV! *Love Love Heart* is about to start!"

"W-Wait up, Sanae-chan! If you pull on me that hard—"

The sound of something big hitting the floor could be heard. The next moment, Sanae appeared in the inner room.

"Ah, you're back, Koutarou!"

"Welcome home, Sanae."

"Thanks! Look at what we got, Koutarou!"

Upon seeing Koutarou, Sanae flashed a large smile and, by moving the fingers on both hands, she used her psychic powers to make a small box float in front of Koutarou. It was some anime merchandise that she and Yurika had bought.

“Good for you, Sanae.”

“Yeah!”

With a quick nod, Sanae hurried off towards the TV with the box floating after her. It was almost time for their favorite show—the same anime they’d just bought merchandise of.

“Ow, that hurt...”

“Welcome home, Yurika.”

Yurika staggered past Koutarou. For some reason, she was holding her head in her hands and there were tears in her eyes.

“I-I’m back...”

“What’s wrong, Yurika?”

“No, i-it’s nothing.”

“Yurika, it’s starting! It’s starting!”

“Okaaay...”

As tears continued to well in the corners of her eyes, Yurika sat down next to Sanae in front of the TV. Before long, a familiar song began playing. It was the opening theme of the anime that Sanae and Yurika made sure to never miss.

“Next time on *Magical Girl Love Love Heart*: ‘An enemy?! An ally?! Sparkling Heart appears!’ A bouquet of flowers for your maiden heart!”

After the flashy preview, the show ended. Sanae and Yurika, who had been sitting still in front of the TV all this time, began moving again.

“Yurika, who is Sparkling Heart, I wonder?”

“It must be the character we’ve seen peeks and glances of!”

“Oh, you might be right!”

“Do you think she’s an enemy?! Or an ally?!”

“I can’t wait to find out!”

Sanae and Yurika were excitedly talking about the anime that had just gone

off.

Based on the name, Sparkling Heart is probably an ally of Love Love Heart. Well, pretending not to notice that stuff is part of the fun of this kind of anime.

Koutarou warmly watched over the two girls.

“Maybe we’ll get to see some new magic too!”

“Oh, I hope so! It sure seems like it!”

The two of them were cheerfully chatting while imitating the gestures performed when using magic in the show. It seemed this week’s episode had gotten them especially hyped up.

Magic, huh? Oh, right! I totally forgot!

As Koutarou watched Sanae and Yurika goof off, he suddenly remembered something. He approached the wardrobe and pulled out a long stick wrapped in cloth. It was one of the things he had come across in his travels with Clan. Since it was too long to keep in the container, he had to keep it separate.

“Yurika, could you come here for a moment?”

With the stick in hand, Koutarou called Yurika over.

“Y-Yes?!”

Yurika seemed a little surprised that Koutarou was talking to her, but she quickly crawled over to the tea table in the center of the room.

“What is it?”

“Actually, I wanted to apologize to you.”

Koutarou put the long stick still wrapped in cloth on the table and sat down in a polite manner with good posture. Since he was about to apologize, he wanted to come across as sincere as possible.

“About the hot water you used to wake me up this morning?”

“No.”

“Then is it about kicking that ball in my face during gym class today?”

“It’s not that either.”

“I know! It’s about you sneakily eating Yurika’s taiyaki, isn’t it?!”

“That was you, Satomi-san?!”

“Hey now, Sanae, don’t make things more complicated.”

“I don’t care what you say. You totally ate it.”

“I did eat it, but that’s not what I wanted to talk about.”

“Waaaah! You’re terrible! The worst! I was really looking forward to eating that!”

“I get it, I get it! I’ll buy you another one later, so just calm down!”

“Really?!”

Yurika had genuinely started crying, but when Koutarou promised to buy her another one, she stopped at the drop of a hat.

Yurika, can’t you have at least a little more pride...?

Though he felt sorry for her, Koutarou couldn’t help worrying about Yurika’s future.

“Sweet bean jam... Cream... Chocolate... Cheese...”

“So, Koutarou, what are you apologizing for?”

Sanae urged Koutarou ahead in place of Yurika, who was busy daydreaming about what flavor her new pastry might be.

“About that, actually—”

“Satomi-san, how many are you going to buy me?!”

“Listen to what I have to say!”

Koutarou slammed his fist onto the table.

“...Okaaay, I’m sorry.”

Waiting for Yurika to shift her focus to him, Koutarou finally began slowly speaking.

“Yurika, I’m not sure what to say after calling you an idiot and whatnot every time you brought this up, but...”

“Huh?”

“Be happy, Yurika. Magic really exists.”

“Huh?”

Hearing Koutarou’s words, Yurika’s pupils shrank to tiny dots.

“I know you won’t believe me right away, but I’ve seen it with my own eyes.”

“You’re kidding?! R-Really, Koutarou?!”

In contrast to Koutarou who was talking calmly, Sanae jumped with excitement and immediately wanted to know more.

“Yeah. I can’t go into the details, but there’s no mistaking it.”

“Wow, really?!”

Sanae’s eyes were sparkling. She hadn’t believed in magic, but since she loved magical girl anime, she was thrilled at the prospect of it being real. And since Koutarou was the one saying it and not Yurika, she believed him right away.

“W-Why now, all of a sudden?”

However, Yurika herself couldn’t hide her confusion, and she stared at Koutarou with her pupils still tiny as dots.

“Like I said, I can’t go into the details. I would cause trouble for a lot of people if I did.”

Koutarou hadn’t told the invaders about what really happened while he and Clan were gone. All he’d said was that they’d run into some trouble that forced them to work together, and during that time, he and Clan came to an understanding. He hadn’t told them that a large amount of time had actually passed during the few minutes they vanished, or anything about the events that had unfolded during that time.

“Instead of that, I’ve got something cool for you.”

“Something cool?”

“Aww, I wish I got a souvenir too.”

Sanae watched as Koutarou unwrapped the cloth from what he was holding,

revealing a staff. Unlike Yurika's staff, it was mostly wooden with a plain design using black and brown colors.

"Th-This is...?!"

The moment she saw it, Yurika was speechless. Powerful magic had been cast on the staff. She hadn't noticed it up until now because it had been camouflaged by all the mana present in room 106, but now that it was right in front of her, it was obvious to a magician of her caliber.

"That's right, it's a magical staff. By using this, even someone who has no talent for magic can freely use spells. Of course, its effect is weaker that way."

"Koutarou, you mean it's a real magic wand?!"

Sanae excitedly shook the anime merchandise she had gotten just today. Inside the box she was holding was a small version of a magic wand that appeared in the show.

"Yeah. Just look."

Koutarou smiled at Sanae and grabbed the staff. He stared at the tip and concentrated.

"Fire! Appear!"

Immediately after Koutarou said that, a small flame appeared at the tip of the staff. The staff now almost looked like a long, wooden candle.

"Wow, fire really came out! Amazing!"

"This isn't just a magical staff?!"

Sanae was surprised by the fire appearing at Koutarou's command, but Yurika was surprised over something else.

This staff isn't of Folsarian design! And what's more, it read Satomi-san's mind and cast a suitable spell!

The magic that Koutarou had just used was different from the kind Yurika knew. The magic she used was what she'd learned from her predecessor, Rainbow Nana. It was the standard magic used in the magical country of Folsaria. Yurika could indeed feel magic at work when Koutarou had summoned

the flame, but it wasn't the same as the Folsarian magic she knew.

"S-Satomi-san, where did you get this?!"

Koutarou had met a magician somewhere. Moreover, it wasn't a magician from Folsaria. That meant it wasn't anyone from Rainbow Heart or Darkness Rainbow. Whoever it was, Yurika was dying to know.

"Sorry, but I can't say. Like I said earlier, if I carelessly say too much, I could cause trouble for a ton of people who helped me out, and I don't want that. Please understand, Yurika."

However, Koutarou stubbornly refused to tell her. His tone was calm, but it was a firm rejection.

"O-Okay..."

Yurika reluctantly withdrew. After sensing his resolution not to tell her, she realized that questioning Koutarou further would be useless.

It doesn't seem like there's any danger, so I guess it's fine for now...

Yurika imagined that while he was gone, Koutarou had met a magician who'd helped him. And based on what he said about not wanting to cause them any trouble, it probably wasn't an evil magician. And if it wasn't an evil magician or someone related to Folsaria, Yurika had no reason to interfere. And since the owner of that staff was Koutarou, there was no need to worry about it being misused.

"Here, Yurika."

Koutarou presented the staff to the silent Yurika.

"Satomi-san?"

After taking a look at the staff, Yurika gave Koutarou a suspicious glance.

"I said I got it for you, didn't I?"

"You're giving this... to me?"

"That's right. Here, take it, Yurika."

Koutarou nodded and pushed the staff into Yurika's hands. Not understanding what Koutarou wanted, she shifted her glance between him and the staff in her

hands. Koutarou clearly believed in magic now, but she couldn't understand why he would be giving her a staff when she could already use powerful magic.

I wonder if it can use some kind of special magic...

Yurika looked at the staff and tilted her head.

"Good for you, Yurika!"

Sanae realized Koutarou's intentions first. She excitedly showed Yurika the merchandise they'd bought earlier. On the box were images of magical girls using their magic wands.

"With this, you've graduated from being a cosplayer! Now you're a real magical girl!"

"Ah..."

With that, Yurika finally understood Koutarou's intentions too. Koutarou had said that he'd gotten the staff for her. He'd gotten a magical staff that let anyone use magic as a souvenir for a cosplayer who couldn't use magic. He was definitely not giving a brand new magical staff as a present to the magical girl of love and courage, Rainbow Yurika.

"Wow! I'm so envious, Yurika! Now you're a real magical girl!"

"I've been a real one from the start!"

Sanae's eyes were filled with envy, but Yurika just started crying.

S-Satomi-san believes in magic now, but he still doesn't believe that I'm a magical girl!

Once she realized why Koutarou was giving her the staff, Yurika couldn't help the tears. She was well aware that it was for the better if her secret didn't get out, but at this point, she at least wanted Koutarou to know. However, reality was cruel. Even though Koutarou believed in magic, Yurika was still just a cosplayer to him.

"Good for you, Yurika! A cosplayer that can use real magic, huh? There aren't many cosplayers that lucky around."

"You're wrong! That's not right at all!"

“Sanae, you don’t have to keep calling her a cosplayer. Her wish has finally come true now.”

“Ah, right. Sorry, Yurika. That was a little insensitive of me.”

“Yurika’s always been a magical girl. Let’s just leave it at that, okay?”



“Koutarou, you’re quite a gentleman, aren’t you?”

“So you finally realized?”

“Heehee, I knew all along!”

“...I want to punch him. I want to beat up Satomi-san...”

Yurika wept bitterly while firmly grasping the staff. Her position as the magical girl of room 106 had finally been established, but the humiliation she felt was even more intense than ever before.

Koutarou had brought the staff home so that Yurika had a means to defend herself. In his mind, she was just a cosplay-loving classmate. That’s what Yurika herself had led him to believe. So to him, Yurika was the only civilian mixed in with the invaders.

On top of that, Yurika was kind-hearted, gentle, and averse to fighting. So while they were both civilians, unlike Koutarou who was athletic and good at fighting, Yurika was practically defenseless against the trouble that had a tendency to surround room 106.

But what if Yurika got involved in the underground or Forthorthe trouble? Up until now, she had been lucky(?) and managed to avoid that, but that was no guarantee for the future. Koutarou had always been worried about the possibility, so he had gotten her a magical staff so that she could protect herself. If nothing else, it was a tool for self-defense.

“So to sum it up, that thing can use a lot of spells, but it isn’t all that powerful. So don’t get overconfident. Just focus on protecting yourself, okay?”

The staff Koutarou had given Yurika was originally created to allow the user to freely access all kinds of magic, so it was a versatile tool in many situations. It was perfect for a civilian to use as self-defense. However, because it had access to such a wide variety of magic, none of the spells it could cast were particularly strong.

“I understand.”

Yurika obediently nodded at Koutarou’s words. She was planning on making

use of this misunderstanding.

As long as I have this staff, I can use magic in front of everyone...

Her perception of the situation had changed, and she was planning on using her own magic while holding this staff. By doing that, it would look like she was just using the magic of the staff to the residents of room 106. They would never know she was using her own magic instead. It was the perfect cover. She could use all the magic she wanted, and they would still think she was just a cosplayer.

"Hey, magical girl. Don't get distracted. Put your weight into it."

"O-Okay!"

Yurika was using the staff in her hands to firmly press down on Theia's shoulders. The staff was vibrating and massaging her shoulders.

"Ooh... So this is magic, huh? It feels pretty good. Ruth, have her do it to you too later."

"Would that be all right, Yurika-sama?"

"Ah, yes, o-of course!"

Yurika nodded with a smile. However, behind her smile, she was struggling to accept the situation.

Something's wrong... This is wrong somehow... It's great that I can use magic without revealing myself... but something is really wrong here!

The staff was vibrating via the power of a minor sonic spell. Yurika was controlling it to give Theia a massage with magic.

Wait, this isn't a magical girl's job!

Earlier today she had used a heat spell to iron clothes. And before that, she had used supersonic magic to drive away the cats crowding around Corona House. This wasn't how Yurika had dreamed things would be. She'd always thought she'd get everyone's respect if they knew that she could use magic.

And I feel like it's getting worse and worse...

Yurika began feeling that she would have been better off just staying a cosplayer. It was indeed convenient that she could use the staff to hide her identity. Now she could boldly use magic in front of everyone to support them. However, Folsarian rules stipulated that magic couldn't be used for personal reasons. In that sense, massages and ironing were definitely misuses of magic. She wasn't using Folsarian magic with the staff, so it was a bit of a grey area, but it still made Yurika uncomfortable.

"Hey, Yurika, can I have your old staff?"

"N-No way! You can't have that!"

Sanae had pulled out Yurika's staff, Angel Halo, from the wardrobe. With it in her hand, Sanae struck various magical girl poses. Seeing that, Yurika's face turned pale and she snatched the staff away from Sanae. Normally she was scared of ghosts and would never defy Sanae, but she had to stand her ground on this one.

"But you have the real magical staff you got from Koutarou."

"They're both real!"

"I want to be more magical girl-like too! You cheapskate!"

"This is a precious staff I got from the person who saved my life! I definitely can't give this away!"

Yurika tossed her new staff aside and embraced her old one as if trying to hide it from Sanae. Her eyes were full of tears.

"Jeez..."

Seeing that, Sanae puffed up her cheeks and easily gave up on the staff. Instead, she floated over towards Koutarou.

"Koutarou, give me something too."

"If it's a charm against evil spirits you want, you can have it."

"I don't want a charm that explodes whenever I touch it! I want something good!"

Seeing Sanae back off, Yurika let out a sigh of relief.

No matter what happens, I can't give up this staff...

Yurika's staff, Angel Halo, was the staff formerly used by Nana, her best friend, teacher, and savior. To Yurika, it was far more than just a tool. It was a precious gift she could never let go of.

"What would something good be?"

"Something magical girl-like! And if that's not possible, something love-like!"

"And what would something 'love-like' be?"

"Something like what boys give girls on White Day!"

"White Day gifts, huh? I've never gotten any chocolate on Valentine's Day, so I'm not very knowledgeable in that area."

Koutarou and Sanae's carefree discussion continued. Theia was listening from the other side of the room. Since Yurika had stopped massaging her shoulders, she was just wordlessly staring at them.

If I asked him, would Koutarou give me something too?

Realizing how she felt, Theia was envious that Sanae was able to be so upfront about what she wanted with Koutarou. But Theia knew she couldn't do that herself. If she started relying on Koutarou the way Sanae did, he'd surely just think of her as some weirdo. And she was also scared of being rejected. Caught between her pride and inner cowardice, she couldn't appeal to Koutarou on her own.

"Your Highness... All right..."

Seeing her master so forlorn, Ruth took action to remedy the situation. She could tell what Theia wanted.

For starters, getting her closer and creating a chance to talk should be good...

Ruth quickly began preparing tea. And after pouring out enough for everyone, Ruth called to Theia.

"Your Highness, could you lend me a hand for a moment?"

"...H-Huh?"

Having been so focused on Koutarou and the others, Theia completely missed

what Ruth said. She had to repeat the question.

“Your Highness, could you lend me a hand for a moment?”

“Ah, yeah, sure.”

After taking one more look at Koutarou and the others, Theia approached Ruth, who welcomed her with a smile.

“Your Highness, I’ve poured tea for everyone, so could you carry yours and Satomi-sama’s? I’ll get everyone else’s.”

“Koutarou’s...”

Theia looked at Ruth’s hands and saw that she was holding a delicate tea cup of Forthorthian design and a plain looking mug.

“Would you mind if I ask you to take these?” Ruth whispered with a smile.

“Ah...”

Realizing Ruth’s intentions, Theia lightly blushed before taking a glance at Koutarou over her shoulder.

“Ah, y-yes... If that’s all, I’ll help...”

When she looked back at Ruth, her face was beet red.

C-Calm down... I’m only bringing him some tea. What am I so shaken up for?

Theia tried to keep her racing heart and impatient feelings under control as she took a cup in each hand. Theia’s shaken mind could be seen represented in the rippling surface of the tea in the cups.

“So I think you should show some gratitude to this beautiful ghost who’s always smiling for you by saying ‘Thank you, Sanae-chan’!”

“K-Koutarou, I brought you some tea.”

Trying her best to sustain her faltering voice, Theia approached Koutarou, who was busy chatting away with Sanae. On the way over to him, she began worrying if her actions were strange or not.

“Thanks.”

Koutarou continued talking to Sanae as he casually received his mug from

Theia. For a moment, his hand brushed up against Theia's.

"?!"

Greatly shaken by the sensation of Koutarou's hand, Theia almost dropped her own cup. She barely managed to save it, but the tea was sloshing about and she nearly spilled it. Just as she was recovering, it happened.

"Oh, this is delicious. Thank you, Your Highness."

After taking a sip of the tea, Koutarou put his large hand on top of Theia's head and gently patted her.

"...Fwaaah..."

A strange sound unconsciously leaked from Theia's mouth in response. This time, the tea cup didn't stand a chance. She dropped it straight on the floor. The tea all spilled out as the cup rolled along the tatami mat. Seeing that, Koutarou finally realized what he had done.

Oh no, I just did what I always do... This is Theia, not Princess Charl...

Charl was a young girl that Koutarou and Clan had met during their travels. She would often bring the tea that her sister had poured for Koutarou, and in return, he would pat her on the head. And because he'd been so caught up in his conversation with Sanae, he had acted out of habit and treated Theia like he did Charl.

Did I make her angry...?

Koutarou was sure someone as prideful as Theia would be angry after being treated like a child. However, no matter how long he waited for it, Theia's roaring never came.

"Oh?"

Absolutely silent, Theia stared at Koutarou with her already large eyes wide open. Her expression was completely stiff, as if it had frozen over, but her face was bright red. Seeing that, Koutarou felt an even greater sense of danger.

Not good! I might have made her really angry!

Koutarou had no way of knowing how Theia truly felt. The thought that she

might have been happy over being pat on the head never occurred to him, so he was left to believe that she was simply enraged.

“...You can do it, Your Highness! You’re almost there!”

Ruth clenched her hands as she watched over her master. She unconsciously put so much force into the gesture that she almost crushed her tea cup.

“Ruth, wouldn’t a more direct approach work better?”

“What?”

Kiriha, who had silently been sipping on her tea, gently set her cup down on the table. She then picked up something that was lying on the floor.

“That’s Yurika-sama’s...”

“Heh...”

With a somewhat happy expression, she held up what she was holding in both hands. It was the souvenir that Koutarou had brought back for Yurika, her new magical staff.

“How about something like this? Magnetism. Magnetism. Bonding.”

Kiriha cast three spells in quick succession using the staff.

The magical staff worked by reading the user’s mind and casting an appropriate spell. Because of that, it didn’t need long incantations like what Yurika used. As long as the user clearly imagined what they wanted, the staff would do the rest.

Three lights shot out from the tip of the staff. The first two were red. One hit Koutarou and the other hit Theia, wrapping them both in red light. Before long, their bodies became magnetic.

“Wh-What?!”

“Wah! W-W-Waaah!”

Having suddenly become powerful magnets, Koutarou and Theia were uncontrollably drawn towards each other. They collided and fell to the floor entangled. When they did, the red light faded and the magnetism vanished. Because the staff used very little mana for each spell, powerful magnetism

wouldn’t last for long.

“That hurt... What happened?”

“Th-This is...?!”

While the surprised Koutarou tried to get up from behind Theia, a third, orange light hit them both.

“Whoa!”

“Kyah!”

The two of them lost their balance once more and fell down. The effect of the orange light was to create a bond between two objects that were in contact. Because of that, Theia and Koutarou were now stuck as they were, with Koutarou holding Theia from behind.

“Are you okay?!”

“What is going on? My body is stuck and I can’t let go!”

“Huwah?! K-Koutarou, don’t move so suddenly!”

The two of them forgot what they were doing and were now struggling on the floor. The first magnetic spell had vanished almost right away, but the second one seemed to be lasting for quite some time. Since it was such a simple spell, it had a longer duration.

“Your Highness, Satomi-sama!”

Ruth rushed over to them and tried to help them up, leaving only Kiriha and her haniwas at the table. As Kiriha watched Koutarou and Theia struggle on the floor, she disappointedly slumped her shoulders.

“Hmm... It didn’t go as well as I had hoped. Adjusting your power with magic is surprisingly difficult.”

Kiriha’s original goal had been to bond Koutarou and Theia’s hands together. Really, she was trying to help Theia out, but her plan had backfired and only caused more confusion.

“Ho! That’s because you’re relying on something unknown like that, Nee-san! Ho!”

“If you’re going to rely on something, rely on us! Ho!”

“That seems to be smarter, yes.”

Kiriha grinned and picked up her tea cup once more to take another sip. The tea Ruth had prepared was just as elegant as Kiriha’s smile.

“What?! Kiriha-san, is this your doing?!”

Seeing her smile and the magical staff still in her left hand, Koutarou realized that Kiriha was responsible for the situation he was in.

“My bad, Koutarou. It didn’t go as planned. It seems I’m not suited to be a magical girl.”

As she said that, Kiriha began spinning the staff around as if she was twirling a baton. Her handling of it was admirable, and after spinning around the staff for a while without hitting any furniture, she grabbed it and held it flat in both hands. She’d said she wasn’t suited to be a magical girl, but right now she looked the part much more than Yurika in her cosplay.

“Undo the spell right away!”

“No.”

Kiriha rejected Koutarou’s demands, maintaining her smile all the while.

“Or rather, I can’t. I don’t know how to undo it.”

“What?!”

Though her original plan might have failed, Kiriha was still enjoying the chaos a little.

The bonding spell that Kiriha had used had bonded Koutarou’s chest to Theia’s back. Moreover, since Koutarou had been holding on to Theia at the time, his arms were stuck wrapped around her too.

At first Theia’s head had been attached to Koutarou’s chest as well, but it had since loosened and come free, allowing her to move it again. As time passed, the effectiveness of the spell slowly wore off more and more. At this rate, the two of them would be free within an hour or two.

Until then, Koutarou was stuck holding Theia. Koutarou was currently sitting down with his back against the wall. Meanwhile, Theia was sitting in Koutarou's lap, leaning back against him. That was the most comfortable posture for the two of them.

I didn't realize Theia was this small...

As Koutarou was forced to embrace Theia, he found himself puzzled by Theia's surprisingly small, seemingly fragile body. The image he had of Theia in his mind was of a more powerful girl.

She's bigger than Princess Charl, but she's quite petite for someone her age...

Koutarou was perplexed by the disparity between Theia and his mental image of her. As he contemplated the difference, he unconsciously put force into his arms.

"Fwaaah..."

Theia let out yet another strange sound in response. It was a quiet, sweet squeak of a sigh similar to the whining noises a cat or dog made when snuggling with a person.

"Ah, sorry..."

Hearing that, Koutarou quickly eased up. He apologized because he was worried he might have made it difficult for her to breathe.

"It's fine. I-It's not your fault."

"So should we try to pull apart now?"

In reality, if Koutarou seriously tried, he would be able to forcibly overcome the power bonding the two of them together. However, after their skin had turned red when he'd tried it earlier, they had mutually decided not to overdo it. But if Theia was uncomfortable like this, Koutarou thought it would be better to pull themselves apart.



“I-It’s fine like this! I’d rather endure this than have my entire back turn red!”

Theia quickly shot down Koutarou’s proposal. Though she had said she would endure being stuck to him, in reality, she actually wanted to stay that way for a while longer.

“Really? Well, if you say so...”

“Good...”

Theia gave Koutarou a small nod before relaxing her body and leaning against him again.

“Kiriha, how do you use this staff?! I want to try it too!”

“Well, you see—”

“Y-Y-You can’t! You can’t just carelessly use magic!”

“Cheapskate. I’m not telling you to hand over the staff, but can’t I just try it a little?”

“That’s not the problem!”

Room 106 was as noisy as ever. But when Theia closed her eyes, she no longer minded the commotion. If anything, it sounded more like a lullaby to her right now.

I wonder what this sensation is...

The part of her that was attached to Koutarou felt hot. That sensation reached her heart and filled her chest. But in contrast to that, the innermost part of her heart was serene. There was a deep calm and gentle peace coursing through her veins.

In her heart were both stillness and motion existing without contradiction. It was the first time Theia had felt this weird sensation. If she had to put words to it, it was similar to what she’d felt when she relied on her mother at a young age. But it wasn’t quite the same thing, and because of that, Theia was able to find new joy in it.

I wish we were stuck like this forever...

Really, the feeling was a sense of security that she hadn’t felt since the day

she came to understand her birth and status. But she felt it now—a powerful sense of refuge—as she leaned against Koutarou. She could believe that she would remain absolutely safe as long as she was here.

And...

As she came to appreciate the sensation she was experiencing, she wanted Koutarou to feel it too. That was because she'd noticed at some point that, deep inside, Koutarou felt lonely too. Theia unknowingly placed her hands on top of Koutarou's.

"...Did you fall asleep, Theia?" Koutarou whispered into her ear.

With her eyes still closed, she slowly shook her head.

"No, I just woke up."

A few days ago, she had woken up. Right now, she knew what she wanted.

"Sorry, did I wake you?"

"That's not what I meant... Heh, oh well..."

Theia laughed to herself. Since her eyes were still closed, Koutarou couldn't understand why.

"Did something happen to you?"

All he knew was that there had been a change in Theia's frame of mind.

"No. I've just been thinking about a lot of things lately."

"For example?"

"For example... Let's see..."

At that point, Theia opened her eyes and saw her hands on top of Koutarou's. She also saw her loyal vassal gently watching over her from the corner of the room.

"For example... how I should repay Ruth who's always helping me out."

Theia wanted Ruth to feel the same way she did too. They had always been together, and Theia wanted to share this precious feeling with her. She didn't want to keep it all to herself.

“If that’s the case, then I’ll help.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. Ruth-san is always helping me out too.”

“Heh...”

“What?”

“It’s nothing. Can I really rely on you to cooperate?”

“Of course.”

“I trust a knight doesn’t go back on his word.”

“Yeah, I’m not a knight though.”

“Heheheh...”

If everything turned out the way Theia wished, if the future unfolded the way she hoped, then...

“What’s happened to you, really?”

“I won’t tell. Heheh, I definitely won’t. As if! Hahaha!”

If this kind of trouble hadn’t happened, or if her back hadn’t been stuck to Koutarou, she never would have been able to feel this way. Embracing that, Theia laughed out loud.

“It’s a promise, okay?!”

Starting tomorrow, Theia would probably return to normal—the normal Theia that would be stubborn and obstinate if she saw Koutarou’s face, but blush if their hands touched.

“I definitely won’t forgive you if you cop out later, Satomi Koutarou!”

“What are you acting so serious for? We’re just talking about repaying Ruth.”

“What’s your answer?!”

“...As you wish, my princess.”

But today was different. Theia’s smile was even more radiant than usual.

A rhythmical noise was echoing through the passageways of the space battleship known as Blue Knight.

It was the sound of Ruth's shoes tapping against Blue Knight's white floors. After the residents of room 106 had fallen asleep, Ruth headed to one of the hangars aboard Blue Knight alone.

"Hmm, hm-hmm-hm, hmm!"

Ruth began humming to the rhythm of her steps. She was in an unusually jubilant mood, and her light steps were almost like a dance as she walked along.

"Heeheehee..."

From time to time, she would stop humming and simply giggle instead. She normally tried to stay reserved and not show any strong emotion, so it was rare to see her this obviously happy.

"Isn't this great, Your Highness?"

Ruth was so cheerful because of what had happened between Theia and Koutarou. Every time she recalled the two of them sitting together, the corners of her lips would turn up and her feet would move on their own. Several hours had passed since then, but Ruth still couldn't contain her joy.

"Well done, Kiriha-sama! I'll make sure to thank you properly the next time I see you!"

All of it was thanks to the spell that Kiriha had cast. At first it seemed to have been a failure, but the results were a rather great success. Ruth recognized the role Kiriha had played in all of this, and she was grateful for it.

"Hmm, hm-hmm-hm, hmm!"

That said, it wasn't all good. Ruth's feelings were so elevated that she couldn't fall asleep. She'd given up on sleeping entirely and had instead decided to get to some unfinished work on the ship.

"Whoops! I almost missed it."

Ruth had walked past the hangar, but quickly turned and walked back with light steps. She then opened the door by rhythmically tapping on a nearby panel. Once inside, her destination was a small maintenance area in the corner

of the hangar.

“Blue Knight, bring out Satomi-sama’s maneuver suit.”

“As you wish, my lady.”

As Ruth gave the order, a vivid blue set of armor with the words “Theiamillis’s Blue Knight” engraved on the chest appeared out of nowhere. It was the Blue Knight’s armor that Theia had given to Koutarou. Ruth had come to the hangar to perform maintenance on it.

“Blue Knight, do a damage check-up on the maneuver suit and make a list of all damaged areas. Also inventory how many spare parts there are for those areas.”

“As you wish, my lady.”

The armor was standing facing Ruth, held upright by an arm coming out from the wall. Several diagnostic devices quickly surrounded the armor, giving it a thorough examination.

“It seems... pretty worn out.”

Staring at the armor from the front, Ruth noticed all kinds of damage on it. It was covered in small scratches, and its royal blue color had slightly faded. There were also a few large dents and burn marks.

“Is this from his battle with Clan-sama? Even then, this is a lot...”

Since the damage caught her interest, Ruth brought up the data from the diagnostic devices. It was a detailed list of what kind of damage the armor had taken, but when she saw it, Ruth unwittingly tilted her head in confusion.

“The abrasion of the joint bearings is moderate. The shock absorber has broken down from wear in two different places. From repeated exposure to heat and impact, the brittleness of the armor has increased, so replacing the plate is recommended... Huh...?”

The list described several kinds of damage that usually only occurred from long-term wear and tear. The joints were worn down from friction, the energy-absorbing material was cracked, and the durability of the armor itself had been compromised from exposure to heat. The accumulated damage was far more

than anything it should have sustained from being used as costume armor in the plays or fighting against Clan. The whole suit was going to need an overhaul.

“Just how has Satomi-sama been using this...?”

Koutarou and Clan had only disappeared for about two minutes. Ruth hadn’t really thought about those two minutes until now. She had assumed that they’d only gone to a different plane of space-time briefly before immediately returning.

However, based on the damage the armor had accrued, it seemed those two minutes had been extremely intense. Or maybe a massive gravitational field had altered the speed of time. Either way, it was clear that it hadn’t just been a simple matter of going and coming back.

“Let’s see, if I look at the memory...”

Ruth tapped on a nearby panel to access the armor’s memory storage. By looking at the armor’s recorded audiovisual data, the record of used equipment, and the AI’s logs, she should be able to piece together what happened.

“No data”?

However, the information that was supposed to be there had all been deleted. Ruth was at a loss.

“It’s been erased... Did Satomi-san do that? No, it must have been Clan-sama... But why?”

If all they’d done was visit and return from a different plane, there would be no reason to wipe the data. The fact that it had been erased made it clear that there was something they were trying to hide.

“Just what happened to Satomi-sama and Clan-sama...?”

Koutarou and Clan had been thrown out of the very universe, but something had happened along the way that had forced them to cooperate. Something that had badly damaged Koutarou’s armor. Something serious enough to wipe all traces of it from the armor’s database. That was the conclusion Ruth came to based on the evidence in front of her.

“I should ask Satomi-sama for more details when I get the chance...”

Koutarou had told Ruth and the others that being blown to a different reality by Clan’s repulsion shell meant he had no choice but to cooperate with her in order to return home. And since he’d brought back a magical staff, that must mean he’d been sent to a plane where magic existed. That’s all she could put together, but Ruth believed that Koutarou was hiding something very important from them.

The Ski Resort and Signature Moves

Wednesday, February 3rd

After making it through the dim tunnel, light streamed in through the bus windows. On the other side of them was a silvery landscape. And even though the clouds were covering the sun, everyone was dazzled by the glittering snow.

“All right! Oh yeah! The mountains are calling me!”

Koutarou’s sparkling eyes were comparable to the snow outside as he pressed his face against the window of the bus. As a sports lover, the moment he saw the snow, he could barely contain himself.

“Please calm down a little, Satomi-kun.”

Kiriha, who was sitting next to Koutarou, smiled at his childlike manner. They were surrounded by their classmates, so she made especially sure to keep up her honor student act, but she couldn’t hide how she really felt. She continued to smile as she watched over the restless Koutarou.

“Kiriha-san, when do we get there?!”

“It’ll be a while yet. The bus will start driving up the mountain now.”

Kiriha looked up front as she spoke. Beyond the bus were mountains covered in white snow that appeared to be growing larger as they moved closer. Koutarou and the other first-years of Kisshouharukaze High School were loaded onto eight buses currently making their way to a ski resort. As part of their school trip, they would be spending the next two days there enjoying various winter sports.

“About thirty more minutes or so.”

“Damn, it’s still that far off?”

Even as he was talking to Kiriha, Koutarou’s face remained pressed up against the window. He was looking up at the ski resort, watching it get closer and

closer.

“It’s no use, Kiriha-san. Once he’s like that, it’s impossible to peel Kou off the window.”

Kenji’s face popped up from behind Koutarou’s seat. He was seated right behind him.

“Shut it, Mackenzie. A weakling like you wouldn’t understand the appeal of the mountains.”

“You’re just being a child. What are you, a kindergartner?!”

“I’d rather be a kindergartner than a weakling!”

Despite the judgmental look Kenji gave him, Koutarou didn’t move away from the window.

“But it’s dangerous like that, Satomi-kun.”

“Danger always accompanies the mountains.”

“That’s not what I meant. Heehee...”

Kiriha put her hand in front of her mouth as she giggled. Her elegant smile had a serene beauty to it that was rare in girls her age. In fact, the boys who saw it were smitten, but Koutarou, who still had his face pressed against the window, showed no reaction whatsoever.

“Satomi-kun, it’s dangerous to stand up like that, so please sit back down.”

“Like I said, it’s impossible. I’ve tried for years.”

“Is that so?”

Kenji shrugged his shoulders, clearly writing off Koutarou as a lost cause. Kiriha, however, leaned in and tried whispering into Koutarou’s ear to convince him.

“Sit down, Satomi Koutarou. Do you want me to use magic on you again?”

In that moment, Kiriha had a devilish, provocative smile on her lips.

“Ugh...”

Her words had a profound effect. Koutarou, who had stubbornly refused to

move away from the window before, now awkwardly sat back down in his seat.

“Sorry for getting excited about something like skiing!”

“Very good.”

As Kiriha smiled at the seated Koutarou, she pulled out a meat bun from her bag and gave it to him.

“Eat this and calm down a little.”

“Of course! It would be my honor!”

Koutarou nervously opened his mouth as Kiriha fed him the meat bun with her delicate fingers. The meat bun should have been delicious, but Koutarou was too anxious to taste anything.

“Kou, what happened to you?”

Kenji was astonished to see Koutarou acting this way with Kiriha. According to his own experience, it was impossible to get Koutarou to listen to anything once he got excited. However, Kiriha had easily reigned him in. Kenji could hardly believe it.



“Mackenzie, you don’t know this woman’s true nature. She’s actually—”

“Would you like another?”

“Mmmph!”

Before Koutarou could say anything else, Kiriha shoved a second meat bun into his mouth.

“Mmph, mmh!”

“Kiriha-san, what did Kou say?”

“Mrghh, mmph!”

“W-Well...”

Kiriha blushed and shyly looked down.

“H-He was just remembering the intimate times we spent together...”

“Whaaaaaat?!”

The next moment, Koutarou had plastic bottles, shoes, magazines, and all kinds of other objects hurled at him by almost everyone nearby. He was already struggling to breathe thanks to the meat bun that had been shoved in his mouth, so between that and the sudden panic at the incoming barrage, Koutarou blacked out for a moment. Once he came to, the person who was supposed to be sitting next to him was mysteriously absent.

“D-Damn it, that Kiriha-san...”

“Are you okay, Koutarou?”

“That was unfortunate, Satomi-san.”

Sanae and Yurika were working together to dig Koutarou out from the pile of items that had been thrown at him.

“...Thanks, you two.”

“Koutarou, you definitely shouldn’t go out with that woman.”

“That’s right. Satomi-san should only go out with Sakuraba-senpai.”

“Th-That aside, Yurika...”

Koutarou brushed the dust off his clothes and got up.

“What?”

“Don’t ever give Kiriha-san that magical staff. Who knows what she’d do for fun...”

In the event that Kiriha did get her hands on it, Koutarou would most likely be the victim of her whims. It would be even worse than having a busload of random things thrown at him.

“I understand!”

Yurika responded emphatically. She wouldn’t stand for the misuse of magic either.

“Not even if she offers you something delicious, okay?”

“O-Okay!”

Yurika nodded again. However, her determination had already started to waver.

“Not even if she tells you a scary story, okay?”

“I-I-It’ll be fine! Probably! Yurika, fight! Yurika, fight!”

Yurika nervously nodded and cheered herself on.

“...Are you sure?”

“I’m sorry! I’m not actually sure at all!”

It seemed like the security for the new magical staff was far weaker than Koutarou had hoped.

Theia had stood up from her seat and was looking over at Koutarou and the others. After confirming that Koutarou was all right, she let out a sigh of relief and sat back down.

“Your Highness, you could just go to Satomi-sama’s side.”

“L-Like I could do something like that! But even so, I’m still—”

“A girl, right?”

“...”

Her face red, Theia stared down at the ground in silence. She had been about to say “princess,” but the word caught in her throat and just wouldn’t come out.

“Your Highness, if there’s something you want, you can’t just wait for it.”

Theia still said nothing and continued to look down. Her long, golden hair hid her face and expression from Ruth.

“And there’s no guarantee that Kiriha-sama will always be helping you either.”

While it might have been harder to understand than using the staff the other day, Ruth believed that Kiriha had also done this for Theia’s sake. It had given her an opportunity to go protect Koutarou or see if he was okay, but she hadn’t taken it.

Instead, it was Sanae and Yurika who had gone to Koutarou’s side. Theia had fallen behind in her hesitation. And if she didn’t take action, she wouldn’t see any results no matter how many opportunities Kiriha created. On top of that, there was a limit to Kiriha’s cooperation. Even though she knew what she wanted now, Theia would never be able to get it if she didn’t seize it for herself.

“I know... Even I know that I can’t go on like this...”

Theia finally opened her mouth. However, it was hard to believe that such timid words were coming from Theia.

“But I don’t understand... I’ve only ever made connections with others with my own strength. Giving that up now and trying something different is... impossible for me to even imagine. Just what should I do...?”

Theia had been born a princess and spent her life bargaining with people she couldn’t fully trust. To survive, she’d learned to exert her dominance and make people fall into line by using force. That was the only way she’d been able to interact with people. Theia’s wish wasn’t to win Koutarou’s heart through force, but it was the only thing she knew to do. This conundrum puzzled Theia. She wanted to move forward, but didn’t know how.

“Then why not just show him your strength?”

“Huh...?”

Theia instinctively raised her head at what Ruth said. It wasn’t what she’d expected to hear.

“It’s meaningless. My wish won’t be fulfilled by doing that...”

“If you just demonstrate normal strength, that might be true.” Ruth put her hand on her chest and gently smiled at Theia. “However, you have a different kind of strength you can show him, Your Highness.”

“A different... strength...?”

“Yes, the strength of your feelings and how much you care for others. If you make use of that strength without holding back, I’m sure he will understand no matter what you do, be it playing games, drinking tea, or fighting.”

Ruth’s words were powerful and there was an intense conviction visible in her eyes.

How can you be so certain? What makes you so confident?

Theia couldn’t sense any hesitation in what Ruth said. She wanted to know just where all this faith was coming from.

“Our Theiamillis’s Blue Knight isn’t the kind of thickheaded knight who wouldn’t understand that.”

Ruth gently smiled as she spoke. When Theia saw her face like that, she finally understood.

I see... So that’s what you believe in...

Ruth believed in Koutarou. She believed that the person Theia longed for wouldn’t ignore her when he was so kind to everyone else. In fact, it was precisely that part of him that had made Theia long for him in the first place.

“Ruth...”

Now that she understood what Ruth had so much faith in, a small smile finally appeared on Theia’s face.

“Yes, Your Highness?”

“You just said ‘our,’ did you not?”

Theia was questioning Ruth, but her words were gentle. She was in no way criticizing her.

“Yes, that is indeed what I said.”

Ruth responded with the same conviction she had shown before.

“Then... are you fine with that?”

In fact, Theia was the one who had a slightly apologetic expression on her face.

“Yes. My ideal man is someone who will support you, Your Highness.”

“You’re not being very honest with yourself either...”

A tinge of bitterness crept across Theia’s smile, but Ruth simply shook her head.

“No, I just stubbornly believe.”

“Heh... Then I should believe as well.”

“In what, if I may ask?”

Ruth already knew. She already knew, but she had to ask because she wanted Theia to put it into words.

“In our Theiamillis’s Blue Knight.”

Theia answered just what Ruth hoped she would. She believed it was a wonderful thing for Theia to finally be able to say those words.

“Yes... As you wish, my princess...”

And so Theia and Ruth smiled at each other once more.

To the girl known as Nijino Yurika, a ski resort could be likened to hell. Not only did she dislike physical exertion, she also hated the cold. And since she lacked any endurance or discipline, there was no way she’d ever be good at skiing.

“Kyaaaaaaaah!”

As such, Yurika lost her balance just moments after getting off the ski lift.

“Save meeeee, Satomi-saaaaaaaan!”

Yurika was bundled up in so much clothing that she was almost round, and she rolled right down the ski slope like a barrel.

“Hey, Yurika!”

Koutarou quickly gave chase. However, Yurika was rolling at a frightening pace and she only picked up speed as she moved down the slope. It was like she was in freefall. Although he was athletic, as a skiing amateur, the distance between Koutarou and Yurika only grew.

“Save me, Satomi-saaaaan!”

Yurika looked like she would roll on forever, but...

“Uffh!”

She rolled right into a pile of newly fallen snow and stopped. Her two legs were the only thing that could be seen sticking out of it now.

“Wah, that looks bad, Koutarou!”

“Sanae, g-go on ahead and check on her!”

“Yeah!”

Sanae let go of Koutarou and headed for Yurika. Since she could freely fly, it was faster than skiing. She would be able to reach Yurika before anyone else.

“Are you okay, Yurika?”

“I-I’m nooot!”

Yurika had managed to get her head out of the snow, but she was completely trapped otherwise. She tried to move her arms, but there was no room in the snow. The only thing she could do was kick her legs, but that didn’t exactly help her. Luckily, Koutarou arrived shortly thereafter, kicking up snow as he slid sideways right over to the pile.

“How does it look?”

“She doesn’t seem to be hurt, but she can’t get out.”

“Save meee, Satomi-saaaaan!”

Yurika’s voice was slightly muffled as it reverberated off the snow. Based on her shouting and how she was kicking her legs, Koutarou could tell that she was just fine.

“Jeez...”

Koutarou let out a sigh of relief before removing his skis and approaching the pile where Yurika was stuck.

“Hey, are you okay, Yurika?”

“Yes. I’m not hurt,” Yurika replied. She sounded miserable.

“Are you stuck?”

“I can’t move my arms, so I can’t get out on my own.”

The snow had collapsed in on the Yurika-shaped hole, making it impossible for her to escape on her own. Without much of a choice, Koutarou reluctantly put his hands on Yurika’s legs sticking out.

“Kyaaah! Wh-What?!”

Yurika, who couldn’t tell heads from tails, panicked and began struggling.

“Pervert! Molester! Why are you trying to take advantage of me when I can’t move?!”

“You’ve got the wrong idea! Stay still, Yurika! I’ll pull you out of there!”

“Oh, I wondered why someone was grabbing me like that.”

However, when she realized that Koutarou was trying to pull her out, she completely stopped moving.

“Okay, Satomi-san. Hurry up and save me.”

“You idiot. Maybe I should just bury you instead...”

Despite being irritated by Yurika’s behavior, Koutarou grabbed ahold of her legs again.

“Here I go, Yurika!”

“Okay.”

When Yurika answered, Koutarou put all of his strength into his arms.

“Ouch! Owowowow!”

Yurika began screaming right away and started kicking her legs again.

“H-Hey, Yurika, stop moving!”

“But— Ow! It hurts! Owowowow!”

“In that case...!”

Yurika kept struggling and complaining, but having determined that they wouldn’t get anywhere at this rate, Koutarou ignored her pleas and yanked as hard as he could. When he did, he pulled a snow-covered Yurika up out of the pile.

“Ow...”

“Are you okay, Yurika?”

Yurika rubbed her neck with tears in her eyes. That was what had hurt the most when Koutarou was pulling on her.

“I thought my head was going to pop off.”

“Don’t be so dramatic. It’s just snow.”

“Show some guts.”

“You’re wrong!”

“How?”

“The deeper snow is denser and harder, and that’s where my head was stuck.”

“But in the end, it’s still just snow, right?”

“You’re wrong! Satomi-san, I think you should be more gentle with me!”

“I don’t care...”

As Koutarou, Yurika, and Sanae sat on the snow and talked, more of their classmates came skiing down the slope. Someone on a pair of skis and someone on a snowboard glided towards Koutarou and the others with great speed as they crossed each other’s trails. They then both came sliding to a stop, kicking up snow right in front of Koutarou and the girls.

“What are you doing, Kou?”

“What are you sitting down here for?”

It was Kenji on the snowboard and Shizuka on the skis. Both of them were quite skilled.

“Well, Yurika crashed into that snow pile over there and got stuck, so I had to help her out.”

Koutarou responded sourly as he wiped off the snow that had been kicked into his face by Kenji and Shizuka’s flashy stunt. Yurika, who didn’t seem to care much about the snow in her face, immediately gave them her side of the story.

“Satomi-san is just terrible! Even though I said it hurt, he just kept pulling! I thought I was going to lose my head!”

“Nijino-san, Kou’s always been reckless like that.”

Kenji saw an opportunity and took it. Yurika could be his way to get back at Koutarou for his daily little pranks.

“Just the other day, he woke me up using hot water—did you know that?! He definitely needs to be more gentle with me!”

“I know just how you feel. He’s normally way too rough.”

“So you understand, Matsudaira-san!”

“Of course!”

Yurika and Kenji firmly shook hands, both rejoicing at having found someone who understood them.

“What are those two doing...?”

Koutarou and Shizuka watched them with cold stares.

“They’ve already moved past the pain and are just complaining now... Oh, right! Satomi-kun!”

“Yes?”

“Regardless of what happened, the truth is that she fell, right? Her neck might really be injured, so I think we should take her to the hotel infirmary, just in

case.”

“The infirmary?! I’ll go! I’ll go!”

The moment she heard the word “infirmary,” Yurika’s eyes began sparkling.

“...You just don’t want to ski anymore, do you?”

“You’re wrong! Oh, ouch! Ow! Oh, Satomi-san, my neck! It hurts!”

Yurika brushed aside Koutarou’s suspicions. She held her neck with both hands and wailed in pain with a big smile on her face.

This girl... She’s planning on using her neck pain as an excuse to skip out...

Not only did Yurika not like sports, she also hated the cold. It was obvious that she wasn’t planning on coming back out once she went inside.

“Fine, I got it. Let’s go to the infirmary, Yurika.”

“Really?! Thank you! I knew you were a gentle person the moment we first met!”

Yurika grabbed ahold of Koutarou’s hands and shook them up and down.

“That’s right, there are times you *have* been gentle with me lately! You must really love me, Satomi-san!”

Yurika was ecstatic over not having to ski for now.

“...Don’t get so full of yourself.”

“Are you sure she needs to go? She doesn’t look hurt to me.”

“What can I do? There’s still a chance that she actually is.”

Koutarou was well aware of Yurika’s underlying motives, but he still felt an obligation to take care of her. He let out a sigh and stood up, then dragged Yurika up as well.

“Let’s go, Yurika.”

“Okaaay.”

“Satomi-kun, Mackenzie-kun and I will take care of the skis.”

“Please do. Thank you, Landlord-san.”

“What? No thanks for me, Kou?”

“Koutarou, I don’t like infirmaries, so I’m gonna go play with Theia and the others.”

“Yeah. You do that.”

Theia and Ruth were in the middle of getting skiing lessons from Kiriha. Tagging along to the infirmary would just be boring, so Sanae decided she’d rather go join up with them.

“Well, I’ll leave the rest to you, Landlord-san, Mackenzie.”

“Satomi-san, Satomi-san! Can you give me a piggyback ride?”

There was a loud thud.

“I said not to get too full of yourself.”

“Okaaay...”

And so Koutarou and Yurika walked down the rest of the slope. Sanae had already flown off looking for Theia and the others, so the only ones remaining were Shizuka and Kenji. Kenji stared at Koutarou and Yurika as they walked off, his head tilted to the side.

“Kasagi-san, are those two going out?”

Shizuka’s eyes opened wide upon hearing Kenji’s most unexpected question.

“Satomi-kun and Yurika-chan?! Why do you ask?!”

“Why? Well... don’t they seem too close for just classmates? It’s like you can’t get between them...”

“Ah, they certainly do have that going for them.”

Shizuka looked up from picking up the skis and watched Koutarou and Yurika as they walked off too. Yurika was cheerfully talking to Koutarou with exaggerated gestures, while Koutarou was responding with a variety of expressions and by occasionally hitting her on the head. There was certainly a sense of intimacy between them.

“But I don’t think they’re going out. They’re both terrible at hiding things, so I’m pretty sure we’d know.”

“That’s true, but... Hmm...”

Kenji wasn’t fully convinced, but he had to agree that there was no way they could keep it a secret if they were dating. To him, the two of them had a very strange relationship.

It’s only natural for it to seem strange to you, Mackenzie-kun. In reality, the two of them are living together.

While feeling a sense of admiration for Kenji’s keen observational abilities, Shizuka smiled wryly. The reason Koutarou and Yurika were so close was because they lived together in room 106. As roommates, they got a little closer every day.

Well, the same goes through for the other girls too...



Although the residents of room 106 all had different interests, they had built up a mutual trust between one another. Shizuka, who had lost her family, was somewhat envious of that.

Yurika's diagnosis was just what Koutarou had assumed—nothing. She was fine, but the doctor on duty had told Yurika to take it easy for the day just to be on the safe side. That was just what Yurika had hoped for.

"Really, that Yurika... This is why she's so unreliable."

Because of that, Koutarou would be returning to the slopes alone. Yurika had gone to sleep in the infirmary, but she stayed on Koutarou's mind even after he left. Despite how he might act, he was always worried about her.

"What's the matter, Satomi-kun?" someone called out to Koutarou.

When he turned around to see who it was, he spied one of his classmates.

"Oh, Aika-san."

"That's a gloomy expression you have there. Is something wrong?"

It was a girl named Aika Maki. She was a transfer student who had come to their school around the start of winter. Maki was supposedly one of Yurika's acquaintances, but she hadn't left much of an impression on Koutarou, so he didn't have many memories of her.

"Yurika hurt her neck, so I took her to the infirmary..."

"My, Yurika-san did?"

Hearing that Yurika had been injured, Maki's eyes opened wide.

"The doctor said she was fine, but she refuses to leave the infirmary."

Koutarou turned to look at the door behind him with a dissatisfied expression. Yurika was sleeping in a warm bed just on the other side of that door.

"I see..."

Hearing what was going on, Maki's expression suddenly got sharper.

Regardless of the circumstances, this is my chance to investigate...

Maki had been trying to make contact with Koutarou for the past few days. She decided this was her chance and approached him accordingly. She'd set up magical devices to gather information on room 106 while they were away on the school trip. Now she just had to question Koutarou and the majority of her goals would be complete.

This is also my chance to outsmart this man. Don't be too rash now. Just tread carefully...

Maki calmed herself to keep from doing anything foolhardy, and then smiled at Koutarou.

"Then why don't we talk for a moment as we take a break, Satomi-kun? I'll buy you a soda."

Behind that smile, however, Maki was getting more and more nervous.

When Maki left to buy soda from the vending machine, she activated two spells that had been dormant. One was a spell to allow the user to see through lies, and the other was a camouflage spell that concealed the mana. The first was because she didn't want to be fooled by Koutarou's slick tongue, and the second was because she didn't want Koutarou to know she'd used any magic. Maki had specifically prepared these two spells before she made contact with Koutarou.

The rest is up to me...

Maki pulled herself together and approached Koutarou with two plastic bottles in her hands.

"Here, Satomi-kun."

"Sorry for making you treat me."

A green light was now surrounding Koutarou's body, visible only to Maki. It was the effect of her first spell. Whenever Koutarou lied, the light would waver.

It doesn't look like he's been dishonest so far...

The light surrounding Koutarou was a steady green, proof that he hadn't said anything untrue.

“Let’s have a seat.”

“Sure.”

Maki and Koutarou sat down side by side on a bench in the corner of the hotel lobby.

“So what did you want to talk about?” Koutarou asked.

Waiting for an answer, he removed the cap from his bottle and put it to his lips. He hadn’t told Maki what soda he wanted, but she’d brought him his favorite cola.

“Well... it’s about Yurika-san.”

“Yurika?”

Taking care to act naturally, Maki removed the cap from her bottle too and took a sip.

“Yes, that’s right. Actually, things haven’t been going well with Yurika-san lately...”

Maki despised lies, so she tried not to outright lie herself. Since she and Yurika were enemies, it was certainly true that things weren’t going well between them.

“So please tell me... Has something happened with Yurika-san lately?”

Maki appeared rather concerned. Because of that, to Koutarou, it just looked like the transfer student was worried that her old friend had changed.

“Do you mean since you transferred here?”

“Yes, I think it’s something very recent.”

The mana pool in room 106 had recently grown much larger, meaning something must have happened involving either Yurika or Koutarou. Maki decided to start her line of questioning with Yurika.

“Recently, huh?”

Koutarou began seriously thinking.

Something major happened to me, but... Yurika’s the same as ever. The only

thing that's happened with her recently was making children cry with her acting as Alunaya, right? But that probably has nothing to do with why things aren't going well with Maki-san...

"Sorry, I can't think of anything."

In the end, Koutarou was stumped himself. He had no memory of anything major happening to Yurika.

The light is stable... So does that mean Satomi Koutarou is the reason for the mana pool's growth? Or the enemy he fought during the play?

The light enveloping Koutarou was still a stable green. It was confirmation that he was telling the truth. Maki immediately began wondering about all the possibilities that could mean for her investigation.

"...No, wait."

But then Koutarou suddenly remembered something and his expression changed.

Couldn't you call that a substantial change?

Koutarou had no recollection of anything wrong with Yurika, but something major had happened.

"So did something happen?"

"Yeah. Actually, Yurika's dream finally came true."

Koutarou had given her a magical staff as a present. Thanks to that staff, she was now able to use real magic, weak though it may be. Koutarou just thought of it as a tool for self-defense, but it might have been a big deal to Yurika. In truth, Yurika had cried tears of joy when he gave it to her.

"It's complicated, so I can't go into detail, but something she's wished for with all of her heart finally came true. Maybe that changed her a little."

"Something she wished for with all her heart...?"

Maki knew what Yurika's dream was. She wanted to become a splendid magician. A splendid magician that could fulfill the duties of her predecessor, Rainbow Nana.

If that dream has been fulfilled, that means... she's drawn out power from the mana pool and gotten a great deal stronger? Or perhaps Yurika's own mana has increased somehow, which is making it look like the mana pool in in room 106 is bigger now?

Either Yurika had become a powerful magician using the mana in room 106, or the mana pool only looked like it had grown because Yurika herself had gotten more powerful. Either way, the light around Koutarou was still a stable green, which meant that he wasn't lying.

"So, if you could, just give her a chance to adjust to things."

"I see. I understand."

At this point, Koutarou and Maki weren't at all on the same page. It was like they were having completely different conversations. Despite that, both of them had come to the conclusion that Yurika was now a splendid magician. And since they were both being honest, neither seemed to notice the disconnect.

Either way, the increase in mana has only made Yurika stronger... That's problematic.

Maki took another sip of her cola. It was one of her few favorites, but no matter how much she drank, it did nothing for her parched throat.

After parting ways with Koutarou, Maki hid in the woods around the ski resort and contacted her allies using a portable magical tool for communication. It was similar in shape and size to the charms sold at temples. Because of its size, however, it was only possible to talk with one person at a time. The person she chose to contact was the dark magical girl who dressed in purple, known accordingly by the other members of Darkness Rainbow as Purple.

"Purple, it's me."

"Navy... what is it?"

"There's something I wanted to report to you right away." Maki wasn't interested in wasting any time and quickly got down to business. "It seems like that increase in mana has directly affected Yurika's power."

“What?!” Even the normally calm and collected Purple was shocked. “Are you sure?!”

“Yes, sadly it seems to be the case. That’s what the information I obtained from making contact with Satomi Koutarou indicates, and I was able to confirm via my magic that it was true.”

Ever since she had spoken with Koutarou, the anxiety Maki was feeling had turned her throat into a desert. If the increased mana in room 106 was all under Yurika’s control, Maki and the other evil magical girls had no chance of winning. It was obvious that they’d be sent packing if they tried.

The truth of the matter, however, was that Yurika hadn’t powered up at all. The staff Koutarou had brought home may have had a lot of mana within it, but that mana was divided among many types of magic, so it wasn’t actually very powerful. Maki was just so eager for a fight that she had misunderstood the situation. Of course, Darkness Rainbow had no way of knowing that, but it was about to lead to yet another grand misunderstanding about Koutarou and Yurika.

“That’s bad...”

“I agree. We should avoid a direct confrontation if possible. At this rate, we’ll suffer an even more crushing defeat than we did against Rainbow Nana.”

“I understand. I’ll consider out next move, you continue investigating and—Hang on, Navy. Green is saying something.”

With those words, the girl in purple fell silent. A few solid minutes passed before her voice could be heard through the magical tool once more.

“...Navy, are you there?”

“Yes, I’ve been bored to death waiting.”

“According to Green, a powerful demon has appeared at the top of the mountain near you. It arrived there at roughly the same time you did.”

“A powerful demon...?”

In Maki and the others’ homeland, the magical country of Folsaria, there existed abnormal looking monsters known as demons. Occasionally they would

stray to Earth and cause chaos. A lot of the monsters and devils in legends and myths were actually demons from Folsaria.

“We want you to capture that demon and make it your familiar. Normally we’d send you some backup, but we’re not in a position to do that now, I’m afraid. That said, if we do nothing at all, Rainbow Heart will exterminate it.”

One of the jobs of the organization Yurika belonged to, Rainbow Heart, was to exterminate demons that wandered to Earth. So sooner or later, this demon would likely meet the same fate.

“So now that Yurika’s gotten stronger, we’ll want to increase the odds in our favor by gaining allies, even if that comes with a risk, huh?”

Maki realized what the girl in purple was really suggesting, and she confirmed it.

“That’s right. Will you give it a shot?”

“I’ll do it. Fortunately, creating familiars is a specialty of mine.”

A familiar was a demon that served a magician and followed their orders. In order to gain a familiar, the magician either needed to bind it using contracts and curses, or manipulate its mind with magic. Maki specialized in the latter: mind manipulation magic. A job like this was right up her alley.

“Besides, I need to get some more power too or I won’t be able to win against Yurika or that man.”

“We’re counting on you, Navy.”

“Yes... Hmm?”

At that moment, Maki’s sharpened senses detected that someone was approaching her.

“Purple, I’ll contact you again later. It looks like I have a guest.”

“Be careful, Navy.”

After finishing her call, Maki tucked her magical tool away in her bosom. And when she turned around, she saw a lone girl approaching, weaving her way through the snow-covered trees.

“Very impressive, Yurika. To think you could sense mana as feeble as this.”

“Maki-chan, what are you doing using magic in a place like this?”

Yurika looked far more serious than she normally did. It made the usual carefree expression she showed Koutarou and the others on a daily basis almost seem like a lie.

Yurika had sensed the mana from the magic that Maki was using and come out to investigate. While it may have only been feeble mana from a magical tool used for communication, Yurika was cautious of Maki using magic under these circumstances. For the past few months, Maki hadn’t made any suspicious moves. She’d simply been acting like a normal classmate. She hadn’t been using magic or causing trouble. So why start now, in the middle of their school trip? That was a question Yurika couldn’t leave unanswered.

“Do you think I have an obligation to explain myself to you?”

A smile appeared on Maki’s lips and she looked Yurika up and down.

From what I can tell, she’s not powered up in her current state... Maybe her staff has something to do with it.

Yurika was currently wearing colorful winter clothes, just like Maki. Maki couldn’t sense anything different about Yurika’s mana the way she was now, so she started to suspect that the strong magic may have been coming from her staff or her magical girl outfit.

“Maki-chan, I don’t know what you’re planning, but I’ll be your opponent if I have to.”

The snow crunched underfoot as Yurika mustered her courage and took a step towards Maki. She was terribly scared of fighting, but as a magical girl, she couldn’t just back down.

“Those are some big words, Rainbow Yurika. Do you really think you can beat me with your skills?”

“It’s not about winning. I’m simply doing my duty.”

Yurika in the past probably would have run away in a situation like this. But ever since she came to room 106, she had slowly been building up her courage,

and that courage now supported her.

But I will definitely win. I have to win and protect everyone so I can graduate together with Satomi-san and the others!

It wasn't so much the courage of a magical girl as it was the courage of a regular girl named Nijino Yurika. She had a strong desire to protect her life as it was, both in room 106 and at Kisshouharukaze High School. Everything had led up to this—even Koutarou hitting her on the head earlier.

"That's awfully confident... Let's see how long you can keep that up," Maki said as she readied herself.

This courage... from the same Yurika who would always run away? She must have gained a considerable amount of power.

Maki wasn't as optimistic about the situation as she sounded. She didn't think she stood much of a chance after taking Yurika's supposedly drastic increase in mana into account.

And then there's the terrain... This footing is disadvantageous to me.

Maki, in her snow boots, was standing on fresh snow. She fought using a combination of mind manipulation magic and martial arts. In comparison, Yurika's fighting style primarily relied on long-range spells. Because of that, Maki was at a disadvantage in the snow where she would have a hard time moving. With that in mind, Maki decided she should prioritize retreating and getting her hands on a familiar.

But just running away isn't my style!

Despite the situation, there was a fire burning in Maki's eyes. No matter how strong Yurika had gotten, her pride wouldn't allow her to just run away without putting up a fight.

"Here I come, Nijino Yurika!"

Maki thrust her right arm forward.

"Maki-chan?!"

Yurika's response was slightly delayed, but she put both of her hands up in front of her.

“Come, Nightwalker!”

“Come! Angel Halo, Encyclopedia!”

In response to their summons, three staffs appeared. Nighwalker appeared before Maki’s right hand, and a staff appeared on either side of Yurika. Angel Halo was on the right and Encyclopedia was on the left. Both girls snatched their staffs out of the air and raised their right hands over their heads as they began concentrating.

She has two staffs?!

Maki was caught off guard by Yurika having a staff in each hand. She had made the first move, but her incantation was slightly delayed because of her surprise, so she and Yurika ended up chanting the same thing at the same time.

“Costume Change! Modifier: Quick! End: Permanent!”

“Costume Change! Modifier: Quick! End: Permanent!”

It was a transformation spell. The two girls were wrapped in blue light as their winter wear vanished and was replaced with different outfits. After the blue light faded, Yurika and Maki were wearing pink and indigo magical girl outfits respectively.

“And...!”

“What?!”

Maki’s incantation ended there, but Yurika’s continued.

“Arming: Angel Halo!”

After finishing her incantation, the staff she was holding above her head, Angel Halo, began emitting an orange light which gradually grew large enough to envelop it, obscuring its silhouette. Once the light was bright enough, it suddenly divided into balls of light of several different colors.

“She armed her staff?!”

While Maki watched on in disbelief, the balls of light crashed into Yurika’s body one after another, into her head, her back, her chest, her arms, and her legs. For every ball of light that touched her, her outfit began changing. The

balls of light that crashed into her limbs and chest transformed and added glowing white embellishments. The ball of light that crashed into her back transformed and added angelic looking wings. And the final ball of light, the one that crashed into her head, transformed into what could only be described as an angel's halo. Thanks to the transformation, Yurika's normally revealing outfit, which always screamed "cosplay," was given a heavenly makeover.

"I am the magical girl of love and courage, Rainbow Yurika!"

As her whole body glowed white, she swung her other staff, Encyclopedia, around using both hands.

"I will protect the peace of this city!"

Yurika pointed the tip of her staff towards Maki. Her dignified stance made her look powerful for once.

"I see, so that's your new power..."

Seeing Yurika's new appearance, Maki held her breath. She had prepared two staffs, binding powerful magic into one of them and arming the other. While fighting normally with one staff, she'd be looking for a chance to unleash the bound magic in the other.

I see you put some thought into this, Nijino Yurika!

Normally, a lone magician could only use a limited number of spells at the same time. However, by using powerful magical tools, it was possible to increase that number. Maki believed that's how Yurika would try and use the mana from room 106.

"That new staff holds quite a lot of power, I see."

"Its power may be insignificant, but I won't let things go like they did last time!"

"'Insignificant'? Do you think I'll fall for that?"

Maki gritted her teeth.



Highly dense mana from artifact-rank magical tools, the highest level of magical tools whose means of creation had been long been lost, was flowing out from Encyclopedia. When Yurika called that insignificant, Maki was slightly irritated.

Eek! I hope she doesn't see through my bluff!

Yurika, on the other hand, was secretly feeling anxious. It was indeed true that the staff she had gotten from Koutarou held large amounts of mana, but as its name alluded, it was sort of like an encyclopedia. Since it could use a wide variety of spells without relying on the user's mana, the power of each spell was below average. It was super flexible, but weak. So rather than relying on Encyclopedia's power, she was counting on it as a way to disguise her own magic while in front of Koutarou and the others. But since the staff did indeed hold an impressive amount of mana, it also worked as a bluff against Maki. That's all the meaning the staff held to Yurika, whose magic repertoire was wide enough as it was.

"I guess I'll give it a shot..."

Maki readied her own staff, intent to test Yurika's abilities for herself. Now that she had revealed her new power, it was a great opportunity to see what it could do.

I can't show weakness now! Yurika, fight! I've grown since then!

Yurika mustered up all her courage and pointed her staff at Maki.

"Sanctuary! Modifier: Effective Area, Colossal!"

"Sanctuary! Modifier: Effective Area, Colossal!"

The two girls again began their incantations at the same time. This time it was a spell to keep other people in the area away. It was an unwritten rule for magicians to use it whenever they fought each other, and it doubled as the gong to start the fight.

"Quick Cast Acceleration!"

Maki was the first to move. After casting a spell that improved her reaction

speed, she began closing the distance to Yurika.

As I thought, this footing is terrible!

However, as expected, Maki's movement was impeded in the snow. She was still moving faster than a normal person, but the poor footing slowed her just enough to give Yurika an opportunity to attack.

"Energy Bolts! Target Option: Spread!"

The spell Yurika chose created multiple magic arrows to attack her target. Those magic arrows normally worked like a machine gun, but Yurika altered the spell to work more like a shotgun. It was a necessary adjustment to score a hit on the quick Maki.

"Tch! Quick Cast Anti-Magic Shield!"

However, Maki wouldn't just take that lying down. Before Yurika could fire off her glowing red magic arrows, Maki created a translucent yellow shield around herself. Yurika's magic arrows smashed into it like rain. Since Yurika had spread the shots out to cover a wider area, their power was weakened some. The shield Maki had created easily blocked them.

"Tiny Memory Flash! Modifier: Touch Trigger!"

Still protected by the magic shield, Maki charged forward. At the same time, her staff began glowing indigo. That light was a mind manipulation spell—Maki's forte—that induced a short-term memory lapse. She infused her own staff with the spell so that it would activate at the same time she struck her target.

"Take this, Yurikaaa!"

As Maki wound up for her swing, the shield protecting her vanished. She dismissed it in order to attack.

"Now!"

"Kyaaaaaaaah!"

Unexpectedly, the snow below Maki's feet suddenly rose and lifted her up with it. It was a spell that Yurika used to control the snow and slow down her target. However, Yurika hadn't recited a single incantation. Her new staff was

what had activated the spell.

She can cast spells without any incantation whatsoever?!

Maki was left astonished. She had expected Yurika to use her own magic in addition to the power of the staff, but she didn't think its effects would be instantaneous. Unlike Koutarou and Kiriha, Yurika knew the ways of magic and understood how it worked. Because of that, she didn't need to say anything in order to control the magic of the staff. That was the original intended power of Encyclopedia.

"Flame Lance! Target Option: Auto Homing!"

And while Maki's body was still midair, Yurika created a spear of fire. She was able to cast two spells, one right after the other—something that shouldn't be possible. The flaming spear soared through the air towards Maki.

"I'll get hit?!"

Seeing the burning spear charging at her, Maki realized that she had no way of dodging it. She couldn't take any evasive actions while she was falling.

"Damn it! In that case...!"

Maki pointed her staff upwards.

"Energy Release!"

Maki released the magic infused in her staff and created a small explosion. Thanks to the shockwave of the explosion and a little help from gravity, Maki was able to slightly change the direction she was falling in. The fire spear grazed her as it sailed past, singeing her outfit. It continued on until it crashed into a pile of snow, blowing most of it away and melting the rest. The intense flame continued burning even after all the snow was gone, scorching the earth below.

That was close! If I had been just a moment slower, I would have been defeated!

As Maki mentally wiped the cold sweat from her brow, she quickly rolled across the snow before getting to her feet. She then readied her staff again, but she was still quite taken aback.

To think she'd use magic like that...

Artifacts were powerful magical tools said to be created by god. Any mortal means to create them had been lost to the ages. Because they were so powerful, they tended to be used for large-scale magic. However, no matter how powerful the artifact was, an incantation was required to cast such a spell. That was true for the majority of the artifacts that Maki knew of. However, Yurika's Encyclopedia worked completely differently. The spells it used were so minor that there was no need for an incantation and it required no focus or casting time. On top of that, it could be used completely independently from Yurika's own magic.

Maki wasn't sure which was more dangerous—Yurika's more powerful spells that required incantations, or the weaker magic that could strike at any moment—but she knew both were a serious threat.

The staff Satomi-san gave me isn't useless after all! This was made to fight against magicians!

Really, Yurika was just as surprised as Maki was. She'd thought the only use for Encyclopedia would be disguising her own magic, but she'd now realized the true worth of the staff. The staff was an artifact that defied the common rules of magic. It allowed her to attack at just the right time when her opponent had no chance to evade or block.

But I can't let my guard down! Maki is still better than me!

Yurika grabbed the staff with both hands and stared straight at Maki. Yurika had more mana than Maki thanks to her staff, but when it came to using each spell effectively, Maki had more experience. Yurika knew if she relied on the staff too heavily, she would suffer for it.

"Impressive, Nijino Yurika. That staff surprised me."

"But you're still standing, Maki-chan. There's no point in just surprising you."

Yurika had no intention of giving Maki a chance to attack.

Theia-chan is always telling me that I'm too weak on the finish!

Thanks to the games that Yurika had played against Koutarou, Theia, and the others for over ten months now, Yurika had gradually gotten better at thinking strategically when push came to shove. Sensing that, Maki clicked her tongue in

her mind.

You've gotten much more skilled than before, Nijino Yurika... It seems your wish truly has come true...

Yurika had always had the air of a mere apprentice, but not now. Maki now saw for herself what Koutarou had said about Yurika becoming a splendid magician was true.

"Playtime ends here, Nijino Yurika."

Maki decided to switch gears. If Yurika was now strong enough to be properly recognized as a member of Rainbow Heart, she couldn't be taken lightly. That meant Maki would go all out in order to defeat her. In other words, Maki was forced to admit that Yurika was a worthy opponent.

"Maki-chan!"

Yurika could also sense that Maki's demeanor had changed. Her seemingly overconfident expression had vanished and was replaced with a more serious one. She now came across as desolate as her indigo outfit.

"Nightwalker! Recall Precast Category Alpha!" Maki loudly declared with her staff pointed towards Yurika. Maki's body was then wreathed in colorful lights.

Maki's new staff, Nightwalker, came equipped with a special ability. A magician could prepare a certain number spells beforehand and store them, and Nightwalker increased that capacity. The two spells Maki had used when talking with Koutarou earlier were a good example, but they weren't the only spells she had stored in her staff.

What Maki had done now was release more than ten spells all at once. All of them were spells that increased her combat abilities. They enhanced everything from her physical strength to her toughness, from her eyesight to her thinking speed. All kinds of spells activated and enveloped her, greatly amplifying her original power.

"The staff is...?!"

But what attracted Yurika's attention the most wasn't Maki, but her staff. It was enveloped in red and indigo light, and its form had greatly changed. It now

appeared in the shape of a large sword. The red mana that manipulated physical energy had transformed the staff into a sword, and the indigo mana that controlled mental energy was surrounding it to make it more powerful. It was a potentially deadly combination of spells Maki had picked out personally.

“Here I come, Yurika!”

Maki made a quick dash forward. With her entire body enhanced by magic, Maki was far faster than before. She was closing in on Yurika in the blink of an eye.

“She’s fast!”

Yurika had had Maki targeted with her staff, but Maki was now so fast that Yurika couldn’t keep up with her, much less keep her aim on her. Despite being slowed by the snow, Maki was too fast even for Yurika’s eyes.

“I can do this!”

As Maki closed the distance between her and Yurika, she felt she had a chance of winning. Even though Yurika could combine instant, weak magic with her own normal, powerful magic, she couldn’t cast anything on an opponent she couldn’t target.

But to think I’d have to use this against Yurika...

If Yurika could use spells at any time, Maki would just have to attack her using overwhelming speed and power. That was only possible thanks to precast spells she’d prepared beforehand, but she hadn’t actually planned on using them against Yurika. She’d wanted to save this ace up her sleeve for her fight against Koutarou.

Maki had fixated on the white light Koutarou had summoned around his sword, and this was the way she’d planned to overcome it. Koutarou’s sword had the power to dispel magic, so using overwhelming speed to avoid it was an absolute necessity. And since she knew he had more mana at his disposal, a drawn-out fight would be to her disadvantage. She would move to finish it all in a single hit. That had been Maki’s plan to defeat Koutarou, but it seemed that it was also effective against Yurika. She could defeat Yurika without giving her a chance to cast any spells.

“Maki-chan?!”

As she turned her head, Yurika spotted Maki in her peripheral vision.

“Too slow!”

However, by that time, Maki was already swinging her sword. The next moment, Yurika ordered her staff to cast the same spell as before, disturbing the snow under Maki’s feet. However, Maki was far faster than before, and she instead kicked off the snow and jumped into the air before she could lose her balance.

“Haaaaaaaah!”

“Kyaaah!”

With no time to cast a spell of her own, Yurika was only able to use the staff in her hands to protect herself.

Maki's sword and Yurika's staff collided. Yurika was barely able to block Maki's swing. As she held her ground, she ordered her staff to cast another spell.

"You're too naive!"

But in spite of the situation, Maki didn't relent. She instead prepared for another attack.

"Oh no!"

The reason for that was the indigo magic infused in Maki's sword. It erased several seconds of its target's memory. Maki watched as the spell passed through her staff and into Yurika.

"Huh...?"

The next moment, Yurika lost sight of Maki.

Amnesia?!

However, since she had been hit by this same spell before, Yurika wasn't too shaken up. She recognized its effects and began looking for Maki to counterattack.

"Hiyaaaaah!"

Unfortunately, Maki was quicker on the draw. She kicked her leg into Yurika's side. She was still just disoriented enough from Maki's memory-erasing spell that Yurika took the blow without being able to cast anything to defend herself.

Maki had magically enhanced her legs to increase their speed and strength, but she'd also covered them with a spell that exploded on contact. Taking such a powerful kick directly, Yurika was sent flying and crashed into the snow.

"Urgh..."

A pained groan escaped Yurika's lips, but luckily, she was still able to get back up. The snow had acted as a cushion and reduced the damage she took from the fall. If it wasn't for the snow, she probably would have been knocked out right then and there.

"Good job getting back on your feet, Nijino Yurika! As expected of Rainbow

Nana’s successor!”

Maki didn’t ease up on her attacks. She readied her sword with both hands and charged towards Yurika.

I have to hurry! The time limit is near!

Maki was continuing to attack at full power to keep Yurika from counterattacking as much as she was out of necessity. The several spells she had prepared beforehand all required a massive amount of mana to keep active. Though she could use that power to easily overwhelm an opponent, she couldn’t keep it up for long.

“Wh-What can I do to capture Maki-chan?!”

Maki was approaching Yurika at high speed while rapidly changing directions to throw her off. And with Yurika still reeling from the damage she’d taken, she couldn’t aim properly at Maki.

“It’s impossible for you the way you are now! And even if you enhance your own strength, it’s already too late!”

Maki could taste her victory. Yurika was thrown off by Maki’s movements and couldn’t cast any spells. The next strike would take her down. But though she was confident, Maki made sure to play it safe and began taking careful aim for Yurika as she waited for the right time to attack.

What can I do?!

While Yurika was racking her brain, Maki moved in on her. Sensing the incoming attack, Yurika did her best to defend herself.

“Quick Cast Anti-Magic Shield!”

Maki’s sword met the shield that Yurika had created.

“Well done blocking it!”

Maki took the opportunity to back off instead of attacking again. As she jumped back, the snow covering her body was scattered into the air.

Huh...?

Seeing that, Yurika looked down at herself. She too was covered in snow, but

it was nothing compared to the amount that had accumulated on Maki.

“I see! I could do that!”

Realizing a potential path to victory, Yurika’s eyes started sparkling as she raised her staff above her head. While chanting her spell, she mentally ordered Encyclopedia to cast a spell too.

“I’ve got you!”

To Maki, this looked like a golden opportunity. Since she was confident that Yurika wouldn’t be able to hit her, she didn’t care what spell Yurika was preparing. If anything, with Maki’s speed what it was, Yurika had left herself wide open.

However, Maki hadn’t anticipated the spell combination Yurika was about to use.

“Quick Cast Acid Cloud! Modifier: Effective Area, Large!”

Yurika unleashed a spell that created a potent cloud of acid. She’d also had Encyclopedia call forth a cloud. It was made of poison gas which, if inhaled, would spread through the body.

“What?!”

Maki was shocked. Yurika had cast the clouds around herself, so Maki jumped right into them as she went to attack.

“Th-This is...?!”

The two thick clouds obscured her view, making it difficult to see Yurika. They then began eroding her clothes and skin.

“Guh! Kah! T-To think she would use such a reckless tactic! But with this, we’ll both— No, wait! So that’s what she’s planning!”

Maki saw through Yurika’s plan. Since Maki moved around a lot more than Yurika did, she would come into more contact with the acid. And since she was so much more active, her body consumed more oxygen, meaning she would need to breathe in more of the poisoned air. That meant Maki would suffer more damage from the clouds than Yurika would. On top of that, Maki had lost sight of Yurika and could no longer attack.

That was the strategy Yurika had come up with after seeing the snow covering Maki. If she came into that much contact with the falling snow, surely the same would be true for an acid or poison cloud. It was a simple but effective means of indirect attack.

“Energy Bolts! Target Option: Spread!”

But Yurika’s attack didn’t stop there. She fired the same kind of magic arrows as before at the area where she assumed Maki would be.

“C-Curse you, Yurika!”

Maki hurriedly moved to dodge and was able to get out of the way in time. Although Maki’s speed had marginally been compromised by the acid and poison, Yurika wasn’t aiming for her directly.

“Heh, to think you’d become this strong!”

And the result was exactly what Yurika was going for. Since Maki needed to move quickly and take large steps to dodge, she would suffer even more from the acid and poison. Her entire body was now covered in the acid and she was taking massive damage. Moreover, the slight amount of poison she had already breathed in was beginning to spread throughout her body. There was no need for Yurika’s attacks to hit. Even if Maki dodged them, Yurika still had the upper hand.

“Ugh!”

Maki clenched her jaw in pain and leaped with all of her strength, trying to escape the effective area of the clouds. Staying in them any longer would lead to her defeat.

I’ve been had! To think victory has slipped through my fingers after all this!

After leaping from the clouds, Maki turned around. If she didn’t treat the damage from the acid and poison, she wouldn’t be able to continue fighting. And as things were, she didn’t have enough remaining mana to switch things up and try to fight long-range. Either way, she realized she was no longer in a position to come out on top.

You won’t get so lucky next time, Nijino Yurika!

Frustrated and humiliated, Maki retreated while telling herself that she was sure to win against Yurika in the future as long as she took her time to prepare.

“...She ran off?”

Realizing that the attacks had stopped and Maki’s presence was moving away, Yurika dismissed her spells. The clouds dispersed and a glowing white Yurika appeared from their center.

“No, she probably didn’t... Maki-chan probably just let me go because she wanted to avoid going down together...”

Yurika leaned against her staff and let out a sigh of relief. She didn’t think that she had won against Maki. In fact, Yurika herself had taken a beating from the acid and poison. If the fighting had continued on much longer like that, it wasn’t hard to imagine both of them collapsing from serious damage, regardless of who won.

“Maki-chan is really strong...”

After letting out another sigh of relief, Yurika began using healing magic to treat her wounds. If she hadn’t noticed that Maki was covered in more snow than she was, she definitely would have lost. And though it was only by a narrow margin, Yurika felt a deep sense of relief that she’d managed to escape defeat.

But, but...

But at that time, Yurika was gripped by a terrible doubt—one so profound that it threatened to undermine her entire identity.

“But, but... Should a magical girl of love and courage really be using acid and poison?”

The magical girl of love and courage, Rainbow Yurika now had a signature acid and poison cloud attack combo.

“It feels like Maki-chan is the more magical girl-like one here... At least she used a sword...”

While she had gotten a second transformation and a power-up, Yurika felt like she had lost something important as a magical girl.

Pursuit and Conditions for Being a Couple

Wednesday, February 3rd

The ski resort hotel had an arcade on the premises. The game machines inside were all antique models that were over a decade old, however, so most of the guests just passed by without entering.

“Come on! Power-up, power-up!”

“You’re going for it now?!”

But it had a certain appeal to enthusiasts like Koutarou and Theia who loved old games. Because of that, Koutarou, Theia, and Ruth were the only ones in the arcade now. The three of them had found the place after dinner, and they now were taking some time to enjoy themselves. Koutarou and Theia were playing a game together with Ruth watching over them from behind.

“See what happened? You should’ve picked up the power-up right there.”

“As if I could grab it in the middle of that rain of bullets!”

“I won’t listen to your excuses. More importantly, hurry up and continue. A knight can’t be letting his princess fight on her own.”

Koutarou had gotten a game over, but Theia was still playing. She was controlling a small fighter in the center of the screen and was trying to fight off invaders coming from space.

“You know, it’s hard not to laugh seeing you fight alien invaders.”

“I couldn’t laugh even if I wanted to when I’m this busy defending myself. Hurry up and continue.”

“Hang on. I need to get some more change.”

“I’ve already gotten you some, Satomi-sama.”

As Koutarou stood up to get more change, Ruth presented her hands to him.

She was carefully holding handfuls of coins.

“Thank you. I’ll pay you back later.”

“No need to worry. Please use them freely.”

“I can’t just—”

“Hurry, Koutarou! I’m about to lose!”

“Okay, okay!”

Koutarou put the coins he got from Ruth into the machine and sat back down next to Theia. When he did, his blue fighter reappeared next to Theia’s pink fighter and the two of them continued working together to defeat the invaders. After a while, they finally reached the last boss of the game.

“Koutarou, it’s time for a combo attack!”

“I got it! I’ll do the rapid fire! You take care of the ship!”

“Leave it to me! Just believe in me and keep firing!”

“Understood!”

Through their skillful tag team approach, they chipped away at the enemy’s huge battleship little by little. Koutarou focused on offense and endlessly mashed the button to fire as fast as he could, while Theia dexterously evaded the enemy’s attacks. It was a splendid fight that made use of both their skills. Eventually, their teamwork paid off and the enemy battleship exploded.

“Ooh!”

“Did we do it?!”

After a flashy explosion, the screen faded to the credit roll, displaying the names of everyone involved in creating the game. At the end was a special thanks to the players who played all the way through.

“We did it, Theia! We beat it!”

“Hoorah! We reign victorious!”

When they saw the end message, Koutarou and Theia began cheering loudly. They pointed at the screen and celebrated their accomplishment before

bragging about all the cool things they'd done along the way. All the while, Ruth was watching over the two of them with a smile.

"All right, I'll give you a reward for your contributions to the glory of the royal families."

"A reward?"

"Indeed. I'll buy you a soda. Same cola as usual?"

"Sure. Aren't you feeling generous today?"

"Praising vassals when they deserve it is the duty of royalty."

"Who are you calling a vassal?"

"You, of course. Even if you aren't right now, you will be eventually!"

Still excited, Theia shot up from her seat and took off towards the vending machine, not giving Koutarou any time to object.

"I will be eventually, huh?"

Theia hadn't changed a bit since they first met. She was coercive and spoke to him like she was looking down on him. In the past, Koutarou would have never even considered obeying her, but he'd begun changing his mind as of late. Ever since he found out the real reason Theia wanted to make him her vassal, his will to resist had almost completely vanished.

But still... What is this?

Ever since they'd gotten to the ski resort, Koutarou had been feeling like something was different about Theia. She'd seemed troubled the past few days, but when the class reached the ski resort, she almost seemed to return to her usual self.

It's normal Theia, but... something's still...

Theia was talking and acting the way she always did, so in that sense things seemed normal, but Koutarou felt like something was still somehow different. He just didn't know what it was. That's what left him feeling so perplexed now.

"Is something the matter, Satomi-sama?" Ruth asked when she noticed the puzzled look on Koutarou's face.

“No, not with me... but did something happen with Theia?”

Koutarou was honestly turning to Ruth for answers. He was sure Ruth would have noticed too, and if the reason was anything that meant trouble, he would help if he could.

“Why do you think that, Satomi-sama?”

However, Ruth only answered Koutarou’s question with another question and a happy smile.

It seems like something definitely happened...

Seeing Ruth’s smile, Koutarou quickly gathered his thoughts.

“How do I put this... She looks the same as always, but... Her presence, maybe? I just feel like something’s a bit off.”

Theia was currently putting coins into the vending machine. Nothing appeared to be wrong, exactly, but something was definitely different. Koutarou struggled to put that into words, but he felt like something was out of place.

“Does it bother you?”

“No, it’s not like that. I just noticed. That’s all.”

Ruth nodded with a satisfied expression on her face after hearing Koutarou’s answer, and her smile grew slightly brighter.

“I see... Satomi-sama, Her Highness had a personal worry. And after resolving that, it seems like her frame of mind has changed slightly as a result.”

“A worry, huh? So it’s not like something major happened?”

“No, nothing like that. Although, that’s not to say it wasn’t major to Her Highness.”

“I see. So that’s why...”

Koutarou looked at Theia. As if sensing his gaze on her, Theia turned towards him.

“Koutarou, there’s a cola with zero calories and one that’s unhealthy. Which one do you want?”

“Dealer’s choice.”

“Okay, then leave it to me.”

Theia turned back to the vending machine with a smile and put in more coins. She then returned holding three plastic bottles.

“Here, Ruth. They didn’t have any tea that wasn’t sweet, so I got you some Japanese tea.”

“Thank you very much, Your Highness.”

Theia handed a bottle to Ruth. Although they hadn’t spoken before Theia walked off, she hadn’t forgotten about Ruth.

Well, Theia is different, but Ruth-san is a little different too...

It was rare to see Ruth let Theia go buy drinks. It seemed Theia hadn’t been the only one to go through something of a change. While Koutarou was thinking about that, a plastic bottle appeared in front of his face.

“Koutarou, this is for you.”

“Ah, thanks.”

She gave him a diet cola.

“Since it’s a school trip and since it’s your reward, I was thinking of buying you the one that’s full of sugar as a treat, but...”

Koutarou preferred the sugary cola even if it was bad for him. He felt like the aftertaste of diet cola was different.

“You’ll eventually become someone who stands above others, so I bought this one instead since you should worry a little more about your health like me.”

Theia had gotten the same thing for herself.

“Stand above others...”

Theia had gotten the diet cola out of concern for Koutarou’s—or rather, her future vassal’s—body.

“Are you dissatisfied?”

Theia removed the cap from her bottle and smiled at Koutarou.

“Well...”

Koutarou couldn’t answer right away. Feeling both dissatisfied and not, he was struggling a bit with his emotions. But before he could answer, Ruth spoke up.

“I’m dissatisfied. Your Highness. Why was I the only one left out?”

“Ruth, you don’t like cola, right?”

“If Your Highness bought it, I would have wanted it anyway.”

“Ah fine, just wait! I’ll go buy another one for you!”

Theia thrust her bottle at Ruth and returned to the vending machine. Koutarou stared at the two of them, but he eventually looked down at his own bottle and opened it.

I feel like it doesn’t even matter anymore...

Regardless of what changes had happened to Theia or Ruth, there was no need to worry. Koutarou felt certain of that after witnessing their carefree discussion.

“Here, this is yours.”

“Thank you very much, Your Highness. I’ll do my best to drink it.”

“I feel like something is very wrong, but... oh well.”

While listening to the girls talk, Koutarou brought his bottle to his mouth. The chilled cola felt great in his parched throat.

“By the way, what are we going to do with this Japanese tea?”

“Since Her Highness bought it for me, I’ll drink it later.”

After Koutarou had drunk most of his cola, he spotted Yurika passing by the entrance to the arcade as he was casually looking around.

“...Where is she going this late?”

“What’s wrong, Koutarou?”

“Well, it looks like Yurika is heading outside.”

Koutarou had only seen Yurika for a few seconds from where he was sitting, but he could tell she was dressed in thick outdoor clothes. Since the entire hotel had working heating, not even Yurika would normally wear that much clothing indoors. It had to mean she was planning on going outside.

“At this hour?”

Ruth looked up at the clock in the arcade. It was now past 9:30PM, and it was almost time for lights out.

“That’s odd... I’ll go check with her.”

Just the fact that Yurika, who hated the cold, was going outside was strange. Koutarou had an ominous feeling and finished off his cola before heading towards the exit of the arcade.

“Ruth, we’re going too.”

“Yes, Your Highness.”

Theia and Ruth followed suit, and the three of them chased after Yurika together.

Koutarou and the others caught up with Yurika as she got off the stairs leading from the second floor to the first.

“Wait up, Yurika! Where are you going this late?”

“Satomi-san?!” Yurika’s eyes opened wide when Koutarou suddenly called out to her. “Wh-Where? I’m not going anywhere.”

“Don’t lie. You dressed like that in here... You might as well be wearing a sign that says you’re planning on sneaking outside.”

“Auuugh...”

Yurika wearing a thick coat, avoiding the elevators, and sneaking through the less trafficked areas of the hotel made it obvious she was planning on going out, and for a while by the look of it. If she was just heading out to pick up something she had dropped from a window, for example, there would be no need to try and be sneaky about it.

“Yurika-sama, where are you planning on going?”

“Based on your answer, we might even help you. Just tell us.”

“U-Um... that’s...”

Questioned by Ruth and Theia, Yurika was at a loss for an answer. After turning it over in her mind, she gave them an answer that only she could.

“A-Actually, Maki-chan is missing.”

“Aika-san is?”

“Yes. So I was going to quietly search for her...”

After healing her wounds from their battle, Yurika had tried to figure out where Maki had gone. Since she knew that Maki was planning something, she couldn’t just leave her be. And though she’d tried looking for her, she hadn’t had any luck. Maki wasn’t anywhere by the ski slopes, and even after skiing hours were over, Maki still hadn’t returned to the hotel. Thusly Yurika determined that Maki must be somewhere outside the hotel, and she was going to go to try and find her.

“By yourself?”

“Y-Yes. I wouldn’t want it to turn into a big deal, so I thought I should go alone...”

If their classmates or teachers found out that Maki was missing, it would cause a fuss. And if Yurika was alone, she could use her magic to look for Maki. There was also the chance that the two of them would end up fighting again, so Yurika going on her own was a good idea for multiple reasons.

Aaaugh! What should I do? Satomi-san will get angry again.

Even so, Yurika couldn’t tell them that. And since it was Koutarou, he would definitely worry about her going out on her own. He wasn’t the kind of guy that would just let a girl walk around the mountains at night by herself. So Yurika closed her eyes tightly and prepared herself to get hit or yelled at.

“Ah, I see. Good idea, Yurika.”

“...H-Huh?”

However, no matter how long she waited for it, neither fists nor angry words came flying her way. She cautiously opened one eye and saw Koutarou nodding and smiling.

“In this situation, you’re perfect for the job.”

“S-Satomi-san?”

Yurika was terribly surprised by Koutarou’s unusual reaction.

What?!

Yurika was so surprised, in fact, that she even doubted her own eyes and ears.

“What do you mean? There’s no way that Yurika could find Maki in the mountains on her own.”

Theia was equally as skeptical as Yurika was, and asked Koutarou to explain himself in her place. Behind her was Ruth with a worried look on her face. She seemed to feel the same way.

“Did you forget? Yurika can use real magic now. She’d definitely find Aika-san before the police could even send out a search party.”

“You’re right!”

Theia’s eyes lit up at Koutarou’s answer. Yurika had the staff that Koutarou had brought home. If she used its power, she would be able to resolve the situation before it got serious. However, in order for her to do that, Yurika had to be alone. If other classmates or teachers went with her, she wouldn’t be able to use her magic.

“Yurika, I apologize for my rude remark. Your judgement was correct.”

“I am very sorry too, Yurika-sama.”

“N-No, you don’t really have to apologize...”

When Theia and Ruth apologized, Yurika felt a little warm and fuzzy, but mostly confused.

H-Huh?! S-Something’s strange! What’s happened to them?!

The situation developed completely counter to anything Yurika could have expected. Just a few days ago, they would have made fun of her, but now all

three of them were showing her respect. That only confused her even more.

“But Yurika...”

Then Koutarou’s expression turned more serious.

Augh! Here we go! He really is going to get angry!

Yurika instinctively shut her eyes again. She would be put down after being raised to the skies. It was something that had happened several times in the past.

“I’ll have to subtract points for not consulting with us first. Even if you can use magic, going into the mountains alone at night is dangerous. Besides, you can use your magic in front of us.”

Koutarou put his large hand on top of Yurika’s head.

“...Huh?”

Yurika lifted her head up and opened her eyes. She was met with the sight of Koutarou still smiling at her.

H-He’s really not angry...?

Yurika wouldn’t have been surprised at all if she had been shouted at or hit, but this unexpected development sent her for a loop.

“All right, I understand the situation.”

“S-Satomi-san?”

Koutarou said he understood, but Yurika wasn’t following the situation at all.

“Yurika, I’ll come with you. I’ll go get changed, so just wait here a minute.”

“O-Okay...”

Yurika was so out of it that she just ended up going along with things.

“Koutarou, I’ll come with you too.”

“No, that would be bad.”

“Why?”

“With me, Yurika, and Aika-san gone, that would mean three students from

class 1-A are missing. Any more than that and even the teachers would notice.”

“Th-That’s true...”

“Your Highness, I believe it would be wise if we remain and keep everyone’s absence a secret.”

“I understand. But call me right away if things get dangerous.”

“Yeah. Anyways, I’m gonna go change. Yurika, don’t run off on your own!”

“O-Okay!”

Leaving Yurika and the others behind, Koutarou rushed up the stairs.

Satomi-san praised me... and now he’s going to help me...

Even as she watched him go, Yurika couldn’t understand how this had happened. She couldn’t understand it, but she could feel that the atmosphere around her was starting to change.

And what is... this blissful feeling?

Koutarou still recognized Yurika as a normal girl, but now he also acknowledged that she could use magic.

And why is my heart pounding so hard...?

Yurika was able to accomplish her duty as a magical girl while being treated as a normal girl. What’s more, she was even getting help and being praised. It was a twist of fate brought about by Koutarou originally thinking Yurika was a cosplayer, and it was a splendid development for Yurika. She was so thrilled that her racing heart wouldn’t calm down anytime soon.

Not long after leaving the hotel, Yurika stripped off all of her thick outerwear to reveal her magical girl outfit. She would normally complain how cold it was in the middle of the mountains at night in light clothing, but right now, Yurika didn’t mind the temperature one bit.

“Satomi-san, Satomi-san, look! I’m going to cast another spell!”

“I think that’s enough.”

“You don’t have to be so modest. This next one is amazing!”

“You said the same thing about the last one.”

“Just look! Hyah!”

With a bright smile, Yurika held Encyclopedia above her head with both hands. When she did, red and yellow lights shot out from the staff at the same time and enveloped Koutarou and Yurika.

“H-Huh? I’m floating!”

“It’s amazing, right? It’s supposedly called Limited Levitation.”

Both Koutarou and Yurika’s feet started to float slightly above the ground, almost like they were standing on an invisible board five centimeters above the snow.

“It doesn’t seem to have enough power for full-on flight, but it makes it easier to walk in places like this where the footing is so poor.”

“Oh, that’s quite impressive...”

Thanks to the spell, Koutarou and Yurika’s walking speed increased considerably.

“All right, then I’ll cast the next spell!”

“Yurika, that’s really enough. It would be problematic if we run out of mana when we need it, right?”

Koutarou stopped Yurika as she held her staff overhead again. Since the two of them had left the hotel, Yurika had cast about ten spells. She was using magic she believed would be useful for traveling in the mountains at night—spells like levitation, light, protection against the cold, and night vision. She’d gone so overboard that even though Koutarou knew that the staff had been created to use a lot of weak magic, he couldn’t help worrying about its mana reserves.

“It’ll be fine. This staff hasn’t lost a bit of its power even after using this many spells.”

“I hope not...”

Since Yurika understood how the staff worked better than Koutarou, she knew he was worried over nothing. And besides, she wasn’t just using the staff

for fun. She was using a lot of lesser spells to preserve their stamina and help keep them prepared for a confrontation with Maki. And by repeatedly casting spells in front of him, it wouldn't be hard to put Koutarou to sleep before she encountered Maki, effectively keeping him out of the fight. That was half of the reason she was using so many spells, but the other half was genuinely because she couldn't help herself.

"Satomi-san, Satomi-san! What kind of spell should I use next?!"

"Yurika, don't get too carried away. It's dangerous, so watch where you're going."

"It's fine! Not even I would— Oof!"

Not a moment after Koutarou said something, Yurika walked into a tree by the side of the snow-covered road. When she did, the snow piled up on the branches overhead poured down on her.

"What did I just say? Here, give me your hand."

"S-Sorry."

Koutarou reached out his hand to Yurika, who was covered in snow and sitting on the ground. She was looking down, her face red from smacking into the tree, but she grabbed Koutarou's hand and stood up. She then began to embarrassedly wipe the snow off herself.

"Hey, Yurika."

"...What?"

"About your next spell... Make it one that'll fix your face or dry your clothes."

"Okay, I will..."

Yurika had become freely able to use magic in front of Koutarou, but it hadn't seemed to make much of a difference in their relationship.

Maki took to tracking down the demon on the mountain as soon as she healed herself after her fight against Yurika. However, since Maki wasn't a specialist in divination magic like Dark Green was, her detection spells weren't as strong and she lost track of the demon before night fell. After that, she

aimlessly wandered the mountain for a while, but just a moment ago she had managed to pick up the demon's track once more.

"There's no mistaking it... It's just past here..."

Maki was wearing her magical girl outfit. She was far too lightly dressed to be walking around a snowy mountain, but the cold wasn't affecting her at all. Like Yurika, she was using several spells to protect herself from the elements. She was even walking lightly across the snow.

"There... Is it in that cave?"

Maki could see the entrance to a cave up ahead. It was about three meters in size—more than large enough for a person to pass through. The detection spell that Maki was using was telling her that there was powerful mana deep inside the cave. Based on that, Maki assumed that the demon she was after had made the cave its lair.

"This certainly is an impressive amount of mana..."

As Maki stood at the entrance of the cave, she could sense the magical power coming from within. It was enough to give her goosebumps even without using her detection magic. This demon must be incredibly powerful to have mana like that, and if Maki could make it her ally, it should prove quite useful in battle. But even so, something was nagging at Maki.

"I wonder what this feeling is..."

Maki used indigo magic and excelled at spells that manipulated the mind. She was sensitive to thoughts and emotions, and she detected a hint of something mixed in with the mana.

"Is this... fear, perhaps?"

Maki was able to sense strong fear from what she assumed was the master of the cave. It was powerful enough that it created a disturbance in the mana leaking out, almost like waves crashing on the shore.

"Sense Emotion. Mana Shield. Resist Magic."

Maki sensed something ominous about the fear coming from deep inside the cave, and cast several spells accordingly. While the existence within the cave

wasn’t as powerful as Maki, it seemed dangerous enough to convince her not to go in defenseless. A minimal amount of preparation was necessary.

“Now then, just what lies in wait inside?”

Relying on the light from her staff, she carefully entered the cave. The passageway continued forward in a slight curve. At least there was no fear of getting lost. The walls and floor of the cave were covered in ice. The heels of Maki’s shoes clacked loudly against the icy floor as she walked further in. The sound of her footsteps echoed into the very depths of the cave.

“It seems like the master of this cave can manipulate ice...”

Trace amounts of magical power were embedded into the ice. There seemed to be no mistaking that the master of the cave had created it. So as Maki continued deeper still into the cave, she activated another spell to defend her against the ice.

“Guuuuuuuuh...”

After walking several dozen meters into the cave, a bestial groan could be heard. It echoed off the walls, making it sound much louder than it actually was. But the effect was profound. Between it and the powerful mana emanating from the place, Maki’s whole body shook.

“Looks like it’s just up ahead.”

Any normal animal or person probably would have run off after hearing that groan. However, Maki simply smiled and picked up the pace. Intimidation of that level didn’t work on her.

“Found it!”

Pressing on another several dozen meters after hearing the groan, Maki reached a large open area in the cave that seemed to stretch at least twenty meters in all directions. It was there she spied the demon standing across the room.

Its body was about two meters in height and covered in tufty white hair. It stood up on two legs like a human, but its silhouette was closer to that of a beast than a man. It looked a little like a lion being forced to stand upright. But

what stood out most of all were the wings on its back and the shape of its head. Both features reminded Maki of a falcon or eagle.

All in all, it appeared as a white behemoth standing on two legs, with the head and wings of a bird of prey. It was the master of the cave—a demon. It certainly looked like a devil or the stuff of legend. Based on its powerful looking body and the vast mana it held, Maki believed it was quite a high-ranking demon.

“Y-Yu! Wy di yu com her?! Do yu com her to kil me?!”

But as the demon looked at Maki, it started backing away. It was rare for a high-ranking demon to back off even in the face of a strong enemy. Maki had encountered many powerful demons before, but this was the first time she had seen this kind of reaction.

It sounds like its speaking Ancient Folsarian...

Maki tilted her head in confusion at the demon’s behavior and began speaking to it in the same language it had used. The language it was speaking was something that high-ranking magicians like Maki studied daily.

“Calm down. I only came here to make a deal with you. If possible, I want to make a contract with you as my familiar.”

Maki was upfront with the demon, honestly declaring her intentions.

“Yur lyng!”

However, the demon rejected her immediately. It then glared at Maki and tried to intimidate her by growling.

“Guuuuuooooooo!”

“Wait! I really did come to make a contract with you as—”

“Silen! I kan tel tha yu ar lyng! Vadra ar komin her! Yu ar Vadra aly, righ?!”

“Vadra...?”

The demon spoke a strange word that Maki didn’t recognize. Based on the context, it seemed to be a proper noun, but since the demon’s throat hadn’t been made to speak human language, Maki couldn’t quite understand him.

“What is ‘Vadra’? What are you so scared of?”

Whatever that word meant seemed to be the source of the demon’s fear. And whatever it was, he was horribly frightened that it was approaching. If she didn’t do something about this fear, Maki wouldn’t be able to make the demon her familiar, so she wanted to find out what this “Vadra” was.

“Yu kan no ful me! I kan smel Vadra on yu! Yur ar hir tu stahl mi, no?!”

“Vadra’s smell? Stall you?”

“Hir! Vadra is hir! Almos righ hir! I wil be kiled! Wil kil me wit Signatin! I hav to kil tis oen an run!”

However, Maki wasn’t able to get to the bottom of the matter. Without answering her question, the demon, frightened and frenzied, attacked her.

Koutarou and Yurika reached the cave in question several minutes after Maki had entered it. Yurika believed that Maki was up to something magical, so instead of blindly searching for her, she had tried to track any traces of mana on the mountain. Her search had led her to the same place Maki’s had.

“Here?”

“It looks like it. Maki-chan is probably in there.”

Koutarou stared into the cave curiously. As Yurika looked at him from behind, she began thinking that it was about time to put him to sleep. Maki was somewhere inside that cave. Or, if it wasn’t Maki, then something else magical and powerful. Since she wanted Koutarou to believe that they were just looking for Maki as classmates, she believed that it was best if she put him to sleep and hid him somewhere safe outside before he entered the cave. Having made up her mind on the matter, Yurika pointed her staff at Koutarou.

“Satomi-san, since it’s dark inside, I’ll cast some more light magic.”

“Yeah, please do.”

Having had several spells cast on him already, Koutarou didn’t question Yurika approaching him from behind with her staff.

I feel kind of bad for tricking him, but... this is for Satomi-san’s own good...

Yurika pointed the staff at Koutarou, but instead of using the staff's magic, she began incanting a spell of her own. Since she was going to cast a mind-affecting spell, she wanted to use her own magic instead of the staff's to make sure she had proper control over it.

What if I let him have a nice dream? Something like Satomi-san, me, and Sakuraba-senpai going out to play somewhere...

Yurika began casting her spell, mixing in her own wishes and mischief into it.

"Combine: Deep Sleep, Control Dreams! Modifier: Effective Time, Twice!"

Two spells—one to put the target to sleep, and the second to manipulate their dreams—combined into one indigo light around Koutarou.

"O-Oh...?"

Koutarou had a quizzical look on his face as he watched the indigo light surround him, but only for a moment. The effects of the combined spell quickly took effect and seized hold of his mind. Since Koutarou was accepting of her spell, he easily fell into a deep slumber.

"Goodnight, Satomi-san."

Yurika smiled at Koutarou and held on to him so he wouldn't collapse.

"W-Wah!"

Koutarou's body was heavier than she expected, but she was somehow able to support him.

"Phew... Now all that's left is to hide him somewhere safe. He should be fine if I put up a ward."

While supporting Koutarou, Yurika looked around the area and spotted a large rock near the cave. She thought she could probably hide him in the shadow of that rock. However, before she could carry his body there, something happened.

There was a loud sound that could have easily been mistaken for cannon fire. Not a second later, a large amount of snow came blowing out from the entrance of the cave right in front of Yurika. In the burst of snow, she caught a glimpse of Maki.

“Kyaaah! Wait, M-Maki-chan?!”

“Nijino Yurika?!”

In the brief instant they passed each other, Yurika and Maki’s gazes met. Maki then continued flying on and crashed into the snow. Yurika blankly stared at her as she held up Koutarou.

“Guuuuuooooooo!”

The next moment, a white demon came flying out of the cave, chasing after Maki. The demon looked like he was about to attack the collapsed Maki, but the moment he saw Yurika, he stopped moving midair.

“Gaaaaaaaah! Vadra! Vadraaaaa!”

The demon then flapped his wings violently as it changed directions and came charging at Yurika.

“Kil! Kil! Vadra! Vadra!”

His hands shone red for an instant before both his arms were surrounded by a white snowstorm. It was a manifestation of the ice magic this demon used.

“Oh no!”

Realizing the demon was now coming for her and Koutarou, Yurika hurriedly began chanting.

“Quick Cast Greater Protection!”

She cast the strongest defensive spell she knew how to use, and the yellow light it produced surrounded both her and Koutarou.

“Dieeee!”

The demon attacked with its magic, sending the white snowstorms from its arms to surround Yurika and Koutarou.

“Kyaaaaah!”

Caught in the whipping winds and snow, Yurika let out a scream. As the snowstorm wrapped around her, its density rapidly increased and it turned into a column of ice. Within a few seconds, Yurika had been sealed into a giant ice pillar.

Meanwhile, Koutarou only felt a cold rush of air over him as he slept. That was thanks to Yurika's defensive spell and the fact that she had pushed him away before the snowstorm hit. Protected by a yellow light, he had rolled several meters away from her.

"Y-Yurika..."

Maki pulled herself up out of the snow and saw Yurika trapped in the ice. She was completely frozen with her eyes wide open. Maki wasn't even sure if she was alive or not. With the sudden arrival of her rival and the crisis she was in, Maki momentarily forgot about the demon.

"Die! Dieeeee! Vadra! Dieeeee!"

But even if she hadn't forgotten, she probably couldn't have avoided his next attack. The frenzied white demon conjured up a huge avalanche.

Koutarou and Yurika had left the hotel a little after 9:30PM. Roughly an hour and a half had passed, and it was almost time for bed for the Kisshouharukaze students. Because of that, the amount of people in the lobby had drastically decreased.

Theia had come to the lobby as things had started to quiet down for the night. She was getting worried about Koutarou and the others who still hadn't come back yet. Without thinking about it, she'd found herself in the lobby waiting for them.

Where is Koutarou...?

Theia looked around for Koutarou. She knew he would contact her on his way back. She had no doubt about that. So even looking for him now, she knew she wouldn't find him here. Still, she couldn't help herself.

I'm such a fool... Hmm?

It wasn't Koutarou, but Theia spied a familiar face as she looked around. She smiled slightly and approached the girl.

"Sanae."

Sanae was sitting on a sofa and staring at the entrance's automatic door.

“Huh? What is it, Theia?”

Sanae had been so focused on watching the door that she hadn’t noticed Theia until she called out to her. It even almost startled her.

“It’s nothing. I just sort of found myself here and thought I’d say hi.”

Theia sat down next to Sanae. She felt like staying here and talking with Sanae for while.

“Hmph. I’m waiting for Koutarou to come back.”

Sanae pouted and pointed at the automatic door. Sanae seemed to be in a bad mood despite waiting for Koutarou.

“Once he gets back, I’m going to let him have a piece of my mind.”

“Why?”

“Because he didn’t take me along for something so interesting.”

While expressing her dissatisfaction, Sanae emphatically pointed at the door. Koutarou and Yurika left while Sanae and Kiriha were at the hot spring. Sanae was unhappy because it felt like Koutarou had left her behind on purpose.

“Theia, you should say something too.”

“Me too?”

“Yeah. Isn’t there a thing or two that you want to tell him too?”

“Well, yes, but...”

Theia smiled wryly. There were indeed some things she wanted to tell Koutarou, but it wouldn’t be what Sanae had in mind.

No, in the grand scheme of things, it might be the same...

In the end, the reason Theia and Sanae were waiting in the lobby was the same.

“You take those suppressed feelings and use your maiden spirit and guts to—”

The entrance door opened. Both Sanae and Theia immediately turned to look.

“We finally made it, papa!”

“It’s already so late at night... Jeez...”

“I’ll check us in right away. Just hang on, honey.”

A young couple with a child entered the hotel. They seemed to be guests and walked over to the receptionist.

What... Oh, it’s just some guests...

Theia’s shoulders drooped despondently. It wasn’t who she’d hoped to see.

“Sanae?”

“...”

Theia looked back towards Sanae, but Sanae was looking elsewhere. Her eyes were following the family of three. The young couple and the small girl—most likely their daughter—was something that caught her attention.

“What is it, Sanae?”

“Theia... S-Sorry, what were we talking about?”

Sanae was only able to focus on Theia after the young family had disappeared into the elevator.

“It doesn’t matter. More importantly, what was that about? Was there something wrong with that family?”

“No. They just reminded me of papa and mama a little.”

Strictly speaking, Sanae wasn’t interested in the three people that had passed by. She was simply remembering her own parents. Because of that, Sanae’s normally cheerful smile had grown faint.

“Right. That’s what happened to you... Sorry for asking about something that brings up old memories.”

“It’s fine. Besides, that’s not all.”

“What do you mean?”

“Hmm... When I saw that family, I started thinking...”

Sanae looked away from Theia and down towards the lobby floor. Her already faint smile had now all but vanished. She was still smiling, but it was a sad,

lonely smile.

“I was thinking that I can’t get married or have children, so I was envious of that mom...”

As a ghost, Sanae couldn’t do things most normal people could, including marrying or having children. No matter how much she wanted to, she would never be able to start her own family.

“Ch-Children...?”

That one word from Sanae pierced right through Theia’s heart.

That’s right, I... I’m the same as Sanae...

Theia was shocked at what she’d just realized. It was like her whole world had been rocked.

“Theia? What’s wrong? Your face is pale.”

Sanae was concerned about Theia, but her voice didn’t reach Theia’s ears. The sudden, massive despair that was born in her heart pulled Theia down into a very dark place.

I’m an alien...! No matter how much I love him and wish for it, I can’t provide Koutarou with a family...!

If she worked hard enough, Theia might be able to make Koutarou her vassal. It might even be possible for them to become lovers. If that happened, marriage wasn’t out of the question.



But that was it. The path ended there for an alien like Theia.

Earthlings and Forthorthians looked very similar, but in reality, they were completely different creatures that had developed in different ecosystems. Even for closely related species, a single generation of offspring was roughly the genetic limit. So when it came to two completely different species, the chances of being able to have a child were close to zero.

What... was I so elated for...? As an alien, I'm the same as a talking doll to Koutarou...

The great principle of life was passing things on to a new generation. But Theia couldn't do that. She and Koutarou couldn't even become a normal couple.

When she realized that, Theia's heart grew icy. It was as if her soul was feeling the blizzard blowing outside the hotel. Her newfound resolution to believe in Koutarou and the warm feelings that had come from that had frozen over.

Escaping the Dungeon

Wednesday, February 3rd

The hypnosis Yurika had used to put Koutarou to sleep was powerful, but it wasn't powerful enough to last through two full-blown magical attacks. Because of that, Koutarou woke up when the avalanche hit him.

"Whoooaaaaa! What is going on?!"

Koutarou couldn't remember anything past Yurika casting a spell on him, which only added to the confusion of waking up in the middle of an avalanche. Swept away by the snow, Koutarou was carried at least a hundred meters down the slope. Fortunately, with the defensive spells Yurika had cast on him, he was only disoriented and not hurt.

"I-It's stopped...?"

Koutarou pulled himself out of the snow and tried to get his bearings.

Did the avalanche happen when Yurika was about to recast her spell?

With what he knew, that was the only sense Koutarou could make of what happened.

"That's right! Where's Yurika?!"

If he had been caught in the avalanche, Yurika should have been too. As Koutarou got up to look for Yurika, he finally got a good look at his surroundings. He was in the woods down the mountain a ways. As the avalanche crashed into the forest, it lost momentum and died down before getting out of control.

"There! Yurika!"

Between the trees and snow, Koutarou spotted two things. The first was Encyclopedia, the staff he'd given Yurika. The second was someone's head sticking out of a snow bank. It looked like they'd been caught in the avalanche

and whisked down the mountain like Koutarou was. He assumed that it was Yurika.

“Just wait! I’m coming to get you right now!”

Koutarou quickly began running. He picked up the staff on the way and ran over to what he thought was Yurika.

“Good thing this staff was here!”

Koutarou used the staff as a shovel and began digging to uncover the person in the snow. Responding to Koutarou’s will, the staff began assisting him magically. Thanks to that, he was able to dig out the buried person before long.

“This... This isn’t Yurika!”

Of course, the person he saved wasn’t Yurika. Instead, it was the person they had gone out to look for—Aika Maki. She was unconscious, so Koutarou picked her up.

“Aika-san?! Why are you here, Aika-san?! No, more importantly, Aika-san! Aika-san!”

Koutarou shook Maki’s body in an attempt to wake her up.

“Hngh...”

As he did, Maki grimaced and let out a pained groan. Seeing that reaction, Koutarou immediately stopped shaking her.

“What’s wrong, Aika-san— Ah...”

That was when Koutarou realized that his hand was covered in blood, but it wasn’t his. It was Maki’s.

“Aika-san, you’re injured...”

Perhaps it was from getting caught on something in the avalanche, but Maki had a large wound in her side. Blood was pouring from it, running down her body and forming a red pool on the snow. It was enough that it was immediately obvious her life was in danger if she didn’t get help.

“All right, I’ll contact Theia and the others and have them come as soon as possible.”

As he thought things through out loud, Koutarou decided to use the bracelet he had gotten from Clan to contact Theia and the others.

“Guuuaaaaaaaa!”

“What?!”

However, the moment before Koutarou’s finger touched the bracelet, a bestial roar echoed down the mountain. When he looked up the slope to see what it was, he saw a white demon by the cave entrance. Next to it was Yurika, encased in a column of ice.

“Kil! Vadra kil! Com ot! I no yu ar stil liv!”

“Isn’t that a demon?! And Yurika’s right next to it?!”

Koutarou hurriedly focused on his eyes. When he did, he could see a white aura overlapping Yurika inside the pillar of ice. It was her spiritual energy, which wouldn’t have been there if she were dead. At the very least, despite how bad things looked, she was still alive.

“Did that monster do that to Yurika?! If I hurry, I can still save her!”

Koutarou was about to take off to go rescue Yurika...

“Uuugh...”

But Maki’s groan made Koutarou hesitate.

Wh-Who do I save first?!

Koutarou looked back and forth between Maki and Yurika. He was torn.

“Sorry, Yurika! I’ll come save you as fast as possible! Just hang in there a little longer!”

At last, Koutarou decided he needed to start with Maki. Her aura was growing weaker faster than Yurika’s, and she was still actively bleeding. She was going to die at this rate, and Koutarou couldn’t just let that happen.

The girl known as Aika Maki was born in the slums of Folsaria, but Maki couldn’t even remember the name of which city. She was sold off as a slave by her own parents at such a young age that she wasn’t even aware of her

surroundings.

But it might have been fortunate for everyone involved that Maki didn't remember that much. If she did, the city would have been leveled as she became a powerful magician. Maki cursed her childhood, and she despised anyone and anything associated with it.

Just like on Earth, slaves on Folsaria were treated as subhuman by slave traders. It was nothing but endless days of violence and cruelty. Trusting anyone in that situation simply put you in a position to get stabbed in the back. Growing up in that hell was what had given Maki such a distaste for betrayal.

But betrayal and the cold were connected in Maki's mind, and the freezing temperature brought back unpleasant memories. Memories of a dark, dismal day. Memories of her exhausted body refusing to move. Memories of a cold so bitter that it numbed everything but her aching heart. Memories of betrayal. It was the day she'd attempted to escape slavery, only to be sold out by her best friend. After taking a severe beating, she was thrown into the dungeon in midwinter and left to die. The cold Maki was feeling right now was very similar to what she'd felt back in that dungeon.

So in the end, I'll die in the cold anyway...

Maki smiled wryly. Of course, her near-frozen face didn't move a muscle. The bitter smile was only in her mind. The reason why Maki hadn't died in the dungeon that day was because the previous Dark Navy had sensed Maki's mana and bought her.

But everything makes sense like this. Back then, all I wished for was the power to take revenge on them...

Thanks to the previous Dark Navy, her wish had been fulfilled. She was raised as a magician and given the power to get her vengeance on the slave traders and her former best friend. But now, after all this time, she was feeling the same deadly cold creep over her body that she'd felt that day in the dungeon. Maki was convinced that was her fate. Back then, she had only wished for power and revenge. She hadn't wished to live. She'd grown tired of this world full of cheating, betrayal, and abuse.

Oh...?

However, Maki realized something was different from that day in the dungeon. Since she had almost no sensation in her body, she wasn't quite sure what it was at first.

What is... this...?

But as time passed, her senses gradually returned and she realized that what she was feeling was warmth. She then sensed the presence of someone nearby.

A corpse looter? Or did a beast come to eat me...?

Maki knew whatever it was, it wasn't good. So she ignored the presence and focused on the warmth. If she was going to die, she at least wanted to go warm.

It's... the same thing...

As she concentrated on it, however, Maki realized that the warmth and the presence she was feeling were the same thing. It wasn't a looter or some beast. Something warm was by Maki's side.

Are you lonely too...? Just like... me?

The presence was warm and comforting, but Maki could feel something cold at its core. And she knew what it was because she was the same. Maki tried to move her cold heart towards the coldness of the presence in front of her.

I just wish we could always stay like this...

By overlapping the two, she thought they both might warm up a little. But Maki knew she didn't have much time left for that, and for that, she was truly sorry.

When Maki regained her consciousness, the first thing she heard was a man's loud voice.

"Breathe, Aika-san! Don't you die on me!"

Maki tried to smile.

It's fine. I'll be fine for a little longer, so don't worry...

She had no idea if her face actually reflected the gesture or not. If she wasn't breathing, she might not be able to properly smile either. Worried about that,

Maki consciously took a breath.

“Ack, hack...”

The task was surprisingly difficult and sent her into a coughing fit.

“Aika-san! Damn it! Is the staff’s magic not enough?!”

“Ack, hack...”

For each time she coughed, Maki could feel herself getting weaker. Knowing that would make the owner of the voice sad, she still tried her best to breathe.

Somehow... it’s different from before...

In the past, the last time she was on the verge of death, she’d drawn breath out of spite. But now, Maki was breathing for a different reason.

“Hahh... Hahh... Hahh...”

“That’s right! Breathe, Aika-san!”

Something deep inside Maki’s mind was pushing her forward. Something her fading consciousness had reached out and held on to in its stupor.

I can’t do anything to betray or disappoint this person... If I did, we’d both be all alone...

Thanks to Maki’s rekindled will to live, oxygen began circulating throughout her body. Each breath dispelled the haziness clouding her mind, eventually bringing her back to herself.

“Wh-Where am I...?”

Maki felt as if she’d snapped out of a dream. Now completely awake, she was puzzled by the change in her surroundings. Maki’s last memories were of being swept away in the avalanche, but now she found herself in a dim, dusty lodge. She was lying on her back, staring up at the small, unshaded lightbulb hanging down from the ceiling.

“Aika-san?! You’re awake?!”

As she blinked repeatedly, someone leaned over her. It was enough to shield her sensitive eyes from the dazzling light overhead.

“Satomi... Koutarou?”

Maki recognized the man in front of her.

“That’s right, it’s me! Keep it together!”

Satomi Koutarou. He was a master of the sword and multiple kinds of magic, including necromancy. He was an opponent who had outsmarted Maki repeatedly in the past. Her mind tried to warn her of the danger, and the spells she had precast in order to face Koutarou activated one after another. To her, Koutarou was an enemy, pure and simple.

“How are you feeling?! Are you okay?!”

“No... It looks bad.”

Maki smiled at Koutarou as he desperately tried to check on her. It wasn’t an act, either; it was just a natural smile that had come from the bottom of her heart.

Why am I smiling at this man...?

If Maki had been able to move her arms, she probably would have been touching her face because she couldn’t understand her own actions. Despite that, her emotions were getting the better of her mind and body. She had a strong feeling telling her that it was fine.

“I can tell. There’s no saving me from a wound like this.”

Maki shook her head as she spoke. She understood the condition she was in. Despite her young age, she was a veteran warrior. She had survived many battles, but her experience told her that the wound she’d suffered this time was fatal and that she had only regained consciousness through sheer chance.

Ah, maybe that’s why...

It crossed Maki’s mind that she felt no hostility for Koutarou right now because she was on death’s doorstep.

“Aika-san, don’t say things like that!”

To Maki’s eyes, Koutarou was surrounded by a stable green light.

Ah, he really is worried...

The light she saw was the effect of one of her spells. It was proof that what he was thinking and saying was genuine.

Is this... all part of some artful trick of his?

Maki had prepared this spell in particular for her fight with Koutarou so she could see through his lies, yet the spell hadn't reacted even once so far.

Or maybe I've gotten weaker... That's probably it. I'm dying a disgrace in the end...

Whether or not Koutarou was lying and whether or not he'd managed to trick her in some way, Maki was getting herself worked up for no reason. She couldn't help but find it funny.

"Aika-san..."

Maki smiled even though she knew she was about to die. After the harsh life she'd lived, she was ready to give up. But not Koutarou. Not here. Not now. He wasn't going to give up on Maki.

This staff isn't enough!

Koutarou tightly clenched his hands around the magical staff. He'd been trying to use it to save Maki, but the results weren't looking good. The staff's magic was indeed healing her, but Maki's life force was fading faster than he could heal it. Koutarou could tell because he had the ability to see spiritual energy.

It'll take too long to get her aboard Blue Knight! How can I save Aika-san?!

Theia's spaceship was equipped with medical technology far more advanced than anything found on Earth, but not even advanced science could do anything for someone that not even magic could save.

"It's fine, Satomi-kun. I believe this is my fate."

Maki accepted her own death. Looking back at her life, this wasn't a bad way to go. Just having someone care about her seemed like a good ending to it all.

My only regret is not knowing if he's really worried about me or not...

And so Maki smiled, resigned to her fate.

“Fate?! As if I could accept this kind of fate!”

Koutarou, however, adamantly rejected that idea. He knew a girl who’d fought and overcome similar hardships, so he couldn’t accept Maki giving in. And he didn’t want Maki to accept it either. He continued to shout, raising his voice even more to try and convince her.

“I... I won’t accept this kind of fate! I will never—”

In the middle of his sentence, Koutarou suddenly remembered something.

“Wait, fate? That’s right! I still have that!”

It was a last resort, but he still had a small chance of saving Maki’s life.

“Clan! Clan!”

Koutarou hurriedly operated his bracelet and called out Clan’s name.

“What’s wrong? And at this hour, no less?”

Despite the hour, however, Clan responded immediately. Apparently she wasn’t asleep yet. Hearing her voice, Koutarou’s expression lit up.

“It’s an emergency! I need the sword!”

“Just wait a moment. In three minutes, I’ll finish this stage of my experiment. Then I’ll—”

“I can’t wait three minutes! I told you it’s an emergency!”

“Wait, wait! Just waiiit! Don’t be so unreasonable!”

Sensing what Koutarou was about to do from the tone of his voice, Clan began panicking. However, Koutarou ignored her objections and gave his order to the bracelet.

“Cradle! Give me my sword!”

“As you wish, my lord.”

“Kyaaaaaaah! I’m telling you to waiiit!”

Despite Clan’s protests, her small spaceship, the Cradle, initiated action. Koutarou’s sword was currently being experimented on in the Cradle’s laboratory, but upon receiving Koutarou’s order, the Cradle forcibly terminated

the experiment and began to transfer the sword to him.

“Curse you, Veltlion! I won’t forget this!”

“Come, Signaltin!”

Completely ignoring Clan’s objections, Koutarou thrust his right arm forward. As he did, a black disk appeared a few centimeters in front of his palm. It was a space-time hole that connected the Cradle and Koutarou’s bracelet.

“Sa... Satomi-kun, what are you...?”

Maki stared on as this spectacle unfolded in front of her, completely dumbfounded. Since Maki herself had access to some spells that warped space, she functionally understood what the space-time hole was. She knew it connected two different places. However, she couldn’t sense any mana coming from it. Maki didn’t think it was possible to create a space-time hole without using magic, and her surprise at seeing such a thing for herself made her temporarily forget the pain she was in.

“Call sign confirmed. Coordinate axes fixed. Commencing transfer of Signaltin.”

Suddenly a sword appeared from out of the hole. As it did, Koutarou felt like he could hear an explosion and a woman screaming coming from the hole too, but he didn’t hesitate to grab his sword.

“Your Excellency, this ship, the Cradle, will pray for your fortune and glory in place of the nation of Forthorthe.”

“...Thank you.”

The moment Koutarou grabbed the handle, the sword began shining bright white. It flooded the room with mana.

White mana! Is this room 106’s power?! It’s like before... but the energy he’s controlling this time is far greater!

Despite dealing with magic on a daily basis, Maki was so surprised by the massive amount of mana that she couldn’t even let out a gasp of surprise.

“Let’s do this, Signaltin!”

Koutarou pulled the sword still in its sheath out of the space-time hole. He then closed his eyes and began concentrating as he held the sword before him in both hands. His right hand gripped the handle of the sword, and his left hand held the sheath.

Your Majesty Alaia, I'm sorry for using it for such a personal reason, but I will be borrowing the power of this sword...

Koutarou then opened his eyes and began moving his hands apart. Accompanied by a ringing noise, the glowing white blade slowly emerged from its sheath. Correspondingly, the pure white mana filling the room grew stronger and stronger. Once Koutarou fully drew the blade, he took a deep breath.

"Signaltin, if you really have the power to shape the future, then please cut a path for this girl's future!"

The next moment, the sword unleashed a blinding glow almost like an explosion. The flash of light lit up the small lodge. Eventually that light turned into a glowing band of pure white connecting Koutarou and Maki.

A portion of the mana being emitted from Signaltin was converted into light and filled the lodge with its glow. The light was so bright that Koutarou and Maki could only see white and nothing else. However, the light didn't harm them. Instead, it gently wrapped them in a warmth almost like a hug.

What...?

In that white world, Koutarou saw something. It was hard to tell if he was seeing it with his eyes or his mind, but there was a clear image in the white light.

A small girl?

It was a badly beaten young girl covered in wounds. She was lying motionless on a dungeon floor.

Just what am I seeing...?

Maki also started to see something in the white light. It was a young boy crying and embracing a half-knit sweater.

That girl was familiar to Koutarou, and that boy was familiar to Maki. At the same time, they both thought...

“Just wait! I’ll save you right now!”

“It’s okay. I’ll always be with you...”

They used different words, but the feelings they put into them were the same.

When Koutarou returned to his senses, the light had died down. The only thing illuminating the dusty lodge now was the lone unshaded lightbulb overhead. The blade of the sword had a dim glow, but it certainly wasn’t enough to light up the room.

How is Aika-san?!

Koutarou immediately recalled the situation and looked to Maki. His eyes were met with her pale skin. Just a moment ago there had been a large, profusely bleeding wound in her side, but now all Koutarou saw there was her pale skin.

“It worked... Th-Thank god...”

Koutarou let out a big sigh of relief and held up Signaltin’s sheath. Koutarou had no way of knowing if using the sword was enough to save Maki, so he was beyond relieved at this outcome.

Meanwhile, Maki was gradually regaining consciousness. Still dazed, she was blankly staring up at the ceiling.

I feel like something very important just...

Maki felt like something important had happened, but it was just a fleeting, unsubstantiated feeling. After a few seconds, it disappeared just like a dream. She returned to her senses upon hearing the sound of Koutarou returning his sword to its sheath.

“Ah... I...?”

In that moment, Maki remembered everything from her encounter with the demon to Koutarou desperately trying to save her afterwards. That helped her

make sense of why she was now lying down in the lodge, and the next thing she did was check her wound.

“It’s gone?!”

Maki was overwhelmed with surprise when she touched her own side. The wound that should have been there had completely vanished. There was no sign of blood now. And since her wound had disappeared, so too had her pain. She no longer felt the cold that numbed her entire body either. It was almost like her injuries had been nothing but a dream. The only evidence she had otherwise was her torn clothing.

“I survived...?

Maki lifted her head and peeked at her exposed side. She could see her pale skin through the gaping hole in her outfit. Her wound really had disappeared.

“Looks like it.”

“S-Satomi-kun...?”

Sitting up, Maki was confused as to why there was a ski jacket draped over her shoulders. Koutarou had been worried she’d get cold in the outfit she was wearing and given her his jacket, and it wasn’t until she looked at that jacket now that she remembered Koutarou was even there. She’d been so taken aback by her miraculous recovery that she had temporarily forgotten everything else.

“Anyways, I’m glad you pulled through.”

“...You’re the one who saved me, aren’t you, Satomi-kun?”

Maki looked at what was lying next to Koutarou. There was Yurika’s new staff, Encyclopedia, and Koutarou’s sword, Signaltin. Those two new magical tools had saved Maki’s life, and they were quite clearly the cause of the increase in room 106’s mana.

However, Maki still had a lot of questions. How had Koutarou saved her with them? And how had he obtained them in the first place? As the magical girl Dark Navy of Darkness Rainbow, she wanted to get her hands on any information she could about these magic items.

“I guess you could say that.”

“Satomi-kun, are you a magician...?”

As Aika Maki, however, she simply wanted to know more about Koutarou.

“No.”

As Koutarou flatly denied being a magician, there was no change in the green light around Koutarou that Maki used to detect lies. It seemed even now, he was telling the truth. Dark Navy should have known better. There was a better way to go about this. A more calm and logical line of questioning she could have taken.

“That can’t be true! No matter how you look at it, what you did wasn’t normal!”

But right now, Maki was just Aika Maki and all she really wanted was to understand Koutarou. It was an emotional matter, and she approached it without any of Dark Navy’s normal calmness or rationality.

“I’m really not. The tools are what’s not normal. I’m just your everyday high school student.”

Koutarou was planning on being honest. He knew that there was no way he could hide the truth after saving Maki’s life in such a dramatic fashion. He knew this was coming the moment he decided to save her life, and he’d steeled himself for it.

“What do you mean?”

“Actually, something big happened recently. You know, when we were doing the play.”

On the day of the play, Clan had come after Theia and Koutarou, and that had been the start of it all.

So it really was during the play...

Koutarou’s story matched with what Maki had conjectured.

“There were some people that helped me resolve that incident, and among them were a few people that could use magic. I got this sword and staff from those people.”

As he spoke, Koutarou presented the staff to Maki. He smiled wryly and shrugged as she received it from him.

“So while I think that it’s probably magic, I don’t really get the details. I was told how to use it, but I don’t know how it works.”

“I see...”

Maki nodded and examined the staff in her hands.

As I thought, the enchantment is considerably old... It seems to be using the same ancient language of magic that controls the mana in room 106. But the staff was made quite recently... which means it must have been made by magicians with no direct relation to Folsaria.

The current practice in Folsaria used a reorganized, modern language for magic. However, Maki could tell the magic in the staff used something much older than that. That suggested it had been made by magicians who had branched off from Folsaria a very long time ago.

This staff essentially takes care of casting the spell entirely on its own, just like he said. Between that ability and the vast amount of spells it contains, it’s wasting the artifact-rank mana it has. So on it’s own, it’s not a big threat... but it’s quite troublesome the way Yurika used it.

That was Maki’s conclusion upon examining the staff. Thanks to that, Maki was able to see the total picture behind Yurika’s power-up. The power of her magic hadn’t increased outright, but she had evolved in a direction that made it very hard to fight her.

And the sword is the same as this staff. It does a lot on its own... So while the sword is powerful, Satomi-kun himself is just a normal human. Which means that was also true when we fought last time.

Maki finally started to really understand Koutarou, and because of that, she came to realize her own misunderstanding.

In the past, Maki had assumed that Koutarou was a dangerous magician. He was able to get through her barrier, he had a ghost companion, and he could use a powerful magic sword, so she assumed he had access to powerful magic. Either enhancement or alteration would have allowed him to get through a

barrier and make a magic sword, and necromancy would have allowed him to control ghosts.

However, knowing what she did now, Maki was getting a different picture of the situation. First off, he had been able to slip through the barrier because he had a powerful sword that interfered with the magic of others. And the ghost had simply followed him of her own will. It was just such an unlikely scenario that Maki had written it off entirely at the time.

And here I was... worried about traps and schemes that don't even exist. I never even truly saw the man in front of me...

Right now, Maki no longer feared Koutarou. It was a strange feeling. Despite seeing his overly powerful sword right in front of her and knowing that she wouldn't stand a chance against him in a fight, Maki wasn't afraid of Koutarou. At worst, she felt like it would probably hurt when she lost.

What is this feeling, I wonder...? Why do I feel so relieved? Even though he's an opponent I have no chance of beating in my current state...

Maki was confused, but only on the surface of things. Deep inside her heart, she was calm. She was satisfied with the current situation.

"Achoo!"

Koutarou suddenly sneezed. As she was lost in thought, the abrupt noise caught Maki unawares and her eyes opened wide in surprise. But the moment she saw the silly face Koutarou was making, she began to laugh.

"Pffft! Ahahaha!"

"Don't laugh. I'm in the middle of an important story."

Seeing Maki laugh, Koutarou's cheeks turned red with embarrassment.

"I-I'm sorry. It's cold, isn't it? Do you want this jacket back?"

Maki apologized, but she was still laughing happily. She put one hand over her mouth in an attempt to suppress her laughter, and touched the jacket on her shoulders with the other. Koutarou had ultimately sneezed because he lent Maki his jacket.

"I don't need it. I'm not that cold."

“Ah...”

In that moment, Maki could see the green light that enveloped Koutarou wavering. The spell Maki used to detect deception finally caught Koutarou in a lie.

Satomi-kun lied to me...

That surprised Maki far more than the sneeze had. Maki hated lies and deceit more than anything. She abhorred any form of scheming or trickery. Because of that, the moment she realized Koutarou was lying to her, her heart skipped a beat.

He really does lie... Of course he does... There’s no human who doesn’t...

Maki’s heart then began intensely throbbing. It was almost like it was burning. It was the first time she’d ever felt something like that.

“Satomi-kun, you’re a terrible liar.”

“I’m not lying. A true man wouldn’t lose out to the cold.”

“I think you sneezed because you did lose, though.”

Maki smiled, but this time it was much, much brighter than before.

“Ugh...”

“Actually, Satomi-kun, I hate people who lie.”

“I see. Then we’ll make good friends.”

“That’s true. Heehee...”

Maki slightly tilted her head as a tinge of mischief crept across her grin. Really, it was a smile no one had ever seen from her before.

“Heehee... Indeed, I think people who trick other with lies are the worst!”

But strangely, Maki was actually happy that Koutarou had lied to her. It was the first time that had ever happened.

This man’s lies aren’t scary at all!

Not even Maki knew why she felt that way, but that didn’t bother her right now.

“Definitely.”

“Heehee... Ahahaha!”



And so Maki dismissed the spells she had activated.

“...Satomi-kun, you liar! I hate you!”

“Huh?”

Maki no longer needed a spell to confirm if Koutarou was being honest or not.

After watching Maki laugh for a while, Koutarou eventually nodded with a satisfied expression.

“All right, you look like you’re okay.”

Koutarou had explained the immediate situation to Maki and now she seemed to be fully recovered, so Koutarou decided to move on to the next matter at hand.

“Aika-san, the staff, please.”

Koutarou reached his hand out towards Maki.

“Satomi-kun?”

When Maki looked up at him, Koutarou was already on his feet. His expression was serious and she sensed a strong will in his eyes.

“Please give me back the staff. I have to go save Yurika.”

“Save Yurika-san...? O-Oh right, that white demon!”

It wasn’t until after hearing Koutarou say something about saving Yurika that Maki finally remembered how this had all happened. She’d gone into the mountains to obtain a familiar, but things had gotten ugly and Yurika was frozen and trapped. Maki still had a score to settle.

“So you saw it too, Aika-san? In that case, this’ll be easy to explain. I have to beat that thing and save Yurika.”

As Koutarou said that, he looked out through the window of the lodge. The blizzard was still raging on outside and he couldn’t see a thing. However, somewhere in the direction he was staring, Yurika was out there waiting to be saved.

To think monsters like that exist on Earth too...

Koutarou strongly grasped Signaltin's sheath. This wasn't the first time Koutarou had encountered strange monsters, and based on his experience, Signaltin should be enough to deal with them.

"So please give me back the staff. I'll probably need that too."

Koutarou's Signaltin was very powerful, but since he had used it to heal the fatally wounded Maki, its power had temporarily grown weaker. Encyclopedia would be the perfect tool to compensate for that. Koutarou was planning on fighting using both sword and sorcery.

Return the staff...?

Maki was a leader of Darkness Rainbow. Her best option right now would be putting some sort of curse on the staff before returning it to Koutarou. That way she could use it as a trap against Yurika later. However...

"Satomi-kun."

Instead, Maki simply didn't plan on giving the staff back.

"Since I'm better now, can I help too?"

Holding the staff in both hands, Maki smiled at Koutarou.

Maki's suggestion was simple. Koutarou was an amateur when it came to magic, so it would be better to have one of them focus on using the sword and the other focus on the staff. It was a perfectly sound plan.

"So how about it?"

"Huh..."

As things were, Koutarou was inclined to say no. He was reluctant to drag a normal girl like Maki into a fight. But he understood what she was saying. He also didn't think that he'd be able to pull off something as demanding as using a sword and a staff at the same time. Since they had two people and two weapons, it did seem much more reasonable to divide them accordingly.

"Since you're struggling to make up your mind, Satomi-kun, I have some news

that might convince you.”

“What’s that?”

“I have an A in PE. Yurika’s barely even passing.”

Seeing Maki boasting with pride, Koutarou nodded.

“All right, I’ll leave the staff to you, Aika-san”

“Really?!”

Maki’s expression lit up.

Honestly, Aika-san does look like she would be better with the staff than Yurika...

Maki was obviously in better shape than Yurika. Koutarou felt like Maki was more suited to be a magical girl than Yurika just based on that alone.

“In exchange, you have to promise to run away before things get really dangerous. If you do that, I can run away too without worrying if all hell breaks loose.”

The only thing Koutarou was worried about was that Maki might try to do too much and get in over her head. Since he’d just managed to save her from the brink of death, he wasn’t interested in seeing her in danger again. That’s why he wanted her to retreat before things got ugly.

“...Liar.”

“Huh?”

However, Maki didn’t agree. Instead, she stared at Koutarou quite suspiciously.

“Satomi-kun, you won’t run away even if things turn dangerous, will you?”

“That’s not true. I’d run with my tail between my legs,” Koutarou said, nervously shaking his head.

“That’s a lie. There’s no way you would run away without saving Yurika-san first.”

Maki was no longer using her spell to discern lies, but she still knew that

Koutarou would never leave Yurika behind to save himself.

“Aika-san...”

There was nothing Koutarou could say. His real intentions were just as Maki had said.

“In that case, we’ll share the same fate.”

Maki appeared to be quite serious as she looked at Koutarou and firmly held the staff with both hands.

“Please steel yourself, Satomi-kun. I definitely won’t leave you on your own. In exchange—”

“Fine, I get it. I’ll protect you.”

In the end, Koutarou was the one who backed down. The best chance he had of saving Yurika was if he and Maki truly worked together. That’s what he himself believed.

“It’s almost like you’re proposing. Heehee...”

Maki smiled. She seemed awfully happy. Koutarou didn’t know the meaning behind it, but Maki’s smile in that moment reminded him of Yurika’s. Without realizing it, his attitude did a one-eighty.

“You idiot. Be more serious.”

“Yes, sir!”

Maki smiled at Koutarou and jokingly saluted. And just like that, the strange team of Koutarou and Maki was born.

The lodge that Koutarou had taken refuge in with Maki wasn’t all that far away from the cave. It had been built when power lines were being constructed in the area, but it was no longer in use. As such, Koutarou and Maki didn’t need to worry about running into anyone on their way back to the cave. The area was desolate. It was just the two of them making their way across the mountain as the snow and wind intensely raged on.

“By the way, Aika-san, what were you doing out here in the mountains?

Yurika was really worried about you.”

“Ah, that’s because of that white demon.”

However, neither of them seemed particularly bothered by the weather. That was thanks to a spell that Maki had cast. They forged ahead, unfettered by the harsh winds, the steep slope, the darkness, and the ever dropping temperature.

“Did he capture you?”

“Oh, um... Well, something like that.”

“I see. That was really unlucky.”

“...Though to be more precise, I was the one that came to capture him.”

“What was that?”

“I said I would have been in danger if you and Yurika-san hadn’t come along. It seems like that demon is very violent and attacks people on sight.”

“I see. Then let’s be careful to reduce the danger.”

“Yes, let’s.”

The two of them carefully climbed the slope while staying alert and wary of what was in front of them. Since magic made it easier for them to brave the elements, they had more energy to focus on finding the demon and Yurika.

“Satomi-kun!”

“Uwah!”

After climbing for a while, Maki suddenly grabbed ahold of Koutarou and knocked him down into the snow.

“Wh-What?!”

“Shh! Don’t you see it? Over there!”

While whispering to Koutarou, Maki covered his mouth with her left hand and pointed with her right.

“Mmmhh!”

The white demon in question was just up the slope from them. Next to it was Yurika, still frozen. Maki had seen them first, and she’d taken action to keep the

white demon from spotting them too.

“I’ll let go now.”

“Mm.”

Maki made sure Koutarou saw the demon for himself before removing her hand.

“Hahh... Thanks, Aika-san.”

“You’re welcome.”

“Yurika is...”

After crawling out from under Maki, the first thing Koutarou did was look to Yurika. Fortunately, Yurika’s spiritual energy wasn’t so weak that she appeared to be in immediate mortal danger. Koutarou relaxed his shoulders when he realized that.

“Phew, she seems to be okay...”

Koutarou had been worried all along that she might die while he was treating Maki, or that the demon would destroy her along with the pillar of ice. So now that he was here and could see that she was safe, Koutarou let out a heavy sigh of relief. His fighting spirit was lit anew upon discovering that he still had a chance to save her.

“So what do we do, Satomi-kun?”

“Hmm? What?”

“Don’t you think it’d be dangerous if we just charged straight in?”

As Maki spoke, she indicated their surroundings. They were in the path of what had been carried away by the avalanche, but they’d hit the edge of the woods. They’d been using the trees as cover, but from here on out, they’d be in the open if they continued forward.

“Yeah, he’d definitely try something.”

“I think it will be another avalanche.”

“I’d rather not go through that again...”

It was possible that the white demon might cause another avalanche if it spotted Koutarou and Maki climbing up, and they were right in the path of where the first one had fallen. That was part of the reason why Maki had stopped Koutarou in the first place.

“Should we go around and climb up?”

“Hmmmm...”

Considering Maki’s idea, Koutarou looked to his left and right. From what he could see, there were a lot more trees to either side. If they went around, they would be able to stay hidden as they made their way up the mountain.

“Let’s not.”

However, in the end, Koutarou gave up on the idea circling around. While it would lower their risk of being detected for now, they would still hit the edge of the forest eventually, putting them right back at square one.

“So what do we do? If we just twiddle our thumbs here, Yurika-san will be in danger.”

“That’s true, but can’t we lure him to us somehow?”

“Lure him?”

Maki’s eyes opened wide in surprise at hearing such a strategic idea from the normally simple Koutarou.

Normally simple Satomi-kun, huh?

At the same time, Maki gave up on her own idea and began laughing on the inside. She had only just today overcome her misunderstanding about Koutarou and started to learn a little bit about him. Despite that, she pretended like she knew everything, including declaring that an intellectual idea was unlike Koutarou. Maki was sorely amused at how quickly she was changing.

“Yeah, I feel like that would be better.”

During Koutarou’s time in Forthorthe, he had taken part in several large-scale battles. In those battles, the strategy of baiting an enemy was an old trick. It was something that had stayed fresh in his mind.

Right. If we lure him here, we can ambush him and we can get him away from Nijino Yurika. You put some real thought into this, Satomi-kun.

Maki understood where Koutarou was coming from and took a moment to reflect on his plan.

“We’re luring that demon out so we can save Yurika-san first, right?”

“Huh?”

This time, it was Koutarou’s turn to be surprised. Maki had brought up exactly what he was just about to ask her about.

“We’re not?”

“A-Ah, no... That’s what I wanted to do, but I wanted to run it by you first.”

When Koutarou explained himself to Maki, she clapped her hands together in a gesture of realization.

“I see. Since you don’t know how much time you can buy, you don’t know if you can save Yurika-san before the demon returns, right?”

“Y-Yeah.”

Maki once again pointed out exactly what Koutarou was about to say.

It happened again... Aika-san, can you read my mind?

Considering the timing of Maki’s remarks, Koutarou had to wonder. But not paying surprised Koutarou any mind, Maki began racking her brain.

What happens if we can’t save her?

Maki quickly gathered her thoughts together and was about to share them with Koutarou, but...

“If we don’t manage to save her, that demon will know what we’re trying to do and might target Yurika instead.”

Oh?

This time it was Koutarou who beat Maki to the punch. Hearing her own thoughts come out of his mouth almost word for word, her eyes opened wide in surprise.

Can Satomi-kun read my mind, perhaps?

Maki was curious about their seemingly overlapping minds.

“In that case, luring him over and taking him out first would be better.”

“That’s right. What do you think?”

“Heehee, what do *you* think? I just said defeating him would be better.”

“Oh, right, sorry.”

Koutarou and Maki agreed on luring the demon out and ambushing him. If they did it the other way around and tried to save Yurika first, even if they freed her, there was a high chance they’d still be forced to fight the demon. And if it was going to lead to a fight anyway, luring him out and ambushing him would be a more reliable strategy. That was the conclusion Koutarou and Maki came to.

“...I feel like this method of attack is more fitting of a villain. I don’t really like it.”

“Me neither.”

“Right. You’d rather face off with the demon than rely on petty tricks, wouldn’t you?”

“But if he stays that close to Yurika-san, we don’t have a choice.”

“I guess not...”

“We’re just civilians after all.”

“That’s true... Let’s not get in over our heads.”

They were both resistant to the idea of using an ambush, but they had to prioritize Yurika’s safety. In the end, they resolved themselves to resort to such an unfair attack.

Maki’s specialty mind manipulation magic was closely related to the magic that created illusions, so she was quite good at those as well. Instead of using Encyclopedia’s mana for them, she used her own. That way the spells would be more accurate and powerful.

“Good luck!”

Maki had created an illusion of Koutarou. It was so well done that Koutarou found himself cheering for his doppelganger as he watched it walk off. Reacting to Koutarou’s voice, the illusion turned around and waved its hand.

“Uwah?! It responded?! Creepy!”

The illusion Maki conjured was created with a certain degree of consciousness, however feeble. It was like an autonomous robot that could act by itself within reason. In this case, the illusion walked away on its own and would be acting as a decoy.

“Creepy? You’re always like that, you know.”

“I’m more manly. I’m not that weak looking either.”

“That’s not true. You’re just like that.”

The illusion had been created based on Maki’s perception of Koutarou. Because of that, there were some minor discrepancies. In Maki’s mind, for example, Koutarou was slightly slimmer and more handsome, so the illusion created from that didn’t quite live up to Koutarou’s ideal of manliness.

“Am I really...?”

“More importantly, let’s get ready. There’s a lot that needs to be done before Satomi-kun No. 2 lures the demon here.”

Maki didn’t want Koutarou to dwell too much on her creation, so she rushed him along on the plan. If he thought about it hard enough, he might realize that the illusion was based off of Maki’s ideal Koutarou, and Maki definitely didn’t want that.

“Sorry. So where should I hide?”

“Since No. 2 should be running past here, behind that tree should be fine.”

“Got it.”

Koutarou pulled his sword from its sheath and approached a tree by the mountain path. Since the illusion would be running down the path, this would let Koutarou jump out at the demon that should be following right after it.

“And I’ll cast some spells on you.”

“Please do. I’m not wearing my armor today.”

“Heehee, then please leave this to magical girl Maki.”

Full of confidence, Maki giggled and pointed the staff at Koutarou.

“Magic Armor. Shield. Elemental Protection...”

Maki incanted spell after spell, using the power of Encyclopedia whenever it would be more powerful than her own magic. Doing that let her optimize her spells while also conserving her mana.

This staff might be far more convenient than I thought...

Since Maki often fought on her own, she couldn’t really appreciate the true value of the staff until she used it for herself. There was no better tool than Encyclopedia in a situation like this where she was casting multiple spells on herself and an ally. Before long, Koutarou had been strengthened with the power of over ten different spells.

“The next spells will depend on how things go.”

“Got it. Aika-san, you should go hide too.”

“Okay.”

Having finished casting her spells, Maki headed towards a bush a little bit away from Koutarou. She would be supporting him from there.

“Ah, Satomi-san! It seems No. 2 was found by the demon. He’s heading this way under attack,” Maki warned Koutarou and jumped into the bush.

“So we really are going to have to fight...”

Koutarou had only seen the demon roar standing next to a frozen Yurika so far. Based on circumstantial evidence and Maki’s testimony, Koutarou believed the demon was violent. He’d expected that this would lead to a fight, but now that there was no going back, he was a little depressed.

“All right...”

But no matter how depressed he got, he couldn’t leave Yurika behind. Having steeled himself, Koutarou peeked out from behind the tree and looked up the

path. There he saw the illusion of himself with the white demon in hot pursuit. Seeing that, Koutarou's face turned pale.

"Aika-san, this is bad! He's chasing after No. 2 in the air!"

The white demon was floating behind Koutarou No. 2 and repeatedly firing shards of ice at him. The illusion was dodging the attacks while running down the designated route, but there was one problem. The demon was flying far too high up in the air for Koutarou to be able to hit it with his sword.

"Hopping Carrot!"

Maki's response was a new spell. Yellow light enveloped Koutarou's legs. It was a spell that increased his jumping power.

"You should be able to reach him with that!"

"I'll give it a shot!"

Koutarou and Maki's conversation was kept brief. Since the demon was approaching, they didn't have the time to leisurely chat. There would be no point in the ambush if they were discovered.

And not long after, No. 2 was upon them. While replicating the sound of running on snow, the illusion continued running down the path past them.

"Gaaaaa! Gruuuuuaaaaa!"

The white demon was right on its tail. He was completely fooled by the splendid illusion and was frantically trying to destroy it.

"Die! Dieeeee! Vadra! Dieeeee!"

While shouting, the demon shot shards of ice from the palms of his hands. Some of the ice shards passed right through the illusion.

"It dos no wok! Magi is no wokin! Vadra rely is a monser!"

If the demon had been calm, he might have been able to see through the illusion. However, he was clearly worked up about something.

"Now!"

It gave Koutarou the perfect opening. As the demon flew by, Koutarou kicked off the ground with all his might and jumped, swinging at the demon in the sky.

“Gaaaaaaaa!”

Koutarou’s swing connected just where he’d been aiming: the wings on the back of the white demon. The blow caused the demon to lose his balance in the air and he fell towards the ground.

“It was too shallow?!”

However, as Koutarou clicked his tongue, the demon flapped his large wings and made a soft landing. Koutarou’s sword had damaged the wings, but they were still usable.

The plan had been perfect. The demon’s back was wide open for Koutarou. It was the impromptu jumping that was the problem. Since Koutarou was under the effects of a spell he wasn’t used to, he misjudged how much force he needed to use to jump.

“Can I do it again?!”

Koutarou readied his sword again midair. His first attack had been too shallow, but the demon had landed with his back towards Koutarou. If Koutarou could land right, he would be in a position to make a second attack.

I’m not sure about the timing, but I have to try!

However, the demon didn’t stay where he was. He had already recovered from the shock of the ambush and looked prepared to defend or dodge now. It was questionable whether or not a second attack would work.

“Force Field!”

Two spells came flying towards Koutarou. One was a defensive spell that would block attacks. The other was a spell that could control Koutarou’s falling speed. However, oddly enough, the defensive spell didn’t protect him. Instead, it deployed like a wall next to him.

“Satomi-kun, use that—”

“This’ll help!”

Koutarou kicked off the magic wall and adjusted the direction he was falling in.

“—as footing!”

Koutarou had acted before Maki could even finish her sentence. But she was already making her next move too. She accelerated Koutarou’s speed after he adjusted his direction. That was thanks to the second spell she had cast using the staff that allowed her to control his speed while falling.

“Haaaaaaaa!”

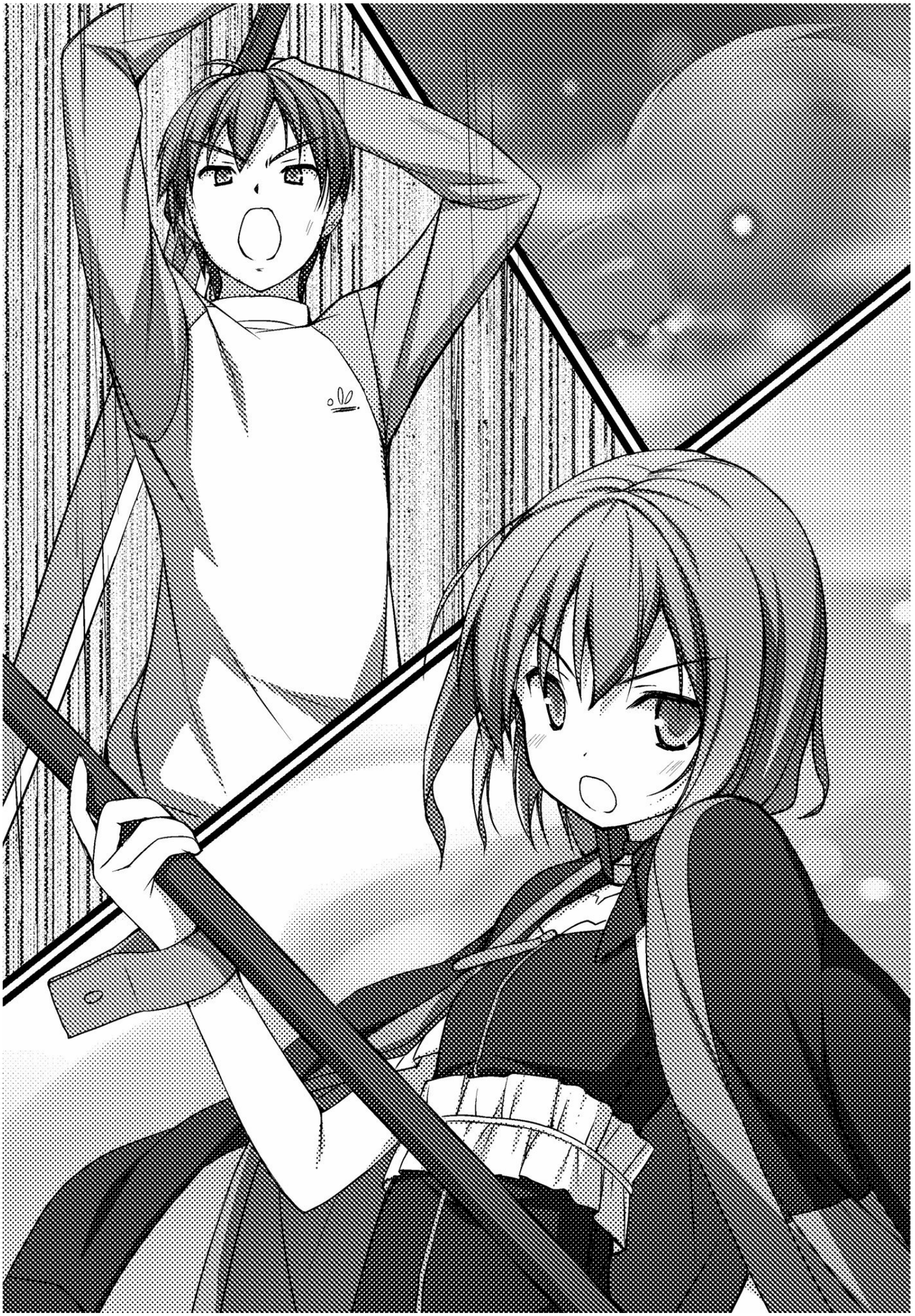
Koutarou was now lined up for another swing as he fell, and he went for it with all of his might. In response to Koutarou’s will, the sword was enveloped by a sonic barrier. It was weaker than what the Blue Knight’s armor could create, but it still served to improve the range and power of the sword. When the blow connected, the sonic barrier enveloping the sword was unleashed as a shockwave that assaulted the demon.

“Guuuuu! So tha is wher yu ar, Vadra!”

However, the white demon wouldn’t go down that easily. The thick slabs of ice created in front of him served as a shield and had blocked Koutarou’s attack. The sword shattered the sheets of ice, but couldn’t reach the demon on the other side.

Signaltin’s power really has weakened! It didn’t do as much damage as I thought it would!

If Signaltin had been in peak condition, by the time the sword hit the demon, it would have negated some of its inner mana and caused major damage. That’s what had happened when Koutarou fought demons in Forthorthe. However, it wasn’t the case now. Despite having been attacked twice, the demon didn’t seem to have taken any real damage at all. The sword was in an even weaker state than expected.



“I kan tel, Vadra! Signaltin is weaken, is it no?!”

The white demon’s mouth warped into a twisted grin, and he moved to attack Koutarou with his massive arms.

“Kil! Is my chans to kil!”

The demon’s sharp, icy claws gleamed as he stretched out his arms.

“Satomi-kun, keep going like that!”

Though he’d already attacked, Koutarou’s body accelerated even more. It was like a powerful force was trying to slam him into the ground.

“I got it!”

Koutarou pitched his body forward as if he was trying to roll. Thanks to Maki increasing his speed, he sailed right by the demon and the demon’s claw caught nothing but air.

After rolling once when he landed, Koutarou kicked the snow and stood up. By that time, Maki was already casting a new spell on Koutarou.

“Flame Weapon!”

Maki used her own mana to cover Koutarou’s sword in fire, increasing its attack power. She also used Encyclopedia to cast a spell that let Koutarou see heat with his eyes. Suddenly Koutarou’s sword burst into flames and everything above a certain temperature began glowing red. Of course, the thing glowing the strongest was Koutarou’s sword.

Which means the next thing coming is...

Koutarou could tell what was coming, so he quickly shouted to Maki, “Aika-san, make good use of the fire at the end!”

“Quick Cast Darkness!”

Almost at the same time, Maki’s next spell cloaked the region around Koutarou, herself, and the demon in darkness. Suddenly unable to see anything, the demon froze up. However, the darkness didn’t make much of a difference to Koutarou who could see temperatures. He could still clearly make out his sword and the enemy’s position, and thanks to the reflecting heat, he could see

the ground as well. It was the perfect setup.

Koutarou's sword crashed into the white demon, but he felt a great deal of resistance. Once the demon could no longer see anything, he focused on protecting himself and covered his entire body with a wall of ice.

So that's what he was up to!

Koutarou's sword crushed the wall of ice, but still didn't reach the demon. The only damage to the demon was that some of his fur was singed by the flames of the sword.

"Guooooooooo!"

He realized that as long as he stayed in the darkness, he would keep getting attacked, so the demon flapped his damaged wings and took to the skies to escape.

"Satomi-kun, was using the fire like that good enough?"

"Like what?"

"I tried copying Yurika-san."

Maki indicated the area where the demon had flown.

"What's that?"

"It's a cloud. However..."

Maki had created a large cloud with magic. Since it was floating right above the darkness, the demon flew right into it before realizing it was even there.

"It's a special cloud made out of highly volatile oil."

Not a second later, the smoldering fur of the demon ignited the cloud and caused a large explosion.

As he looked up at the explosion, Koutarou was engrossed in a strange sensation of surprise.

Can Aika-san really read my mind...?

What surprised him wasn't the explosion, but all of Maki's actions during the

fight. She had predicted what Koutarou wanted to do and used spell after spell to make it happen. When he wanted to pursue the demon, she had created footing for him. When he wanted to dodge the demon's claws, she had given him the speed he needed to do so. And when he was lamenting that his sword lacked the power it needed, she had enchanted it with fire. And then there was the finishing touch—the explosion overhead.

This was on a completely different level than just being good at using magic. It was almost as if Maki knew what Koutarou was going to do and gave him just what he needed to succeed. Thanks to her, he hadn't taken a single one of the demon's attacks.

At the same time, Maki was equally surprised at Koutarou's performance in battle.

Can Satomi-kun really read my mind...?

She was feeling the same way Koutarou did. He had done everything she wanted to do before she could.

By the time Maki realized it was possible to attack the demon while falling, Koutarou had already readied his sword. By the time she thought of using the spell that controlled his falling speed to avoid the demon's claws, Koutarou had already pitched himself forward. And lastly, when she was infusing Koutarou's sword with fire, he told her to make good use of the fire at the end. She then created the oil cloud, and the demon had jumped into it of his own free will.

The demon was caught up in the explosion before he even had a chance to put up a fight. Maki looked up at the sky, but she felt nothing for the demon or the explosion. Instead, what she felt was a strong sense of unparalleled freedom. She didn't think she could feel this way even if she were soaring through the skies. The feeling of being able to do everything she wanted truly liberated her mind. She wanted to feel this way forever.

"Hey, Aika-san, are you—"

"Satomi-kun, are you—"

Koutarou and Maki were about to say the same thing, but they cut themselves off simultaneously.

There's no way something that dreamlike is possible.

They both knew they were thinking the same thing.

After the explosion died down and the remaining smoke had been blown away by the wind, the demon still hovered overhead. The white demon, however, was no longer white. Its entire body had been scorched black. It was wounded, but still flapped its powerful wings and came down for a firm landing.

"Kil! Need to kil Vadra whil stil weak! If no kil, I be kiled! I be ruined!"

"Satomi-kun... Looks like he still wants to fight."

Seeing that, Maki held the staff with both hands.

Vadra again... Just what is this demon so scared of?

That word the demon kept using bothered Maki, but she knew it wouldn't tell her anything even if she asked. So she drove the question out of her head and focused on the fight ahead.

"It would've been easier if he just ran away..."

Koutarou could sense the demon's bloodlust now as well. He was hoping that the demon would just retreat after the explosion, but it seemed to be dead set on killing Koutarou and Maki, leaving him no choice but to reluctantly ready Signaltin.

"Flame Weapon. Flame Protection. Elemental Shield."

"Aika-san, you're thinking of doing something cruel again, aren't you?"

"Heehee, but you make a great accomplice, Satomi-san."

"Then I'll try to live up to your expectations."

Koutarou's sword was covered in flame once more and now there were two yellow lights protecting him. Seeing that, the demon bared its fangs and roared at Koutarou.

"Goooaaaaaaaa!"

"Here I go, Aika-san!"

“Quick Cast Acceleration.”

As Koutarou started running, Maki started her incantation. Following suit, the demon made a move too. Seeing Koutarou’s flaming sword, the demon decided to fight up close. He’d learned his lesson the hard way. If he tried to fly away again, things might end up just like last time.

“Here it comes!”

As Koutarou shouted, light enveloped his body and his running speed dramatically increased. Maki had cast a spell that increased his physical ability.

“Dieeeee!”

Even though the demon was moving in to attack, he wasn’t just using his claws. He created shards of ice and repeatedly fired them at Koutarou like a machine gun. He would use openings in the barrage to reach through and swipe at Koutarou.

“Hah!”

Koutarou slid under the shards of ice. As he got close, the demon reached down for an attack.

“Satomi-kun, jump!”

Koutarou channeled all his strength into his legs, and at the same time, the snow beneath his feet shifted upward. Normally, Snowtrap was a spell used to throw a target off balance, but Maki was using it as a catapult to send Koutarou flying. With that, Koutarou was able to spring right on top of the demon from a sliding position. Thanks to that, the demon’s claws missed.

“Gugugguh! Yu fel fo it!”

However, the demon had already predicted that Koutarou would dodge, so he ignored Koutarou and made a move for Maki. He was going to kill the magician helping from the sidelines first.

“Yu wil die firs!”

The demon roared again, and Koutarou and Maki’s minds went into overdrive. They shouted to and over each other in a rapid succession of thoughts.

“Aika-san—”

“Quick Cast Force Field!”

“—some footing! And—”

A defensive spell appeared in front of Koutarou like a platform. He kicked off of it and changed his direction in the air.

“It’s okay! I—”

“Dieeeeeeee!”

But the demon was already right next to Maki. Koutarou would never be able to make it in time from his position. The demon flashed a twisted smile. Ready to enjoy the coming slaughter, he slashed his claws at Maki.

“Use that!”

“Already on it!”

In that instant, Koutarou appeared between Maki and the demon.

“Vadra?!”

The demon quickly changed his target and went to attack Koutarou instead. His claws whistled through the air as they came flying at Koutarou.

“What?!”

However, when the claws struck Koutarou, they passed right through him. It was almost as if he was a mirage.

“Well done, No. 2!”

Using that opening, Maki distanced herself from the demon. When she did, the Koutarou who was in front of the demon vanished. It was the slightly slimmer, more handsome Koutarou illusion Maki had created. The demon might have been able to see through it ordinarily, but that was an incredibly difficult thing to do in the heat of battle. The end result was that the demon was fooled and Maki was able to get away from him.

“Damit!”

But the demon didn’t miss a beat. He came right for Maki again. However,

Maki cast a new spell to keep him at bay.

“Quick Cast Fire Wall!”

“Yu fol!”

A wall of flame appeared in front of the demon and blocked his way forward. The demon took a moment to cover its body in a thick layer of ice and then charged through without hesitation. The flames Maki had created didn’t have the power to burn the demon through the ice. They melted the ice, but the demon came through on the other side of the wall of flames mostly unscathed.

“Guhahaha! Tis tim yu wil die!”

The demon was convinced of Maki’s demise. There was no way her small body could withstand a powerful blow from the demon, and now Koutarou was on the other side of the wall of flame. She’d ended up separating herself from her backup. And with the illusion gone, there was nothing left to stand in the demon’s way. Maki’s death now seemed certain.

“Guaaa?!”

However...

“Even though it’s burning at a low temperature and you’ve cast defensive spells, you’d make your ally walk through fire? And what’s more, you even used yourself as bait...”

“Heehee. But you came through for me anyway.”

Before the demon’s claws could reach Maki, Koutarou’s sword pierced the demon’s back. It was all part of an elaborate trap. Maki had intentionally reduced the temperature of her wall of flame to let the demon pass through. The demon would then think that Maki was a sitting duck by herself since Koutarou had no way to get to her. He would then ignore Koutarou and focus on just her.

However, because the wall of flame was burning at a relatively low temperature and Koutarou was being protected by Flame Protection and Elemental Shield, he easily broke through the wall himself and scored a direct hit on the demon’s wide open back. Even Koutarou’s sword being infused with

fire was part of the trap. If the demon had jumped over the flaming wall and attacked from above, Maki would have been in danger. Keeping Koutarou's sword enhanced with fire was to make the demon cautious of more overhead traps, making him reluctant to fly. All in all, without using a single advanced spell, Koutarou and Maki's perfect teamwork had created an inescapable trap.

"I-Imposib! Ho ar yu aliv?! I kiled you! I shold hav kiled yu!"

With Signaltin thrust into his back, the demon's inner mana was negated and his body began to crumble.

"Curse yu, Vadraaaaa!"

Even though the sword was weakened, the demon couldn't withstand a direct hit like that. In just a few seconds, the demon's entire body was reduced to a white pile of dust.

Inside the Pocket

Thursday, February 4th

The next day, Maki contacted her allies in Darkness Rainbow from her room at the hotel. The other classmates sharing the room with her had all left to go ski, so she made use of being alone in the room. Instead of using her small magical tool to talk with one person, she used the same magical tools she did at home to contact everyone at the same time.

“It was certainly a strong demon, but he was horribly frightened from the start. There was no way to make a contract with him. When I talked to him, he attacked me and I had to put him down.”

“Hmm, it’s rare to see you resolve things with force, Maki.”

“If there’s no room for negotiation, then you have no choice but to resort to force.”

“That’s true.”

Maki was reporting on the white demon, but not saying any more than she had to. Really, she’d only told them that the demon was scared and that she had ended up killing it. She didn’t tell them about being bested by the demon initially, being saved by Koutarou, or about helping to save Yurika.

“Navy, why was the demon so afraid?”

“I never found out. The only clue was that the demon kept repeating the word ‘Vadra.’”

In the end, Maki never got to the bottom of what had frightened the demon so badly. Since she was unable to properly talk to it, all she really had to go off of was what the demon kept shouting. The only thing she could really put together was that Vadra seemed to be a person, place, or thing.

“I see... Vadra, huh? I haven’t heard that word before.”

The girl in purple shook her head. She was the most knowledgeable leader of Darkness Rainbow, but not even she had heard the word before.

“Well, in the end it was just a lone demon. I think it’s better if we focus on Rainbow instead.”

Seemingly bored, the girl in red tried to move the conversation forward. To her, fighting was everything, so talking about something that had already been killed was a waste of time.

“You have a point.”

Maki agreed. She was happy to shift the discussion away from the demon as well since there was a lot to the story she wanted to keep hidden. Because the other girls remained quiet, Maki took the opportunity to change the topic.

“Well then, about the mana of room 106, the reason for the increase was because Yurika and Satomi Koutarou got their hands on some artifacts.”

“Artifacts?” the girl in red asked, surprised.

“Yes,” Maki said with a nod. “Yurika has obtained a new staff and Satomi Koutarou’s sword has been strengthened.”

“Navy-chan, how is Yurika-chan’s new staff? Was it cute?”

Hearing about a new staff, the girl in orange was the first to react. It piqued her interest just like when Maki completed her new staff.

“It had a design that wouldn’t live up to your expectations.”

“Whaaat?! Another serious and old-fashioned one?!”

“Navy, what is the staff’s ability?”

“It’s rather strange. Because of that, it doesn’t pose much of a threat on its own,” Maki began. “Yurika’s new staff has been created so even someone who isn’t a magician can use it. The staff essentially automates most of the spell casting process. It also has a large variety of spells keyed to it.”

“That sounds pretty special.”

“Yes. The power of each spell, however, is weaker than most.”

“Navy-chan, does that mean that even a complete amateur can become an

average magician with that staff?”

“Yes, but since we’re already magicians, it wouldn’t have much effect. It’s not like we’d get twice as strong.”

“Then what’s the point? It’s not like we fight one on one.”

“We don’t. That’s why I’m not worried.”

Maki smiled at the girl in orange. If Yurika’s new staff had been limited to a few spells, they would’ve had to reconsider their strategy. Since the staff itself had so much mana, if that were concentrated into only a handful of spells, each one would be quite powerful. But since that wasn’t the case, Maki was able to casually chat about it.

“So, Maki, what about Satomi Koutarou? His weapon increased in power too, you said?”

“Yes. Its abilities are the same as before, but its performance has greatly improved. It’s like a completely different weapon. I don’t think I could beat him on my own.”

What Maki had seen before was a sword made purely out of energy. What she saw this time around seemed to have the same abilities, but its power was on a new level.

“You don’t sound very worried though.”

The girl in red noticed that although Maki was telling them how strong Koutarou was, she didn’t sound particularly concerned. Maki honestly admitted to it.

“That’s true. I don’t think we need to regard Satomi Koutarou as dangerous.”

“What do you mean, Navy?” the girl in purple asked.

“I only understood this after my making contact with him this time, but... it seems like Yurika and Satomi Koutarou aren’t necessarily in a cooperative relationship.”

“Navy-chan, by that, do you mean to say they aren’t allies?”

“Yes,” Maki replied as she scanned the expressions of all six girls. “Last time

their goals just happened to overlap, but in reality, Yurika hasn't revealed her identity to Satomi Koutarou yet. Since Rainbow Heart forbids personal use of magic, she may never be able to. And if that never happens, they'll never really be allies in any way that's a threat to us."

"Navy, that means..."

The girl in purple looked right at Maki as she seemed to realize what she was suggesting.

"That's right, Purple," Maki said with a nod. "If we handle things the right way, we might be able to avoid having to fight Satomi Koutarou."

As Dark Navy, she would be able to avoid having to fight a powerful enemy. And as Aika Maki, she wouldn't have to fight Satomi Koutarou. Maki was relieved her wishes as a girl and her duties as a magical girl wouldn't conflict in that regard. However, the girl in red looked at Maki and flashed an impish grin.

"Hmm, last time you were going on about how you were going to kill him, but now you're singing a different tune. Why is that?"

In her report just a few days ago, Maki had been adamant about killing Koutarou. Now she wanted to avoid a fight with him altogether. The girl in red was curious as to why, but she also wanted to tease Maki some.

Not good...

But it was that question that Maki had wanted to avoid the most. Not even she was certain of the reason herself. It wasn't as simple as Koutarou saving her life. It was just that some vague part of her heart had accepted Koutarou. Explaining that to anyone else would be incredibly difficult, and it wasn't something she wanted to discuss in the first place.

"I don't live to fight like you do."

To answer, Maki cautiously chose her words and spoke of her reasons as Dark Navy, careful not to mix in any of Aika Maki's personal motivation.

"It's only logical to avoid an opponent I know I can't beat. Unlike certain parties present, I don't believe that fighting is worth it if I know I'll lose."

"That's harsh." The girl in red smiled wryly. "But that does sound more like

you. Hearing you go on and on about killing was strange."

The girl in red saw no reason to push the subject any further. She had no reason to think that Maki's feelings for Koutarou had changed. She assumed that Maki still despised Koutarou, she now simply wished to avoid a fight.

But the girl in red's response somewhat stumped Maki.

"Like me"?

What did that mean? Just who was she really? Was it the Dark Navy that her allies knew? Or was it the Aika Maki that Koutarou knew?

"Navy, what are the chances of making him one of our allies?"

Maki was slipping deep into her thoughts when the girl in purple pulled her back to reality. She collected herself and directed her attention towards the girl in purple.

"Well..."

Maki pictured Koutarou in her mind. He was straightforward, clumsy, and stubborn. He did lie on occasion, but he would never betray someone's trust. He was the only person that could release the burdens of Maki's heart and make her feel free. Thinking of him now, Maki was careful not to let herself smile.

"I don't think there's much of a chance to make him a member."

Based on Koutarou's personality, Maki couldn't imagine that he would agree with Darkness Rainbow's motives. If anything, he would side with Rainbow Heart. More importantly, Maki wanted to keep Koutarou out of the fight between Darkness Rainbow and Rainbow Heart. She would rather have him as Aika Maki's friend than Dark Navy's ally.

"However, even if we can't formally make him an ally, we should be able to gain an advantage if we appeal to him."

After thinking for a while about how best to respond, Maki gave her answer as Dark Navy. It wasn't exactly what Maki wanted, but she thought telling the truth would be the best way to convince her allies.

As long as I can keep Koutarou away from the room during the fight, he should

be safe...

That was Maki's main goal.

"That's Maki for you. Clever and vicious."

"Petty tricks like that don't suit me, so you do it, Maki."

"Navy, can we leave that part to you?"

Fortunately, the members of Darkness Rainbow didn't doubt Maki or her report. All six of them readily agreed with her.

"Yes. I managed to gain some trust with Satomi Koutarou this time around, so I believe it would be best if I handled things from here."

"Then please do, Navy."

"I'll do it concurrently with my information gathering."

"Navy, do you have anything else to report?"

"I don't. That's all for now."

"Then this meeting is now over. Also, Navy, please report any new developments to me."

"I understand."

As the meeting drew to a close, it seemed things had gone well. Darkness Rainbow now trusted Maki to handle the situation with Koutarou, which was exactly what she wanted since she was hoping to avoid any serious confrontation with him.

"See you later, Navy-chan."

"Until next time."

The holograms of the girls surrounding Maki started vanishing one after another.

"Oh, right. Maki, you're on a skiing trip, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"That's good. How about you let loose a little?"

“That’s none of your business.”

“You know, you really are just wasting your life.”

The girl in red stayed longer than the others, but once even she vanished, Maki was left alone in the hotel room once more.

“Good. I don’t have to fight with Satomi-kun...”

Now that she was alone, the serious expression melted away from Maki’s face. It was like she was a completely different person from when she was speaking as Dark Navy. However, Maki herself didn’t realize the change. Even now, she still believed herself to be the cold and evil magical girl Dark Navy.

“All right. Let’s go meet with Satomi-kun right away. I have some work to do after all!”

But as Maki flung open the door to her room and stepped out, she looked more like a magical girl of love and happiness.

When Yurika woke up, she was lying on a bed in the hotel. The last thing she could remember was being attacked by the white demon on the mountain.

“Aika-san, Aika-san! Let’s do rock, paper, scissors.”

“What?! Satomi-kun, you want me to treat you?! Matsudaira-kun would—”

“He’s a wuss. I’m not going to go easy on you just because you’re a girl.”

“Jeez, this is why you never get any chocolate on Valentine’s Day.”

“Shut up. Let’s do this. Rock, paper, scissors, shoot!”

“Rock, paper, scissors, shoot!”

However, what surprised Yurika more than anything was the casual sight unfolding before her very eyes. Seeing Koutarou and Maki sitting on the sofa together playing rock, paper, scissors was too surreal to believe.

“Aaagh! I lost!”

“So you really did use scissors. I had a feeling you’d do that after our last draw.”

“Wh-What are you two doing...?”

Koutarou threw scissors and Maki threw rock. Having lost, Koutarou held his head in mortification while Maki, the winner, simply smiled. Yurika doubted her eyes.

I-Is this some spell or curse? Am I seeing things?

Yurika knew that Maki was planning on killing Koutarou. Perhaps rock, paper, scissors was just some sort of ruse. Seeing her grin at him made Yurika nervous about what she was really plotting. She couldn’t help worrying that he was in danger right now.

“Oh, Yurika. You’re awake?”

“S-Satomi-san, what’s going on here?”

Yurika looked back and forth between Koutarou and Maki and asked for the reason why the two of them were together.

“Hmm? Oh, after you were done in, I had Aika-san help me beat that strange monster. Then I carried you back to the hotel, and here we are.”

Yurika had planned on confronting Maki after putting Koutarou to sleep at the cave. Getting frozen, however, put a damper on things and the showdown with Maki never happened. Instead, their trip into the mountains turned into a rescue mission for a missing classmate—just how Yurika had set it up. But that wasn’t really the part Yurika wanted to know about.

“Th-That’s not what I meant. Satomi-san, why are you and Maki-chan so... so friendly?!”

“Why? Well, we are classmates, you know.”

Koutarou blankly stared at Yurika. To him, Maki was a classmate. He hadn’t had much to do with her up until now, but it wasn’t because he disliked her. She’d also been a great help to him in saving Yurika. He was just treating Maki like he would anyone else, so when questioned about it, he didn’t quite understand.

“No, I mean... Listen, Maki-chan is trying to, you know...”

Yurika wanted to convey the situation to Koutarou somehow. Maki was an

evil magical girl who'd been her enemy for some time now. Even worse, she was aiming to kill Koutarou. Yurika was desperate for a way to tell Koutarou, but she couldn't come up with anything she thought might convince him. As she struggled for words, Maki spoke up.

"Heehee, Satomi-kun, since Yurika-san just woke up, how about you give her some time to get herself in order?"

"Yeah, that sounds good."

Koutarou nodded at Maki's suggestion. It seemed quite reasonable. There was no way Yurika wouldn't be at least a little disoriented after being frozen solid. She should be given some space so she could calm down, and some privacy to change clothes and put herself back together.

"Maki-chan...?"

However, that only perplexed Yurika more. She couldn't help feeling anxious about what Maki might be up to.

"Also, you're buying, aren't you?"

"Not because I want to, Aika-san. Hey, Yurika, you haven't eaten anything since yesterday, right? You must be hungry. I'll get you something, so what do you want?"

"Oh, u-um..."

"I want something to drink."

"I didn't say anything about getting something for you, Aika-san."

"Whaaat?!"

She was confused enough as it was, but witnessing the intimate conversation between Koutarou and Maki left Yurika absolutely dumbstruck.

J-Just what happened...?

They sounded much closer than classmates, and perhaps even closer than friends. Koutarou was talking to Maki almost the same way he did to Yurika.

"Well, Yurika?"

"Huh...?"

“What do you want to eat?”

“Ah, r-right! If there’s some bread or something, that’ll be fine!”

“Gotcha. I’ll be right back.”

Koutarou got up from the sofa and walked towards the door, paying no mind whatsoever to Yurika’s confusion.

“Satomi-kun, make sure you don’t get lost.”

“As if I would, you goober!”

“S-Satomi-san, wait!”

Yurika helplessly called out to Koutarou, but he was already out the door and didn’t look back. Yurika was now left alone with Maki.

After Koutarou left, the room went silent. There was a lot Yurika wanted to ask Maki, but she had trouble even opening her mouth. Being alone in a room with Maki was just too weird. However, as time passed, Yurika grew more and more intimidated by the sight of Maki sitting on the couch and smiling. She eventually couldn’t bear the silence, so she finally decided to speak up and ask Maki what she was scheming. At the very least, Yurika thought maybe by talking she’d be able to distract herself from the fear.

“U-Um, Maki-chan...”

“Hmm?”

Hearing her name, Maki casually looked up. Still smiling, she stared right at Yurika. Yurika shrank back a little, but did her best to continue talking.

“Just what are you planning on doing?”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m talking about Satomi-san! What are you planning on doing to Satomi-san?!”

Yurika’s most pressing question was why Maki was acting so close with Koutarou. She knew that Maki considered Koutarou an enemy, so there definitely had to be an ulterior motive for her getting closer to him. Since Maki

understood that much, she answered honestly without sneering or making fun of Yurika.

“There’s no need to be so scared, Yurika. I’m friendly with Satomi-kun exactly because I don’t want to do anything.”

“You don’t want to do anything?! Wh-Wha... What’s that supposed to mean?!”

Yurika was confused. She genuinely had no idea what Maki meant. Why would she get friendly with Koutarou if she didn’t want to do anything? Yurika had a hard time taking that at face value knowing that Maki considered Koutarou an enemy.

But what confused Yurika the most now was the atmosphere around Maki. It wasn’t the same harsh, pressuring aura she usually had. Rather, it was calm and stable. Yurika couldn’t even sense any bloodlust in her.

What is this? She’s not scary, but... I don’t feel like I could win...

Yurika felt a lot less hostility from Maki compared to before. Strangely, however, she also felt like she wouldn’t win against her if they ended up in another fight. Maki today somehow seemed stronger than Maki yesterday.

Maki-chan has gotten much stronger... Just what happened between yesterday and today?

It wasn’t like Maki’s mana had increased or she had gained new abilities. Instead, it was like Maki’s mental stability was drawing out all of her strength. It was enough to make Yurika realize that there was an overwhelming difference between them.

“That’s true, Yurika. This is probably hard for you to understand after everything that’s happened, but Darkness Rainbow has decided to avoid a direct confrontation with Satomi-kun.”

“You aren’t going to fight Satomi-san?!”

Yurika’s surprise reached new heights. If what Maki was saying was true, this was a dramatic development that would greatly affect the outcome of the upcoming battle.

“Wait, Maki-chan, what does that mean?!”

“Calm down. I’ll properly explain since this concerns you too.”

Yurika was panicking, but Maki remained calm. If the two of them were to fight now, Maki would likely win easily. That was just how vast the difference between them was.

“I figured this out while talking to Satomi-kun yesterday and today, but... Yurika, you still haven’t truly revealed your identity to him, have you?”

“R-Right... It just didn’t really pan out that way...”

At first Yurika wanted Koutarou to believe her. However, as of late, Yurika had come to feel things were fine as they were, so she hadn’t taken any steps to correct what Koutarou thought of her. She was still just a cosplayer to him.

“That’s why you’re not in a proper cooperative relationship. Isn’t that right?”

“Huh?!”

Yurika was aghast. In her mind, of course Koutarou was on her side. What Maki was pointing out, however, was that they weren’t formally allies.

“Th-That’s true, but...”

“That’s why Darkness Rainbow isn’t strictly Satomi-kun’s enemy yet. There’s no need for us to increase our enemies unnecessarily, don’t you think?”

“Ah...”

Yurika now realized what Maki—and subsequently Darkness Rainbow—was getting at. Maki and the other evil magical girls had only considered Koutarou an enemy because they believed that he was Yurika’s ally. But that wasn’t strictly the case, and therefore there was no point in attacking him. Instead, they’d changed their approach.

“S-So you’re befriending Satomi-kun?!”

“That’s right, Yurika. Since Satomi-kun is strong, I’d rather not fight him,” Maki replied with a nod. “And if possible, I want to make him an ally. Even if that fails, considering it’s Satomi-kun we’re talking about, as long as I can become his friend, there’s no way he would face me in a serious fight. That’s

why I want to befriend him by any means necessary.”

“Maki-chan!”

Maki was going to use Koutarou’s goodwill to protect herself. She was using him, and that was something Yurika couldn’t forgive. Somewhat riled, strength returned to her eyes.

“But Yurika, this situation is useful for you too.”

“Huh?”

“As you know, Satomi-kun is a gentle person. He might take up arms, but he wouldn’t fight to the death.”

Maki continued speaking with a thin smile, but it didn’t appear to be the smile of someone planning on using Koutarou’s kind personality against him. Rather, Maki looked and sounded rather trusting of Koutarou. That puzzled Yurika.

“Darkness Rainbow’s intentions are just as I said. However, depending on how you and I act now, we might be able to keep Satomi-kun out of our fight.”

“Th-That’s...”

That was certainly something that Yurika was interested in. She wanted to stay Koutarou’s roommate and graduate high school with him. In order to do that, she couldn’t reveal herself as a magical girl, and she would have to keep Koutarou out of her fight with Darkness Rainbow. So using the situation to distance Koutarou from any fighting was indeed something useful for Yurika.

Maki-chan just said “Darkness Rainbow’s intentions”...

But there was also one more thing that caught Yurika’s interest. Maki had said “Darkness Rainbow’s intentions” as if her own intentions were different. And if that was the case, what was she up to?

“What’s the reason for you personally not wanting to involve Satomi-san, Maki-chan?”

“Yurika...”

Yurika had taken a stab at the heart of the matter. After recovering from her surprise at the question, Maki smiled. As she did, she looked towards the door

that Koutarou had left through.

“Yesterday, after you got frozen... I was attacked by that demon and almost died.”

Still staring at the door, Maki touched her side with her hand. Last night there had been a wound there—one serious enough to threaten her life.

“But Satomi-kun saved me, so I want to return that favor.”

No sign of the mortal wound remained now. Koutarou had healed her using Signaltin’s powers. The only proof that it had even happened was in Maki’s heart, and the lingering feelings there were what now urged her to protect Koutarou in return.

“So Satomi-san saved Maki-chan... and that’s why...”

Maki and her motivations were usually incomprehensible to Yurika. But this, however, she seemed to understand. What Maki said was enough to convince Yurika. As of right now, Darkness Rainbow wanted to avoid a fight with Koutarou. There were many methods to go about that, and out of them all, Maki had chosen the safest one for Koutarou in an attempt to repay the favor.

“So let’s work together, Yurika. You and I have to keep that man out from the fight!”

“M-Maki-chan?!”

And even though Yurika understood her reasons and motivations now, Maki asking Yurika for her cooperation was quite a bombshell.

Koutarou returned shortly after Yurika and Maki’s discussion. Yurika still hadn’t recovered from the shock. She simply sat on the bed with a spaced out look on her face.

“I’m back, Yurika. I got you some bread. They had your favorite yakisoba bread, so I got you that.”

“Welcome back, Satomi-kun. What bread did you get for me?”

Yurika was so spaced out, in fact, that Maki was the only one to greet Koutarou. She got up from the sofa and approached him.

“I told you I wasn’t going to get you anything. Why on earth would I?”

“My, my... Well, if you start earning points now, I’ll let you become my boyfriend eventually.”

“I don’t want a girl you can get with bread.”

“Tsk, tsk, Satomi-kun. I told you I hate liars.”

Koutarou and Maki were casually joking around. To Yurika who was watching them, it certainly didn’t seem like a relationship that had developed overnight. Koutarou was treating Maki the same way he did Kenji, his childhood friend.

Maki-chan said that Satomi-san saved her life, but... is that really all?

And that was exactly what stumped her. Koutarou and Maki were acting more like childhood friends than they were savior and saved. Something else must have happened. Something more profound than just Koutarou saving Maki’s life. But what? And how could that even be? Yurika racked her brain for answers, but the more she thought about it, the less likely the whole scenario seemed. She was chasing her own thoughts in circles.

“Well, you did help me out a lot yesterday, so I’ll at least give you something to drink.”

“Really?”

“Consider it a bribe to keep you quiet.”

“Ahaha, understood. So what do you have?”

“Let’s see... An unhealthy cola, an unhealthy cola made by another company, and some overly sweet strawberry milk for Yurika.”

“A cola then. I love cola.”

“What a coincidence. I do too, actually.”

Koutarou pulled out two dark bottles from the plastic bag he was holding and then put the bag in Yurika’s lap. All that was left in it was her strawberry milk and yakisoba bread.

“Here. You can have this one.”

“I prefer the other one.”

“Don’t be so picky.”

“Since it’s a bribe, I think I’m allowed to be picky.”

“...Fine...”

Koutarou reluctantly handed his favorite cola over to Maki, and she accepted it with both hands and a smile.

“That side of you is worth a lot of points, you know?”

“I better hurry up and drink this one before you take it too.”

“You know I wouldn’t do that, Satomi-kun. Teehee...”

Yurika continued to watch the two of them as they began chatting and drinking their colas. They were smiling and laughing together, even coming close to doing a few spit takes.

Somehow... they get along really well...

Yurika felt like the atmosphere surrounding Koutarou and Maki was special. It was something he hadn’t shared with anyone else.

“Now, let’s see...”

“Where are your manners, Aika-san?”

“Thank you for the drink, Satomi-kun.”

After finishing her cola, Maki got up from the sofa. She put her hands together and smiled at Koutarou.

“Satomi-kun, do you want to go skiing together after this?”

“Yeah, let’s do that. Yurika, you’re coming too, right?”

“Ah, um...”

“All right, then it’s decided. I’ll go get ready!”

Before Yurika could properly reply, Maki was already walking towards the door. It seemed she wasn’t going to take a no for an answer.

“Let’s meet up in the lobby after getting changed.”

“Yeah... Yurika, don’t space out. Finish your bread or we’ll leave you behind.”

“O-Okay! I will! I’m coming!”

Yurika was still doubtful of Maki. She wasn’t sure she trusted her enough to leave her alone with Koutarou, so even though it meant going outside in the cold and exercising, she had no choice but to go skiing with them.

“Heehee...”

Maki left the room with a little giggle, but after entering the hallway and closing the door, she stopped for a moment.

“Phew...”

She let out a deep sigh of relief. Being alone with Koutarou was one thing, but she couldn’t help feeling a little nervous around Yurika. She was still an enemy.

Oh right...

As she sighed, she remembered what was in her pocket.

“Maybe I should... use it...?”

Maki mumbled to herself in a quiet voice as she put her hand in the pocket of her skirt and touched something small and hard with her fingertips. This seemed like the right time, but Maki was still hesitant to pull it out. Her smiling lips now pursed with unease.

“But... won’t it... be like tricking him...?”

Maki wrapped her fingers around what was in her pocket, but she still couldn’t bring herself to pull it out. Yet at the same time, she couldn’t let go of it either. Maki was still wavering, but...

“No, I’m sure it’s fine... He’s not the kind of person who would be fooled by something cheap like this...”

She mustered her courage and drew her hand from her pocket.

“And in that case... it’s fine... if I make myself look a little cuter... right...?”

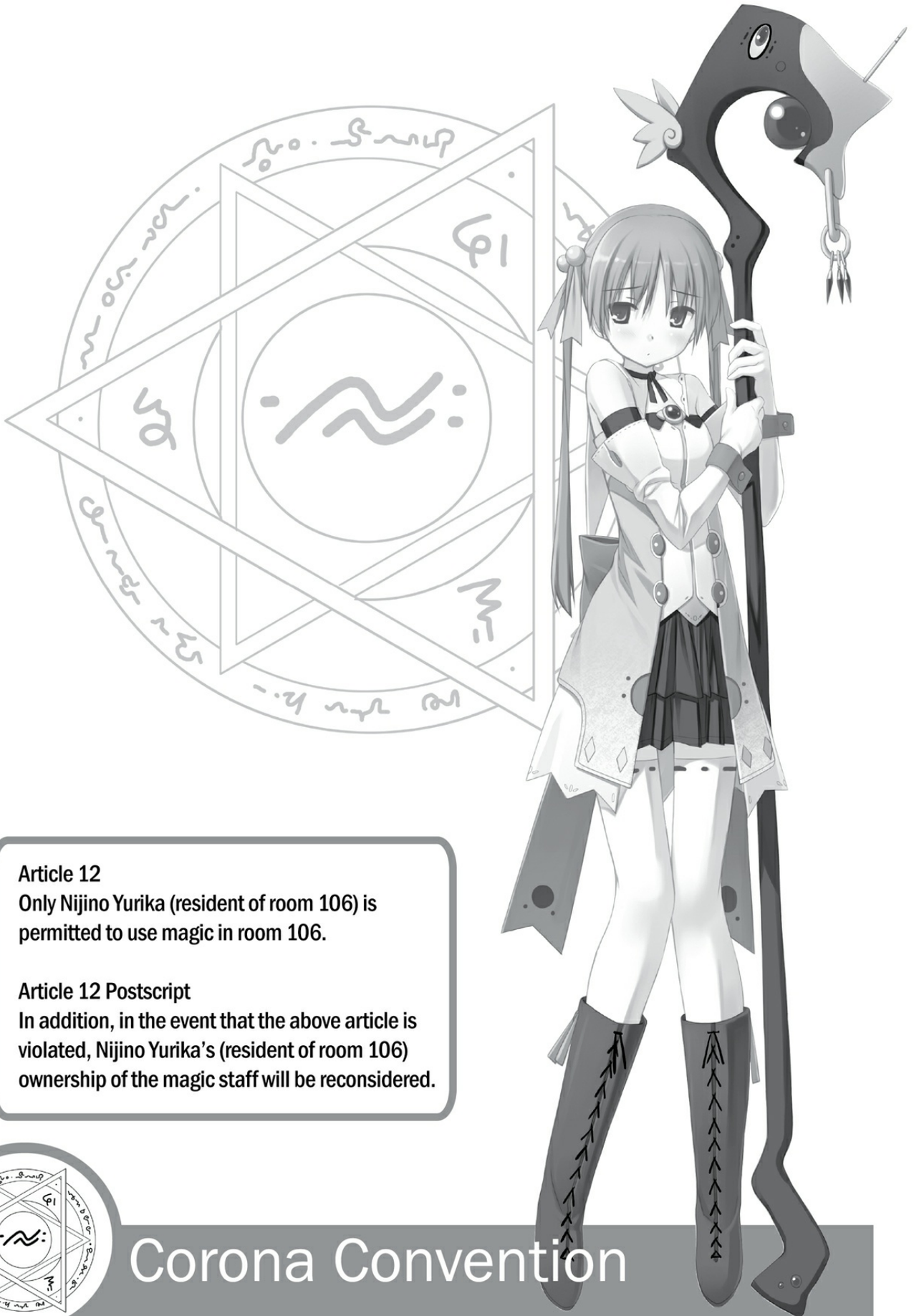
She slowly opened her hand. Her heart started beating faster. Her mind started to go blank and her hand was slightly trembling.

“Would he like it if I...”

In her hand was something she had always scorned.

“N-No! It’s not about that! This is for Darkness Rainbow’s sake! That’s right! If it’s for them, I can do my best, even if I have to do things I hate!”

It was the liquid lipstick that she had supposedly thrown away.



Article 12
Only Nijino Yurika (resident of room 106) is permitted to use magic in room 106.

Article 12 Postscript
In addition, in the event that the above article is violated, Nijino Yurika's (resident of room 106) ownership of the magic staff will be reconsidered.

Corona Convention

New! February 5th, 2010

Afterword

Long time no see, everyone. It's the author, Takehaya.

This volume was published in three months just like the one before. Because of that, it's only been half a year since we last saw the invaders.

This volume takes place a few days after the events of volume 7. After what happened, the characters have now begun moving to fulfil their own wishes, which will lead into the next story. The spotlight this volume is cast on the return of Maki and her confrontation with a powered up(?) Yurika acting like a magical girl again, as well as Yurika's circumstances changing greatly.

The next volume will be 8.5, just like I promised in the afterword of 7.5. It will correspond to the second manuscript Theia wrote. Alaia's party will reach their destination: the Pardomshiha territory. There, they will create the Reborn Forthorthian Army and wage war on Maxfern's coup d'etat army. That's all I need to write, but I'm still racking my brain trying to figure out how I'm going to fit it all in one volume.

Speaking of conundrums, I'm a bit concerned about my schedule as well. I want to put out the next volume—where most of the main characters will be missing—as fast as possible, but my schedule has been thrown for a loop because of the earthquake. Based on the rolling blackouts, I might be able to return to my normal work pace as long as they don't happen too often, but that's all up to luck.

This volume featured a closer look at magic, but magic is actually a very problematic technology. Magic makes use of a much more complex power than we think. In a lot of stories, a magician will create fireballs, shoot lightning, or use magnetism and gravity. However, if magic like that really existed, it would serve as proof of the Grand Unified Theory.

The Grand Unified Theory is a theory Einstein tried to form that would unify all the fundamental forces, such as electricity, magnetism, and gravity. By the way, electricity and magnetism have already been unified. There are four well

known principles that prove the relation between them. However, the principles regarding the other fundamental forces, especially gravity, are still a mystery. Even the closest theory to explaining gravity, string theory, has five different variants, and we're nowhere near getting to the bottom of it.

But in this world, magicians *do* create fireballs, shoot electricity, and use magnetism and gravity. They convert the energy known as mana into all kinds of forces. In other words, these magicians are casually using science that scientists are dying to understand. Conversely, if the Grand Unified Theory weren't true, magicians wouldn't be able to use magic. Really, this all means there is a high chance that magicians are creatures that can recognize the higher dimensions that string theory is advocating to a certain extent. They can sense mana, for instance.

So since all the technicalities were bogging me down, I decided to ignore reality to some degree. I want the world to be a place where anyone can learn magic if they train. It wouldn't be fun otherwise. It's sort of like not thinking too hard about the giant robots in anime, or how detectives run into far too many mysteries. Since it's a premise for the story, let's not be too critical.

Reality is unexpectedly boring (ha!). Anyways, on to recent news.

I came to the conclusion lately that it would be bad to shut myself in at home and work all the time, so I've started riding a bicycle. Since the movie theater is only about thirty minutes away by bike, I've taken to watching a movie whenever I get some time off. As a result, I've been able to sleep better and gain an appreciation for exercise.

Back in high school, it took me forty minutes to get to school on my bike. The wear and tear on my tires was so serious that I could see the casing from time to time. I don't bike as much as I did then, but I will try to continue exercising regularly.

Also, I signed an autograph for the first time the other day. Someone just came up and asked if I was Takehaya. He worked at a bookstore and mentioned holding an event. Since I'd been working on drafts, I ended up staining the colored paper and smudging my name some when I signed. I couldn't help but think at the time that I just shouldn't do things I'm unused to. While I was

thinking that, a different bookstore said something about renovating and asked if I could sign thirty copies. And so I suddenly found myself practicing my signature. I hope I can do it well now. Yurika, fight! Yurika, fight!

I've been told I can have a few more pages for the afterword, but since I don't think I can write that much, I'm going to wrap things up here. I would like to thank everyone at the editorial department for their hard work; Poco-san who's always on time with the illustrations; my band of friends who always join me for a drink when I'm tired; and all the readers who bought this book.

Let us meet again in the afterword of volume 8.5.

June, 2011

Takehaya

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Invaders of the Rokujouma!? Volume 8

by Takehaya

Translated by Warnis Edited by Morgan Dreher

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