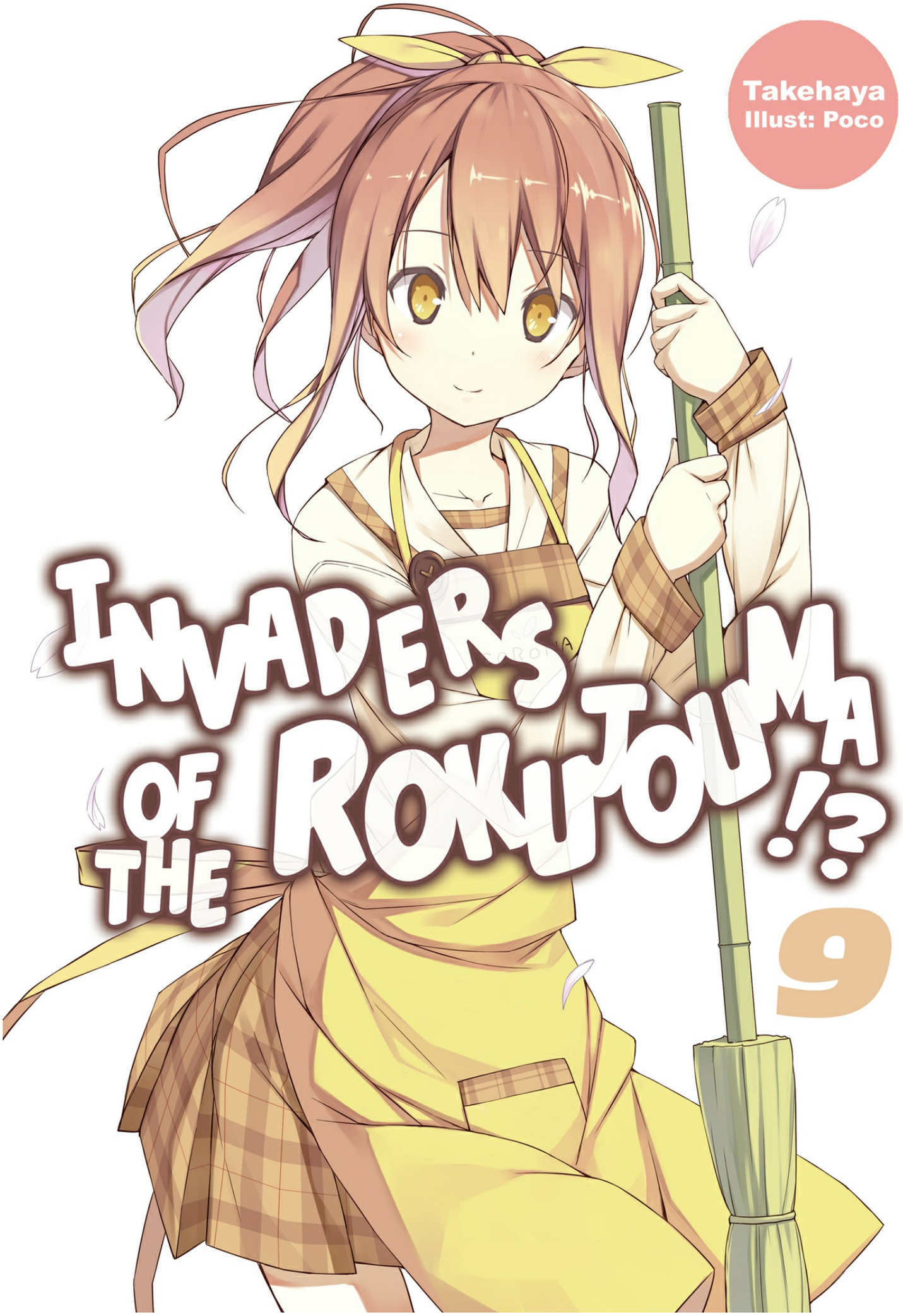

Takehaya
Illust: Poco
INVADERS OF THE ROKUJOUMA!?
9


INVADERS OF THE ROKUJOUMA!? 9
"SATOMI-SAMA, WILL WE BE DOING SOME MUSCLE TRAINING TODAY AS WELL?" SHE ASKED WITH AN EAGER SMILE.


EVERYONE'S
Yes.
In that case...
At last!
Here, Satomi-kun!♥
Hmm...
CHOCOLATE CIRCUMSTANCES


"...SO BOTH MASTER AND SERVANT HAVE MADE THE SAME MISTAKE, HUH?"
"YOUR HIGHNESS..."

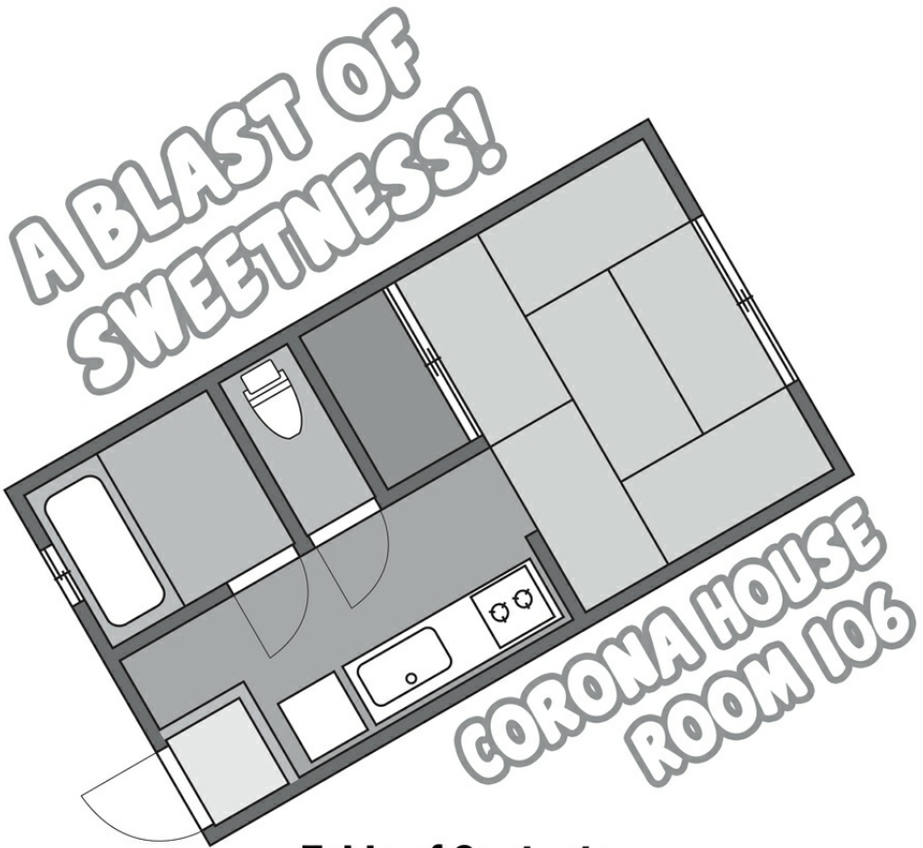


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INVADERS OF THE ROKUJOUMA!?
FACTIONS MAP

STUDENTS OF KISSHOUHARUKAZE HIGH SCHOOL



KASAGI SHIZUKA
Koutarou's classmate and the landlord of Corona House.



MATSUDAIRA KENJI
Koutarou's childhood and best friend.

RESIDENTS OF CORONA HOUSE



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



SAKURABA HARUMI
The president of the knitting society that Koutarou joins. She's one year his senior, and a little sickly.

UNDERGROUND DWELLERS



KURANO KIRIHA
Trying to invade the surface using room 106 as a foothold?

GHOSTS



HIGASHIHONGAN SANAE
The ghost girl haunting room 106.

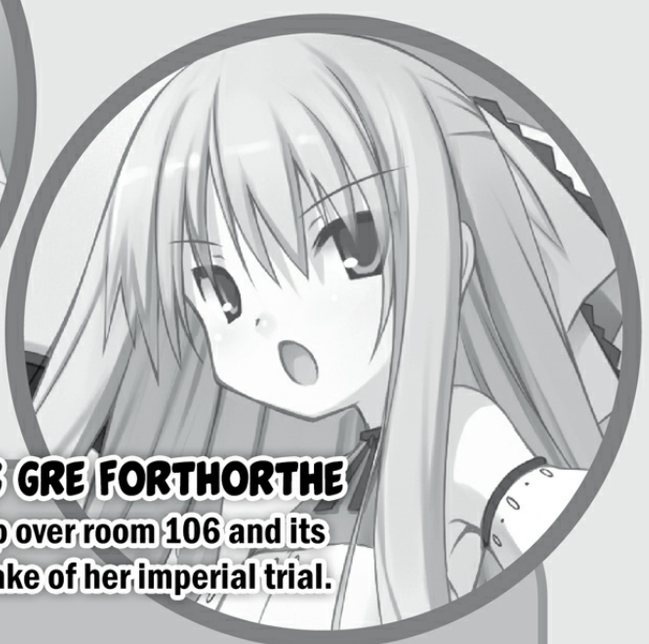
MAGICAL GIRLS



AIKA MAKI
A member of the evil magical girl group, Darkness Rainbow. Yurika's enemy.



NIJINO YURIKA
Self-proclaimed magical girl who came to warn that danger is looming for room 106.



THEIAMILLIS GRE FORTHORTHE
Seeks rulership over room 106 and its owner for the sake of her imperial trial.

ALIENS



CLARIOSSA DAORA FORTHORTHE
Another alien princess and a rival of Theia's.



RUTHKANIA NYE PARDOMSHIHA
Theia's retainer and assistant.

Training

Monday, February 8th

Koutarou and Ruth's morning started early. By 5 AM, they were already up and headed out for their daily run. Leaving Corona House, they'd jog down the promenade running along the river.

The physical training Ruth had started during the latter half of last year had shown very promising results. By the start of February, she was already in much better shape. She never skipped out on her daily training, and she'd slowly built a better working relationship with her own body. As a result, she was no longer in the same sad state Yurika was.

As expected from a descendant of Flairhan, I guess... Ruth-san really does have a talent for this...

Her improvement was enough to earn Koutarou's admiration. At first, just running had left her out of breath, but that was no longer the case. Even now well into their jog, she was only sweating lightly.

"Satomi-sama, will we be doing some muscle training today as well?" she asked with an eager smile.

After running several kilometers down the promenade, they would move into muscle training in a more open space by the riverside. That had been their morning training routine for these past few months, and the two of them were just about there now.

When they'd first started training, Sanae and Yurika had initially joined in as well, but they quickly dropped out because they were too sleepy, it was too cold out, et cetera. Nowadays it was just Koutarou and Ruth going out to exercise together.

"No, I think it's about time we start with the real thing."

Koutarou shook his head in response to Ruth's question. As it was a rather

unexpected reply, she cocked her head to the side in turn.

“The real thing?” she asked.

“That’s right. Ruth-san, you’ve built up enough strength, so I think it’s time we start practicing techniques.”

Ruth’s original goal was to learn how to fight from Koutarou. The running and fitness training were just in preparation for that. And after seeing how far she’d come, Koutarou decided it was finally time to start teaching her a thing or two about fighting.

“Then you’re finally going to teach me martial arts?!”

An excited expression flashed across Ruth’s face as she balled her hands into fists and playfully started jabbing at the air like she was shadowboxing. It was a good thing her opponent was imaginary, however, as her untrained punches didn’t look like they could even hurt a fly. Koutarou watched her with a small smile and shook his head.

“No, I think this would be better for you than martial arts.”

“‘This’?”

Ruth lowered her fists and gave Koutarou a suspicious glance. Koutarou left her be and walked over to the bags he’d set aside: two sports bags and a leather case for carrying baseball bats. The leather bat case was the one he picked up.

“...Will we be using a bat?” Ruth asked as she watched.

She recognized the case that Koutarou always kept his heavy wooden baseball bat in. As part of their muscle training, he would get it out and take a few swings from time to time. Seeing him go for it now, Ruth’s first though was that Koutarou was going to teach her how to fight with it.

“Ahaha! No, not that.”

Koutarou laughed as he loosened the fasteners on the case and revealed its contents. Inside was not a bat, but two swords. One was a traditional Forthorthian knight’s sword, and the other was a much thinner version of the same blade that looked like it would be good for thrusting. As practice

weapons, however, both were blunt.

“Then... sword fighting?”

“Yup. I felt like this would suit you better, Ruth-san.”

As Koutarou said that, he handed the thin sword over to Ruth. Ruth looked it over and lightly but unhesitatingly tried swinging it. Since she was from a family of knights, she had received formal training in swordsmanship, and though it had been quite a while since she’d held one, she had no difficulty wielding it.

As I thought, this definitely suits her.

Really, there were three reasons why Koutarou wanted to teach Ruth sword fighting over martial arts. The first was that Ruth was slight of frame. Given her size, it would be far more practical for her to take up a weapon in a real fight. Since Ruth was a knight, the natural weapon of choice for her seemed to be a sword. And if she was going to use a sword, a thinner one would be best. The traditional Forthorthian knight sword was simply too large for someone of her build. It could easily throw her off balance.

The second reason was that Koutarou personally was better with a sword than his fists. His experiences in Forthorthe of the past had improved his skills with a blade considerably. As a result, he was much more skilled using the disciplined sword techniques Theia had taught him rather than his own self-taught hand-to-hand techniques.

The final reason was that Koutarou remembered the fighting style of Ruth’s ancestor Flair, who was a master at using a thin blade. He had spent almost every day practicing with her while he was in Forthorthe, so he had a pretty good handle on her style and techniques. All he had to do now was teach those to Ruth.

And so for all those reasons, Koutarou had decided to teach Ruth sword fighting rather than martial arts. But really, passing down Flair’s techniques to Ruth was something that made him feel nostalgic. Just the thought of it made his heart leap with joy.

Ruth’s sword cut through the cold, early morning air. Her technique was still

faltering, but it was clear she was getting the hang of things. At the very least, she could wield the sword confidently and with ease. That was the result of the physical training she'd taken so seriously all this time.

"Does this look good?"

"Yeah, keep at it like that. But make sure your elbow doesn't drop down too much when you thrust."

"Yes, Satomi-sama!"

Koutarou observed Ruth from the front and critiqued her form so that her stance better matched Flair's.

She really does look a lot like her...

Ruth indeed looked very similar to Flair, not just in appearance, but in the way she handled a sword. Of course, Ruth was nowhere near Flair's level of skill as things stood now, but even then Koutarou could see glimpses of Flair in Ruth's style. He couldn't help the gentle smile that crept across his lips at the sight.

"Ah..."

Noticing the change in Koutarou's expression, Ruth instinctively stopped moving her sword. The look he had on his face was something she had never seen before. It was gentle and calm, but somewhat wistful. She felt like she could watch him smiling like that forever, but at the same time, she wanted to do something about it. It was a mysterious smile that stirred something deep in her heart.

"What's wrong, Ruth-san?"

Confused as to why Ruth had stopped moving all of a sudden, Koutarou called out to her.

"Ah, I'm sorry, Satomi-sama!"

Koutarou's lonely smile faded, and Ruth quickly returned to herself.

"I... I just have this strange feeling..."

She couldn't just admit to staring at Koutarou like that, so she quickly tried to cover it up.

“I know what you mean.”

Koutarou, however, had no idea what Ruth really meant. Oblivious as ever, he nodded in agreement and didn’t even notice her face turning red.

“I learned how to use a sword from you, and now I’m the one teaching you. It really is a strange feeling.”

Up until now, Ruth had used a large sword when she fought. It was a particularly advanced piece of Forthorthian technology that was more or less automated, meaning that it didn’t make much use of her own skills. When Theia had taught Koutarou how to use a sword for the play, Ruth had been his sparring partner. And though she’d used a sword like that, Ruth was still like a teacher to Koutarou. This reversal of roles felt very strange to him.

“...It was all because the sword was strong.”

“I’m sure you’ll get stronger too, Ruth-san.”

“I hope so...”

After exchanging a few words with Koutarou and collecting herself, Ruth readied her sword again. Seeing that, Koutarou brandished his own sword.

“Satomi-sama?”

“Try attacking me some. That’ll make it easier for me to see what you’re made of.”

As Koutarou said that, he concentrated on his eyes. When he did, he could see a faint white light enveloping Ruth’s body that represented her aura. Koutarou was planning on more accurately understanding the difference between Flair and Ruth by examining the flow of her spiritual energy.

“But isn’t that dangerous?”

“Don’t worry. These are just practice weapons.”

Koutarou smiled and demonstratively ran his finger along the edge of his own sword. Their weapons were both intended to be used for practice, so their blades were made of softer material than normal. There wasn’t any real need to worry about getting hurt with them.

“Okay, I’ll give it a try.”

Ruth nodded with a serious expression on her face. She readied her sword and pointed it at Koutarou. Her form was beautiful, just like Koutarou taught her.

Hmm... Her form is good, but she’s hesitant in her aim. And...

The aura that Ruth was emanating was wavering, indicating she was searching for an opening to attack Koutarou. When he’d fought Flair in the past, she was always confident of where to strike. But since that was just indicative of the difference in their levels of experience, Koutarou felt like it was unavoidable.

“Here I come!”

Ruth stepped forward with confidence and strength uncommon for a girl her age. The results of her physical training were showing in more ways than one.

It’s just as I thought...

However, Koutarou sensed a problem in the aura Ruth was emanating. It was an even bigger issue than her not knowing where to strike.

“Ruth-san, be more serious.”

“But I am being serious!”

Ruth moved in with a swift step and extended her arm to thrust. Koutarou responded by changing the angle of his sword a little. With that, Ruth’s thrust struck the flat of his sword and recoiled.

“I’m doing my best!”

Despite her first strike being blocked, Ruth didn’t stop. As she responded to Koutarou, she unleashed attack after attack. She chained together thrusts and slashes, clearly—just as she said—doing her best at her current level. Meanwhile, Koutarou read her aura and blocked her attacks one after another as he tried to think of a way to explain himself better. Since Ruth had only just started her sword training, Koutarou could afford to be distracted with such thoughts while still easily managing to parry her attacks.

“That’s not what I meant... Um, I want you to come at me like you’re seriously trying to kill me.”

After deflecting several thrusts, Koutarou tried to rephrase his advice so Ruth would understand what he really meant. Even while talking, he kept up his guard.

“Trying to kill you...?”

But it seemed wholly unnecessary. After what he said, Ruth completely stopped attacking. Though still holding her sword at the ready, she looked quite troubled as she furrowed her brow.

“That’s right. Ruth-san, you’re trying to avoid hurting me, right?”

“That’s true, but...”

Ruth lowered her sword. She glanced down at it before looking up at Koutarou, clearly deep in thought. But it only lasted for a moment; she quickly shook her head.

“That would be difficult. You’re not an enemy, Satomi-sama...”

“You’re using a practice weapon, so it’ll be fine.”

“Even then...”

Ruth was indeed rather unsettled at the thought. Since she had such trust in Koutarou, it was hard for her to seriously turn her sword against him. That was the problem Koutarou had sensed. Ruth’s sword was too gentle. Her hesitant aim was one thing, but it was obvious now that she was simply unwilling to hurt him. Really, her personality was holding her back just as much as her skill level was.

“Then... Why not pretend that I’ve suddenly betrayed you and that I’m now about to attack Theia?”

After thinking for a while, Koutarou offered that as a suggestion. Ruth’s gentleness was an asset in her daily life, but at this rate, it would be the biggest obstacle in their training. He wanted to come up with a way for her to be able to set it aside during practice.

“That’s not possible.”

However, Ruth shook her head again. To her, it was flat out impossible to imagine Koutarou ever turning on Theia. She never would have asked him to

serve her otherwise.

“Well, crap... What should we do then? Hmm...”

Koutarou smiled wryly while scratching his head. He was happy that Ruth had that much faith in him, but if he was going to teach her how to fight with a sword, it was a problem.

Like Yurika, Ruth just isn’t cut out for combat... It would probably be the same way even if I wasn’t her opponent.

Ruth would likely be just as unwilling to raise her sword against Yurika, Sanae, or even Kiriha. She was just too gentle.

“Okay, okay, then let’s try pretending your target isn’t me, but some assassin that’s coming after Theia.”

“Then... I’m sorry, but could you please hide your face? When I’m looking at you, I naturally let my guard down, Satomi-sama...”

Ruth understood what Koutarou was trying to accomplish this way, but even then it was hard for her to seriously point her sword at someone she trusted as much as Theia.

Satomi-sama is just asking too much. There’s no assassin that smiles like that when he attacks...

It was hard enough for Ruth to show any hostility towards Koutarou as it was, but the gentle, wistful smile on his face whenever Ruth came at him with a sword killed any desire whatsoever she had to attack him. He was the last person on earth she wanted to hurt.

“Is there something on my face?”

With Ruth looking at him, Koutarou touched his own face, still oblivious to what she was really thinking. Seeing him like that, her feelings unwittingly escaped her lips.

“...You fool...”

They were sweet words from the normally temperate Ruth. If nothing else, as a little payback, she wanted to reveal her feelings to Koutarou to trouble him.

“What did you say, Ruth-sa—”

However, Ruth was unable to get that far. Just as Koutarou was replying to her, something completely derailed his train of thought and subsequently their conversation.

An enemy?!

Something alarming entered Koutarou’s vision via his spirit sight. It was a strong hostility that manifested as six incoming attacks. Koutarou sprang into action the instant he sensed them.

Is it a sniper?! There are six attacks—is the enemy above me?!

Knowing there was no way such hostility was coming from Ruth, Koutarou’s battle instincts immediately kicked in. His adrenaline began pumping and his spiritual energy began flowing. He still had access to the spiritual energy circuits Sanae would use to strengthen him from time to time, and he made good use of them now. His hand started moving long before the command from his brain ever could have reached it through his nerves. His sword slashed out in front of Ruth.

Not a moment later, a bullet crashed into the flat of the blade.

“Kyaaah!”

Ruth finally realized that they were being attacked upon hearing the sound of the bullet hitting the sword. However, even realizing that, she was far too taken by surprise to react. It seemed Ruth really wasn’t suited for combat.

And now...!

Meanwhile, Koutarou was continuing to do his best to defend them both. He swung his sword with his right hand while twisting his body. A bullet then whizzed by where Koutarou’s right shoulder had been just moments ago and buried itself in the riverbed. Immediately after that, he swung his sword upwards and held it in front of his face just in time to catch two more bullets: one by the tip and the other near the handle. They were aimed at his head and torso respectively.

Two more to go!

Koutarou could still sense two attacks quickly closing in on him. They were aimed at his right leg and chest. In response, Koutarou planted his left foot down and leaped up into the air, right out of the way of the first shot that was aimed at his leg. And since he moved, the second shot aimed at his chest only managed to graze his side.

“That’s six shots!”

After avoiding all six shots, Koutarou quickly looked up to see a lone girl. She was holding a large rifle in her hands, freely floating in the sky with seemingly no support. It was a strange sight, but Koutarou didn’t seem surprised in the slightest as he called out to her.

“That’s quite a rude morning greeting, Clan.”

The flying girl was none other than Clariossa Daora Forthorthe, or Clan for short. She was Forthorthian royalty like Theia, and she had a rather deep connection to Koutarou.

“I’m quite surprised, Vel—whoops—Koutarou. You can block bullets even without the armor.”

Clan smiled wryly and lowered her rifle. The device she was using to float in the air was one of her own invention. It performed so well that, even while flying, the hem of her dress barely even fluttered.

“It’s not me you should be impressed with.”

Koutarou knew he wouldn’t have been able to block the shots without the spirit sight he had gotten from Sanae. He drooped his shoulders and sighed. As he did, Ruth boldly pointed her sword at Clan as she landed.

“Clan-sama! Are you after Satomi-sama again?!”

It turned out she had no problem raising her sword against Clan where she couldn’t with Koutarou. After having been attacked by Clan several times now, Ruth glared at her with a dead serious expression.

“It’s okay, Ruth-san.”

Koutarou, however, smiled at Ruth and lowered her sword with his hand.

“But Satomi-sama!”

“That was just a greeting... Granted, it was in pretty bad taste.”

“I refuse to take that kind of criticism from you of all people.”

Hearing the words “bad taste” come out of Koutarou’s mouth, Clan adjusted her glasses with a stern frown and gave orders to the bracelet on her right wrist.

“Cradle, recover my weapon.”

“As you wish, my princess.”

The next moment, a black hole appeared next to Clan. It was connected to her spaceship, the Cradle, and after she inserted her rifle into the hole, it vanished. All that was left was the girl in the dress and glasses, now unarmed.

“Ruth-san, try attacking me like that during our next practice.”

“S-Satomi-sama?”

Koutarou smiled at the puzzled Ruth and left her behind as he approached Clan. He appeared completely defenseless as he casually walked right up to her.

“I thought I could kill you if you weren’t wearing your armor, but it seems I miscalculated.”

“If those had been actual bullets, they probably would have gone straight through the sword.”

“You barefaced liar. You knew it was me from the start.”

Clan showed no sign of attacking Koutarou despite his defenseless state. She seemed a bit unhappy, but she was mostly just playing around with a close friend.

“I just automatically assumed that my highly esteemed Princess Clariossa would use real bullets, seeing as how she’s so sly.”

“Y-You little... Don’t you worry! Next time they will be real bullets! Mark my words!”

“See? You totally would use actual bullets.”

“Ugh, you always have some witty remark! You are so detestable!”

“It is an honor to receive praise directly from Your Highness.”

“I’m not praising you!”

As Koutarou and Clan’s lively back and forth continued, Ruth, who was looking on from the sidelines, couldn’t hide her confusion.

Just... what is going on...?

She’d heard that Koutarou and Clan had to work together to return after being thrown out of the universe. That said, the two of them had started as bitter enemies. Once they’d returned safely to the world, it seemed only natural that they would return to hostile terms. However, aside from Clan’s initial attack, that didn’t at all seem to be the case. Koutarou was talking to Clan much how he would to Theia. And since it had only been days ago that they were literally trying to kill each other, this was a very confusing sight to Ruth.

And then there’s Satomi-sama’s skill with the sword... It feels like he’s on a completely different level from before...

Koutarou’s relationship with Clan wasn’t the only thing that stumped Ruth. There was also Koutarou’s astounding capability with the sword. He had received formal training from Theia for the play, he could see spiritual energy thanks to Sanae, and he was good at fighting to begin with. But even then, he shouldn’t be able to block bullets.

In reality, on the day he and Clan had fought, Koutarou had only been able to put up a fight because he was wearing Blue Knight’s control armor. But now, mere days later, he was able to block bullets on his own. All he had used was a practice sword. There was clearly a disconnect there. Somehow, in just a few days, he had gotten skilled enough with a sword to make up for not wearing the armor.

Just what happened to Satomi-sama? No, before that, where did Satomi-sama and Clan-sama end up during those few minutes...?

Between Koutarou’s new relationship with Clan and his astoundingly improved sword skills, Ruth was quite bemused.

“More importantly, did you finish that thing I asked for?”

“‘More importantly’?! If you were anyone else, I’d have thrown you in prison for life a long time ago for lese-majesty!”

“Don’t get so worked up. You know you’re the only one I can ask for something like this.”

“...The way you put that is very unfair and I hate it. Honestly...”



Unaware of Ruth's befuddlement, the two of them continued their rather casual conversation. They appeared to just be getting to the heart of the matter.

"Cradle, bring it out."

"As you wish, my princess."

Clan gave her bracelet a command and summoned a large box from her spaceship. She opened the box in front of Koutarou, and the two of them stood across from each other as they peered into it.

"Is this it?"

"Yes. I made them just like you asked."

Inside the box were five metallic balls of different sizes and weights. The largest was about as big as a watermelon while the smallest was about the size of a baseball. They were all heavy, however, and even the smallest felt quite substantial when picked up.

Clan had come to deliver these balls to Koutarou. They were something he'd asked her to make as his training with Ruth progressed. Despite their appearance, they were aids for practicing sword fighting. The balls would produce holograms as they moved around in the air. They would serve as targets, and sometimes counterattack. The size of the ball determined the size of the hologram it produced and the speed at which it could move.

Clan had plenty of detailed combat data from studying soldiers, and she had created these devices after analyzing that data. Of course, Flair's combat data was included as well. And if all went according to plan, Ruth would eventually match that level of skill.

On top of that, the devices had been designed to help Koutarou practice too. Peaceful Japan was lacking in opportunities to put sword skills to good use, so in order to practice fighting, Koutarou would need clever ways to train.

Koutarou was already plenty strong since he was borrowing the powers of the invading girls, but that didn't mean it was okay for he himself to remain weak. He didn't see a need to become overwhelmingly powerful, but he at least

wanted to be strong enough that he could lend the others his strength in return.

And so Koutarou had asked Clan to create these training devices. She had agreed to the task, and her appearance today was to deliver the finished product.

“So, how do you use them?”

“I made it so you can control them using your bracelet. Just order them like you would your armor.”

“Gotcha. I’ll try it out later and contact you if there’s something I don’t understand.”

“...Seriously, you’re probably the only person in the universe who would treat a princess of Forthorthe as a handyman.”

After finishing her explanation on how to use the devices, Clan folded her arms, puffed out her cheeks, and pouted in an expression of her dissatisfaction. It was because of things like this that she had no problem greeting Koutarou with sniper rounds.

“What else could I do? I don’t know any scientists more amazing than you.”

“Well, I don’t feel as bad when you put it like that...”

“Anyways, you’ve been a big help, Clan.”

“Can’t you at least be a bit more respectful when you talk to me?”

“I would like to express my utmost gratitude for your cooperation, Princess Clariossa.”

“Ohoho, it was nothing.”

Her pouting didn’t seem to last long. She began smiling as soon as Koutarou gave her an honest thank-you.

“Now you owe me a favor.”

“I know, I know.”

“That face tells me you don’t... Well, anyway...”

With her business here finished, Clan glanced behind Koutarou. And after revealing a mischievous smile, she turned her back to Koutarou.

“Since Pardomshiha is glaring at me with such a scary face, I think I’ll take my leave.”

Upon hearing Clan’s comment, Koutarou looked behind him. Ruth was indeed glaring at Clan with a serious expression.

Of course. Though it’s been months for me, it’s only been a few days since the attack for Ruth-san...

Koutarou and Clan had spent a lot of time together, but it didn’t seem that way to anyone else. It would take a lot longer than just a few days for Ruth to change her mind about Clan too. So Koutarou chose not to stop Clan, and instead just bid her farewell as she turned to go.

“Bye, Clan. I’ll call you later.”

“Just as long as you don’t call with more work. You got that?”

Clan threw a glance Koutarou’s way and lightly kicked off the ground. As she did, her body floated up into the air. In her beautiful, fluttering dress, she looked like a fairy as she rose skyward.

“Of course it won’t be anything like that, stupid.”

“Heh, then that’s fine. Well then, goodbye for now.”

Departing with a smile, Clan disappeared into the blue morning sky. She had activated another one of her inventions, a device that made her invisible. Even though there weren’t many people out early in the morning, a girl flying through the sky would still stick out like a sore thumb. And so Clan had activated her device to stealthily return to her spaceship.

Everyone's Chocolate Circumstances

Monday, February 8th

Even after Clan left, Ruth couldn't get past the mystery of what had happened to Koutarou and Clan. She was distracted enough that she was unable to focus on her training and ended up making lots of mistakes. It stayed on her mind as she walked to Kisshouharukaze High School, and well into class as she ignored the lecture to simply follow Koutarou with her eyes.

Koutarou remained unaware of Ruth's gaze, and when lunchtime rolled around, he spent it carefreely chatting away with some classmates.

"So, Satomi, how many do you think you'll get?"

"I'm in the same boat you guys are. Even if I get some, it'll only be one or two obligatory valentines."

It was now the second week of February, and Valentine's Day happened to fall on a weekend this year. Since the 14th was a Sunday, students would be handing out their valentines on the last day of school that week, Friday the 12th. Today was only Monday, but the entire school was abuzz with talk of chocolates and love.

"You're still sitting pretty, Satomi. Even your obligatory valentines are exceptional."

"Huh? What's that supposed to mean?"

"Don't play stupid! An obligatory valentine from Princess Alaia is a big freaking deal! It might as well be a real valentine!"

"Sakuraba-senpai, huh? Well, it's true that she's awfully kind, but it'll still just be an obligatory valentine. I can't go into details, but she's pretty popular."

"Duh. We're talking about Princess Alaia here. Of course there's a lot of competition for her."

“It’s but a fleeting dream...”

The members of the unpopular boys alliance—including Koutarou—were grieving their situation. They had no girlfriends and no particular skills or assets that would make them popular with girls. To them, Valentine’s Day was just a miserable reminder of that. And so around this time of the year, they would huddle together in the corner of the classroom and complain to each other. There were eight of them in total, each one currently sulking.

“And... How do I put this? I want Sakuraba-senpai to focus on the person she actually likes.”

“Ah, I know what you mean. Of course the princess has her one true love!”

“So everyone’s going to end up getting one or two obligatory valentines... We’re all in this together, I’d say.”

“That traitor is the one stealing all the valentines that could be ours.”

“Feh... Mackenzie, that bastard...”

“Everything is his fault!”

“Did you hear? He was walking around with a new girl the other day.”

“What?!”

“Are you for real, Satomi?!”

The alliance usually ended their meetings by complaining about Kenji. He was attractive, athletic, fashionable, considerate, kind to girls, and even a model student. He was also active in the drama club now, so it seemed like he might get even more valentines than usual this year. And that was exactly why the unpopular boys alliance regarded him with such contempt. He was their natural rival. An enemy. Of course, that envious behavior was a major reason they weren’t popular with girls, but they were too young and immature to realize that.

“Hey, Kou! I don’t want to hear you making up random crap again!”

Hearing all this, Kenji finally put his foot down and fiercely protested what Koutarou had said about him. This was a constant issue, and nothing but trouble for him.

“Don’t be like that, Mackenzie-kun. It’s unbecoming.”

Koutarou leaned over and put his hand on Kenji’s shoulder as a wicked grin crept across his lips.

“Wh-What are you talking about?”

“I saw you coming out of a cafe by the station with a girl the day before yesterday, you see. What happened with that drama club girl you were so close to?”

Kenji’s face turned pale as Koutarou whispered into his ear. Kenji normally had a smart look to him, but now he looked nothing short of desperate as he scrambled for an excuse.

“That was just a classmate from middle school. I was just talking with her since it had been a while since we’d seen each other. It’s not like something suspicious happened or—”

“Of course, of course. Let’s just leave it at that, Mackenzie. I know how hard this time of year is for you, after all...”

Koutarou smiled and patted the panicking Kenji on the shoulder repeatedly. It was like he was saying that he truly understood him.

“So, how many have you fooled with that trick, Mackenzie?”

“I said it’s not anything like that!”

“You’re a disgrace to all men!”

“Just how many valentines are you planning on scooping up for yourself, you traitor?!”

“I have no intention of doing any of that!”

The unpopular boys alliance unleashed a barrage of attacks on Kenji. Doing so would only earn them more scorn from the girls, but again, not realizing such things was exactly what had landed them in the unpopular boys alliance.

“...Serves you right.”

Koutarou had a satisfied look on his face as the other boys tore into Kenji, and he popped a potato chip into his mouth as he watched it happen. The taste was

just as satisfying as the sight unfolding in front of him.

Man, junk food really is the best...

After going so long without junk food, Koutarou had spent the last several days really savoring the taste of his potato chips and cola. As he did so now, however, a slender arm reached over and casually grabbed a few of the potato chips from the bag.

“Satomi-kun, I can make some bona fide Valentine’s Day chocolate for you if you’d like,” said the thief.

She then shoved the stolen potato chips into her mouth. After chewing and swallowing, she smiled at Koutarou.

“That is, if you pay for the cost of the materials and labor.”

“No thank you. More importantly, don’t just steal my chips, Aika-san.”

“My, they’re delicious... Are these the winter limited edition consommé flavor ones? Maybe I’ll buy some too.”

The potato chip thief was none other than Aika Maki. She was a classmate that had gotten friendly with Koutarou recently. So much so, in fact, that she paid no heed to his protests and reached out towards the potato chip bag once more.

“Ah— Hey!”

“Heehee...”

Maki snatched up a whole handful of chips this time, but when Koutarou went to protest, Maki shoved several of them in his mouth. Instead of words, there was only a crunch.

“There’s no need to be so stubborn. I’ll make you splendid chocolate well worth the cost.”

Since Maki had fed Koutarou most of the chips she’d taken, she’d really only ended up stealing the same amount she had the first time. Next, she reached out for his bottle of cola.

“Mmmhh!”

Koutarou started to say something, but he was so surprised at the sight that he got a piece of potato chip stuck in his throat. Unable to breathe properly, he repeatedly pounded his chest.

“Here you go, Satomi-kun.”

“Mhhmm!”

Maki handed the bottle over to Koutarou, and he took a good swig to wash down the troublesome chip.

“Phew, I’m saved...”

“You’re like a child, Satomi-kun.”

“Leave me be.”

“Heehee.”

After Koutarou had some of the cola, Maki grabbed it from him and took a sip like it was her prerogative to do so. Koutarou wanted to complain, but since she’d just helped save him from choking, he let her do as she pleased.

“Hey, Kou...”

Turning to the side, Koutarou saw Kenji looking at him half amazed, half angry.

“Hmm?”

Koutarou wasn’t sure what that look meant, so he cocked his head to the side. He then opened his mouth to accept some more chips that had been presented to him. As he did, Maki pushed the chips into his mouth.

“...No, it’s nothing.”

“Ish that sho? Wheirdho.”

In the end, Kenji said nothing. Koutarou still didn’t get it, so he continued chewing on his chips with his head tilted to the side. Kenji ignored him, so Maki took the opportunity to strike up a conversation again.

“So about that chocolate, Satomi-kun...”

“You really don’t get it, Aika-san.”

Koutarou swallowed the chips he was chewing and waggled his index finger at Maki.

“What we want isn’t the taste of chocolate or a pretty package! The chocolate itself isn’t what matters! Isn’t that right, everyone?!”

Koutarou firmly asserted himself and looked to the rest of the unpopular boys alliance for support. What he wanted was a real valentine, not just an imitation.

“Aika-san, make one for me!”

“Me too! Me too!”

However, the other boys seemed to feel differently. They leaped at the chance and ordered chocolates from Maki one after another.

“Of course, of course! I take cash up front.”

Maki put on her business smile and used the back of the printout she had on her desk to record her orders.

“Ah, you idiots! Have you really fallen this low?!”

“I’d rather have chocolate than my pride! Aika-san, please make one for me too!”

“I want three, and if possible, each with different packaging!”

“In that case, two of them will cost extra.”

“That’s fine by me! I don’t care what it costs!”

“All right then. You can count on me.”

Maki’s to-order chocolates appeared to be a big hit. She received over twenty orders before long, and her list was continually getting longer. If the unpopular boys weren’t going to get valentines through normal means, they were happy to pay Maki for one. They wanted to eat gorgeous handmade chocolate and at least *feel* like they had gotten the real deal. That was just how desperate the unpopular boys alliance was this time of year.

“Y-You guys...”

“So, what about you, Kou?”

“I don’t need any!”



“You should buy some. This might be your only chance, you know.”

“Shut it, Mackenzie! You don’t understand how I feel!”

The serious and stubborn Koutarou couldn’t find it in him to pay for Valentine’s chocolate. Especially not in front of Kenji with such a smug look on his face.

“I think you’re the one who doesn’t understand, though...”

“Yeah, you’re so stubborn... You’ll only lose out like that, Satomi-kun.”

“Quiet, you! Your business preys on lonely men’s innocent hearts!”

In the end, it looked like it would be yet another lonely Valentine’s Day for Koutarou.

Deep in thought, Ruth continued to observe Koutarou as he carried on loudly with his classmates.

Looking at him now, he doesn’t seem any different from before...

That was the conclusion Ruth had reached after watching him all morning. Koutarou ultimately didn’t seem any different since he and Clan had vanished together. He was cheerfully chatting with his classmates like always.

But how can that be?

Knowing how much Koutarou had improved with the sword and seeing how much his relationship with Clan had changed, Ruth was sure that something had happened while they were gone. And it had to have been something big. She just couldn’t tell what it was.

Satomi-sama wouldn’t tell me even when I asked him...

When Ruth had asked Koutarou about it before, she had only gotten a vague summary of what had happened. He and Clan had been sent to a different world, and they were forced to work together in order to return. During that process, they’d become friends. That was Koutarou’s answer every time Ruth had asked him about it. She wanted to hear the details, but he was oddly mum on the matter. In order to get the truth out of him, she would need some kind

of definitive proof to confront him with. That's why she'd been observing Koutarou the entire day, looking for something that might give him away, but she had yet to find anything that fit the bill.

"Hey, Ruth, did something happen between you and Koutarou?"

As Ruth was deep in thought, Sanae appeared upside down in front of her. She was able to do such things freely as a ghost, and she floated in front of Ruth like so to talk to her.

"Kyah!"

Ruth was startled by her sudden appearance, but she quickly returned to a smile when she realized it was a familiar face.

"O-Oh, it's just you, Sanae-sama."

"You've had this big wrinkle on your forehead since this morning and you've done nothing but glare at Koutarou like you're trying to curse him to death. Did you get into a fight? Or are you pretending to be a stalker or something?"

Since Sanae could see the auras of others, she was especially sensitive to changes in people's emotions. Because of that, she was the first to notice the doubts that had begun sprouting within Ruth towards Koutarou.

"Um..."

Ruth fumbled for an answer, but that was when she realized that Sanae might be able to help her. Since Sanae had noticed her doubts, there was a chance she might be able to tell what was different with Koutarou too.

"It's not like we had a fight, but... I just feel like the atmosphere around Satomi-sama has changed a little."

Ruth carefully choose her words as she explained herself to Sanae. In response, Sanae turned around and looked at Koutarou.

"Oh, that's what you're talking about."

"So you've noticed it too?"

"Yeah."

Sanae turned back to Ruth with a smile on her face. As Ruth had suspected,

Sanae had also noticed the change in Koutarou.

“The feeling inside Koutarou has changed a little.”

“The feeling inside him?”

Sanae’s choice of words confused Ruth. She had no idea what Sanae meant about the feeling inside him.

“Oh, right, sorry. You know how I usually sleep inside of Koutarou, right?”

“Oh!”

Ruth clapped her hands together as the lightbulb came on. Since, as a ghost, Sanae didn’t have a physical form of her own, she could enter into the bodies of others. Her favorite person to inhabit was Koutarou, and she would often slip into his body to sleep. Ruth had seen it herself—a few too many times for her taste, in fact—so she immediately registered what Sanae was talking about. The sight of Sanae’s head and limbs sticking out of Koutarou’s body wasn’t something she would soon forget.

“It’s still comfortable, but it feels bigger than before.”

“Bigger?”

“Yeah.”

Sanae nodded and spread her arms out in an attempt to express her meaning.

“Before, when I entered, it felt really cozy with just me in there, but now it feels like there’s room for several more.”

Based on Sanae’s exaggerated gesture, she seemed to be indicating the size of room 106. It was like he’d gone from feeling like the size of the wardrobe to the whole apartment.

So inside of Satomi-sama has gotten bigger... I guess that means he’s gotten more mentally mature or that he has grown into a man of higher caliber.

That was how Ruth interpreted Sanae’s explanation. In the past, Koutarou’s heart only had room for one or two people, but now there was room for plenty more. That seemed to indicate he’d matured mentally or emotionally somehow.

“That’s right. We should sleep together inside Koutarou sometime, Ruth.”

“N-No, I... You know I can’t leave my own body.”

“Man, what a shame. It’s so warm and pleasant.”

Entering Koutarou’s body might give her the chance to find new clues, so it wasn’t like Sanae’s suggestion was an unattractive one to Ruth. There was just no way it would work. Since the only way she could do it would be to die and become a ghost too, she had no choice but to give up on the idea.

That said, this only makes me more sure that something big happened to Koutarou-sama and Clan-sama...

Thanks to Sanae, Ruth had learned that Koutarou’s sword skills weren’t the only things that had developed while he was away. And she wasn’t idealistic enough to think that kind of growth happened spontaneously. After talking with Sanae, Ruth only grew more suspicious of Koutarou.

To the girl known as Sakuraba Harumi, this year’s Valentine’s Day was special. It would be the first one she’d spend in love—something she had only read about in books before. Of course, that’s not to say it would be her first time trying her hand at making chocolate. She made it every year for her family and the children at the hospital. But even so, this would be her first time making a real, bona fide valentine for a boy she loved. As such, she was going to proceed carefully to make sure it came out perfect.

Aww, I should’ve started on preparations earlier!

Harumi stared at the mountain of snacks on the desk in the club room, secretly panicking. The old club room was still cold since it was the middle of February, but Harumi didn’t have the mental energy to spend caring about the temperature. Or on her knitting, for that matter. The needles in her hands were moving at a snail’s pace, almost autonomously. The truth was that Harumi hadn’t realized until very recently that she even had someone she wanted to give a valentine.

“Are you going to give Satomi-san a valentine, Sakuraba-senpai?”

It was actually a question from Yurika that had prompted it. Until then, she’d

only been planning on giving chocolates to her family and the children in the hospital as usual.

Harumi didn't currently have the courage to confess to Koutarou. But since the difference between a real valentine and an obligatory one was so obscure, she could express her real feelings to Koutarou without having to worry about how he might take it. Thinking of it that way, Harumi definitely wanted to make chocolate for him. It was a quest she couldn't afford to fail. She knew she had to make the best chocolate she could, but she also wanted to make sure that it was something Koutarou would actually like. She couldn't do this just for her own satisfaction.

And so Harumi began researching Koutarou's tastes when it came to sweets. However, since she'd only just started her research the other day, she hadn't learned much yet. And since she couldn't flat out ask Koutarou what kind of chocolate he liked, she was starting to panic a little.

"Oh, hey, Sakuraba-senpai, Mackenzie asked me about you at work yesterday."

Koutarou, who had been ardently knitting, set aside his work and reached out for a cup of freshly poured tea.

Maybe this time...

With his needles and his knitting now on the desk, Harumi paid close attention to Koutarou's hands. In his left was a cup of tea, and his right was reaching out towards the mountain of snacks.

At last!

This was exactly the moment Harumi had been waiting for, and she instinctively held her breath as she watched with great anticipation.

"He wants you to appear in another play. It seems you were a big hit even with people outside of the school."

Unaware of Harumi's intentions, Koutarou casually grabbed a snack and threw it into his mouth.

Another tick for milk chocolate.

Harumi made a mental note of every type of snack Koutarou ate, and this time he'd chosen a milk chocolate one. Harumi had prepared the snacks herself, and while she'd included rice crackers and potato chips, she'd made sure that most of the snacks were chocolatey sweets.

There were three kinds of chocolate snacks in total, each with a different coating. There was the sweet and easy to eat milk chocolate, the bitter chocolate without much sugar or milk in it, and the bittersweet chocolate in between the two. This time Koutarou had taken one of the milk chocolate snacks.

Based on everything so far, it seems like Satomi-kun prefers milk chocolate...

Harumi had secretly been researching Koutarou's preferences this way since last week. Since she couldn't find it in herself to ask him straight out, she had taken this roundabout method instead. She felt only lining up chocolates would be too obvious, so she had included various other candies as well. Because of that, however, her research was taking quite a long time and she was starting to panic.

Maybe I should use milk chocolate to make something fun...

Based on the data Harumi had collected so far, she knew that Koutarou was extremely fond of specially shaped candy. When she had brought candy she'd made using flour, water, and syrup in a mold, Koutarou's eyes had sparkled and he had gone after those first. And based on her findings today, she learned that Koutarou preferred milk chocolate. And so Harumi slowly began thinking of things she could do putting the two together.

"Sakuraba-senpai. Hey, Sakuraba-senpai."

But as she stared up at the ceiling while thinking up recipes, Koutarou's face suddenly appeared in front of her.

"Y-Yes?!"

Harumi let out a loud yelp in response. She was caught off guard by Koutarou's unexpected appearance. She was so startled, in fact, that she nearly jumped out of her chair.

"U-Uh, wh-what is it, S-Satomi-kun?"

“Weren’t you listening?”

“I-I’m sorry, m-my mind just wandered off...”

Harumi tried to calm her racing heart and apologized to Koutarou in a fluster. She couldn’t tell Koutarou what she was really thinking about. She couldn’t even bear to imagine what he might think of her if he knew.

“Pffft! Ahahahaha!”

But Koutarou only laughed. Harumi’s flustered face and her panicked excuses were just so cute and funny that he couldn’t hold it in.

“S-Satomi-kun?”

Harumi was baffled by Koutarou’s laughter, and her eyes opened wide in surprise at the sound. That reaction, however, only made things funnier to Koutarou. He nearly busted a gut laughing.

“Wahahahahaha! Wh-What’s with that face, Sakuraba-senpai?! Hahahahaha!”

“Oh you, Satomi-kun!”

“No, not me! Ahahaha! It’s your face that’s funny, wahahaha!”

Harumi quickly realized that Koutarou was laughing at her, but by then there was nothing she could do about it. Koutarou found her face so funny that he had to gasp for breath in between fits of laughter.

“Satomi-kun, you really are a big meanie, jeez...”

Harumi’s angry face—which was 50 percent embarrassment, 40 percent affection, and 10 percent anger—only made Koutarou laugh even harder.

While Koutarou was laughing like an idiot, Sanae and Yurika, who had been getting along well recently, were visiting the supermarket by the station.

“Wow, there’s so much chocolate!”

“I hope some of it’s a good bargain!”

The supermarket was having a special sale on chocolate now that Valentine’s Day was so close. Armed with that knowledge, two girls who rarely went to the

supermarket had come to do some serious shopping.

“Don’t be so cheap. Valentine’s Day only comes once a year.”

Sanae cheerfully looked over each and every one of the chocolates on display, and she was currently eyeing the shelf lined with the relatively expensive products. Since she rarely used her money, being a ghost and all, they were well within her price range even with just the small allowance she got from Koutarou. The only other thing she really ever bought was anime related merchandise. Because of that, she was planning on buying something nice.

But if it’s too expensive, Koutarou might not like it, so something around here should be good...

Sanae had perused the top-shelf chocolates briefly, but in the end she decided against them. She was planning on giving Koutarou chocolate, but she was also planning on sharing it with him by clinging to his back as he ate it so that she could taste it too. But that meant if she bought him a kind of chocolate that he was unused to and he didn’t like it, she wouldn’t get the right sensation out of it. She loved the spiritual energy Koutarou showered her with when he was happy, and if all she really wanted was Koutarou to be happy, there was no reason to buy a needlessly expensive chocolate.

In the end, Sanae chose a nice, limited edition Valentine’s Day chocolate from a popular brand. The label read: “A special version of the taste everyone loves, just for the special person you love.” That spoke to her, and she felt like she made the right choice.

“But, but, but! Expensive chocolate doesn’t fill you up like the cheap stuff does!”

Unlike Sanae who headed for the more expensive products, Yurika immediately went for the bargain bin. They were split up, Yurika on the left side of the aisle and Sanae on the right.

Yurika lived off the stipend she received from Folsaria. However, considering the strength of the yen right now and how seriously her stipend was docked to cover all the property damage she’d caused in the past, she had to survive off of very meager means. Despite that, she still couldn’t stop herself from buying her beloved shoujo manga, meaning that she had almost no spare money. If it

weren't for Koutarou generously allowing her to live in room 106, she'd be the first homeless magical girl in history. As a result, Yurika ended up being drawn towards the right shelves.

Do I get ten 10 yen chocolates, two 50 yen chocolates, or one 100 yen chocolate? Auuugh, what should I do?

Yurika was wondering how to use the 100 yen she'd managed to scrounge up. Should she buy a bunch of cheap chocolates, one of the most expensive kind she could afford, or something in the middle? If she were buying for herself, she definitely would have chosen the cheapest chocolate to get as much as possible, but since she was going to give it to Koutarou and the others, she felt like going too cheap would be bad. At a loss for what to do, she began thinking of different ways to spend her 100 yen, such as two 30 yen chocolates and four 10 yen chocolates.

"...I hate this. I hate being poor..."

Since Yurika loved shoujo manga so much, Valentine's Day had a special place in her heart. She also wanted to try giving a boy she liked a big, homemade chocolate creation. But with the market and her circumstances what they were, that was just a pipe dream. Yurika clenched the 100 yen coin in her hand and gritted her teeth. It was all she could do.

"V-Valentine's Day sucks..."

Yurika stared at the chocolate on the shelf with tears in her eyes.

"Yurika, Yurika!"

That was when Sanae, holding her own chocolate, approached.

"Huh?"

Yurika looked up to see Sanae pointing behind her.

"Isn't that the one you were talking about the other day?"

"Huh, what?"

Yurika looked in the direction Sanae was pointing.

"Whaaat?!"

Yurika froze when she read the words: “Sale! Kanto seaweed soy sauce ramen! One bag for just 78 yen!” It was a sign for the new flavor of instant ramen that she had eagerly been waiting to try.

While Sanae and Yurika were at the supermarket, two other girls from the Corona House crew arrived. They, however, weren’t headed for the candy aisle.

“Kiriha-san, over here.”

“Thank you, Shizuka. You’re a big help.”

Shizuka and Kiriha were browsing the alcohol aisle, not that they wanted any to drink. What they were after was special cooking liquor.

“It’s no trouble. I’m here to buy something myself anyway.”

Shizuka had guided Kiriha to the supermarket’s alcohol aisle, but it was also her destination. There was a kind of alcohol she wanted to buy too.

“Liqueur, liqueur... Ah, here it is.”

Shizuka was looking for liqueur. She could have gotten regular cooking alcohol at the store by the shopping street, but Shizuka had to come all the way out to the supermarket to find a particular liqueur used for making sweets. This supermarket carried a great selection of them, and Shizuka picked out the yogurt flavored one. It was one of her favorites, and this was the only place that carried it.

“Shizuka, what are you going to make with that?”

“Heehee, I was actually planning on using it as the secret ingredient in my chocolate-covered cake.”

“Oh, a cake, huh? That sounds delicious.”

Kiriha, who was also quite skilled in the kitchen, had no trouble reading between the lines. She could tell Shizuka was going to make a sponge cake with yogurt liqueur in it and then cover it with chocolate. It would give the cake a refreshing flavor and make for a nice contrast against the chocolate.

“Something like strawberry would go well with it too.”

“Oh, I have some strawberry liqueur at home, so I’ll give that a try too.”

As the two continued to talk about cooking, they moved down the aisle some to find what Kiriha needed.

“The brandy for cooking is right around here.”

“Now then, which one should I pick?”

In addition to liqueur, the store had a nice selection of brandy too. Kiriha picked up the closest bottle and read the label. She needed to find something that would work for her purposes.

“You’ll be putting the brandy into the chocolate, right?”

“Yes. I wanted to give it a more sophisticated taste.”

“So you want it to be a little bitter?”

“That’s my plan.”

Kiriha was looking for a brandy to give the chocolate a complex flavor. She wanted it to be mature, and something less sweet than normal. She was planning on making a valentine of her own, so she had to make sure it was something an adult would like. Kiriha’s first love, the man she’d met on the surface ten years ago, should be around thirty years old now.

Unfortunately, she still hadn’t managed to track him down. She’d used various methods and she’d checked everywhere she could think of that he might be, but it was all to no avail. Despite that, however, this was the season of romance. Kiriha couldn’t help wanting to make a valentine for him, even if he wasn’t around. That was just how in love she was.

Heh, I’m sure Koutarou would laugh at me for being so stubborn...

Kiriha herself was well aware that what she was doing was silly, but she didn’t feel like it was a waste. She now had a best friend who understood her. Even if she couldn’t actually give her valentine to the man she loved, she could laugh about it with her best friend. And then they could just eat the chocolate together. It wouldn’t be a waste at all. That’s why Kiriha was looking forward to this year’s Valentine’s Day.

As Kiriha was smiling to herself thinking about the coming holiday, Shizuka

presented her with two small bottles of brandy.

“Then try this one or this one. Either you really bring out the bitterness of the chocolate, or you suppress it to make it easier to eat.”

Should she use a dry brandy to make the chocolate’s bitter taste stand out even more, or should she use a sweet brandy to make the chocolate easier to eat? Shizuka was recommending that she choose one of the two.

“Hmm, which one to pick...”

Kiriha returned the bottle she was holding to the shelf and compared the two bottles Shizuka had brought her. Her cooking experience told her that either one of them would be good.

“Now that I think about...”

In that moment, the face of Kiriha’s best friend flashed through her mind. After smiling once more, she decided on which brandy to pick.

“Let’s go with this one.”

Kiriha picked the sweet brandy that would make the chocolate easier to eat.

“Oh? I thought for sure you’d pick the dry one instead.”

Shizuka lightly shook the bottle of brandy she was left holding. In her mind, Kiriha was a very mature woman, so she naturally assumed she’d go for the more mature option.

“I just felt like it would be better if it’s easier to eat when I share it with everyone.”

Kiriha’s best friend had very childish tastes. Even if she cut the bitterness of the chocolate with the brandy, he would still probably make a funny face when he tried it and say it was too bitter. With that in mind, she saw no need to go out of her way to make it even bitterer. If it was slightly sweet, then it would be ideal for sharing with her friends.

“I see... Now that I think about it, there are friends to share it with this year...”

Shizuka smiled as she said that. She looked happy, but at the same time, strangely sad.

“Oh, that’s right. Your parents are...”

Shizuka had lost her parents and was managing Corona House on her own. Birthdays, Halloween, Christmas, New Year’s Eve, Valentine’s Day... While the world was celebrating all kinds of things, she was all alone.

“Yeah, but this year I have all you guys, you know? That’s why I’m so happy.”

However, Shizuka’s life had completely changed since Koutarou moved in. She now had people to spend those special days with. She was used to spending them at home alone, but things were different now. All she had to do was walk downstairs and open the door to room 106, and there would be smile upon smile there to greet her. That’s why Shizuka was making a whole cake. To see all those wonderful, radiant smiles at their best on such a special day.

“While I can’t say it openly... I feel the same way.”

Kiriha smiled and nodded. She was feeling something similar. She had lost her mother early in life and had felt her share of loneliness. On top of that, she was the daughter of the clan’s chief and, for political reasons, could show no weakness in her day to day life. So like Shizuka, she was happy to be able to come home to so many honest smiles every day.

“Heehee, you can count on me to keep a secret like that.”

“Then please do. I have to think of my position, after all.”

The two girls smiled at each other and began discussing chocolate again. Their smiles, brighter than before, were proof that the friendship between them had grown.

As most of the residents of room 106 were preparing for Valentine’s Day, one lone girl seemed to shy away from the festivities.

“Hahh...”

She was sitting in the corner of quiet room 106, holding her knees and resting her chin on them. She would let out a deep sigh every now and then. As she was looking down at the floor, her long hair concealed her face, hiding her expression. Even then, however, it was quite clear it was a gloomy one,

especially compared to the radiant, golden tresses falling over it.

Theiamillis Gre Forthorthe. She was an alien who had crossed the vast universe to invade this small apartment.

“Why... Why did it turn out like this...?”

Theia’s weak voice echoed through the still room. She was normally proud and powerful. Though her body was small, she had a big personality. However, right now, that was nowhere to be seen. She seemed far smaller than usual huddled in the corner of the lonely room. The cause was a very, very troublesome feeling welling up in her tiny chest.

“At first... I thought that he was just a Neanderthal...”

When Theia had first come to Earth, she had only thought of its people as primitive barbarians. As a result, she would often clash with Koutarou and the other invaders, and it kept them from having an amiable relationship for a long time. However, as things progressed and she and the invaders vied for ownership of the apartment, they’d all come to know each other a little better and build trust and respect in their own ways. Before she knew it, she had begun enjoying life with her new friends here.

Back on Forthorthe, as a princess, everything was political and Theia had to live her life with her guard constantly up. So to her, these fun, laidback days in room 106 were irreplaceable. And somewhere along the way, Theia realized that she had fallen in love with the young Earthling. At first she had considered him to be nothing more than an uncultured brute, and as such, she had tried to make him submit by using force. They had brawled, fought, and argued countless times. In fact, they still did every now and then, although the reason had changed greatly.

It was fun to be able to express herself so freely and willfully. She was happy to be treated like anyone else because it meant she could forget that she was princess for a time. Theia and the boy she’d fallen for would still butt heads, but Theia thought of it affectionately. Before she knew it, all hostility she had was replaced with a warm, fuzzy feeling, and she indulged in that even when they argued.

“He’s an alien... Why do I keep forgetting that...? I’ve known it all along...”

However, now that she had realized her feelings, a new problem had arisen. There was no denying that Theia was an alien to the boy she loved and vice versa. Even if he were to respond favorably to her feelings and the two of them married, they were still from two different planets. A relationship between them would be fraught with problems. On top of them being different species, Theia's position would pose an issue. And as she thought these problems out one by one, she grew more and more depressed as it set in on her just how unrealistic the whole thing was.

"He and I... will never be married..."

She had fallen in love with someone she could never really be together with. That was what was troubling Theia now. And while it sounded simple enough when put into words, it wouldn't be that easy to reckon with.

"Haha... This is what I get for getting carried away with 'Theiamillis's Blue Knight'... The real Blue Knight couldn't be together with his princess either..."

A dry laugh leaked from her lips as large tears fell down her cheeks.

In the past, Theia had secretly given the man she loved the title of "Theiamillis's Blue Knight." But the Blue Knight of legend could never be together with the Silver Princess. The Silver Princess loved him, but he left Forthorthe all the same. And just like the legend, Theia would never be together with her own Blue Knight. That was all she could think of right now.

Having served Theia for a long time, Ruth was in tune with her emotions. She had already realized that something was wrong with her.

Her Highness has been acting strange lately... Is she struggling with another problem, I wonder...?

However, Ruth hadn't yet pinned down the cause. Since Theia and Koutarou's relationship had improved during the ski trip, she couldn't imagine that anything bad had come up between them since then. Unfortunately, however, that was essentially the case. What troubled Theia now was something of a blind spot for Ruth.

But if it's not about Satomi-sama, I don't think I need to worry too much. I'll

simply start by giving her this to cheer her up.

Ruth was working on preparing a Valentine's chocolate for Theia's sake. Upon learning of Valentine's Day, she knew she wanted Theia to participate. She believed that if Theia gave chocolate to the boy she had feelings for, even an awkward girl like her could express her gratitude and love. Their relationship might even develop further. Ruth was also hoping the prospect of that would cheer up her depressed princess now.

No, maybe I should be worried about Satomi-sama instead...

Ruth was certain that Koutarou was hiding something from her and the others. As such, it was hard to gauge exactly how he would react to certain situations or being put on the spot. Ruth's intuition told her that there was no way she needed to worry about Koutarou becoming Theia's enemy, but it would still be troublesome if things started to develop in a strange direction. He had been spending an awful lot of time with Clan lately. Ruth didn't want to let go of an ally as trustworthy as Koutarou. She needed him to protect Theia alongside her. Theia needed him too in her own way, and that's why she felt Theia needed to actively take part in events that would improve her relationship with him.

Contemplating all this, Ruth carried a paper bag full of ingredients and tools to the kitchen on board Blue Knight. Since she wanted to keep Theia's chocolate a secret until the day of, using the kitchen in room 106 was out of the question.

The paper bag Ruth was carrying was heavy. When she put it down on the kitchen counter, the metal bowl and utensil inside banged together, making a loud noise. Despite the weight of the bag, however, Ruth didn't seem the slightest bit tired from carrying it all this way. After setting it down and stepping back from the counter, she put her finger on her chin and started thinking.

"All that's left is to get Her Highness... but I guess it would be best to do that after dinner."

After dinner, they would be holding their usual games for control of room 106. Since that would take some time, if she and Theia were going to make chocolate together aboard Blue Knight, it would make the most sense to do it after that. Having settled on a plan, Ruth turned her back to the equipment on

the counter. In no small part thanks to her training with Koutarou, her steps were so light that it almost looked as if she was dancing.

“Now, what should I make for tonight? Heehee, I guess I should make something simple in preparation for Her Highness’s chocolate this weekend...”

Ruth smiled as she imagined Koutarou eating tonight’s dinner. She loved seeing him enjoying her cooking, especially when he couldn’t seem to get enough. She also loved seeing Theia eat, but that had a different charm to it. Between the two of them, Ruth always made sure to do her best when it came to cooking.

“If I cook a steamed chicken, the texture and taste should be great, and then I can focus on the calories and—”

As Ruth was walking down the hallway that led to the inner room, the bracelet on her right arm began to slightly vibrate.

“Oh?”

It was a signal that her bracelet had received information of some kind. Ruth brought the bracelet up to her face and accessed the information that had been delivered.

“...A hyperspace communication from Pardomshiha?”

Seeing what was displayed on the bracelet, Ruth tilted her head in confusion. It meant that she’d received a message from her family.

The Problems of a Noble

Monday, February 8th

In Corona House room 106, it was always game time after dinnertime. Points were distributed based on the outcome of the games, and those points represented each player's ownership of the apartment. The first person to get all the points would then be declared the owner of the apartment. In other words, this was how they'd agreed to peacefully settle their dispute over room 106.

All kinds of games were used in this peaceful invasion, too. They would play card games, party games, and sometimes even console games. Since everyone had their own strengths and weaknesses, Koutarou and the invaders took turns deciding what they would play. As a result, any real change in points was gradual and even now, ten months after they had started, they still hadn't reached a conclusion.

That being said, there was one person in particular who was steadily falling further and further behind, perhaps in part due to her quirky nature: Nijino Yurika. She was the second invader of room 106, who, just the other day, had established her position as the magical girl of the room.

Games that required strategy or wit were Yurika's weak point. Her way of thinking was awfully predictable. She could be read like a book just based on the look on her face. As a result, she very rarely won any games that involved subterfuge or gambling. Though she'd gotten a little better over time, Koutarou and the others knew her well enough that her win rate still hadn't improved. Recently, she'd been making a comeback through games of chance, but if it weren't for her occasional lucky streaks, she easily would have been out of points by now.

"Heh heh, this should do the trick..."

Having realized the dire straits she was in, Yurika had prepared something

special for today's games. Games of chance were her only saving grace so far, but there was no guarantee that would continue. That's why she'd gone out of her way to come up with something that would give her an edge in strategy games and the like.

"Now, let's play!"

And so Yurika was sitting right up against the tea table, eagerly waiting for the night's games to start.

"Yurika... Are you really satisfied... with that purchase?"

"Koutarou's right, Yurika! That's not something a magical girl should do! Love Love Heart would never do something like that!"

"Ho! Are you planning on robbing a bank like that, Yurika-chan? Ho!"

"Korama, apparently there are no banks in this game, ho!"

Yurika's plan, however, didn't seem very popular with the residents of room 106.

"What's so strange about this?! It's perfect!"

Yurika's magical girl outfit fluttered as she adamantly objected to their criticisms. She had absolute confidence in her plan. The reason she'd been losing in so many games was because her face gave her away. To counteract that, Yurika was wearing a ski mask and sunglasses.

"Oh, I get it!"

Yurika raised her voice and slammed her hands on the tea table.

"You're only saying that because you're scared I'll take all your points, aren't you?!"

The ski mask and sunglasses did their job in that it was impossible to see what kind of expression Yurika was making right now. That being said, no one had any trouble imagining it.

"Yurika..."

Pained by seeing Yurika like that, Koutarou called out to her with a gentle voice and an expression full of pity.

“Yurika, if you want points that badly, I’ll give you some. Would twenty be a good start?”

Koutarou picked up a pen and altered the score sheet on the wall. He docked twenty points from himself and added them to Yurika’s total.

“Huwah?”

Yurika let out a stupefied gasp at Koutarou’s unexpected charity. Her face probably reflected something similar, but the ski mask and sunglasses were doing their job perfectly.

“I’ll even pick a game that’s easier for you, too.”

Koutarou was in charge of choosing today’s game, and he was offering to pick something that Yurika would have a better chance of winning.

“So please just take those off, Yurika! You’re fine as the magical girl you are! You don’t have to wear something so weird, even if it’s to win!”

“Well said, Koutarou! A man has to be particular about the methods he uses to win!”

“Even I would shy away from defeating that.”

“...That’s true.”

He could understand Yurika wearing her magical girl outfit to pump herself up, and the ski mask and shades to hide her face. But even so, the sight of it all together was just too bizarre.

Even worse, Koutarou was confident that this getup of Yurika’s wouldn’t change anything. Half a year ago, things might have been different, but now everyone knew Yurika well enough that they could tell what she was feeling regardless of what she was wearing. All this time they’d spent together hadn’t been for nothing.

Yurika would still lose, even in that outfit. She would then jump into the wardrobe to cry, trying to stay quiet, but all the while complaining that she should have bought instant ramen instead of a ski mask and sunglasses.



Imagining that, Koutarou simply couldn't leave Yurika be. The thought of how things were going to turn out was just too pitiful, and she was a precious friend of his.

"Y-You're making a fool out of me!"

Having finally realized what Koutarou was thinking, Yurika began to fiercely object.

"I'll make you regret being so naive later!"

However, even though Yurika said that, she quickly removed her ski mask and shades.

"You know, Yurika, if you're not happy, you can always give Koutarou his points back."

"No thank you! I'm happy to keep what I get!"

Yurika happily tossed the ski mask and sunglasses aside with a smile before picking the game board up from the tea table and returning it to its box. Since they were going to be playing a different game now, they didn't need it anymore.

"...Is Yurika-chan really okay living her life like that?"

Shizuka sipped on her tea as she watched Yurika cheerfully cleaning up the game while humming to herself. Recently, Shizuka was spending more time in room 106 than in her own apartment.

"If you ask me, despite how she may look, Yurika strikes me as the type to scrape by, no matter how rough things get." Kiriha took a sip of her own tea and smiled at Shizuka. "She'll probably be fine as long as someone like Satomi-kun is around."

"Haha, you've sure got your work cut out for you, Satomi Koutarou."

Shizuka and Kiriha both believed Yurika's life would remain somewhat stable as long as Koutarou was around since he couldn't find it in himself to abandon her. More accurately, they hoped it would remain stable since they didn't want Koutarou to abandon her.

“Satomi-kun might just end up getting together with someone like Yurika-chan.”

“That’s certainly possible. Satomi Koutarou looks like the kind of guy who would draw the short straw on purpose.”

Yurika would undoubtedly be worse off without someone like Koutarou in her life. Regardless of how things worked out in the future, Kiriha and Shizuka were sure of that much as they looked at each other and smiled.

“So what are we playing today, Koutarou?”

“If we go with Old Maid, even Yurika should have a chance.”

“Do I need to remind you that Yurika has absolutely no poker face?”

“I’ll sit next to her and pick cards without looking at her face. Hey, Yurika, I told you to cut that out!”

“Eek!”

Upon hearing that the game would be Old Maid, Yurika had reached out for the ski mask and sunglasses again, but she reluctantly let go of them upon Koutarou’s strong objection.

“Just make sure you pick the bad card, Satomi-san.”

Yurika was dissatisfied with this since her equipment was specifically designed to be useful for games like Old Maid, and she took it out on Koutarou.

“Don’t push your luck. I don’t have to go that far.”

“Oh, Satomi-san, there’s no need to be so shy. I know you actually love meee!”

“You really should check yourself...”

Koutarou had decided to change today’s game to Old Maid since it was his turn to pick, but he decided to run it by the other two girls who hadn’t spoken up yet to make sure it was okay with them too.

“Kiriha-san, Theia, do you mind playing Old Maid instead?”

“That’s fine. You can choose as you please.”

Kiriha sipped on her second helping of tea and nodded her head. Her goal was to keep the battle for room 106 at a standstill to prevent the other underground dwellers from getting out of hand. That meant she couldn't allow even Yurika to lose, so she had no objection to changing the game for her sake.

"In return, however, I desire the sweet jelly you've hidden in the back of the cupboard."

But even so, just letting Koutarou get his way was no fun. Instead, Kiriha struck a deal with him.

"Man, I was planning on eating that in secret!"

"That's why I'm requesting it."

Kiriha's sudden power move left Koutarou panicking a little, and Kiriha smiled rather smugly to see it. She enjoyed pulling these little pranks on her best friend. The truth was that she wasn't particularly interested in the sweet jelly. She just wanted to see Koutarou flustered.

"Wait, you have sweet jelly?! What flavor?!"

"This is the first I've heard of any sweet jelly, Satomi-san!"

Rather than Kiriha, there were two other girls who showed great interest in the sweet jelly: Sanae, who loved eating anything delicious, and Yurika, who loved eating anything at all. Upon hearing there was a dessert in the apartment, they sidled up to Koutarou with stars in their eyes.

This is why I kept it quiet...

Koutarou held his head and smiled wryly, reluctantly accepting Kiriha's deal.

"...Okay, okay, have as much of it as you want."

Koutarou had bought the sweet jelly to cheer himself up in the event that he didn't get any chocolate for Valentine's Day. However, he couldn't say no to the two girls in front of him, and so he ended up caving for their sake.

"All right! You're so generous Koutarou! What a gentleman!"

"That's a whole meal! Thank you very much, Satomi-san!"

"Heh, you heard him, Karama, Korama."

“Roger that, ho!”

“Leave it to us, ho!”

With the sweet jelly set as the price for changing the game to Old Maid, the two haniwas hopped off to the kitchen. After watching them go, Koutarou turned towards Theia, who was sitting on the opposite side of the table from Kiriha.

“What about you, Theia?”

“...”

Despite talking to her directly, there was no response from Theia. It seemed especially weird since she was usually rather quick about voicing her opinion.

“Hey, Theia.”

Koutarou waved his hand in front of her face.

“Kyah!”

Startled, Theia jumped back a little out of reflex. She threw her arms out behind her to keep from falling completely on her butt. She then looked up at Koutarou with a blank stare.

“Wh-What is it...?”

“What...? Well, I want to change today’s game, so I was interested in what you thought, but... is something wrong?”

Seeing Theia look so uncharacteristically vulnerable, Koutarou began worrying.

Is she feeling bad or something?

Theia had been a little out of sorts before the ski trip as well. She seemed to cheer up while they were in the mountains, but now there was clearly something on her mind again.

The only thing Koutarou could think of was that it might have something to do with her right to the throne, but Clan, who was really the only potential source of any such problems, no longer had any reason to attack Theia. Clan had renounced her claim to the throne as part of a bargain to return Signaltin to the

royal families. And if that wasn't the issue, Koutarou had to wonder if Theia was sick or something.

"N-No, it's nothing. Nothing at..."

Theia shook her head and looked down to escape Koutarou's gaze.

Or maybe I did something to upset her...?

If she was having trouble or felt sick, there was no reason for her to look away from him like that. Theia always looked people right in the eye, so for her to avoid doing that, he had to wonder if he himself was the problem. Maybe he'd done something he hadn't realized.

"You have the right to select today's game. Do as you please."

"Okay..."

Theia answered Koutarou without looking back up at him, but Koutarou was far more concerned about her than her answer.

Hmm, Ruth-san might know something...

Ruth knew Theia better than anyone else. She might be able to give Koutarou a hint as to what was up, so he turned to her for help.

"..."

Ruth, however, was also looking down, seemingly in deep thought. Her expression was serious and it was quite clear that she was mulling something over.

I wonder what's up with those two. I guess I'll ask them later...

Koutarou was concerned about the way they were acting, but he couldn't confront them about it in front of everyone. It might be something involving Forthorthe, after all.

"All right, then let's get the game started."

So Koutarou decided to carry on like normal. It would be much easier to check up on them once they were done playing games anyway.

In total, they played five rounds of Old Maid. Kiriha, who remained calm and

composed the entire time, ended up collecting the most points. Following her were Sanae, Koutarou, Theia, and Yurika in that order. Alas, despite all her enthusiasm, Yurika came in dead last and lost plenty of points for it. She couldn't even beat Theia, whose head clearly wasn't in the game.

"I really should have used the ski mask and sunglasses..."

"What does it matter? You only lost the twenty points that Koutarou gave you."

"That's true... But if I had hidden my face, I might have been able to keep a few!"

"...I'm pretty sure you'd still be emptyhanded."

"Auuugh..."

Yurika cried bitter tears of defeat as Sanae updated the points on the scoreboard hanging on the wall. In the middle of writing, however, she suddenly stopped.

"Oh, hey! Koutarou, Koutarou!"

"Yeah?"

"I'll give you ten of my points."

Sanae swung the pen in her hand around like a magical wand as she spoke. Floating in the air like that, she looked more like a magical girl than Yurika ever did.

"Why?"

"I won half of the twenty points you gave to Yurika."

"Don't worry. I still have points to spare."

Koutarou's goal was no longer to gain control of the room; it was simply to help each of the girls resolve whatever had led them to invade in the first place. Because of that, he didn't want anyone to lose. That was his primary motivation for giving Yurika points, so there was no need for Sanae to give them back to him.

"It's okay. I won some today, and besides, I'm striving to become the perfect

woman!”

“What’s this gobbledygook all of a sudden?”

Sanae ignored Koutarou as she continued to adjust the scoreboard, subtracting ten points from her total and adding them to Koutarou’s.

Heehee, if Koutarou’s going to be the perfect man, then I just have to be the perfect woman. I’ll become a grand guardian angel that you’ll be happy to have protect you!

Sanae no longer thought of Koutarou as an enemy she had a truce with. She went back and forth from considering him a close friend and an older brother she admired. But either way, she didn’t want him to lose. And since she respected him, she wanted to emulate him and his generosity.

“Thanks, Sanae.”

“Ohoho, there’s no need for thank me! Consider it my treat.”

Seeing Sanae smile so cheerfully as she laughed, Koutarou decided to let her do as she pleased.

Well, now if Sanae looks like she’s about to lose, I can just give her those points back.

Koutarou knew that Sanae was imitating his gesture to Yurika, so he decided to accept her goodwill. And since the two of them were cooperating, her giving points to him didn’t really put her at a disadvantage. Their combined total was still the same.

But more importantly...

Now that the games were settled for the day, Koutarou refocused on what he knew he needed to do.

“...”

And that was figure out what was up with Theia, who was still sulking.

First, I think I should pull Ruth-san aside and ask her about it

Having made up his mind, Koutarou shifted his glance from Theia to Ruth, who was sitting next to Theia.

“...”

Ruth was also still silently looking down. That something appeared to be wrong with both of them made Koutarou quite nervous. Theia’s normally imposing demeanor and Ruth’s calming aura came as a set in his eyes, and without either one, something really seemed off in room 106.

“Ru—”

“Satomi-sama.”

In the exact moment Koutarou was about to say something to Ruth, she called out to him as if she’d known what he was about to say. Before he knew it, she’d raised her head and was staring straight at him.

“Yes?”

Slightly surprised, Koutarou looked back at Ruth. She had a very serious expression on her face. Her eyes were silently wavering like she was trying to tell him something. Her hands were firmly clenched and resting on top of her knees. She looked extremely determined about something.

“There’s something I want to ask you about.”

“I don’t mind.”

When Koutarou nodded, Ruth briefly looked quite relieved.

Could it be that... something really bad has happened?

Based on Ruth’s behavior, Koutarou was starting to worry that Theia was in danger.

“Then...”

Ruth took a deep breath and slowly began to explain.

Just the other day, a long-distance message had reached Blue Knight. It had come all the way from Forthorthe. Specifically, the message was a video letter from Ruth’s parents. They inquired as to how she was doing and how work was going—very normal questions for parents to ask of their daughter who was away on another planet. It had been a long time since she’d seen her parents’

cheerful faces, so receiving a message from them put her in a good mood too. At least, it had until they'd gotten to the real reason they'd contacted her.

"Well, we were originally going to wait until you returned to Forthorthe, but... your arranged marriage has been decided."

"Huh?"

Hearing those words, Ruth felt absolutely blindsided. She doubted her own ears.

"The other party is really enthusiastic. And he wants to meet you, even though you're in the middle of Her Highness's trial."

Ruth's father, Lord Pardomshiha, had secretly been trying to find suitors for her while she was away. This one in particular was in charge of a powerful company that was a frontrunner in the science industry. Though he was a civilian, he was a descendent of the distinguished Melcemhein family of knights. On paper, he was an ideal candidate for marrying Ruth.

But not only did he have prestige, he seemed to be a very capable and worthy man. He had taken over for his father just years ago and now, despite his young age, was singlehandedly running the company. As president, his achievements had come at a brisk pace, and the company rapidly grew under his direction. He was also a well known philanthropist that had donated very generous sums of his personal money to good causes.

If Ruth were to marry him, the Pardomshihas' influence would increase. The Pardomshihas would forge an official bond with the Melcemheins, who served a royal family other than the Mastirs—Theia's family. That would mean a marriage between them would grant them new allies. Of course, since Ruth's suitor was such a rich man, there was financial gain to be had in their marriage as well. And since he was a well known philanthropist, he would also be a great asset in terms of public image.

All of this would enable Ruth to better protect Theia. Really, the arrangement was optimal for Ruth, but the same could be said for her family. That's why her parents hadn't objected when the other party wanted to hurry the marriage along. In fact, they welcomed it, which was why they'd sent Ruth the video letter to let her know.

As it turned out, what was bothering Ruth had nothing to do with Theia as Koutarou had hoped. Nonetheless, her story surprised everyone who heard it.

“An arranged marriage... Is that true?”

Theia was no exception as she stared at her most loyal retainer with wide eyes. She was so taken aback that she temporarily forgot her own worries.

“It is, Your Highness.”

Ruth slowly but firmly nodded at Theia. She didn’t seem to be excited about the prospect in the slightest. Her dark expression was riddled with doubt and consternation.

“So... what are you planning on doing?”

Ruth hesitated at Theia’s question, but she answered her sincerely.

“That’s... I’m honestly still not sure. I understand that this marriage is the best option for the future, but...”

Ruth knew all too well the situation she was in. She knew that going through with this would benefit Theia, and she knew there would be consequences if she declined. Having been born into a well known family of knights, Ruth had always known that she wouldn’t be able to marry freely. Marriage among the upper classes, after all, was a political tool.

That was actually one of the reasons she wanted Koutarou to become Theia’s vassal. Knowing that she would one day be married off for the sake of her family, she wouldn’t be able to stay by Theia’s side the same way forever. But knowing Koutarou would still be there for her would make that easier to bear. As long as he stood by her, Ruth could marry without worrying.

“But... I can’t just make up my mind... so I wanted to hear Satomi-sama and everyone else’s opinion...”

However, despite knowing all of that, Ruth still couldn’t bring herself to readily welcome the idea of the marriage. Rather, she felt quite reluctant about it. But the reason for that was simple—another man had already stolen her heart.

“So... what do you all think?”

After explaining the situation she found herself in to everyone, she turned to them for advice.

“Hmm... Isn’t it still too early?”

Shizuka was the first to answer. Shaking her head, she appeared to be counting something on her fingers.

“You’re still in your first year of high school, so you can’t be more than fifteen or sixteen years old. I think that’s way too soon to be deciding on your future like that.”

That was her way of thinking as a human living on Earth, but Shizuka didn’t think that things could be that much different on Forthorthe. And that much was true; even in Forthorthe, it was rare for girls of Ruth’s age to get married.

“I would accept on the right terms.”

“What?! What on earth, Kiriha-san? That’s way too young to get married!”

Kiriha was in favor of the marriage, but Shizuka couldn’t understand why.

“If Ruth gets married, it should improve the situation Theia-dono is in. It will very likely be beneficial for Ruth herself as well.”

Kiriha was speaking from a purely political point of view. If the perks were considerable enough, they would outweigh whatever downside there was to the union.

“So you’re telling her to settle and get married? That’s just awful! How do you think Ruth-san feels about this?!”

While Kiriha saw things very objectively, Shizuka’s primary concern was for Ruth as a woman. She was still young, and her feelings hadn’t been taken into consideration. Shizuka wouldn’t stand for that.

“Don’t get too heated, Shizuka. That’s why I said on the right terms,” Kiriha said with a wry smile at the excited Shizuka.

“...Then what do you mean?”

Upon seeing Kiriha smile like that, Shizuka managed to calm down a little. But

she still wasn't convinced it was the right answer, and the skepticism was visible in her eyes.

"If Ruth were to marry someone she didn't like, that would indeed be troublesome. If the cons outweigh the pros, there's no point in getting married."

A while ago, Kiriha's father had also suggested that she get married. It was an entirely political affair intended to suppress the radical faction, but Kiriha had refused. There was already a man she loved, so she'd felt very similarly to the way Ruth did now. And so no matter how great the perceived benefits would be, Kiriha wouldn't recommend a marriage to Ruth that would result in her being miserable. In the end, looking at the bigger picture, Kiriha and Shizuka were of the same opinion on that matter.

"So what about the guy? Is he good looking or not?"

Yurika, however, approached the issue a very different way. Ruth's suitor was a wealthy, powerful man, and although he wasn't a proper noble, he had blue blood in his veins. As long as he was good looking, he sounded like the perfect fiancé straight out of a shoujo manga. Her eyes sparkled at just the thought, but her impoverished way of life was clearly influencing her opinion.

"This isn't about what he looks like, Yurika. Jeez..."

"Whaaat, really?"

"Well, in your shoujo mangas, the good looking guys are always nice. But real life doesn't work like that, you know?"

Sanae looked both dumfounded and amazed. She couldn't keep up with Yurika's outlook on men. To Sanae, a man's looks weren't what was important, but neither was his money or status. To her, what mattered most was his heart. Or really, his soul.

To a ghost like Sanae, physical appearance wasn't all that important. She was more sensitive to spiritual energy than actual visuals, so the aura a man emitted meant more to her than anything else. Sanae hated negative auras, and being exposed to people's greed through their spiritual energy made her feel sick. Nothing was better than someone with a pure aura. Moreover, to a ghost,

money and status meant nothing. So for a very good reason, Sanae valued people for their spirits.

“So if I had to choose between a good looking but sly guy or Koutarou, I’d rather go with Koutarou. He feels good to sleep in, after all.”

“Wait a minute, Sanae! Are you saying I’m ugly?!”

“What about you, Yurika?”

“Hey!”

“Um, which one would give me food?”

“A sly person wouldn’t give you food for no reason. But Koutarou always gives you your fill, right?”

“Then I’d pick Satomi-san too! I have no use for a handsome man who won’t feed me!”

“Seriously, what’s that supposed to mean?!”

At first, Sanae and Yurika’s taste in men seemed different, but they seemed to achieve some common ground in what they considered desirable. If a nice person was the same as someone who would feed them, they wanted the same thing. To Yurika, good looks were important, but not as important as food. While she ideally had high standards, her stomach forced her to be realistic.

“I’d rather get a stomachful than an eyeful, so I’d much rather pick Satomi-san.”

“Hey, look at that, Koutarou! You’re super popular!”

“Y-You guys...”

Koutarou couldn’t get past the fact that the girls had said he wasn’t good looking in a roundabout way. He himself was aware of that, but their words still stabbed at his heart.

“What does it matter, Koutarou? You’re winning when it comes to beauty of spirit.”

“...That’s real cute coming from an actual spirit.”

That was the only rebuttal he could think of in the heat of the moment.

“Eeheehee! I am currently an adorable ghost, but who knows? I might have been ugly when I was alive.”

“That doesn’t matter.”

“Ahaha, so you *do* get it, Koutarou! Anyway...” Sanae smiled happily and looked towards Ruth. “What’s this fiancé of yours actually like?”

And so the derailed conversation finally returned to Ruth.

“When it comes down to it, that’s what really matters.”

“That’s what I want to hear too. There’s nothing sadder than being forced to marry someone you don’t love, after all.”

Shizuka and Kiriha agreed with Sanae, but it seemed to pique the interest of all the girls in the room. The real question now was whether or not this man was Ruth’s type.

“I hear he’s a wonderful person, but since I have never met him, I can’t tell you anything else,” Ruth said as she shook her head.

Ruth knew that he was the CEO of a famous corporation and she knew that he was a well known philanthropist, but that was really it. She had no personal experience with him.

“Apparently he’ll be paying a visit here, so until then, I can’t say for...”

“Hmm... So unless you have a reason not to marry him, you at least have to meet him, right?”

A reason not to marry. Hearing those words, Ruth’s heart skipped a beat and she instinctively looked to Koutarou. He was resting his chin in his hand as he pensively looked at Ruth.

“So, um... what do you think, Satomi-sama?”

Ruth asked for Koutarou’s opinion like she was asking for help. The truth was that she was most interested in his thoughts on the matter. After all, he was the real reason she didn’t want to get married.

To Ruth, Theia was both her esteemed liege and a dear childhood friend she thought of as her own sister. Ruth could handle any kind of trouble that befell

her personally, even in her love life, but anything that affected Theia—her princess and her best friend—would be a complete disaster.

Theia meant the world to Ruth, and Koutarou was the first person she'd ever felt like she could entrust Theia to. Inherently, that also meant that he met all of her requirements for a love interest. Ruth only felt like she could leave Theia to him because he was her ideal man.

Ruth had never revealed that to Koutarou because she didn't want to become an obstacle in Koutarou and Theia's relationship, but in her current situation, she was desperate to hear what he had to say. It was a sign of her real feelings starting to show through.

"I..."

Koutarou was hesitant. All kinds of things ran through his head. There was a lot to take into consideration here.

Satomi-sama...

Ruth watched over Koutarou contemplatively, as if praying. All she needed was a sign. One word would be enough. She didn't care what the reason was. She just wanted Koutarou to tell her not to go through with it. That would give her a reason to say no.

If Satomi-sama says I shouldn't, then that's all I need...

Ruth knew that she would never really be able to tell Koutarou how she felt, and that was because she needed him to focus on protecting Theia. If all went as Ruth hoped, Koutarou would become Theia's partner. That meant she could never be with him, but she was fine with that. She was satisfied just to be near him and watch over Theia with him. She was fine with that kind of love.

But even so, Ruth now prayed that Koutarou at least thought something of her. That would be enough. Then she would be able to carry on. It was perhaps the most selfish thing she'd ever prayed for, but it was still a modest wish.

"...I can't really say."

And it seemed her hopes didn't reach him. In the end, Koutarou didn't tell Ruth not to go through with the marriage.

The moment she heard Koutarou's answer, tears came streaming out from Ruth's eyes.

"Satomi-sama..."

But it was more than just tears. A horrible, weighty sadness from the bottom of her heart was overflowing. She felt like it would crush her if she remained still.

"I-I'm sorry... I need a moment to myself."

And with those words, Ruth ran from the room. She didn't want anyone to see her falling tears, and that feeling drove her forward. It was both a matter of pride and because she didn't want to become a burden to Koutarou.

"Ruth!"

Theia stood up just as Ruth burst out the front door.

"Ruth, wait! Where are you going?!"

Theia treasured Ruth much the same way Ruth treasured her. They had a very close relationship, and she had never seen Ruth act like this before. She knew that whatever was going through her head must have been serious, and she didn't hesitate to run right after her in the darkness. She would do whatever she could to find her childhood friend that she thought of as an older sister.

After both Ruth and Theia had run out, silence befell room 106. The commotion was quite a shock to them all, but as time passed, that shock slowly faded into understanding.

"Satomi-kun! Why'd you have to go and say that?!"

Shizuka was the one to break the silence. Her face was contorted with anger for the first time in a long while. It was the same way she'd looked when the invading girls had first fought in room 106, but this time her rage was specifically directed at Koutarou.

"Landlord-san..."

"Don't give me that! You knew Ruth-san wanted you to stop her, didn't you,

Satomi-kun?!”

“Yes.”

Despite Shizuka’s fury, Koutarou remained calm. He nodded with the same serious expression from before.

I’m sorry, Ruth-san...

He looked towards the front door that Ruth had run through and apologized to her in his head. Regardless of his reasons, he’d made her cry.

I know that there’s also the matter with Theia, but...

Just as Shizuka had said, Koutarou actually knew what Ruth had wanted when she asked for his opinion. She wouldn’t have asked him otherwise. He understood that she was looking for a reason to say no.

Koutarou thought that rather than asking him as a close friend, Ruth’s turning to him was because she’d asked him to serve Theia one day. If she were to get married, for example, the meaning and necessity of Koutarou serving Theia would greatly change. And so right now, Koutarou thought that not speaking his mind led Ruth to think that he was turning down her request. That he was betraying the trust she’d put in him to take care of Theia.

Koutarou was only half right, however. He hadn’t fully understood what Ruth was asking of him, or why she was so heartbroken when he couldn’t answer her.

“Then what gives?! If you knew that, then why did you say something that sounded like you were pushing her away?!”

Shizuka was still furious. She’d really started to enjoy her day to day life ever since she started visiting room 106 regularly, and she believed that Ruth felt the same way. That’s why she couldn’t forgive Koutarou’s cold words. That’s why she couldn’t help being as angry as she was the day the invading girls had damaged her beloved Corona House that her late parents had left to her. Shizuka now loved the invading girls as much as she did the building.

“...”

But Koutarou couldn’t say anything back to Shizuka. Even though it wasn’t

entirely, Koutarou still vaguely understood Ruth's feelings, and yet he'd chosen not to say anything. As a result, he'd badly hurt Ruth, but he still didn't regret his answer.

That being the case, he decided to accept Shizuka's upbraiding. Although there might not have actually been anything else he could have said to her instead, the fact of the matter was that he'd made Ruth cry.

"Don't be so harsh on Koutarou, Shizuka."

Kiriha was the one who took it upon herself to stand up for Koutarou, who offered nothing in his own defense. Despite her calm gaze, however, she wore a sad expression. Since Kiriha was sensitive to the emotions of others, she understood how Ruth, Shizuka, and Koutarou all felt.

"But think about poor Ruth-san! Even if you're not dating, there are times when you want close friends to say what you can't, Satomi-kun!"

Ruth had asked Koutarou for advice because she was hesitant and anxious. But the response she had gotten amounted to a close friend of hers saying he didn't care. Ruth had formed a bond with each of the residents of room 106, and if Koutarou had just given her the slightest sign she should stay, she never would have run out of the apartment like that. Knowing that, Shizuka just couldn't forgive Koutarou for letting it happen.

"..."

But Koutarou still didn't answer. He knew what Shizuka was saying was right.

"Shizuka, Koutarou is well aware of that. He was then too, but he still couldn't say anything despite that."

Kiriha again stepped in to help out since Koutarou wasn't saying anything himself.

You really are an awkward man, Satomi Koutarou... Why would you choose the walk down the thorny path on your own? Surely you can do better than that...

Considering what Koutarou had done when he'd learned of Kiriha's circumstances, she thought it was obvious how he felt when Ruth asked for

advice. That's why she couldn't just stand by and let him get criticized for his actions. And as his best friend, she felt like it was her responsibility to try and make the path he'd chosen just a little easier to walk.

"Why?!"

"That's—"

"That's enough, Kiriha-san. I'll take it from here."

However, before Kiriha could explain, Koutarou cut her off. He was planning on keeping the reason he couldn't fulfill her wish a secret, but he would rather say it himself than have Kiriha say it for him.

"Koutarou... I'm sorry. I was out of line."

Kiriha apologized to Koutarou. She realized that she had gotten a bit worked up herself and reflected on that. Kiriha had the best handle on how everyone felt, but that was exactly why it was so hard for her to let such misunderstandings continue.

"No, it's not that. Thank you, Kiriha-san."

Kiriha was only trying to help, and Koutarou certainly didn't blame her for that.

"So what's the meaning of all this?"

"You could have at least given her your opinion."

Yurika and Sanae spoke up this time before Shizuka could. They couldn't understand what Koutarou had done either.

"Lately, I've been forgetting myself, but..."

Koutarou slowly began explaining. His expression was stiff and unusually serious. It was a face the girls hadn't seen him make before.

"Ruth-san and Theia aren't from this planet. And unlike us, they aren't normal people. They're of extremely high stations. It's not like I'm in any position to be telling either of them how to live."

What concerned Koutarou was that the two girls were not only aliens, but also of extremely high social status.

“But that doesn’t matter to us at all anymore!”

His reasoning wasn’t enough to convince Shizuka. She knew what Ruth was hoping for because she understood her connection to this apartment and the people in it.

“That might be true...”

“Then what gives?!”

“Landlord-san, Ruth-san is our friend and we would be sad to see her go, so of course we would be against her marriage.”

Koutarou knew that. Even he wanted to object to it. The bond he shared with Ruth was something he was prepared to defend.

“But... can you imagine what kind of trouble that might cause for them down the line?”

However, the reason he couldn’t was because he was thinking of Ruth and Theia’s futures. He wasn’t acting for the sake of their happiness now, but for the sake of their future happiness. That was why he’d held in his feelings when Ruth had asked for them.

“That’s...”

Koutarou’s explanation went a long way for soothing Shizuka’s anger. She herself was only thinking of the present. She hadn’t even considered the future.

“We don’t know anything about Forthorthe, or what it might mean to refuse the proposal. It’s possible that this future could protect Theia far better than we ever could.”

Koutarou really had no idea what the current situation in Forthorthe was like. He knew that Theia was in a dangerous position, but he didn’t fully understand the extent of that danger. He had no idea how Ruth getting married might affect that, or how her refusal might either. He had nothing to go off of in that regard. He hadn’t run through the current Forthorthe with Ruth like he’d run through it in the past with Alaia.

“So if we tell her not to get married without considering what that really might mean, she could end up in a terrible position. And what would we even

be able to do for her if that happened? Could we take responsibility after forcing Ruth's hand?"

What Koutarou feared was that their emotional responses to the matter would lead Ruth and Theia down an even more difficult path. Moreover, if they encouraged her to turn down the proposal, what could they possibly offer her in return? If they screwed this up, Ruth and Theia would suffer for it back home, especially in Theia's fight for the throne. Koutarou was worried that if he spoke his mind, it might unfairly sway Ruth's decision.

This is for the best. Isn't that right, Princess Alaia...?

Koutarou's own decision was influenced by his experiences in Forthorthe of the past. He'd seen firsthand what happened when national powers clashed. And he'd seen what effect it had on Alaia, who was caught in the middle of it all.

Alaia prioritized the happiness of her citizens over her own. Koutarou carried her wish on his shoulders even now. The weight of Signaltin and the wooden insignia he'd brought home was far from light. He wanted Ruth and Theia to be happy, but he was also concerned for the consequences anything rash might have on Forthorthe. If anything, Koutarou had simply made the decision he thought Alaia would have.

"Satomi-kun..."

Shizuka's anger now completely vanished as she came to the realization that Koutarou was being even more considerate of Ruth and Theia than she'd been. Her enraged expression was replaced by a guilty one. She felt badly for only thinking about the here and now.

"I think of Ruth as more than just a friend. I think of her as someone important to me. That's why I'll support her no matter what she decides. But this is a decision that she has to make for herself. It's her life, after all, and I don't want her to have any regrets..."

In the end, Ruth had to be the one to decide her own fate. Koutarou had no intention of forcing her hand in that. This wasn't like deciding what to have for dinner. However, regardless of what Ruth chose, Koutarou was planning on protecting her and her master, Theia. He wanted to protect their futures. He'd

returned to room 106 from Forthorthe in order to do just that. Signaltin and the insignia he carried were proof of that.

It was now past 10 PM, and there was hardly any traffic left on the road. The temperature was steadily dropping, and the chill in the night air was piercing. The squeaking sound of metal rubbing up against metal could be heard from a small park not far from Corona House.

“Why...”

The sound was coming from the chains of the swing that Ruth was sitting on as she absentmindedly swung back and forth. It was a horribly lonely sound that could easily be mistaken for a child’s wailing sobs at a distance. It muffled the sounds of Ruth’s own crying as it echoed throughout the empty park.

“...am I...”

Ruth still felt like she was drowning in the sadness that overflowed from within her. It was so intense that she felt like she’d just collapse on the spot if it weren’t for the swing.

Satomi-sama...

Ruth wanted Koutarou to object to her arranged marriage, whatever his reason might be. She didn’t mind if he didn’t think of her as a woman. She would have been okay if he’d only objected as a friend, or even a companion or roommate. She just wanted him to say that he didn’t want her to leave.

Why...

But now all that was on her mind was a strong yearning for Koutarou, and the equally strong sadness that accompanied it. Ruth had only realized that she truly wanted Koutarou to treat her as a woman after hearing his answer. She felt so strongly for Koutarou that she couldn’t help wishing for it.

“How could I have been... so foolish?”

She wouldn’t mind if Koutarou became Theia’s partner, but she at least wanted him to acknowledge her. She wanted him to compliment her cooking or her outfit. Anything.

“...I can’t really say.”

But Koutarou’s answer was quite different from what Ruth had hoped for. It was just too much for her to take. It was too sad. It wasn’t like she wanted him to confess his love for her, but she at least wanted him to show a sign that he cared. That was all she really needed. But he hadn’t even given her that much to go on. That was why she was so devastated to hear his answer.

As she contemplated it now, the squeaking sound of the swing grew louder. It was the sound of a second swing overlapping with Ruth’s. She was so absorbed in her thoughts that she didn’t notice it at first, but when she looked up to wipe away some of her tears, she caught a glance of something golden in the corner of her eye. Someone had taken a seat on the swing next to her.

“Your Highness...”

It was indeed Theia. Seeing that Ruth had finally noticed her, Theia flashed a small smile.

“...So both master and servant have made the same mistake, huh?”

Theia had temporarily lost sight of Ruth after leaving the apartment, but she had managed to find her by tracking the signal her bracelet emitted. And after catching up with her at the park, she decided to join her on the swings.

With a second swing in motion, the squeaking had doubled. Strangely enough, however, it seemed less lonely that way. It eased the pain in Ruth’s heart, even if only a little. She was happy that Theia had come after her.

“Hear me out, Ruth.”

Theia smiled at Ruth again as she swung on her swing. It wasn’t a happy smile, but rather an embarrassed one.

“Lately... I’ve had my head in the clouds. Somehow I’d completely forgotten that I was an alien, and I was fantasizing... about a future with Koutarou.”

Theia would claim room 106 and make Koutarou swear loyalty to her. She would then take Koutarou back to Forthorthe with her, and they would continue about their lives there no differently than they had on Earth. And one day, she would become empress with Koutarou and Ruth by her side. At that

point, she and Koutarou might even be married. That was what Theia had dreamed of.

“I’ve... been doing the same thing...”

Ruth had been dreaming of her future too. As she imagined it, she would follow Theia and Koutarou, one step behind them. Every now and then, they would turn around and give her a smile. And when Theia and Koutarou got married, Ruth would give them her blessing and they would continue their lives together. In the end, Theia and Ruth had the same dream.

“However... if I’m to marry Koutarou, I would have to be prepared to discontinue the Mastir family lineage.”

Theia and Koutarou were from completely different parts of the universe. They could both be called human, but they were completely different species from completely different planets. The chances of them being able to have a child together were close to none. It was rare enough to find even closely related species on Earth that could produce young together. And considering that Theia and Koutarou were aliens to each other, such a prospect was nigh impossible, regardless of how similar they might look. So if they were to get married, it would spell the end of the Mastir family bloodline.

“That’s... Yes...”

It wasn’t until Theia mentioned it that Ruth even considered that problem. Like Theia, she had simply begun thinking of Koutarou as any other normal man from Forthorthe.

“And what’s more, he would have to forsake his homeland to come with us. He would even have to accept that he could never have a family of his own.”

If Theia were to bring Koutarou home as a knight, it would mean giving up his home and everything he knew. And without the ability to procreate, Koutarou would never even have a family in Forthorthe. He would be there all alone.

“No matter how strongly I feel for him, in the end, I am an alien here...”

“So is... that why you’ve been feeling so down the past few days?”

If Theia were to have Koutarou become her knight and return home to

Forthorthe with her, she would have to accept what that would mean for him. In other words, she would have to bring Koutarou with her knowing that she'd be cutting him off from everything. In her heart, Theia knew that would be a mistake, and that was what had been troubling her recently.

"That's right. But Ruth... isn't it the same for you?"

"Yes... I forgot that I was an alien and wanted Satomi-sama to stop me like he would anyone else..."

Ruth nodded. She was in the same predicament Theia was. She hadn't really considered the consequences of the things she wanted most.

I see... So that's why Satomi-sama...

It was only thinking that far ahead that Ruth was able to understand why Koutarou had chosen not to say anything. It wasn't out of indifference. It was out of concern. He'd thought the problem through even more than she had.

"However, Koutarou still won't stop you."

Theia smiled as she thought about Koutarou. It was a gentle, bittersweet smile—the kind you would only show in front of a close sibling. Right now, Theia perfectly understood Koutarou's feelings.

"He might say a lot of things, and he's without a doubt an alien, but... he's an invaluable knight of Forthorthe. He would never do anything irresponsible... He wants us to make the best choice..."

"Yes..."

Ruth was an alien to Koutarou. Koutarou couldn't say anything one way or another about her arranged marriage since he didn't understand Forthorthian culture. Anything he did say would just be dominated by his emotions. That was the response Ruth wanted to hear, but that didn't sit well Koutarou, which was why he'd said something that had been mistaken for indifference.

But the truth was really the opposite. Koutarou was quite concerned about Ruth and her affairs. That was why, after thinking things through, he'd chosen to stay silent on the matter. It was for her own good.

Upon realizing that, a heavy burden was lifted off of Ruth's shoulders.

However, it was still only about half of what was weighing her down. She was still shackled by the reality that Koutarou was—and always would be—out of her reach.

“If he was just... a little more selfish and didn’t think of the consequences... this might be easier on us both...”

“...But if that were case, Your Highness, neither of us would need Satomi-sama this much.”

Theia and Ruth wished for Koutarou to become Theia’s vassal because they believed he was an ideal knight, surpassing even the Blue Knight. And because he was an ideal knight, he wouldn’t ever say anything that might jeopardize either Theia or Ruth’s position. In other words, the part of Koutarou that they valued most was precisely why he couldn’t give them exactly what they wanted.

“I guess that’s to be expected from the man we love...”

“Yes, I’m afraid so...”

It was a serious dilemma for the two girls, and there was no solution in sight. At a loss, they continued swinging together. Even as the clock ticked passed midnight and the rest of the neighborhood fell dead quiet, the sound of squeaking chains could still be heard coming from the park.

The Day Without Ruth

Wednesday, February 10th

Today, the aroma of breakfast cooking was already filling room 106 by the time Koutarou woke up. It was the familiar smell of miso soup and broiled fish, just like any other morning.

“Koutarou woke up, ho!”

“He’s been getting better at waking up lately, ho!”

“...Good morning, Karama, Korama.”

However, something was slightly different than usual. These past few months, it had been Theia or Ruth’s job to wake Koutarou in the morning. Normally Ruth would do it, but every now and then Theia would accidentally step on him. Today, however, it was Karama and Korama that roused him.

I wonder if something happened...

Having just woken up, Koutarou’s brain was still only working at half power and he sleepily looked around the room. It was so natural for him to be woken up by Theia or Ruth that he instinctively scanned the room for them.

Only Kiriha-san is here...?

All Koutarou saw were the two haniwas in front of him, Kiriha making breakfast in the kitchen, and Sanae’s sleeping face sticking out of his chest. There was no sign of Theia, who would usually elegantly be drinking tea right about now, or of Ruth, who would be helping Kiriha in the kitchen. It wasn’t just that they hadn’t woken him up. It appeared they weren’t there at all.

“...Where are Theia and Ruth-san?” Koutarou asked the two haniwas as he rubbed his tired eyes.

The haniwas jumped up and down on his covers and raised their hands above their heads.

“Theia-chan and Ruth-chan are on Blue Knight, ho!”

“They said that Ruth-chan’s fiancé is coming, ho!”

“Oh yeah, now that you mention it, they did say something about that...”

It had been two days since Ruth had gotten the video letter from her parents. Normally it took several days to travel between Forthorthe and Earth by spaceship. It was such a vast distance that it couldn’t be covered in just two days, even with the latest technology. However, it seemed Ruth’s eager fiancé had departed from Forthorthe even before her parents had contacted her.

It sure is a lonely feeling not to be able to see the usual faces in the morning...

Kiriha was preparing breakfast on her own. The sound of a kitchen knife striking a chopping board filled the apartment, but all else was quiet. There wasn’t the sound of Ruth’s slippers against the floor as she moved around to help Kiriha, or Theia’s tea cup occasionally being set on its matching saucer. Without them, the apartment even sounded different than usual this morning. Koutarou remarked how melancholic it felt with two people missing.

“So you’re awake, Koutarou.”

Noticing that Koutarou had woken up, Kiriha poked her face in from the hallway.

“Ruth’s not here this morning, so breakfast is going to take a little longer.”

With those words, Kiriha smiled wryly and returned to the kitchen. Koutarou wasn’t just seeing things when he thought that Kiriha looked a little lonely too. She seemed particularly invested in what was going on with Ruth.

If Ruth-san gets married, this is probably how every day will be...

Koutarou recalled that he’d felt something similar when the trouble with Kiriha had surfaced. Today, with Kiriha present and Ruth gone, was sort of the inverse of that situation.

If Ruth were to vanish from room 106, there would be no one to prepare tea for everyone. And without that as an excuse, Theia would likely appear much less frequently too. It would be a sad, lonely thing indeed.

That’s right... It’s thanks to everyone that I can enjoy each day to its fullest...

For a moment, Koutarou imagined what it would be like to be left all alone in room 106. No ghost haunting the apartment, no freeloader living in the wardrobe, no underground passage beneath one of the tatami mats, and no glowing wall leading to a spaceship. It would be a completely normal apartment, just like when he had first moved in. But now the thought of that was horribly lonely. The day after he moved in, the invading girls had appeared one after another. At first, he spent all his time desperately trying to chase them out, but he had started to enjoy their company before he even realized it.

In that case... There was at least one thing I should have said to Ruth...

When Ruth had asked for Koutarou's opinion, he hadn't answered her. He did so because he believed that it was the right thing to do, but reflecting on the apartment without two of its regular figures, he started to think that he'd been too quiet.

"Mmm... Koutarou, is it morning already?"

It seemed Sanae had finally woken up too. She sat up out of Koutarou's chest and rubbed her eyes.

"Yeah, but breakfast won't be for a while longer, so you can sleep a little more."

"'Kay."

Sanae leaned back into Koutarou and closed her eyes again.

"Koutarou, it's a little colder than normal, so pump yourself up and make it warm."

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

"Mmmkay... Thanks..."

After closing her eyes, Sanae quickly fell back to sleep. Koutarou couldn't help but smile a little as he watched over her using his body as a sleeping bag.

"I see... So my insides are colder than normal, huh?"

It seemed Koutarou was feeling even lonelier than he thought with Ruth and Theia gone.



Meanwhile, Ruth and Theia were standing on Blue Knight's landing deck. They were preparing to receive Ruth's fiancé. Since Blue Knight was by far the larger ship, Ruth's fiancé was going to dock with them.

"So this is the young scion of DKI..."

Theia narrowed her eyes like she was appraising Ruth's fiancé as he emerged from his ship once it landed on the internal deck. He was a young man who appeared to be in his early twenties. He was the young CEO of the famous mega-corporation Dragon Knight Industries.

Dragon Knight Industries, or DKI for short, was a company founded many years ago by a descendent of the Melcemheins. Since the founder had the scale of an elder dragon as an heirloom, it was said that he was given the title of Dragon Knight. At first DKI had started as a trading company, but as generations passed, it began expanding into other businesses, including commercial enterprises. The company eventually got into manufacturing and started producing its own goods. That significantly increased profit margins, and growth exploded as a result. Nowadays, DKI was one of the biggest and most well known companies in Forthorthe, and their empire was expanding on a daily basis.

"Yes, Your Highness. That is Elexis Borannam-sama."

"He looks frail... but that doesn't seem to be all there is to him."

The man who had taken the wheel of DKI was Elexis Borannam, Ruth's fiancé. The year after finishing his studies, he replaced his father as CEO of the company. At the time, DKI's growth had begun to die down, but after Elexis was appointed, it shot right back up. Under his management, and in just a few years' time, DKI expanded throughout the Forthorthian solar system. As such, Elexis earned quite a reputation for himself as a capable CEO.

But Elexis wasn't just known as a businessman. He was also a prolific philanthropist. He personally donated considerable sums of his own money to various charities every year. Elexis lived by the philosophy that business was best when society was at its best, so he also made sure that DKI made contributions to public order and welfare too. It was met with a certain amount of resistance from shareholders, but when faced with Elexis's ever-growing

success and popularity, they had no choice but to reluctantly let him do as he pleased.

All things considered, Elexis had the qualities expected of a fiancé for the Pardomshiha family's beloved daughter in spades. And even though he wasn't a noble in title, he was still a descendant of the Melcemhein family. He was a promising fiancé that many powerful nobles would have loved to welcome into their family.

"Pleased to make your acquaintance. My name is Elexis Borannam. It is a pleasure meeting you, Your Highness."

Upon arriving, Elexis first greeted Theia. While he might have been Ruth's fiancé, he thought it was only proper to pay his respects to the princess.

Up close, Elexis was an elegant man. He was of a tall, graceful stature, and everything from the clothes, shoes, and accessories he was wearing to his golden hair was refined and beautiful. He looked the part of a gentleman. Strengthening that impression even further was his face. His slim face and narrow eyes made him look both smart and sharp. He certainly appeared to be a man of high standing.

"You have done well to come so far. I won't mind, so come closer. We won't even be able to talk properly from this distance."

Theia glanced over Elexis and invited him closer. He and Ruth would never get married if he insisted on standing several meters away.

This man is the very opposite of Koutarou...

That was Theia's first impression. The only thing Elexis and Koutarou really had in common was their height.

"Your graciousness is wasted on me, Your Highness."

After bowing to Theia, Elexis turned around to address the five bodyguards in black standing behind him.

"You can stay there. Guarding me won't be necessary here."

"Yes, sir."

"If you'd like, you can return to the ship."

“If it’s all right with you, sir, we’d like to stay here. This is our duty after all.”

“Hahaha, you know what they say about all work and no play.”

After having a laugh with his bodyguards, Elexis approached Ruth and Theia with confident, unhurried steps. As he reached the two girls, Ruth opened her mouth.

“Elexis-sama, I am Ruthkania Nye Pardomshiha.”

“It is a pleasure meeting you, Ruthkania-sama.”

“Please, call me Ruth.”

“In that case, please call me El, Ruth-sama.”

Elexis smiled as he knelt down in front of Ruth. Since his family had given up their nobility, Ruth was by far his social superior.

“Please stand up, El-sama. You must be tired from your long journey.”

“Thank you very much, Ruth-sama.”

Elexis looked up at Ruth and smiled again before slowly rising. Ruth didn’t realize exactly how tall he was until he stood up in front of her. It was almost intimidating. After unconsciously taking half a step back, she looked up at his face.

So this man... is my fiancé...

In that moment, Ruth realized that she felt absolutely nothing when she looked at him. Though that was only to be expected since they had just met, there was also no denying that it was because Ruth’s mind was largely occupied with thoughts of someone else.

“I have seen pictures of you before, but you look even more dignified and lovely in person. It was definitely worth hurrying things along so I could meet you sooner.”

Elexis, on the other hand, seemed quite satisfied with Ruth. He had taken an interest in her after seeing her picture and had rushed all this way just to meet her. As such, there was a considerable difference in the way they felt about each other.

O-Of course... He's gone through the trouble of coming all this way to meet me, so I mustn't do anything rude...

This was all so sudden for Ruth, including Elexis's visit, but he was the man her parents had chosen for her. She couldn't be impolite. Regardless of whether she was going to proceed with the arranged marriage or turn him down, she had to handle this the right way. And so Ruth braced herself and looked Elexis in the eyes.

"Thank you very much, El-sama. You are welcome aboard."

"I thought that it might be a little bit fast, but my experience at work has taught me that if I leave a good deal be, it will often get away from me. That was why I took time off from work to come here and see you in person."

Ruth could tell from the way Elexis was speaking and acting that he thought of the marriage rather favorably. It was true that acting quickly on a good deal was very fitting of a veteran businessman.

He seems to have taken a liking to me, and he seems like a nice person, but...

He seemed to have a pushy side to him too, but he clearly made it work for him. He also seemed to have a friendly relationship with his bodyguards. Ruth got the impression that he was a good person just like his reputation indicated, but there was something that bothered Ruth.

"Ruth, let's not stand here and talk. Why don't you show Elexis-dono to his room?"

Blue Knight was large enough that it had guest quarters, which were certainly more hospitable than the landing deck and would provide some peace and quiet for them to talk properly.

"Your Highness... Of course."

Upon realizing Theia's intentions, Ruth quickly agreed and indicated the exit of the landing deck to Elexis.

"El-sama, come this way please. I will guide you to your room."

"No, allow me to guide you today."

"Your Highness?!"

“It’s all right. Don’t worry.”

As Ruth began to show the group the way, Theia overtook her and took the lead. Ruth felt uncomfortable having a princess escort her like this.

“I’m sure you have plenty to think about.”

“Your Highness...”

However, Ruth relented when Theia whispered those words to her. She realized that Theia was doing her this favor not as a princess, but as her childhood friend.

“Princess Theiamillis, I am most grateful for your consideration.”

“Think nothing of it. Ruth’s guest is my guest. And besides, I will be hosting both of you today.”

Theia proceeded to lead the way with the other two behind her. Ruth was absorbed in thought as she watched Theia in front of her, and Elexis beside her.

I can tell that El-sama is a good person... but... something still just seems wrong...

Theia was walking with Ruth and Elexis following behind her. If Ruth and Elexis got married, this would probably become normal. But something about it didn’t click with Ruth, and that was what was bothering her.

With Satomi-sama... it would be more...

She started imagining what it would be like to walk with Theia and Koutarou like this instead. Theia and Koutarou would lead the way with Ruth following after them. They would argue and sometimes even brawl, but they would always look like they were having fun. Ruth would simply watch over the two of them from behind. That alone would be enough to make her happy. And no matter how much the two of them would fuss, they wouldn’t forget about Ruth who was always with them. Every now and then, they would even turn to her to settle a dispute.

That was essentially Ruth’s everyday life with them, but it was also how she hoped their future would be. Right now, there was nothing more comforting she could imagine.

Is it because of the time we've spent together? Or perhaps it's simply Satomi-sama's very nature...

Ruth couldn't imagine any sort of future with Elexis that clearly. Try as she might, it just didn't feel the same way. Wrapped up in her thoughts, Ruth's heel got caught in a seam on the floor as they walked along.

"Kyah!"

Too distracted to react quickly, Ruth completely lost her balance and started to tumble towards the floor.

"I got you."

But Ruth never hit the ground. Elexis caught her before she did.

Though Ruth had been working on her physique with her daily training, she still wasn't an especially coordinated girl. Tripping and falling wasn't that unusual for her, but whenever she did, there was always someone there to catch her. So Ruth instinctively smiled and started to thank him.

"Thank you very much, Sa—"

She had to stop herself mid-sentence. This wasn't the usual man that came to her rescue.

"Are you okay, Ruth-sama?"

"Ah..."

The feeling of a man's arms wrapped around her body, his face in front of hers... It was all so very different from normal. And as that set in on Ruth, she was overcome by an uncomfortable, guilty feeling.

"N-No!"

Ruth practically pushed Elexis away as she stood up. She knew that he meant well, but part of her deeply scorned the gesture.

Something didn't feel right about the arms around her. They were normally more coarse and powerful. Something didn't feel right about the face before her. It was normally more innocent. And something didn't feel right about the very presence next to her. It normally made her feel safe. But worst of all was

the guilty feeling rising in her chest. Like she was betraying someone precious to her.

For each and all of those reasons, she couldn't help pushing Elexis away.

"Oh my, how rude of me. It seems I was a little too forward."

However, Elexis showed no sign of being bothered by that, and smiled as he respectfully distanced himself from Ruth.

"N-No, thank you very much for saving me."

Ruth began to feel sorry for Elexis.

El-sama saved me out of the kindness of his heart, and I...

She'd pushed him away after he saved her. Thinking on it now, she realized that she'd done it reflexively, without even really considering the man in front of her. She felt it was a rather rude thing to do to someone who had crossed the universe just to meet her.

This is no good... This is the man I might marry...

Ruth decided to change gears. Now wasn't the time to be thinking of someone else. She should be focusing on Elexis. She needed to engage with him and determine whether or not she should marry him.

What was important to Ruth was what her marriage with Elexis would do for her and the people close to her. If Ruth and Elexis were to marry, Ruth would gain Elexis's financial powers and his political influence, and in turn Elexis would gain the Pardomshiha name and social standing. It was a mutually beneficial arrangement. But that wasn't everything there was to it. There were three things in particular that bothered Ruth.

The first was whether or not Elexis could be trusted. Upon speaking directly with him, Ruth felt like he was trustworthy. On top of that, the Pardomshiha family's intelligence division had done a very thorough background check on Elexis and his personal life. No issues had arisen from it. So, at least in short term, there seemed to be no problem whatsoever with trusting Elexis. But what about the future? He wasn't a knight, but a merchant. Wasn't the reason for

DKI's growth that he always took the side of profit? Right now he was certainly on Theia's side, but would it stay that way in the future? Could he still be trusted if Theia's political influence was to wane for some reason? Really, the truth of it was that Ruth was a little anxious because Elexis wasn't a knight. There was no way to be sure of his morals, which naturally led to her next quandary.

The second thing Ruth was unsure of was what Elexis was really like. Underneath everything, what was his personality like? What was it like to be around him on a daily basis? If Ruth were to marry him, he would, as a matter of course, also end up being by Theia's side often. If that inflicted any sort of burden on Theia, Ruth would be devastated. Was Elexis even a man that Theia would want close to her? Ruth had to take his character, opinions, and even hobbies into account. But like her first problem, this was all truly only a small matter of concern.

That wasn't the case, however, with her last problem. It was by far the most important one, and it involved Ruth's feelings about the arranged marriage. She was well aware of how valuable an opportunity the union would be. If Ruth's political influence grew, Theia's position would be indirectly strengthened. Moreover, Elexis gave off a good vibe. Although he had a pushy side to him, he seemed positive and kind. If they were to get married, he would surely make her happy. She had two minor doubts about the future, but she didn't doubt that he was a good man. All things considered, Ruth would probably never have a fiancé more blessed than this.

But even then, something deep inside her questioned whether or not this was really okay. She still couldn't shake the feeling that she was betraying someone precious. That's why Ruth couldn't readily bring herself to agree to the marriage, even on such favorable terms.

It would be best if I marry El-sama... That much is obvious... I'm probably only anxious because it's all so sudden... As time passes, that should solve itself...

There was no real reason to refuse his proposal. Everything would surely go well. Ruth repeatedly told herself that while praying that she would come to believe it was the truth.

Ruth and Theia arrived at Kisshouharukaze High School just as lunch break was about to end. They sat down at their desks and stayed quiet. It looked like the two of them were deep in thought, and Koutarou worriedly watched over them both.

Of course they're serious about this... Marriage is a big deal after all...

To Ruth, it was a major event that would determine her future. And to Theia, her childhood friend's life was about to change forever. It wasn't a simple affair, no matter how you looked at it. Even Koutarou understood that this was serious business and that it weighed heavily on them. After Koutarou lost his mother, there was a time his father had considered remarrying. Thinking back to that, Koutarou could vaguely understand what Theia and Ruth might be going through.

All right, I'll take care of it after class.

There was something Koutarou wanted to talk to Ruth about, but with the lunch period about to end, it would have to wait. He decided to hold it in until after school.

As the last school bell rang for the day, Ruth was looking at the clock installed above the blackboard. It read three o'clock, indicating the end of class. However, Ruth didn't seem to register that or the ringing bell. But it wasn't that her mind was blank. In fact, it was quite the opposite. She was so occupied with her worries that she didn't even remember anything from the afternoon's classes.

Oh, right, I better hurry home...

It took a solid ten seconds after the bell rang for Ruth to finally realize that school was over. Recalling that she had a guest waiting, she hurriedly got up from her seat. As she did, Theia stepped up to her.

"Ruth, I'll go on ahead. Elexis-dono might be getting up. You go and prepare dinner."

Ruth and Theia had come to school because Elexis was in need of rest due to the time lag from traveling all the way from Forthorthe. Preparations for dinner

had to be made before he woke up, so the two girls would split up and to get to work on it.

“Thank you very much, Your Highness. I am relying on you.”

“Yes, but keep it together. He’s your guest after all.”

Theia waved her hand lightly and left the classroom. She hadn’t been as distracted as Ruth, so she was already ready to go home.

“She’s right. This won’t do. I need to keep it together...”

Ruth admonished herself for being so preoccupied. She should have left the classroom with Theia, but she was so shaken up that she wasn’t in her usual routine. It wasn’t a very good sign. She took a moment to collect herself, then put her bag on her desk and began gathering her notes and textbooks.

“Ruth-san.”

That was when Koutarou called out to her.

Even as they stepped through the gates to the school, Koutarou and Ruth remained silent. Koutarou wanted to talk to Ruth, but since it was a private matter, he couldn’t bring it up with other people around. Knowing that, he walked along in silence.

Even now, Ruth’s feelings for Koutarou were a bit of a tangle. When Ruth had consulted him regarding her arranged marriage two days ago, he had responded rather indifferently. After talking it over with Theia, she’d come to understand he’d really meant well by taking a backseat in the decision. Yet even knowing that, his words saddened her. As a girl, she still wanted Koutarou to say something more.

But that wasn’t all that was on Ruth’s mind right now. If she were to act normally around Koutarou, she was scared that she wouldn’t be able to commit to her future marriage. She had wanted to avoid Koutarou to keep herself from making any rash decisions.

And so, for their own reasons, both Koutarou and Ruth stayed quiet. They walked down the road towards Corona House without exchanging a word. This

was the first time there had ever been so much tension between the two.

That silence continued for a while, but about five minutes after leaving the school, Ruth finally spoke up. They had gotten away from most of the crowd now, and Ruth just couldn't take the silence and the tension anymore.

"...Satomi-sama, just what did you want to talk about?"

Ruth spoke in a harsh tone, devoid of emotion. It was almost as if she was talking to an enemy. That was the best bluff she could muster.

"There's something that I wanted to apologize to you for."

Koutarou, however, was the same as ever. He carried his bag with his usual carefree expression, and walked along at the same leisurely pace he always did. That threw Ruth off.

"Apologize?"

Upon hearing that word, Ruth showed a stern expression.

Could it be that he doesn't want to become Her Highness's vassal...?

There weren't many things Ruth could think of that Koutarou might want to apologize for. The first thing that popped into her head was that perhaps he'd finally decided whether or not he would serve Theia. And since that was a matter of utmost importance, her expression naturally turned serious.

"Yes."

Koutarou nodded and began talking about what had been bothering him.

"It's about the arranged marriage you asked me about two days ago."

"Oh..."

Koutarou brought up something that Ruth hadn't expected.

It's about that...?

At this point, she was fully convinced that he'd wanted to talk to her about something else altogether.

"Back then, I... I didn't think there was anything I could to say to you, but later on I realized that there was something I should have said."

“Satomi-sama... I...”

Realizing the harshness had faded from her voice and her serious expression had melted away, Ruth quickly tried to recompose herself.

“So first and foremost, I’d like to apologize. I’m sorry, Ruth-san. I hadn’t thought things through back then.”

Koutarou looked Ruth right in the eyes as he apologized.

“I-I see...”

Confused, Ruth nodded her head. Seeing that, Koutarou couldn’t help smiling wryly.

I really should have thought about us a little more. I’m sorry, Ruth-san.

Koutarou realized how immature he was as he looked at Ruth. He could see a striking similarity between the anxious Ruth of two days ago and the confused Ruth that stood before him now.

“This is... something I’d like you to keep to yourself.”

As Koutarou said that, he looked away from Ruth and up into the winter sky. It was clear and seemed to spread out forever.

“I lost my mother early on, so me and my dad lived together, just the two of us. And about a year ago, my dad’s transfer was decided... It was just after I had gotten accepted to Kisshouharukaze High, so I ended up staying here and living on my own.”

A lone, small cloud drifted across the otherwise empty sky. That was how Koutarou had first felt living on his own in such a big city.

“Or at least, I was supposed to. It didn’t really work out that way, because the day after I moved in, everyone attacked.”

Four girls had shown up to claim Corona House’s humble room 106. In order to protect his apartment, Koutarou ended up having to fight. The girls had all kinds of different goals and personalities, so those were very chaotic days.

“Satomi-sama...”

Ruth didn’t know why Koutarou was bringing this up, but based on how he

was behaving, she could tell that it was very important to him. She held back her questions and listened to what he had to say.

“That was ten months ago.”

Koutarou counted them out on his fingers and smiled at Ruth.

“A lot’s sure happened since then, hasn’t it?”

“Yes...”

All kinds of memories flashed through Ruth’s mind when he said that. Sanae being kidnapped. Theia being attacked by Clan. The underground dwellers rebelling against Kiriha. The plays. The Christmas party and ski trip. All of it came flooding back to her in an instant, and that wasn’t even including her trivial but precious day-to-day memories.

“And... I’ve only just realized it, but it’s all thanks to you and everyone else that I’ve really been able to enjoy these past ten months.”

The past ten months had been all kinds of trouble for Koutarou. But it wasn’t until recently that, looking back on it, he realized that they were all fond memories. After getting to know the girls, every day he spent with them was a good one. Now he could say with confidence that they were what made his life special. They were the reason he’d been happy all this time.

While he couldn’t say it to Yurika or Sanae since it’d just go to their heads, it was the truth. And it was that truth that had been his motivation to return home from past Forthorthe. He wanted to fulfill the girls’ wishes and protect this everyday life.

“S-Sato...”

Koutarou’s words sunk into Ruth’s chest, and her heart began racing wildly. Her mind went blank and try as she might, she couldn’t think of anything. The pounding of her heart began to break down the wall that had been built around it.

Oh no, if I listen to any more of this, I’ll...

Ruth’s brain started to flash a red alert, but she could barely hear it over her pounding heartbeat.

“Ruth-san, I don’t know what these past ten months have meant to you, but if you’re worried about your marriage, I want you to choose whatever you believe will bring you the most happiness.”

Koutarou was grateful for the invading girls, including Ruth, so he wanted each and every day of her life to be as happy as his was. Whether she got married or not, he wanted her to do whatever brought her that happiness.

“And so it doesn’t matter to me what you choose, so long as you’re happy. And to that end, I’ll support you regardless of what that choice is.”

That was Koutarou’s ultimate decision. The way he saw it, he was simply repaying the love and kindness he’d received.

“So do what makes you happy. Choose the path you won’t regret later. If you want to know what I think, that’s it... No, it’s what I wish.”

If Ruth was anxious about her marriage, then he would try to think of a way to ease that anxiety. If she wanted to decline the proposal, that was fine too. If that happened, Koutarou would do whatever he could to protect Theia and Ruth. He might even become Theia’s vassal as Ruth had suggested. Or he could discuss it with the other girls and come up with a better solution.

Since Koutarou wasn’t knowledgeable about modern Forthorthe, he didn’t want to say anything that would unfairly sway Ruth’s decision. But still, he wanted her to choose whatever made her happy. And no matter what she chose, he would respect that choice and support her. That was Koutarou’s answer.

He also felt like this was his way of honoring Alaia’s Signaltin and Charl’s insignia. What Alaia wanted to protect wasn’t Signaltin; rather, she wanted to use the sword to protect the happiness of her people. And Charl, who also advocated the people’s happiness, had given him a handmade insignia of rank as a sign of his loyalty to Alaia and her beliefs. And now, if he was still going to uphold their wishes and honor their memories, it was his duty to protect Ruth and Theia’s happiness.

“I...”

If Ruth’s only worry had been about the arranged marriage, she would

probably decline it now. Koutarou's new answer far exceeded anything she'd hoped for when she originally asked him.

"And what's more, he would have to forsake his homeland to come with us. He would even have to accept that he could never have a family of his own."

However, Ruth remembered Theia's words.

If I wish to live my life with Satomi-sama, he would surely oblige me... but that would make him unhappy... and I can't let that happen!

Ruth wanted Koutarou to live with a smile on his face too, just as she did Theia. And that was enough to keep her from declining her marriage and pursuing what she truly wanted.

"...Is that all?"

Ruth desperately tried to keep her feelings from showing through and responded to Koutarou in a calm voice. She even gritted her teeth to keep herself from smiling.

"Yes."

Koutarou didn't think it was strange for Ruth to wear such a serious expression. If anything, he expected it after what he'd said to her the other day. He knew he'd really wounded her.

"Then I'll be taking my leave. I have to make preparations for my guest after this."

Ruth bowed her head while maintaining her stern expression and hurriedly turned away from Koutarou. She felt like she would be unable to contain herself if she stayed with him any longer.

Your Highness... Your Highness, this must be what you felt...

Ruth was finally able to understand the feelings her petite master held inside.

"Excuse me."

After a terse farewell, Ruth walked quickly away.

Everything is okay... I was able to pull it off...

Ruth felt a deep sense of relief. She'd been able to hold it together, and

Koutarou wouldn't have to be unhappy. That relief, however, distracted her just enough that she failed to pay attention to her footing. The toe of her shoe caught the lip of some cracked pavement in her path.

"Kyah!"

Since she was hurrying along, she was walking so fast that she tumbled towards the ground a frightening speed. If she hit the sidewalk at this rate, she was going to be in for a world of hurt.

But that never happened. Someone caught her before she met the pavement, and Ruth knew who it was immediately. The size of his hands, the sensation she felt being held by his arms, and the warmth coming from them... It was all familiar to her.

"Satomi-sama..."

"Are you okay, Ruth-san?"

It was Koutarou. And as she stared up at him, Ruth came to understand something.

It's you... I knew it... You're the only one for me...

Ruth's view of Koutarou's smiling face was quickly obscured by her tears. She simply couldn't hold them in anymore when she realized he was the one holding her. She felt like staying this way with him forever. The secure feeling of his arms, the warmth of his body heat... It all made her heart cry out for him.

Our place is here... If I stay here, I will be happy... Her Highness surely will be too... We would definitely be happy here...

And her heart crying out destroyed any last barrier she had set up to keep her emotions in check.

That's right... I don't want anyone but him. It's not that I hate El-sama, I just can't live without Satomi-sama...!

But even then, Ruth tried to get away from him. She poured her failing strength into her arms to push Koutarou away.

"L-Let me go! Please, Satomi-sama! At this rate, I'll... I'll...!"

“R-Ruth-san?”

Surprised by Ruth suddenly starting to struggle, Koutarou let go of her. And since he didn’t understand why she was crying, he stopped moving.

“Why do you do this to my heart?! Why?! Even though I know I can’t go on like this! Even though I had decided to give up!”

Having escaped from Koutarou’s arms, Ruth took off at full speed and didn’t look back. She knew if she did, she would make the wrong decision. The wall around her heart had completely collapsed and her overflowing emotions were now escaping through her eyes as tears that scattered with each step she took.

Satomi-sama! Satomi-sama, I...!

Ruth ran as fast as she could away from Koutarou, but her heart was still with him.



Ruth retreated to Theia's private room aboard the Blue Knight. Other than room 106, there weren't a lot of places she could run to as an alien. In the end, she turned to her childhood friend.

"Y-Your Highness... U-Ugh, uwaaaaaaaah!"

"Ruth?! What's happened to you?"

Upon seeing Ruth barging into her room and collapsing to the floor in tears, Theia dropped what she was doing and ran to her side.

"I'm sorry, Your Highness. I'm so sorry!"

Her shoulders slumped, Ruth sat on the floor with her head lowered as she continued to cry. She looked like she might just huddle up into a ball.

"Just what are you apologizing for? I can't understand if you just cry, so explain it to me!"

Theia knelt down next to Ruth. As she did, Ruth planted her hands on the carpet and pushed herself up to look at Theia. There was no trace of her normally kind, gentle expression in her sad, tear-streaked face.

"I already know! Thinking of the future, it would be best for me to marry El-sama! And I know that Satomi-sama would be happiest if we left him on Earth!"

Ruth threw everything at Theia. There was no need to hold back with her closest friend.

"B-But I understand now! It's not just that simple! He's the only one for me! No one else will do!"

"Ruth..."

Upon hearing Ruth's words, Theia revealed a solemn smile. She was painfully aware of what Ruth was talking about. She'd been through the same thing herself.

"Even though I know that accepting this marriage would be a boon to you! Even though bringing him to Forthorthe would make him unhappy! Even then... Even then, I..."

Ruth's tears dotted the carpet as she sobbed. She ran her fingers over the tiny

wet spots and then fervently clenched her fists.

“I want to feel his... I want to feel Satomi-sama’s warmth myself!”

Reason dictated that the best choice for Ruth was to marry Elexis and leave Koutarou behind on Earth. But Ruth’s heart scorned that logic. What her brain told her was good for her and what her heart told her she wanted were at complete odds with each other, and the constant fighting between them was tearing her apart. She wanted to scream.

“No matter what I might say, I can’t pretend like I don’t love him...”

Theia lovingly unclenched Ruth’s fingers, one at a time, and took her hand. She held it in her own and gently stroked it.

“Your Highness, I-I’m truly... sorry...”

“I don’t mind. I understand those feelings all too well...”

Still embracing Ruth’s hand, Theia gently smiled at Ruth the same way she did for her when she was sad. Theia continued to sit with her just like that until she stopped crying.

“Still... I am a little envious of you.”

“Huh?”

Ruth instinctively looked up upon hearing those words, and her eyes met Theia’s. She was surprised, but Theia was smiling. This was quite a reversal of their usual situation.

“You already have your answer. All that’s left is to make the leap. But... I can’t take such a bold step myself. So... I am a little envious of you...”

Ruth was born to a distinguished family of knights with a long history, so continuing that lineage was important. But it was even more serious in Theia’s case. Choosing Koutarou as her partner would mean the end of a royal bloodline. And Theia’s family—the Mastir family—could be traced back even to before the time of the Silver Princess, making it the oldest in Forthorthe. Their lineage coming to an end would be considered a grievous loss to the country. As such, Theia still couldn’t bring herself to commit to making a decision.

“But it’s all about perspective. If you choose to live with Koutarou, it wouldn’t

be such a bad future for me...”

“Your Highness...”

Upon her birth, Theia was given the golden shackle that was a princess’s crown. Though it was golden, it still weighed heavily on her.

Even after she dried her tears, Ruth didn’t return to room 106. Facing Koutarou would still be too painful for her. Her dinner with Elexis was also delayed until the next day as she had been unable to make any preparations. So without much else to do for the night, Ruth headed to Blue Knight’s hangar. She was planning on performing maintenance on Koutarou’s armor.

Ruth had now made up her mind about the arranged marriage. She knew she couldn’t go through with it. That said, it wasn’t like she could just decline it. She would have to meet with Elexis’s parents and apologize to them personally. It wasn’t something that could be settled by sending a single message to her own parents. So regardless of how this worked out, Ruth would at least temporarily be returning to Forthorthe.

That left a question of who would protect Theia. Ruth wasn’t just Theia’s retainer; she was also her bodyguard. So though temporary, while Ruth was gone, there would be no one to watch over Theia. Since she couldn’t allow that, Ruth was planning on finishing up the armor’s maintenance and asking Koutarou to take the job. In the end, he was the only one that Ruth felt comfortable entrusting her princess to.

A blue set of armor was standing upright in the maintenance section of the hangar. It kept its balance and posture thanks to the onboard computer, and standing there on its own, it didn’t look too much different from how it did while Koutarou was wearing it.

The Blue Knight’s armor, huh...? If only Satomi-sama were the real Blue Knight...

Ruth let out a small sigh as she looked over the armor. To her and Theia, Koutarou was someone who exceeded even the Blue Knight. The legendary Blue Knight probably would protect Theia’s life too, but Koutarou also

protected her heart. Ruth didn't think any other man could be trusted with that. Theia clearly felt the same way, evidenced by the engraving on the front of the armor: "Theiamillis's Blue Knight."

However, that was just between Theia and Ruth. To the people of Forthorthe, Koutarou was just an alien. Since he was from a less developed planet, they would regard him as a Neanderthal, just like Theia once had. That said, if he were to properly become Theia's vassal, he could be accepted into the Pardomshiha family as their adopted son.

But they wouldn't be so accepting of marriage. It would shake the entirety of Forthorthe if Theia were to marry a Neanderthal from a backwater planet like Earth. There was no telling what kind of backlash it might bring. While he didn't have to be the Blue Knight, things would have been so much simpler if Koutarou had at least been from a family of knights.

"No... In that case, Her Highness probably wouldn't have fallen in love with Satomi-sama..."

Ruth shook her head as that realization set in on her. Theia had fallen in love with Koutarou because they were rivals on equal standing. It was because they could go all out with each other and hold nothing back that Theia had come to love Koutarou. So if Koutarou had been from a family of knights, that likely would have never happened.

"There's no use in grumbling about it... I have work to do..."

Ruth changed gears and moved over to a nearby panel to begin servicing the armor. Maintenance on the armor's hardware had already been completed beforehand, so Ruth's work today would mostly be software maintenance. After Koutarou returned the armor, she'd scheduled the maintenance station to take care of any parts that needed to be serviced or replaced automatically. As such, she also needed to adjust the new parts using existing operating data to prevent any trouble when Koutarou wore the armor the next.

"Looking at it again... there sure are a lot of unreasonable parameters..."

As she was confirming the condition of the armor, Ruth felt like something was amiss. The replaced parts were all reading normally, but many of the parts that hadn't been changed out were programmed unusually.

A simple example was one of the arm motors. It had been set to briefly allow the full use of its power, but it wasn't suited for that kind of use over a long period of time. On that setting, the motor would probably burn out after thirty minutes.

But that wasn't the only thing. Various other parts had been modified in strange, specific ways too.

"What did you have to fight to make you use these settings? And this damage..."

The programmed parameters weren't the only odd thing about the armor. There were parts of the hardware that showed signs of wear and tear over a long period of time, and now that Ruth looked at it, Kiriha's gauntlet had been integrated into the previously damaged left arm of the suit. There was also heavy damage from combat and burns all over the armor. The onboard software showed some peculiar entries as well.

Did he repeatedly fight against a large mobile weapon over a long period of time?

Ruth reached a conclusion as she studied the armor. With this kind of damage, it was hard to imagine that Koutarou had only fought against Clan. Rather, it looked like wear and tear accumulated over several months of front-line fighting, and the damage was serious enough that it looked like he must have fought something like a large mobile weapon. If she thought of it that way, the strange combat parameters that had been programmed into the suit made a little more sense.

It would have been easy to get to the bottom of this with the AI's logs and databases, but those had all been erased. All Ruth had to go off of was the evidence in front of her and her intuition. It left her feeling a little uneasy.

"Satomi-sama and Clan-sama are definitely hiding something..."

Koutarou and Clan's current relationship was yet another of Ruth's concerns. If Clan had somehow managed to win him over, that boded poorly for Theia's future. So in order to make sure that hadn't happened, Ruth wanted to investigate whatever it was that they were hiding.

“Oh? This is...”

That was when Ruth stumbled across a certain something in the computer. It was the settings for the armor’s onboard translation device.

“That’s strange... Ancient Forthorthian has been bumped to the top of the priority list... And Higher Ancient Forthorthe is fourth? Why would such an obscure language be...”

The translation device in the armor could freely translate one language to another, just like Ruth’s bracelet. If Ruth spoke using Forthorthian words, for example, the device would convert them into Japanese while preserving her voice. That was how Ruth and Theia had managed to get along on Earth just fine.

The device could translate nearly any language. Common tongues had been pre-registered into it, including Modern Forthorthian and the languages spoken in nearby star systems, but the list of known languages included both Upper and Lower Ancient Forthorthian. As they were both over a thousand years old, however, they were normally set quite low on the priority list.

The translation device could automatically detect languages in order to translate them, but it did so by comparing the sounds it picked up to information in its databases. For that reason, it made sense to keep commonly encountered languages at the top of the priority list, and rarely encountered ones near the bottom. Despite that, both of these ancient languages were now at the top of the list. That seemed to indicate they were being accessed frequently.

“Normally Modern Forthorthian should be at the top... but it’s Lower Ancient Forthorthian. Why would Satomi-sama need to speak that...?”

Koutarou and Clan had been thrown out of the universe. In order to return, they’d needed to work together. That should have meant that Modern Forthorthian, the language Clan spoke, remained the top priority. But it wasn’t, and that stumped Ruth.

“The only reason I can of think for this is...”

Koutarou hadn’t been speaking Modern Forthorthian, but Lower Ancient

Forthorthian. And in order to hide that, he'd asked Clan to erase the armor's logs. Ruth racked her brain to try and come up with a reasonable explanation for that.

"No... Could it be that Satomi-sama and Clan-sama..."

Ruth gasped. With all the information she was presented with, there was only one answer that fit the mysterious puzzle. It was hard to believe, but Ruth had a gut feeling about it. It was extraordinary, certainly, but if it was true, then everything else made sense.

"There's no time to spare!"

Ruth hurriedly brought up the armor's communication history. Now that she had an inkling of the truth, there was someone she desperately needed to talk to.

Ruth vs. Clan

Thursday, February 11th

Ruth went to visit the Cradle after school the following day. Koutarou's armor had Clan registered in its communication device, and Ruth had used that to contact her and arrange for the meeting.

"So, what was this important thing you wanted to talk about?"

Clan dismissed the hologram floating around her and adjusted her glasses in a slightly irritated fashion. She had been working on research up until Ruth arrived, and she was displeased at the interruption. Clan was cutting out all pleasantries with her so she get could back to her research as quickly as possible.

"It's something very specific."

But Ruth didn't mind. She was anxious to hurry the discussion along as well, and she got straight to the heart of the matter.

"It's about what you and Satomi-sama are hiding, Clan-sama."

"W-We aren't hiding anything."

Clan's expression changed repeatedly. Her irritation turned into surprise and then panic before fading into resignation.

It's just as I thought. They're definitely keeping something from everyone...

That was how Ruth interpreted the rollercoaster of emotion that was written all over Clan's face. She looked like she was taken aback and then tried to pretend like she wasn't.

"I have proof," Ruth said calmly.

"There's no way that's possible," Clan replied as she turned her back on Ruth.

The data has all been erased. Pardomshiha must be bluffing. There's no way

there's actually any proof left...

Clan took several small breaths to calm herself down before turning back to Ruth with a confident smile.

"After all, we're not hiding anything."

Clan had promised Koutarou to keep what happened in the past a secret. Things would be less of a hassle that way, and it would keep present-day Forthorthe from falling into confusion. Besides, there was something in it for Clan too. In return for her cooperation, Koutarou had agreed to let her hold on to Signaltin. She knew there was no more powerful tool than Signaltin, especially as a princess. And she certainly wasn't about to do anything that might jeopardize her hold on it.

"My first piece of evidence is simply that you allowed me aboard your ship, Clan-sama."

However, Ruth didn't flinch in front of the confident Clan. She just carefully observed her reaction as she started to confront her with her evidence.

"What?"

What Ruth said was most unexpected, so Clan could barely help the surprised face she made. Ruth took careful note of it in case it might serve as a clue down the line.

"Just half a month ago, you were trying to kill us, Clan-sama. Despite that, you're now meeting with me on peaceful terms. You've shown no sign of hostility, and you haven't tried to kill me even though I'm right here in front of you. Why is that?"

"That's..."

Clan fumbled for an answer. She had no need to attack Theia or the others because she had the Blue Knight and Signaltin in her back pocket now. They were more useful to her than her claim to the throne, so trying to spoil Theia's trial would have no meaning for her anymore. Moreover, she now considered Koutarou a friend. They'd been through a lot together. Clan had no intention of harming Ruth, Koutarou's friend. But as simple as that was, she couldn't reveal it to her. In a quandary, she tried to keep her cool while racking her brain for a

way out of this.

“That’s because I’ve realized such things are unbecoming of a princess. I have decided that if I am going to get in Theiamillis-san’s way, I will do so boldly and without reservation. A true princess faces any challenge with that degree of candor.”

That was what she came up with on the spot.

Jeez, things are becoming quite troublesome...

Clan was relieved to have gotten out of the hot seat for the time being, but she made sure not to let her guard down.

“Then why do you still remain on this planet, Clan-sama? You say you’ve chosen not to come after Her Highness, yet you haven’t returned home either. Just what are you doing, then?”

Ruth tore apart Clan’s excuse and dug even deeper for answers.

“Tha...”

This question would be more difficult to get around. Clan was staying on Earth to study Signaltin, but also to try and make Koutarou her vassal. She couldn’t admit to either of those, so she racked her brain again.

“That’s because I’m making a weapon to fight Theiamillis-san. Once it’s completed, I plan on challenging her to a proper duel with our rights to the throne on the line.”

“That’s a lie, isn’t it?”

Ruth narrowed her eyes. Her voice was chilling. She’d seen right through her.

“I-It’s not a l-lie!”

Clan was shaken and her voice was shrill. Seeing that, Ruth realized her chance to attack.

“If that’s your plan, why haven’t you called back the Hazy Moon? Surely your flagship is better equipped to develop such a weapon. What benefit could there possibly be to staying on a tiny ship like this?”

Clan was currently using a ship known as the Cradle. It was a small, all-

purpose craft that docked inside her personal space battleship, the Hazy Moon. The sensors and observational equipment aboard the Cradle were advanced, so they were more than enough to begin studying Signaltin, but it was true that the Cradle had inferior facilities compared to the Hazy Moon. If Clan were really going to make a serious weapon, calling back the Hazy Moon from Forthorthe would be the logical choice, just as Ruth had said.

“I-I don’t have to answer that!”

Clan had been backed into a corner this time. She couldn’t think of a good excuse for why she hadn’t called back the Hazy Moon if her intent was to fight Theia. Not answering at all seemed to be her best choice now.

There’s absolutely no mistaking it. Clan-sama and Satomi-sama are hiding a very important secret!

Assured of herself after Clan’s reaction, Ruth brandished her last question to deal the finishing blow.

“Then let me ask you this... What did you and Satomi-sama fight in past Forthorthe?”

That question was Ruth’s trump card. All of the other questions had been leading up to this. Ruth thought that if she rattled Clan a little bit before asking, she might actually get something out of her.

“H-How do you know that?!”

And Clan fell for it.

“So that really is what happened?!”

Upon seeing Clan’s reaction, Ruth’s expression lit up. At the same time, Clan clapped her hands over her mouth to keep herself from saying anything else.

O-Oh no! She tricked me!

What Clan had said was practically the same as admitting that they’d traveled to the past. It was a fatal mistake.

“Satomi-sama’s armor had Lower Ancient Forthorthian prioritized in its translation device. That indicates he was using it more than Modern Forthorthian, so I started to suspect something like this might the case, but... to

think it's really true..."

Ruth had reached her conclusion by piecing together all the tidbits of information she could gather, including the clues from the translation device. She'd confronted Clan about it after getting her a little worked up, and she'd gotten exactly what she'd hoped for. Clan had essentially confessed, but it was still a surprise to hear.

Ah, the priority of the translation device! I didn't think about that!

Clan had erased the logs from the armor at Koutarou's request, but she didn't go as far as resetting all the various programs and such in the armor. She never imagined any information that could be gathered from those would be enough to discover the truth. It wasn't really a mistake on Clan's part; it was simply a sign of how keen Ruth was.

"Clan-sama, please tell me. Where did the two of you go and what did you do?"

At this point, all Ruth really knew was that the two of them had traveled to some point in the past where Lower Ancient Forthorthian was spoken, and that they had fought something there. She wanted to know what that something was. Any problems Koutarou had might become Theia and Ruth's problems in the future, so she considered this a concern of utmost importance.

"...I don't know what you're talking about."

Now that she'd been found out, Clan regained her usual calm demeanor.

It's not like Pardomshiha has figured it all out. In that case, it might be prudent to tell her something of what she wants to know in order to satisfy her and get her to leave...

Clan quickly gathered her thoughts and smiled at Ruth. Ruth grew excited and pressed the matter further.

"Please don't evade the question, Clan-sama! I know it's the truth based on how you reacted just a moment ago!"

"I'm not evading the question. Just listen... Even if it's as you say, that Koutarou and I really did travel to Forthorthe in the past, do you think I could

freely admit to that?”

“Wh-What are you suggesting?!”

On the verge of uncovering the truth, Ruth lost all of her calm. It seemed the tables had been turned in that regard. Clan was the composed one now.

“It’s simple. If I admit to traveling to the past, it would be the same as admitting that I’ve interfered with the past. That would be very problematic. Something of that gravity has the potential to shake the very foundation of the royal families of Forthorthe.”

“Th-That’s...”

Ruth stumbled on her words. She understood what Clan was trying to say. Koutarou and Clan hadn’t really changed the past. There were minor alterations, of course, but on the whole, things were still the same. Yet just publicly admitting that they’d traveled to the past would spread doubt about that. There was no telling what they had or hadn’t altered because there would simply be no way to know. It could even call the founding of the royal families into question, and that kind of uncertainty would rock all of Forthorthe.

“So regardless of the truth, I can only give you this answer: Koutarou and I have not traveled to the past.”

Ruth gritted her teeth. Though she was yet another step closer to the truth, she was barred from going all the way. It was incredibly frustrating.

That’s all I can tell you, Pardomshiha. Please just accept it.

Clan carefully observed Ruth. This was difficult for Clan, and she had to judge the situation carefully.

“I... I understand...”

In the end, Ruth gave up on pursuing the matter any further. She understood that Clan couldn’t tell her anything more.

“But tell me one last thing.”

“What?”

“While the two of you were gone, did Satomi-sama behave as a knight?”

Even if Clan couldn't tell her the truth, there was something Ruth absolutely had to know. And that was if Koutarou had stayed true to himself. Rather than the details of what had happened in the past, that was what she really cared about.

Thank you, Pardomshiha...

Clan internally let out a sigh of relief, and then smiled at Ruth. It was a rare smile for her, pure and devoid of any malice.

"Rest easy, Pardomshiha. Koutarou remained stupidly true to the path of a knight from start to finish."

"I see..."

Ruth's shoulders relaxed. She had been able to confirm what she wanted to know the most, but the truth was still shrouded in mystery. Clan understood the awkward position Ruth was in, and even began to feel sorry for her.

Wait, when did I get so nice...?

Puzzled over her own feelings, Clan offered Ruth a few words of comfort.

"Pardomshiha, since you came all the way here, I can't just let you leave empty-handed. I'll tell you a little something in return for your trouble."

"Clan-sama...?"

Ruth raised her head, her eyes opened wide in surprise. She was truly shocked at such a kind gesture coming from Clan. It was rather unlike her.

You don't have to make a face like that! I'm well aware that I'm behaving strangely!

Grumbling internally about Ruth's surprise, Clan tried to decide what she would share with Ruth. She decided to go with what would be most useful to her.

"Pardomshiha, you recently received an arranged marriage offer, did you not?"

"Yes... You're aware of it?"

Ruth's eyes opened wide once more. She hadn't expected Clan to bring up

her marriage.

“Yes, of course. I’m keeping tabs on Theiamillis-san, after all.”

“I don’t really know how to respond to that...”

Ruth smiled wryly. Not long ago, she felt like she was in the presence of an enemy, but now she could feel herself lowering her guard. Something was different about Clan, and Ruth had started to pick up on that.

“Regardless, you should be wary of the offer you’ve received.”

“Be wary? What do you mean by that?”

“DKI is planning on expanding into the military sector.”

“The military?!”

That struck a chord with Ruth. DKI was a large company, but they had no connection to the military industry. It was because of that that they were on good terms with Theia’s mother, Empress Elfaria, who was an advocate of disarmament. That was a serious consideration when it came to choosing Ruth’s fiancé. But if DKI was planning on expanding into the military sector, Elexis’s push for marriage took on a different meaning.

“Is that true?!”

“It is, though it doesn’t surprise me that Pardomshiha’s intelligence division hasn’t gotten hold of that information yet. As you know, the Schweiger family is a frontrunner in the field of science, so we’re often informed of military affairs.”

Clan’s family—the Schweiger family—had a long history of producing exceptional scientists. As a result, they had strong ties with the military. It was only natural. The military had a lot more to gain from a healthy relationship with the Schweigers and their inventions than they did a relationship with the Mastirs, proponents of disarmament. As a result, when the military learned that Clan was headed to Earth to interfere in Theia’s trial, they’d shared confidential information that was mutually beneficial for both them and Clan. That included a tip regarding DKI’s future plans.

“Elexis wants to expand into the military sector to expand his business. But doing something like that when there aren’t many buyers wouldn’t be very

lucrative, and so DKI's plan is to bait the military with an arranged marriage into the Pardomshiha family. You understand the rest, don't you?"

Clan finished her explanation with a shrug. Ruth's face went pale.

"If DKI expands into the military sector after our marriage, it could drive a wedge between the Pardomshihas and the Mastirs!"

"And in return, the military has promised to make a big order from DKI. It's quite a deal."

With the influence he would have after acquiring the Pardomshiha name, Elexis was planning on working with the military. But as long as he could marry Ruth, he had nothing to lose. If the military didn't uphold their end of the deal, then he could just keep operating DKI as he had been until they changed their minds. Under the Mastir family's rule, disarmament would eventually gain more traction, and the military would have no choice but to come to Elexis to try and fight it. Either way, Elexis was due to make a tidy profit. It was a splendid scheme that lived up to his reputation as a shrewd businessman.

"Then I can just decline this arranged marriage and there won't be any problems, right?"

Ruth was already planning on declining, but if the entire marriage was a trap, then she could do so without feeling badly about it.

"Normally that would be the case, but I'm left wondering why Elexis was in such a hurry to meet you."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that Elexis's sudden visit might be an excuse to bring a military squad to this planet. And if it seems you're about to decline his proposal, they might come up with some excuse to split you and Theiamillis-san up. And while you're gone, it's possible that Theiamillis-san will have an unfortunate accident."

"You can't mean—"

In order to respectfully decline the arranged marriage, Ruth had been planning on temporarily returning to Forthorthe. But now Clan was suggesting that Elexis might use that opportunity to attack Theia. He could either kill her

and claim that it was the work of barbaric Earthlings, or take her prisoner and use her as leverage against Elfaria.

“Are you saying that’s what he’s here for?!”

“It’s just a possibility.”

Clan had implied that Theia would be killed, but she actually believed that the chances of her being kidnapped were much higher. Since the military had gone out of its way to let Clan know about Elexis, it seemed to be politically motivated, and Theia was likely worth more alive than dead.

“Oh no! Her Highness!”

Ruth decided to hurry back to Theia. She had to eliminate any possible danger that might befall her.

“I’ll thank you properly later, Clan-sama!”

The normally polite and formal Ruth ran out of Clan’s laboratory with very little in the way of a farewell.

“There is no need to worry. It’s just a little gift.”

Clan let out a small sigh as she watched Ruth go.

“Hahh... For some reason, I just keep ending up helping Veltlion... Really, when did I get this nice?”

Clan then ordered her bracelet to open up its comms.

The Truth About Koutarou

Thursday, February 11th

Koutarou had just finished his club activities for the day and was on his way to Clan's hideout. There was something he wanted to ask her. It concerned Ruth's marriage. Koutarou felt like he couldn't help her because he knew so little about modern-day Forthorthe, so he'd decided to go to Clan to learn more.

"Jeez, Clan... Your personality is dark enough as it is. You really should've chosen somewhere brighter to live."

Koutarou complained as he walked up the dark mountain path. Clan's spaceship was hidden away in the mountains so it wouldn't stand out. Once the sun started to set, the way to it got a little treacherous.

"Oh yeah, now that I think about it, doesn't this bracelet have a flashlight installed?"

Koutarou brought the bracelet on his right wrist up to his face. Though he had gotten it from Clan, it was the same as Theia and Ruth's. It was equipped with all kinds of convenient functions, one of which was a flashlight.

"Hey, Cradle."

"At your service, my lord."

When Koutarou spoke into the bracelet, the crystal on it began glowing and produced a hologram of Clan's spaceship. Just like Theia and Ruth's bracelets were connected to Blue Knight, Koutarou's was connected to the Cradle. The original design of the bracelet was something similar to a remote control for spaceships.

"It's dark, so—"

"Veltlion."

Just as Koutarou was about to order the bracelet to shine a light, the

hologram of the spaceship was replaced with one of Clan's face. She looked serious.

"Man, all I wanted was a light, but I got your sly mug instead."

"Real bullets, Veltlion! I promise you real bullets next time!"

"There's no need to get so worked up. It was just a little greeting."

"A most unpleasant one!"

"Clan, your cute face is wasted like that."

"I... I want to kill you... I haven't had the urge to destroy someone like this in a long while..."

The hologram of Clan showed her with her fist clenched in front of her face. Her entire body was visibly shaking with rage.

"More importantly, did you want something?"

"Again with the dismissive comments... Urgh! But yes, of course! I called because there's something I have to tell you!"

"I'm on my way to your place right now, so can't we just talk there?"

"I called because I have to tell you now!"

"Then hurry up and spit it out."

"This is all your fault, you know?! Honestly..."

Clan took a moment to compose herself and then looked at Koutarou with earnest eyes. It was an expression she only made when things were serious.

"Sorry, Clan. So what happened?"

"...That part about you is so unfair..."

Clan proceeded to tell Koutarou about Ruth's visit.

"Her Highness's marker is just up ahead!"

Using the information displayed on her bracelet, Ruth was heading towards a nature park. It was a forested area beloved by the people of Kisshouharukaze City.

Theia had taken over for Ruth, who was supposed to be preparing for dinner, and was showing Elexis around on Earth. Upon examining Theia's location history, she'd been guiding him to sightseeing spots around the city. They were at the park now, but it seemed like an odd destination at this hour with the sun going down. Ruth tried to reach Theia over the comms, but couldn't seem to get through to her. Even weirder still, it seemed that after entering the park, Theia's GPS marker had stopped updating. It could have just been a simple system error, but Ruth was preparing for the worst case scenario.

"Your Highness, please be safe!"

It was possible that Elexis was up to something as Clan had suggested, but it was also possible the military had acted on their own if they'd caught wind that Ruth was going to decline the marriage.

Even if I declined, there was a chance I wouldn't leave Earth! If this really is all just a plot, then there's no way they hadn't taken that into consideration! They must have been prepared to strike regardless of where I was! I was careless!

The most efficient way to capture Theia would be to strike when Ruth was away. If there weren't any witnesses from Forthorthe, they could do whatever they wanted. Though there was a chance of Ruth leaving Earth if she declined the marriage, it wasn't a sure bet. And since they couldn't base their plan on an uncertainty, surely they had something else up their sleeve.

That's why El-sama suddenly came to Earth! It was to make sure they had an opportunity!

If her future husband suddenly arrived on Earth, surely that would throw Ruth for a loop. Even if it wasn't much, it would distract her somewhat from her primary responsibility of guarding the princess. That was part of why Elexis had come to Earth. His plan had more than one failsafe.

Thinking back, the fact that I was the only one sent to guard Her Highness might have been part of this plan too! I should have spent more time preparing for a possibility like this!

Ruth wanted to believe all of this was needless worry and that she was getting worked up over nothing, but she couldn't shake the ominous feeling creeping over her. There was no way it was just a system error. All she really

had to go off of was what Clan had said—the same girl who had been her bitter enemy just days ago—but she still believed she was telling the truth. Based on the trust Koutarou seemed to put in Clan, she couldn't imagine that Clan would be lying.

If it hadn't been for Clan-sama, I might have discovered this all too late... Though it's mortifying, Clan-sama seems much closer to Satomi-sama than I am...

Koutarou and Clan had a secret that they hadn't revealed to Theia and Ruth. If Koutarou trusted Clan, that made her more trustworthy in Ruth's eyes, but even so, she couldn't help being jealous of what they shared.

Just after Ruth arrived at the park...

"Oh my, if it isn't Ruth-sama. Good evening to you."

Elexis appeared before her. He bowed gracefully with a confident smile.

"El-sama?!"

Ruth, on the other hand, wore an intense expression. When she instinctively took a stance, Elexis began to look worried.

"Is something the matter, Ruth-sama?"

"Where is Her Highness?!"

"If it's Her Highness you're looking for, we parted ways over there."

Elexis indicated the area behind him. There was a paved road that continued deeper into the park, but the falling darkness and tree cover made it impossible to see what was ahead. There was no sign of Theia, and an unspeakable uneasiness overcame Ruth.

"I was just planning on returning to the ship. I know... Why don't you come with me? There are so many things I would like to show you there."

In contrast to Ruth, Elexis was still smiling brightly. He politely invited Ruth back to his spaceship like a perfect gentleman, but Ruth couldn't get away fast enough.

“No thank you. I have an urgent matter to discuss with Her Highness, so I will be taking my leave here.”

Ruth turned down Elexis’s invitation, tried to calm the anxiety brewing inside her, and headed for the path Elexis had indicated. She was still hoping this was all just her imagination.

“Oh, don’t say that.”

However, as Ruth walked past Elexis, he grabbed her arm.

“I would love for you to come with me.”

Elexis forcibly pulled Ruth back.

“Kyah!”

Because of her light weight, he easily swung her back around to the other side of him. He wasn’t especially rough, but Ruth courageously denounced his actions.

“What is the meaning of this, El-sama?!”

“Why, it’s all for the future—”

Elexis was interrupted by a loud boom from somewhere nearby. He stopped speaking to look over his shoulder. It sounded like it had come from deeper into the park. From Ruth’s current position, she couldn’t see the explosion itself, but she saw a momentary flash in the sky and crows rapidly fleeing the area.

“Your Highness!”

Ruth’s intuition told her that the explosion was a sign Theia was in danger. For Elexis, the explosion told him it was time to take off his mask.

“Goodness me. And I gave them strict orders not to use their weapons, too... Princess Theiamillis really is something.”

Though he was dumbfounded at his subordinates’ carelessness, he was equally impressed at the fight Theia was putting up. The five bodyguards that Elexis had brought with him were actually a special forces unit from the military. They had all kinds of rigorous training, but even they were reduced to using extreme weaponry to capture Theia. Elexis had to commend her for that.

But after the explosion, Elexis knew the jig was up. There would be no point in trying to fool Ruth anymore. So instead of playing a part, he would simply be himself.

“To think she’s capable of making a special forces unit resort to heavy weaponry... If she’s that strong, why is she advocating disarmament?”

“El-sama, so you really are...!”

“Oh, so you were aware of our plans? Splendid. Despite your age, I should have expected no less from the daughter of the Pardomshiha family.”

Elexis had a composed expression on his face as he smiled at Ruth. It was an awfully casual smile, as if saying this was just another workday for him.

“Let go of me, you coward! Are you really so hungry for power that you’d go this far?!”

Ruth’s face was flushed with rage as she tried to shake off Elexis’s hand.

“What a foolish question. You can’t do anything without power. I imagine you understand that quite well right about now.”

Unfortunately, Ruth’s small frame worked against her now. She was no match for Elexis’s strength. Struggle as she might, Elexis wasn’t letting go.

“You’d even go so far as to pretend to be a charitable man... all just for this?!”

Even if she could do nothing against him physically, Ruth lashed out at Elexis.

“That hurts. I’ll have you know there was nothing insincere about those donations. Business is best when society is at its best, after all. And that’s all I really want. An ideal society. I just don’t think I can get it with the way Elfaria is running things. Nothing personal.”

It wasn’t like Elexis harbored any malice for Ruth or Theia. He’d simply ended up siding with the military because he didn’t agree with the current politics of Forthorthe. That was all there was to it.

“So what?! You’re going to demand that Elfaria-sama abdicate by holding Her Highness hostage?! This is no joking matter!”

“I agree. However, the royal families are the ones holding all the political

power hostage, so this is the only way we can achieve anything. It's only fair that we have a royal hostage to level the playing field."

"Have you forgotten all the sacrifices the Mastir family has made to support Forthorthe?!"

"I haven't, but times have changed. When parts get old and rusty, you replace them. Upgrade them, even. Isn't that just common sense?"

"Nonsense! Blue Knight, the Anti-Personnel Stunner!"

Realizing that she could do nothing struggling against Elexis on her own, Ruth shouted an order into her bracelet. She was going to use Blue Knight to incapacitate Elexis.

"I'm afraid that won't work, Ruth-sama."

"The network connection has been lost. Instruction cannot be executed."

"What?!"

Despite Ruth's orders, the bracelet didn't respond with the usual affirmative. Instead, a jarring warning sound and reported that it was unable to carry out the given orders.

"How?!"

This unexpected development made Ruth's expression stiffen.

"It was a mistake to let us aboard your Blue Knight."

"So that's what you were up to!"

"Without weapons, both you and Princess Theia are just normal girls. You never stood a chance to begin with."

Elexis regrettably shook his head. He personally held no ill will towards the girls, and he seriously pitied Ruth as things stood.

"Your only real option was to marry me and end this in a draw, but truth be told, even that may have counted as a loss for you..."

When Elexis had first arrived aboard Blue Knight, his five subordinates had set up devices on the ship that allowed them to freely jam communications, eavesdrop on Theia and Ruth's private rooms, and much more. After learning of

Ruth's true feelings from the bug in Theia's room, Elexis had decided his plan B would be capturing Theia in this empty park. When he discovered Ruth was en route, however, he'd left Theia to his subordinates and come to slow her down. It seemed Theia and Ruth's fate was sealed when they failed to notice the devices planted on Blue Knight.

"Blue Knight, Blue Knight!"

Ruth tried her bracelet over and over again. She used all kinds of methods to try to contact the ship, including electronic, gravitational, and hyperspace communications, but she received the same error message every time. Blue Knight was out of reach no matter how many times Ruth called out to it.

"Please just give it up. Communications have been completely jammed. Nothing you do will help, and your voice won't reach anyone here. So please just give in and come with me."

Elexis looked at Ruth with pity in his eyes—pity that indicated he was absolutely sure of his victory.

"If I give up, who else will save Her Highness?! I will never surrender! I am Her Highness's knight after all!"

"But can't you see how useless all this is...? If not, that's truly unfortunate for both of us."

Seeing as Ruth was refusing to give up, Elexis felt he had no other option. He was going to have to knock her out. Once unconscious, he would bring her aboard his own spaceship. He could then use Ruth as a bargaining chip to get Theia to cooperate. And so Elexis raised his fist.

"I don't think it was useless. Besides, the only one that's going to be regretting this is you."

But instead of Ruth being struck, Elexis was. A fist blindsided him from the right and connected squarely with his cheek.

Having taken a direct hit to the face, Elexis collapsed. In the process, he lost strength in the hand that was holding Ruth, and she managed to break free. When she turned to look at the person who'd punched Elexis, Ruth's eyes began sparkling.

“Satomi-sama!”

“Hey, Ruth-san. Your voice reached me, you know.”

It was indeed none other than Koutarou. After hearing the situation from Clan, he’d gone immediately looking for Ruth.

You saved me, Clan...

Since Koutarou’s bracelet was connected to Clan’s Cradle and the Hazy Moon, he couldn’t access Ruth and Theia’s location information directly. However, thanks to Ruth using various communication methods in an attempt to contact Blue Knight, Clan’s unmanned reconnaissance craft was able to determine her location. Clan relayed that information to Koutarou, and he came straight to the park. Really, it was only because Ruth had refused to give in that he was able to find her.

“So Ruth-san, what’s going on?”

Koutarou glared at Elexis, fists still clenched. Elexis was clearly staggered, but he was still conscious. After collecting himself and lightly shaking his head, he slowly stood up.

“Satomi-sama...”

Seeing Koutarou step between her and Elexis, Ruth was overcome with a secure feeling. She felt safe.

Ah, he really is the one... As long as he’s with me, I will be okay no matter what... He’ll definitely be able to save Her Highness too...

Nothing had been resolved yet, and she had no grounds for thinking any of that. But even so, Ruth believed everything would be okay with all of her heart. She believed in Koutarou, and after wiping away tears from her eyes, she converted those feelings into words.

“Please lend me your strength, Satomi-sama! I want to protect Her Highness! From all kinds of enemies! And from all kinds of hardships!”

That was the future that would make Ruth the happiest. It was her wish. She was sure of it now.

“As you wish, my lady!”

And Koutarou responded without any hesitation. He was prepared to answer that call because he had his own wish, and he'd resolved to uphold it a long time ago.

Once he got back on his feet, Elexis had lost his previous calmness. The unexpected interruption had thrown him off his game.

"Curse you, you primitive barbarian..."

From Elexis's perspective, a gorilla had interrupted important business by punching him. And so he gave Koutarou—the gorilla—a wicked and condescending sneer of a glare.

"Hmm...? Hahahaha!"

Koutarou, however, only laughed when he saw it. Elexis reminded him of someone he'd met long ago. The whole encounter was similar, really, and Koutarou laughed even harder when he realized that. It was obvious that this was a completely different person, but the resemblance was so striking that Koutarou couldn't help it.

"...What are you doing in a place like this, Dextro? You haven't taken a single step forward in two thousand years..." Koutarou mumbled to himself in a quiet voice as he chuckled.

"Dextro...?"

Only Ruth heard what he said.

Satomi-sama just said "Dextro"...

Ruth knew that name. He was a character that appeared in the legend of the Blue Knight. However, in the interest of conciseness, Theia hadn't included him in her play. So it wasn't a name that Koutarou should have known.

Maybe Her Highness showed him a movie when practicing for the play...?

Ruth ended up writing it off and shifted her focus back to Elexis. She didn't have the time to be thinking of anything else right now.

"What are you mumbling about, Neanderthal?"

“Neanderthal? It’s been a while since someone called me that.”

Clan, it seems this synchronicity thing of yours might really exist...

Koutarou recalled something Clan had said to him as he casually approached Elexis. Elexis pulled out a pistol and leveled it at Koutarou. It was a new model that DKI had developed; not only was it compact with little recoil, it was also a multipurpose firearm that would take all kinds of bullets. It was one of the products that DKI wanted to sell to the army.

“What does the unarmed Neanderthal want?”

A smug grin crossed Elexis’s lips as translucent white hexagonal tiles appeared around him. It was a barrier activating. An unharmed human wouldn’t be able to touch him now. To Elexis, Koutarou only looked like a thoughtless Neanderthal who didn’t know when to back down as he approached.

“It’s true that I’m unarmed, but you shouldn’t get too full of yourself.”

“That’s true. There’s a saying in my family that you shouldn’t play around when things get serious.”

A loud bang rang out. Elexis didn’t hesitate to fire at Koutarou.

Looks like you learned a little, Dextro!

However, Koutarou dodged the bullet with merely a turn of his head.

“What?!”

Elexis doubted his eyes. He couldn’t believe that his gun could be dodged at such close range.

In order to improve the accuracy of the gun in Elexis’s hand, it had been made so that the trigger didn’t need to be pulled. Instead, it sensed pressure that was applied to it. That improved the accuracy of the gun by eliminating the need to move your finger to fire it.

It also meant that Koutarou shouldn’t have been able to tell when he was about to fire. And considering the speed of the bullet, no human should have the reaction time to dodge it.

“Your shooting is too honest!”

Koutarou broke into a sprint to close the distance between him and Elexis as quickly as possible.

“Who the hell are you?!”

“I’m the victim!”

As Koutarou closed in on him, Elexis continued firing. But not one of the bullets scored a direct hit. Instead, they would graze his cheek, pass under an arm he had casually raised, or slip between his arm and body. It was a bizarre sight that made it look like Elexis was missing on purpose.

How?! Why can’t I hit him?!

Elexis started to panic as he fired round after round. Even though he was the one on the offensive, he couldn’t have been more confused.

Koutarou was able to dodge the bullets thanks to the spirit sight he had gotten from Sanae. Elexis’s aim was quite precise, and so was the gun. Elexis didn’t have any hesitation like Ruth did, and his shots were logical and accurate. The bullets went exactly where he intended them to go. That’s why his attacks were so easy to dodge for Koutarou.

“A victim, you say?!”

“That’s right! I’m just a regular civilian from a planet that your princess invaded!”

Koutarou was now right in front of Elexis. Elexis fired one last shot at him, but the bullet flew wildly astray as Koutarou’s fist struck Elexis in the face and knocked him flat onto his back.

“Wh-What happened...?”

After hitting the ground, Elexis was unable to move. Part of that was because he was dizzied from the punch, but mostly it was because he was so taken aback. Despite being protected by a barrier, Koutarou had been able to punch him. Elexis had no clue what had happened.

“Satomi-sama... you...”

Ruth, who had been watching Koutarou from behind, saw the whole thing. Yet even though she’d witnessed it with her own two eyes, she was still

surprised.

Immediately before El-sama fires, the barrier in front of the gun vanishes for a moment! Satomi-sama punched him during that small window! I... I see how it worked, but that should be impossible! Just how much training would you have to go through to be able to do something like that?!

Koutarou had been able to pull it off thanks to a combination of the power Sanae had given him and all of his combat experience. Elexis had a tell when he fired his gun. Just before shooting, he would hold his breath. He used it to focus on his attack, and that showed in his aura. Koutarou also knew from experience that it was a common habit among marksmen. So by reading Elexis and swinging his fist at just the right time, he was able to land a blow right before Elexis fired.

“Ouch, that barrier recovers quickly...”

While Ruth looked on in surprise, Koutarou shook his right hand in an attempt to ease the pain. He’d managed to hit Elexis, but then he was repelled by the reformed barrier. Still, he was acting so casually about it now that it was hard to believe he’d just done something so amazing.

“I see, Neanderthal, you aimed for the opening when the barrier was down!”

Elexis finally put it together when his tactical support computer reported on what Koutarou had done.

“But now that I know that, your little trick won’t work on me again!”

Elexis ejected the magazine loaded into the gun and quickly exchanged it with another.

“All I have to do is attack you with lasers without lowering the barrier!”

The new magazine contained a miniature irradiation device that fired lasers. By loading it into the pistol, it was essentially now a small laser gun. Since it was only a prototype, there was a limit to the amount of shots it could fire, but this kind of flexibility was the selling point of the gun.

“You’ve surprised me quite a bit, but it looks like I win, Neanderthal-kun!”

After loading his new magazine, Elexis ordered his computer to change the

settings of his barrier. Normally Forthorthe's protective barriers guarded against lasers as well, but Elexis now instructed his to allow lasers to pass through. That would let him fire at Koutarou without having to lower the barrier.

"Let me tell you something."

"Is that your wish? I'm no knight, but I'll at least hear your final words."

Elexis waited for Koutarou's last words with his gun held at the ready. He was absolutely certain of his victory now.

"Unarmed, I have no way of breaking through your barrier, but you can still attack me all you want. All I can do is run around, but I won't be able to save Theia that way."

"That's right. I'm glad you at least understand that much."

"However..."

Koutarou began running towards Elexis once more.

"What is this? Are you so desperate you'd go in for a suicidal charge? I guess that's only fitting for a Neanderthal!"

Elexis confidently kept his gun trained on Koutarou. He had no need to defeat Koutarou with this attack. He only needed to buy time, so he'd be fine as long as Koutarou didn't take him out. And he wasn't worried about that since there was no chance that an unarmed opponent could break through his barrier. Elexis had been caught off guard the first time, but he wouldn't make that mistake again. He had the upper hand now.

"Satomi-sa— Ah..."

At first, Ruth was also worried that Koutarou was throwing his life away. But then she noticed that Koutarou was smiling. It was the same kind of smile he usually had on his face when he was teasing Yurika.

"My partner is the slyest of them all!"

Before Elexis could fire, several beams of light came pouring down from above. They passed right through his barrier. They struck the gun in his right hand and the barrier generator on his waist, destroying both.

“Wh-What?!”

Elexis was once again taken aback by this most unexpected turn of events. But he didn’t have much time to appreciate it. Koutarou’s fist came at him full force. And without a gun or his barrier to defend him, Elexis was helpless. He just stood there, stock-still and slack-jawed. An easy target.

“Guah...”

Elexis passed out as Koutarou’s fist buried itself in his stomach.

With Elexis defeated, Koutarou and Ruth headed deeper into the park under Clan’s guidance. While Koutarou was fighting, she’d managed to identify heat sources corresponding to Theia and five men using her reconnaissance craft.

“This is all I can do to help. I can’t leave any evidence that the Schweiger family was involved.”

Clan had sniped Elexis with her lasers, and she had guided Koutarou and Ruth to Theia. If she did any more than that, there was a high chance that Elexis and the military would discover she was helping them. That meant this was as far as she could go with them.

“Thanks, Clan.”

“You just keep owing me more and more, Koutarou.”

“I know, I know.”

“Thank you very much, Clan-sama.”

“Why am I being thanked by Pardomshiha? Jeez...”

Since Clan wasn’t good at socializing, she barely knew how to handle heartfelt thanks from someone she wasn’t used to. Dealing with Ruth was a completely different ballgame than dealing with Koutarou. As a result, Clan’s hologram projected by the bracelet blushed ever so slightly.

“...I’m confused myself.”

Ruth put her hand on her chest and smiled gently. Ruth’s earnest feelings seemed to have an effect on Clan as she gave an embarrassed smile in return.

“One last warning, Koutarou. DKI is trying to sell weapons far more powerful than that gun to the army.”

“So what should I do?”

“I would say this is an ‘all our resources’ scenario.”

“I understand. Thank you.”

By quoting Koutarou, Clan conveyed the magnitude of the situation to him. He pulled himself together and began thinking in preparation for the upcoming fight. Seeing Koutarou get so serious, Clan smiled gently.

“...You came back through all those hardships. Now protect her until the end, Satomi Koutarou.”

With that, Clan terminated the hologram and recalled her reconnaissance craft to the Cradle. The rest was up to Koutarou and Ruth.

Not long after Clan withdrew, Koutarou and Ruth reached their destination. The incinerated trees and scorch marks told them they were in the right place. From the look of things, the fight must have been a fierce one “Her Highness is... there! She’s over there, Satomi-sama!”

“Theia!”

A bit away from Koutarou and Ruth, just past some trees, was a spaceship even smaller than Clan’s Cradle. It was only about the size of a large truck. Walking towards it were the five men, one of which was carrying Theia over his shoulder. She appeared to be unconscious. She almost looked like a doll slung over the shoulder of such large man.

“Oh no! If we don’t hurry, they’ll take her away!”

“So there’s no time for petty tricks, huh?”

Theia would be carried into the spaceship any moment now. If they just idly stood by, she would be taken away right in front of them. However, Koutarou and Ruth only had the weapons for self-defense that Clan had left with them. They couldn’t use anything too powerful that would tip anyone off that Clan had been involved. Against five men with special forces training and cutting

edge technology, however, that wasn't going to be easy. They'd been able to take out Elexis because he was alone, but not even Koutarou could dodge attacks from five men if they decided to attack him with lasers all at once.

But there was no time to waste. There wasn't even time to call for backup. They had to act immediately, but they stood no chance of winning as things stood. Realizing his dilemma, Koutarou repeated what Clan had said to him.

"All our resources, huh?"

Koutarou had said something similar before their battle with Maxfern. Back then, just like now, they were faced with a terrible dilemma. Knowing that, Koutarou had told Clan to be prepared to use any means necessary, even if it was a last resort.

Back then, our last resort was Clan's Super Space-time Repulsion Shell. So what is our last resort now...?

Just as Koutarou reached that thought, Ruth spoke up.

"Satomi-sama, I'll act as a decoy and draw them away. Meanwhile, please save Her Highness. I'm sure you can do it, so I'm counting on you! Please save Her Highness!"

Ruth couldn't wait any longer, so she quickly explained her idea to Koutarou with a serious expression on her face. It was an extremely dangerous plan with almost no chance of Ruth surviving.

"Ruth-san..."

Koutarou understood Ruth's determination. He didn't even need to look at her aura. It was obvious enough just by looking at her face.

Ruth is prepared to die for this. She wants to save Theia, even if it costs her her life. Because she would always regret it if she didn't... Because she can't be happy without Theia...

"Here I go! I'll leave to rest to you!"

Ruth didn't fear her own death because she knew that even if she died, Koutarou would still save Theia. In the face of Ruth's selfless resolve, Koutarou made up his mind.

There's no meaning in keeping the secret if it leads to Ruth's death. And I'm sure Her Majesty will forgive me for using it in this situation. It's for the sake of the people Her Majesty fought to protect, after all!

Koutarou was prepared to use any means necessary to protect Ruth and Theia.

"...Please wait, Ruth-san."

Koutarou grabbed Ruth's shoulder just as she was about to rush out towards the men.

"Satomi-sama?"

Ruth was confused as to why he'd stopped her and gave him a puzzled glance.

"Ruth-san... If possible, I'd like you not to mention what you're about see to anyone else."

Koutarou smiled at Ruth. It was his normal smile. An awkward, yet earnest and guileless smile. The very one Ruth loved to see.

"Satomi... sama?"

Ruth didn't understand the meaning behind Koutarou's smile in this situation, however, so she instinctively questioned him. Rather than answering her with words, Koutarou thrust his right hand forward.

"Cradle, give me my sword."

"As you wish, my lord."

The gem on the bracelet Koutarou was wearing blinked repeatedly and confirmed his order.

Satomi-sama's sword? Saguratin should be on Blue Knight right now... And what's this expression on his face? I've never seen Satomi-sama look like that before...

What Ruth was seeing for the first time was Koutarou preparing himself for a real fight.

"Come, Signaltin."

"Call sign confirmed. Coordinate axis fixed. Commencing transfer of

Signaltin.”

“Wha—”

Before Ruth could even express her surprise at the name of the sword Koutarou had whispered, the transfer was in action.

A large black hole about ten centimeters across appeared in front of Koutarou’s extended right hand. And from that hole, a sword still in its sheath emerged. It had a complex engraved design of swirling curves on its white and silver hilt, making it look like an elegant work of art. Without hesitation, Koutarou stuck his hand into the black hole, firmly grabbed hold of the sword, and pulled it all the way out.

When Koutarou placed his hand on the hilt of the sword, it began releasing a pure white glow. The sword bathed everything around it in light almost as bright as the sun.

“What sword is this?! Alaia’s crest is engraved on the handle! And the royal family crest is engraved on the sheath!”

While she was perplexed by the sword’s light, Ruth was primarily aghast at the crests engraved on the sword. They were the two most well known emblems in all of Forthorthe: the royal family crest of the Goddess of Dawn, and Alaia’s personal crest of silvery white snow. Even in the powerful white light of the sword, the crests shone brilliantly as if declaring themselves to the world.

“Your Excellency, Lord Blue Knight, this ship, the Cradle, will pray for your fortune and glory in place of the nation of Forthorthe.”

“...Thank you.”

Koutarou stood in the center of the light, holding the sword in both hands. In his right hand was the handle, and in his left, the sheath. Koutarou turned back to Ruth and called out to her.

“Ruth-san.”

“Signaltin...? Your Excellency, Lord Blue Knight...?”

Ruth was so absorbed in the moment that she couldn’t even respond to

Koutarou.

It's a replica... No, it's too well made for that... And this light... Moreover, why did the Cradle call Satomi-sama the Blue Knight? A code name, perhaps? No, this is...

Without waiting for Ruth's reply, Koutarou smiled and continued speaking.

"I... will protect everyone's future with my life and these two swords."

He didn't just mean Ruth and Theia. Koutarou wanted to protect everyone who was suffering. He couldn't protect everyone in the world, for he was no god, but he at least wanted to protect the smiles of the precious people who made him smile. That was Koutarou's oath to himself. His wish. It was the reason he had returned from Forthorthe of the past.

"So let's go, Ruth-san. Theia is waiting."

"Uh... Um..."

Koutarou pulled Signaltin from its sheath as Ruth struggled to come up with something to say. Its silver blade seemed to respond to Koutarou's emotions as it shot out more white light.

Elexis's five bodyguards weren't special forces in name alone. At the first sign of the strange white light, they realized that danger was upon them. Their professional experience told them something was afoot, so the men in black—carrying beam cannons, barriers, and the like—vigilantly waited for the enemies to show themselves.

"It's just one Neanderthal and the Pardomshiha girl...?"

"The Neanderthal has a knight's sword, and the girl has a small arms for self-defense."

"Are they insane...?"

However, contrary to what they'd expected, the approaching enemy appeared to pose no threat at all. It seemed their intuition had misled them. Looking at their targets—Koutarou and Ruth—they seemed almost hilariously out of place.

To the five experienced men, it looked like these two children were lost. Not only were they vastly outnumbered, but they were armed with toys. The boy had an old knight's sword, and the girl only had weapons intended for self defense. All the special forces unit could figure was that this was a desperate, suicidal act of loyalty.

As such, they chose not to use the powerful weaponry they had stored on their spaceship. They believed it would be no issue to take them out with the equipment they had on hand. It wasn't a matter of pride, either. It was a genuine assessment of the situation and what they believed would be the best way to handle it.

"How shall we proceed, captain?"

"Kill the Neanderthal and capture the girl as planned."

"Roger."

"I wonder what happened to Elexis-sama. He moved to intercept the girl... Did they miss each other?"

Out of the five men, three stepped forward with large guns. They had determined that that would be sufficient to deal with Koutarou and Ruth. The remaining two men had other jobs to take care of. The captain would confirm Elexis's whereabouts, and the last remaining team member would get Theia inside the spaceship.

Seeing how the five men were proceeding, Koutarou let out a sigh of relief.

Phew, they all stayed here... Now we at least have a chance to win...

What Koutarou had feared the most was that the special forces team would split up, leaving a few men behind to fight him and Ruth while the others took Theia away. Fortunately that hadn't happened. They had decided to stay together since they were only facing two opponents and they wanted to wait for Elexis.

"Still, the quality of Forthorthe's soldiers sure has dropped... Flair-dono would grieve this..."

Koutarou was thankful for the situation, but he couldn't help thinking it would

surely upset his old friend. Amused at the thought, he smiled as he turned to face the men.

“S-Satomi-sama, you can’t just attack them from the front!”

“It’s okay. Leave this to me, Ruth-san. I want you to save Theia as soon as you find an opening.”

“Satomi-sama!”

Koutarou left the worried Ruth behind and casually stepped forward. Seeing that, the men began laughing.

“What? It looks like he seriously wants to fight us.”

“Let him do as he pleases.”

“Fair enough. If we shoot him dead before he even gets to swing his sword, he’d never be able to rest in peace.”

Despite Koutarou approaching the men with a sword in hand, they remained confident. They were convinced that some old sword would never be enough to break through their barriers. That’s why they were planning on letting Koutarou do as he pleased.

“Hey, boy. Just go ahead and attack. Show us those sword skills you’ve practiced.”

“Are you sure?”

“You bet, kid. Give it your all.”

“Are you *really* sure?”

“Yeah, knock yourself out.”

“All right, then I’ll take you up on that.”

Koutarou glared at the three men in front of him while focusing his mind and heightening his spiritual energy. He then conveyed his intentions to the sword and activated its mana.

Sorry, but I’ll defeat you all before you even have the chance to fire those guns!

Now that he was fully ready for a fight, Koutarou dashed forward.

“Change of plans! Kill him right now! He’s—”

The captain shouted out to his men right as Koutarou began to dash towards them. The captain’s face was pale. He had just received a report on Koutarou from Elexis, who had finally come around.

“Captain?”

But it didn’t make a difference. In the end, the three men never got the chance to fire their guns. With a single swing, the barrier generators at their waists exploded. The barriers were up and running, but they’d taken so much damage that the generators were almost instantly fried.

“What?!”

“Uwaaah!”

“C-Captain!”

Surprised, the three men were knocked off balance and totally exposed. Seeing his chance, Koutarou mercilessly swung Signaltin again. Without their barriers, the men took the attack directly and were sent flying.

“Relax. I only used the flat of the sword. You’d never be able to rest in peace if you died before you got a chance to shoot those guns, after all.”

The three men had been blown away by a magical shockwave that surrounded the sword. They fell to the ground and were unable to move, but they were largely unhurt. The shockwave had been adjusted to be nonlethal.

“Who is this guy?!”

“Captain!”

“Don’t just stare! Fire!”

“Y-Yes, sir!”

Having lost three of their allies in an instant, the remaining two men hurriedly took aim at Koutarou. It wasn’t until he’d taken out more than half their team that they realized there was more to him than met the eye.

The men fired, but yellow torrents of light shot out of their guns rather than

bullets. They were heavy metal particles given a high amount of energy. The men were wielding mass-produced beam rifles.

The power and speed of their rifles was vastly inferior to what Clan used, but the mass-produced versions were cheaper to manufacture. When given to a whole squad, the overall effect was stronger. On top of that, they were easier to maintain than older models, and had been designed to function in all environments. This was yet another weapon that DKI wanted to sell to the military.

“They’re probably not bad guns, really... but they still don’t stand a chance!”

Koutarou swung his sword horizontally to catch the two oncoming beams. As he did, they were snuffed out like candle flames. Koutarou had experience against Clan’s high-performance beam cannon, so he wasn’t exactly afraid of these lower-quality versions.

“He cut them! He seriously cut the beams!”

“H-He’s a monster! This guy’s not human!”

“How rude, you two. Seriously...”

Beams didn’t work on Koutarou, and their barriers couldn’t protect them against him. Koutarou defied all logic, leaving the two men in a state of panic. They were frightened like they’d just witnessed a paranormal phenomenon.

“I’m not the amazing one. The amazing ones are the people lending me these powers.”

Koutarou, though amazed himself, readied his sword. With one more swing, the frightened men were unconscious.

After confirming that all five men were unconscious, Koutarou relaxed his shoulders.

“Phew...”

No matter how often it happened, Koutarou still couldn’t get used to the feeling of people trying to kill him, even if he wasn’t in any real danger.

“How could this be...? He finished things in an instant with just that sword...”

While Koutarou was sighing with relief, Ruth's heart was starting to pound faster and faster. She couldn't believe what had just happened right before her eyes. It was as if she was watching the prince rescue the princess in a fairy tale.

Satomi-sama was strong before, but this is far beyond that... And he's not even wearing his armor...

All Koutarou had was a single sword, and it wasn't even a piece of modern weaponry. There was no science in it. No advanced technology. It was really just a sword. Despite that, Koutarou had swiftly dispatched five heavily armed men with it.

"Signaltin... Blue Knight... Could it really be...?"

Ruth's gaze was drawn to the sword in Koutarou's hand. It was a knight's sword shining silvery white. It was old, but it was clearly in no way inferior to a modern weapon. It was elegant, shaped like a traditional Forthorthian knight's sword, and it shone as though it was magical.

Magic... That's right, Yurika-sama's staff!

Ruth suddenly recalled that Yurika was now in possession of a real magical staff. Koutarou had gifted it to her as a souvenir when he returned. Ruth knew that it was genuinely magical because she had confirmed it personally several times. And if that staff was magical, Koutarou's sword very well may be too.

If that sword really is a magical sword... If it really is Signaltin... then that would mean...

Ruth concocted a hypothesis. It was certainly out there. Outright fantastical, even. The idea that Koutarou and Clan had traveled to the past was nothing compared to what she was thinking now. But in spite of how outrageous it was, Ruth had already started to accept it as the truth. She had all kinds of circumstantial evidence backing her up. Moreover, she wanted it to be true. She wanted to believe it. Just thinking about it, her heart began throbbing.

"Ruth-san, Theia..."

"R-Right."

But it would have to wait. Koutarou wasn't going anywhere, and she could ask

him for answers later. Right now, Ruth had to focus on saving Theia. She pulled herself together and chased after Koutarou towards the hatch of the small spaceship.

“There she is!”

“Your Highness!”

Theia had been set down right inside the ship. With the hatch left open, the wind blowing in was gently rustling her skirt. Since the man carrying her had been in a hurry to join the fight, he’d just left her lying there.

“Thank goodness... Her Highness is all right.”

Ruth let out a sigh of relief and wiped away her tears. She’d been so worried that the moment Ruth saw Theia was safe, she almost collapsed to the ground out of sheer relief. Theia was still unconscious, but her complexion was fine and she didn’t seem to be injured. Elexis’s subordinates had at least been somewhat courteous with the princess. Based on how she looked, it would only be a matter of time before she woke up.

“Ruth-san, let’s carry Theia out of here.”

“Yes, let’s.”

Though their enemies were defeated, they weren’t dead. It was still in their best interest to clear the area quickly. Koutarou was going to take Theia back to room 106 for now. He had allies there that would help protect both Theia and Ruth.

Koutarou returned Signaltin to its sheath and shouldered Theia’s small body.

“Hup.”

Ruth was helping him out, but she was still absentmindedly staring at the crest on the sword.

No matter how I look at it, this really is...

After confirming that Theia was safe, Ruth concentrated on the mysterious blade.

“...Hmm?”

That might not have been the reason why, but Koutarou was the first to notice a new enemy approaching.

“Not good...”

After they’d taken a few steps down the paved path in the park, Koutarou sensed an incoming hostile presence.

“Satomi-sama?”

“Is he still planning on fighting...?”

It was Elexis. Though there was still some distance between them, Koutarou recognized his aura. It seemed like he had woken up and was headed their way.

“Alert: High-density energy reaction detected. A hostile small mobile weapon is approaching. Please retreat immediately. Based on the enemy’s total energy output, the chance of victory is estimated to be less than 4 percent with current armaments.”

The alert message from the bracelet confirmed Koutarou’s suspicion.

“A mobile weapon?!”

“Ruth-san, please take care of Theia.”

Koutarou put Theia back down and leaned her up against a nearby tree.

“What about you, Satomi-sama?!”

“I’ll go defeat that mobile weapon or whatever.”

Considering the speed at which Elexis’s aura was approaching, they wouldn’t be able to run away. And as long as the mobile weapon’s sensors weren’t broken, they wouldn’t be able to hide either. With little other option, Koutarou determined that he had to defeat the mobile weapon.

“You can’t, Satomi-sama! No matter how strong you might be, it’s too dangerous to fight a mobile weapon by yourself! You at least need your armor!”

When she heard what Koutarou said, Ruth began panicking. Though it was small, a mobile weapon would be equipped with military grade weaponry, including explosives that could cover a wide area. No matter how quick he was, there was no way Koutarou would come out of a fight like that unscathed. Ruth

couldn’t imagine that he had any real chance of winning against one, and believed that their best bet at surviving this would be to retreat.

“It’s not a problem. I should be fine against something like this.”

“What’s your basis for that?!”

Ruth’s voice was close to a scream. She couldn’t easily believe Koutarou claiming that he would be fine.

“My basis...? Huh, good point. Cradle, please collate the combat data.”

“Please set a condition.”

“What would be easier: fighting Alunaya or fighting this enemy without my armor?”

“Under that condition, chances of victory are estimated to be 280 percent higher against the current enemy than against Alunaya.”

“See?”

The bracelet, or more accurately the Cradle, gave the prediction that Koutarou was expecting. His chances of victory against the mobile weapon were almost three times higher than what they’d been with Alunaya.

“Don’t give me that! Why would you compare this to Yurika-sama in a costume?!”

“It’s okay.” Koutarou smiled as he drew his sword. “I’ve fought against the real deal.”

“Huh? Th-The real deal...?”

Not a moment later, Elexis appeared. The mobile weapon destroyed the trees in front of it and entered the open area where the spaceship was. The mobile weapon stood about five meters tall. It was small by Forthorthian standards, but it towered over any human. Despite being cloaked in the darkness of night, it still stood out like a sore thumb.

Elexis’s amplified voice blared from the speakers of the mobile weapon.

“I won’t let you escape, Neanderthal-kun. I’ll have you leave the ladies behind, please.”

Elexis was sitting in the cockpit in the upper part of the mobile weapon. His face could be seen through the transparent windshield.

“Hey now, Dextro... You really love that thing, don’t you?”

Despite being face to face with a mobile weapon, Koutarou didn’t appear surprised. Instead, he smiled as he looked up at Elexis.

“It looks like your personality has improved a little, but you’re still the same...”

“What are you smiling for?”

“Oh, no reason. I was just thinking that your toy looks strong.”

This mobile weapon had the usual appearance: a stocky humanoid figure. The most accurate description of it would be to say it looked like a massive, muscular knight wearing heavy armor.

To think I’d face something like this again...

Koutarou had experience fighting against magical steel giants, and Elexis’s mobile weapon didn’t seem much different. In a way, he felt nostalgic seeing it.

“It is strong. In the future, this will be a DKI bestseller. Once they’re released, please do buy one.”

“Yeah, I think I’ll do just that.”

Koutarou pointed the tip of his sword at the giant. Koutarou stood less than two meters tall while the giant was easily five. It was almost three times his height. It appeared Koutarou didn’t stand a chance, but this time Elexis wasn’t going to let his guard down because of that. Sitting in the cockpit, he cast a sharp glance at Koutarou.

“I never would have imagined using this against a flesh and blood human, but since you seem to be bending all the rules, I’m going all out. Behold the pride and joy of my corporation.”

“You’re the CEO?”

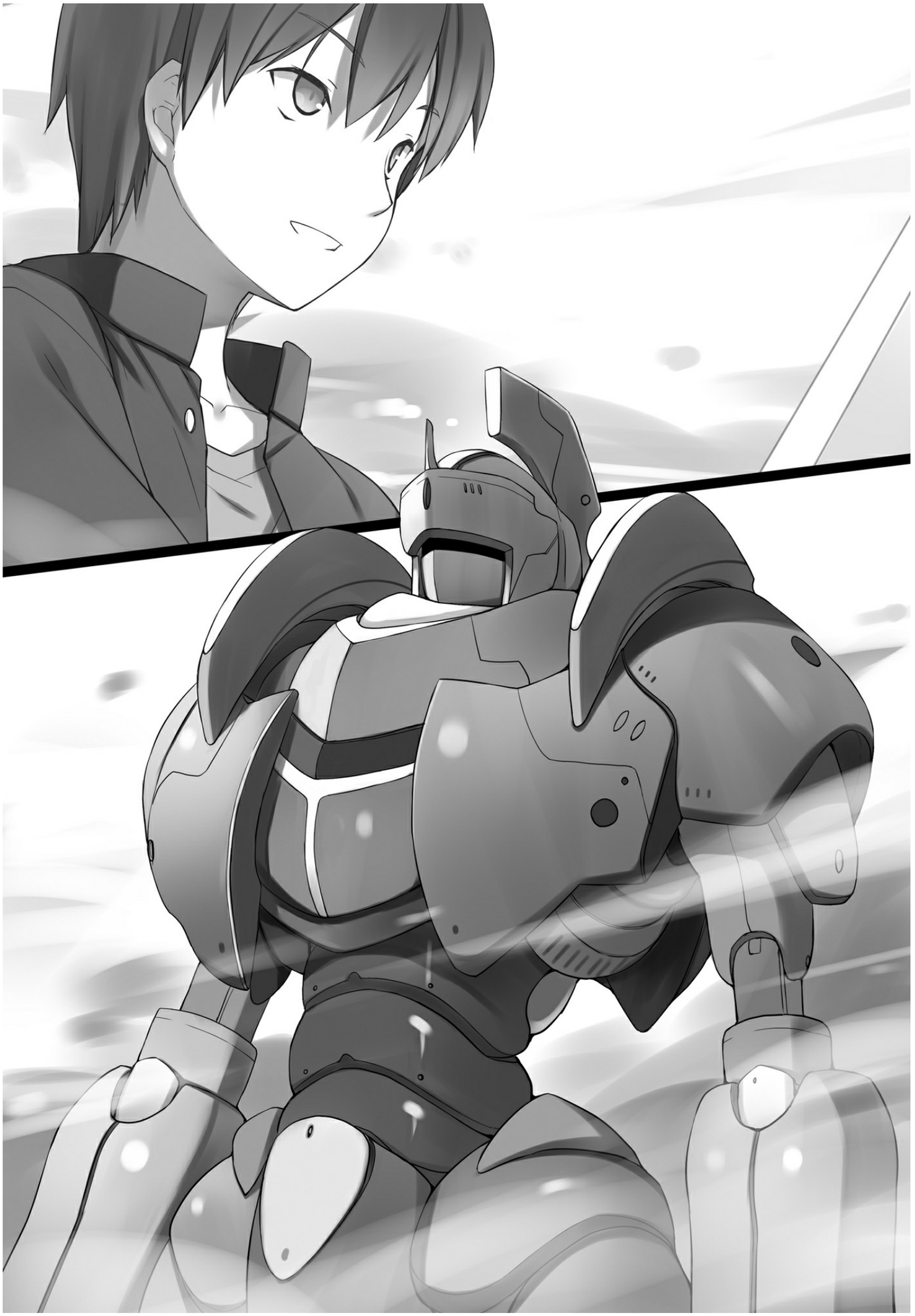
“Yes. But rest easy, Neanderthal-kun. If it looks like you can win against this, I won’t be laying a hand on you for a while.”

“You don’t go in on deals that would cost you... Is that it?”

“Precisely!”

Koutarou and Elexis grinned at each other. That was when the boosters on the giant’s body suddenly activated, and it came flying towards Koutarou. With its size and weight, the giant clearly wasn’t suited for walking. Instead it flew by manipulating gravity. When rapid acceleration was necessary, it would also use boosters. It was much the same as Koutarou’s armor in that regard.

“I’m happy to hear it! You really haven’t changed at all!”



Koutarou rushed forward with his sword in hand. His speed was nothing compared to the giant, but it was still exceptionally fast for a human. That was all thanks to his spiritual energy and the sword's mana.

"How about this?!"

While approaching rapidly, the giant fired the large gun on its left arm. It was a canister shot that spread into small bullets covering an area of about a meter, and they were all coming right for Koutarou.

"Whoa!"

Koutarou rolled forward under the bullets. A few of them grazed him, but the sword's magic protected him by deflecting them.

It looks like he can even dodge canister shots. Let's see if it was a fluke!

Koutarou swiftly got up and started rushing towards the giant again. He wasn't as good at controlling the sword's mana as Alaia was, so relying on the sword to protect him was dangerous. In order to keep from being shot, he'd have to get in closer.

"Expertly dodged! Very impressive!"

After firing a couple more canister shots at Koutarou, Elexis determined that he wouldn't be able to hit him that way and swiftly changed his method of attack. His next weapon was an axe meant for melee combat. It was huge from Koutarou's perspective, but it was merely a handheld weapon to the metal giant. As such, the giant could swing it around swiftly. And with its long reach, each swing of the axe covered a wide area. Between the length of its arms and the axe, anything within three meters of the mobile weapon was in danger. Elexis was sure he'd be able to hit Koutarou this way.

"It is an honor to be praised!"

Koutarou accepted the challenge. Since he wanted to get in and attack with his sword anyway, this was his chance.

The giant charged with its boosters' thrust set to max while Koutarou braced himself to take it on. The distance between them disappeared in the blink of an eye. The giant's attack reached Koutarou first.

“Take thiiis!”

The giant swung its long right arm horizontally, and the axe quickly came at Koutarou. Between its weight and speed, Koutarou would be dead even if only the arm of the mobile weapon hit him. It was an incredibly dangerous position to be in for Koutarou who wasn’t wearing any protection.

“You’ll never hit me with something like that!”

Koutarou quickly jumped to evade the axe that swept under his feet. Then using his momentum from jumping, Koutarou moved to attack the giant.

“I thought you’d do that, Neanderthal-kun!”

However, that was exactly what Elexis had wanted. The giant pointed the gun on its left arm at Koutarou mid-jump. In the air, there was no way he could dodge a canister shot. That’s why Elexis had swung the axe horizontally in the first place. It was all to get Koutarou to jump so he could essentially corner him mid-air.

“Oh crap! Signaltin, I’m counting on you!”

The giant fired. As it did, Signaltin began glowing. Koutarou unleashed Signaltin’s mana to create a barrier before kicking off of it. Through that, Koutarou was able to change the direction he was moving in and just barely managed to dodge the canister shot. The next moment, the canister shot crushed the barrier that Signaltin had created.

“Really, wonders never cease with you. You just jumped again mid-air, didn’t you?”

“Yeah. Despite how I look, I’m pretty flexible.”

But the giant was surprisingly swift too. By the time Koutarou landed and readied his sword, it already had its weapon pointed at him.

“However, it’s about time I end this little game of ours. I’ve already completed my goal.”

“Your goal?”

“Satomi-sama! The soldiers!”

It wasn't until Koutarou heard Ruth's voice that he finally caught on to Elexis's real goal.

I see! He did this to let his subordinates escape! Dextro pulled a fast one on me!

Two additional soldiers that had been hiding somewhere nearby had carried the other five into the spaceship. Elexis had attacked to buy time for them.

"So you're just buying time again... You're surprisingly caring when it comes to your subordinates."

"I don't know about that. Really, the most important thing for us is not to leave behind any evidence that we were involved. It's not to kill you or capture the ladies."

Elexis had distracted Koutarou so his subordinates could make preparations to retreat, but that retreat would be meaningless if they left any evidence behind.

Well played... With this, even if I defeat him, we'll only be escaping danger for the moment...

Blue Knight's systems, including Ruth and Theia's bracelets, were being scrambled, ensuring there would be no recordings of anything that happened. The devices Elexis had planted aboard Blue Knight were set to self-destruct. And the only soldiers who'd witnessed what had happened were on Elexis's side. He'd thought of everything.

The only proof that would remain would be in the logs of Koutarou's bracelet, but using that would only put Clan in a difficult position. Clan was personally cooperating with Koutarou, but her family was on bad terms with Theia's family. Clan had to stay in the background of all this in order not to get them involved, and Koutarou didn't want to force her hand in the matter.

"My only miscalculation was not taking into account the existence of an anomaly like you."

The weapons equipped on the giant's shoulders took aim at Koutarou. On the right shoulder was a large beam cannon, and on the left shoulder was a multipurpose missile launcher that could fire up to eight shots at once. They

were the most destructive weapons in the giant's arsenal.

"If possible, I'd like to get rid of that anomaly right here and now."

"Aren't I an anomaly because you can't get rid of me?"

"Well, when you put it that way..."

Elexis fired the missiles as he spoke. These missiles were trained on their target's heat signature, but were also guided by camera. Once they locked on to their target, they would chase after it as long as it was still alive.

"Damn it!"

Koutarou was planning on getting as close to the missiles as possible before dodging, but they exploded with a loud boom a few meters before they reached him. Elexis had used something known as a proximity fuze, which detonated as it closed in on its target rather than on contact. The intent was to deal damage over a wider area. Not even Koutarou could dodge an attack like that.

"Satomi-sama!"

Ruth screamed when she saw Koutarou caught in the explosions of the missiles. It was the kind of wide area attack that she had feared all along. She had no way of knowing what had happened to him, but it couldn't be good. Ruth's heart sunk as she shielded Theia from the blast wave.

"Satomi-sama! Satomi-sama!"

A cloud of dust shrouded the area where Koutarou had been. Since the explosions had been so close to the ground, dirt and debris had been kicked up everywhere. It made it impossible to see anything, but the winter wind quickly cleared the area.

Once the dust lifted, Ruth could see Koutarou lying wounded at the bottom of the blasted crater in the ground.

"Noooooooooooo! Satomi-sama!"

Seeing Koutarou collapsed like that, Ruth couldn't help screaming. This was like watching a nightmare.

"I guess not even you could do anything about that..."

Next the beam cannon on the mobile weapon started moving. The turret's motor growled as it turned towards Koutarou. Elexis was planning on finishing him off with it.

"Farewell, Neanderthal-kun. You put up a good fight."

"Stop it! Please don't kill Satomi-samaaaa!"

Koutarou was going to die. The same Koutarou who was supporting Theia and Ruth's dream. His death might as well be the end of the world to Ruth. She screamed again and again, feeling like her soul was being torn apart.

But her screams didn't reach Elexis, and he calmly pulled the trigger. The enormous amount of electricity generated by the giant was concentrated into a powerful beam which shot forth like a giant spear of light.

The crater in the ground from the missiles was widened even more by the beam. It kicked up more dust, shrouding the area again.

"Satomi-sama! Please answer me, Satomi-samaaa!"

Ruth was screaming and crying like a child. She was frustrated that she couldn't leave Theia's side. She wanted to run to Koutarou and save him even now, but she had to stay with Theia. All she could do instead was scream and cry.

"Well, that takes care of the anomaly. All that's left is—"

"Like I said... I'm an anomaly because you can't get rid of me."

At that moment, the giant's right arm and leg were cut off.

"Wh-What?!"

Having lost its support, the giant—and confused Elexis inside of it—toppled over to the right. And as it was falling, its left arm and leg were severed as well. By the time it hit the ground, the giant was limbless and defenseless.

"Hahh... it's finally over."

The one who had cut off the giant's limbs was Koutarou, who had managed to sneak up on it. He flicked his sword, sending the oil on it flying, and then pointed it at the cockpit of the fallen giant.

“Surrender. You’ve lost.”

“Satomi-sama! Y-You’re all right!”

Ruth screamed out one more time, but unlike before, this one was a scream of joy.

“How?! How are you standing there?! I just killed you!”

Elexis’s face was riddled with confusion. Koutarou, the boy he was sure he’d just killed, was now standing in front of him. It was like he was having a bad dream.

“The me you shot just now was what you would call a hologram.”

“I see! You hid when the missiles exploded and left a substitute behind!”

“Yeah. As a result, my clothes are a wreck. How are you going to make up for this?”

Koutarou had been caught in the missile blast, but he hadn’t taken enough damage to be incapacitated. Really, all he had to show for it were a few bruises and his burnt clothes. Signaltin and the defensive spell Yurika had cast on him earlier had managed to save him, albeit just barely. In the end, the proximity fuze had helped. If the missiles had exploded on contact, Koutarou would have been much worse off.

But after the explosion, Koutarou used the dirt it kicked up to hide while creating an illusion of himself with Signaltin. Since he wasn’t as good as Alaia at controlling Signaltin, the illusion he made was only a simple one that couldn’t move. Luckily, that was more than enough to emulate a collapsed and injured Koutarou.

Then, while Elexis was distracted by the illusion, Koutarou snuck up on the giant and cut off its limbs. In the end, the wide area attack that Elexis was sure would bring him victory had instead been the reason for his defeat.

Thanks, Magical Girl Yurika. To think having a real magical girl would be this useful...

Yurika had become a real magical girl just the other day. To Koutarou, she was now more helpful than ever. She’d been so useful now—today in particular—

that Koutarou was planning on offering her dinner for the next couple of days.

“...So losing sight of you was the end of the line for me, huh? I suppose now I’ll have to offer you one of my suits at a later date.”

“Thanks.”

“And would you do me the pleasure of giving me your name? I want to know the name of the man who bested me.”

Elexis graciously accepted his defeat and smiled wryly as he spoke to Koutarou.

“It’s Koutarou.”

“Koutarou, huh? It’s an odd name, but I’ll remember it.”

“Now surrender already. You’ve lost.”

The tip of Koutarou’s sword touched the cockpit’s windshield. However, Elexis simply shook his head and smiled.

“It’s true that I’ve lost, but I can’t surrender. I’m a CEO with a lot of employees to think of.”

Suddenly the giant began spewing out a large amount of smoke. The white smoke quickly filled the area and obscured Koutarou’s vision.

“What?! A smokescreen?!”

Over the chaos of the moment and through the thick smoke, Koutarou could hear something like an explosion.

“Let’s meet again, Koutarou-kun!”

The explosion was the sound of the giant’s ejection seat activating. The seat and Elexis were both launched high up into the sky, and he was picked up by his subordinates in the spaceship before anyone knew it. Without his armor, Koutarou couldn’t chase after them, so by the time the smokescreen cleared, Elexis and his men were far out of his reach.

“...Well, I guess you’re still as shrewd as you were two thousand years ago, Dextro.”

Koutarou sighed as he followed the spaceship with his eyes.

After activating the ejection seat, Elexis's giant caught fire and was enveloped in an intensely burning flame. It was a self-destruct feature that had been prepared beforehand, and it would leave nothing behind of the metal giant.

And once it was gone, there really would be no evidence left. The fact that Theia and Ruth were attacked by the military and DKI had been completely covered up. They had appeared without warning and left without a trace. They weren't necessarily strong opponents just yet, but they were clever.

"What a troublesome enemy..."

The fires from the burning giant lit up the area. Even though Koutarou had won the fight, Elexis's retreat was so well orchestrated that Koutarou couldn't help gritting his teeth in frustration.

Ruth, Theia, and Master

Thursday, February 11th

After the fight, Koutarou picked up Theia. He wanted to clear the area before anyone who'd heard the explosion started showing up.

"All right. Let's go, Ruth-san."

Carrying Theia, Koutarou turned towards Ruth.

"Hmm? What's wrong?"

When he did, he saw Ruth kneeling.

"Although I may have been unaware, please forgive me for all my rudeness."

Ruth bowed deeply to Koutarou like she would to someone of a much higher social station.

"What are you doing?"

Koutarou was puzzled by Ruth's sudden actions. She slowly raised her head and looked up at him.

Ruth-san?

Koutarou wasn't sure how to describe the expression on Ruth's face. It looked like she was crying, but it also looked like she was smiling. Her eyes were wet with tears and her cheeks were red. But her calm eyes looked right at Koutarou like they were trying to tell him something. All that Koutarou could tell was that even though Ruth was crying, she wasn't sad.

"That sword... It's the real Signaltin, isn't it?"

Ruth didn't directly answer Koutarou's question. She narrowed her eyes and lowered her gaze. Hanging from Koutarou's waist was a beautiful sword of silvery white. Ruth had seen the power of that sword firsthand, and she had concluded that it was the real Signaltin.

“Ruth-san...”

Koutarou let out a small sigh and looked down at the sword on his waist.

So it really did come to this...

Koutarou felt that it was a shame that he couldn’t protect his secret, but he had been prepared for Ruth to reach that answer on her own, so he didn’t panic when the moment came.

“I am from a family that has served Forthorthe for ages. I can see that this is no replica.”

As Ruth said that, she reached out with her hand and touched Koutarou’s sword. She gently stroked it as if it was her own child.

“I thought something was strange. Why had all the armor’s data been erased...? If you had just been thrown out of the universe, there would have been no need to do that.”

Tears fell from Ruth’s eyes as she continued speaking. One after another, they streaked down her red cheeks.

“But this makes sense. You and Clan-sama traveled to Forthorthe of the past, and you came back with this sword.”

Ruth was desperately trying to suppress her emotions. If she let her guard down even a little, they would burst forth uncontrollably and she would throw herself at Koutarou. She wouldn’t mind that, but it wouldn’t convey what she wanted to Koutarou. She wanted him to know what she was feeling right now. Just how thankful she was for this miracle.

“And you erased the data to keep that a secret. It was to prevent Forthorthe from falling into any needless chaos.”

Ruth looked back up at Koutarou. Her glance was filled with trust and love.

“All of that leads to a single answer.”

Ruth felt such bliss that she couldn’t fully express it with words. The future that she thought would be forever out of her reach was now right in front of her. The intensity of that joy made Ruth feel like she might go crazy.

“And that is that you are the highest ranking knight of Forthorthe, the Blue Knight, His Excellency Layous Fatra Veltlion.”

All of the clues pointed towards that. The silvery white sword, the damaged armor, his relationship with Clan, his improved skill with the sword. The puzzle pieces all fit together a very specific way, and Ruth saw the bigger picture. Koutarou was Forthorthe’s legendary hero, the Blue Knight.

“...The highest ranking knight?”

Those words puzzled Koutarou. Seeing his expression change when he heard them, Ruth was assured and flashed a smile of pure joy.

“So it... really is the truth...?”

“...Yes.”

Koutarou nodded firmly in response to Ruth’s question.

“Oh... Goddess of the Dawn... I thank you for bestowing me with this miracle...”

Ruth loved Koutarou. Those feelings had surpassed her admiration for the Blue Knight for quite some time now. But now that she knew that Koutarou and the Blue Knight were one and the same, her admiration for the Blue Knight merged with her feelings for Koutarou. Combined, she now felt more for him than ever.

“...Your title... of Blue Knight... was affixed as the highest rank... after the war... by Her Majesty Alaia... in honor of your loyalty...”

The tears from Ruth’s eyes flowed freely, and her sobbing made it hard for her to speak.

Your Highness... our Blue Knight... is the real one...

Her trembling hand grasped at her throbbing chest. Through the tears, Ruth did her best to continue speaking. She wanted Koutarou to know just who he was.

“Ever since, ‘Blue Knight’ has become your personal title. There is no other knight that has inherited the title since. That means the Blue Knight is the leader of the knights. It is a higher rank than my title of Guardian Knight.”

“The leader of the knights...?”

Just a moment ago, Ruth had been the one confused, but now the tables had turned. Koutarou was gradually starting to understand the complicated position he was in.

“Yes. As long as you possess that sword and go by the title of Blue Knight, you have authority in Forthorthe second only to the royal families. Not even the highest standing nobles... No, not even the royal families would have an easy time doing something against you. You are truly... exceptional.”

Alaia had established special concessions and exceptions for the Blue Knight during her reign. Not only was Veltlion’s special territory still forbidden to enter, but the Blue Knight’s salary was still included in the national budget even two thousand years later. When it came to the law, the Blue Knight had been given special rights that not even the empress could revoke. Alaia had done so to make it possible for Koutarou to return to Forthorthe, even if it was two thousand years in the future.

“I see... so Her Majesty did that...”

“Yes. If you so feel like it, you could even order me to die, Master.”

Ruth put her hand on her chest and smiled as she said that. It was as if she was saying that she’d be willing to die on the spot.

“I wouldn’t order something like that.”

“I am aware, Master. Heehee... Heeheehee...”

Ruth knew that Koutarou would never give such an order. But at the same time, she almost wanted him do to just that. That was just how she felt.

“By the way... what’s with that ‘Master’ thing?”

“Master is Master. You are the most important knight of all, so it’s only obvious that I call you that.”

“I’m not all that great though.”

“Oh, but you are. What are you saying? Goodness...”

To Ruth, that was unbearably amusing. The Blue Knight was the most famous

general in all of Forthorthe's long history. Yet here he was, saying that he wasn't all that great.

"Heehee, I can't wait for Her Highness to wake up."

Ruth looked at Theia resting on Koutarou's back, and smiled through her tears.

"Once Her Highness learns of Satomi-sama's identity... Heehee."

Ruth was almost dying with anticipation to see what kind of expression Theia would make when she learned Koutarou was the Blue Knight.

"About that... Please don't tell Theia."

"Master?! B-But why?!"

Koutarou's words came as a surprise to Ruth. Theia would rejoice to hear the truth, so Ruth was very much so looking forward to telling her.

"Theia's dream will be ruined."

"That's not true! Not at all!"

"And it's not just that. If both the Blue Knight and Signaltin were to reappear, Forthorthe would be thrown into a state of confusion. The fewer people who know about this, the better."

"Her Highness would keep your secret!"

"It's... It's not about whether or not she'll keep it a secret... It's that her judgment will be influenced simply by knowing about it."

Koutarou trusted Theia and Ruth. They would without a doubt keep his secret. However, Koutarou believed that the fact that he was the Blue Knight and that Signaltin existed would fetter Theia's decisions. So apart from a situation where it became unavoidable, he had no intention of revealing it on his own. Neither Koutarou nor Alaia wished for that.

"Her Highness's judgment..."

Ruth understood the meaning of that as well. Learning such a big secret that couldn't be told to anyone would only be an unnecessary risk.

"I understand..."

Ruth reluctantly decided to listen to Koutarou. Considering today's events, it would be for the best to keep her risks as low as possible. Although logic dictated that was the right thing to do, Ruth was very disappointed.

When Theia woke up, she found herself in familiar surroundings. She was in her private room aboard Blue Knight. Beside her was her childhood friend. It was the same scene she always witnessed when waking up.

"Ruth."

"Good morning, Your Highness."

"...What happened?"

The last thing Theia could remember was being attacked by Elexis's subordinates and resisting them. She asked Ruth about what happened after that.

"Before Your Highness could be abducted, Satomi-sama repelled the enemy."

"What about Elexis?"

"He escaped. And he didn't leave any evidence behind."

"I see... So we fell completely into his trap..."

From that brief talk, Theia had learned everything that she wanted to know. Their efficient communication was probably thanks to the two having spent such a long time together. Moving on from the attack, Theia asked her next question.

"What about Koutarou?"

"He is safe. I believe he is eating dinner right now."

Ruth had prepared dinner while Theia was asleep. Koutarou's injuries hadn't been anything serious, so he was likely eating dinner with everyone else about now.

"I see... That's good..."

Theia's expression brightened up upon hearing that Koutarou was safe.

So you really did come to save me, Koutarou... I'm glad you're okay...

Theia had complicated feelings regarding Koutarou, but that wasn't his fault. She was happy that he had come to save her, and she felt relief to hear that he was safe. What it added up to was that Theia loved Koutarou.

"Why don't you go see for yourself?"

"No, that's all right..."

Theia shook her head at Ruth's suggestion. If she stayed by Koutarou's side any longer, she would most likely end up making a decision that would make him suffer. Theia wanted to avoid that. Since she loved Koutarou, she wanted him to be as happy as possible.

"Your Highness..."

Ruth understood Theia's feelings quite well. Just a while ago, she had felt the same way. But in the end, she chose Koutarou because she realized that she would be miserable any other way. And now that she knew Koutarou's secret, she was convinced that she'd made the right decision. Ruth wanted to convey that to Theia somehow. She wanted her to understand that it was okay to love Koutarou.

I really should tell her... I feel so sorry for Her Highness this way...

After thinking the matter over, Ruth decided to speak her mind. She sat down on the chair next to the bed and faced Theia.

"Your Highness, there is one thing I wish to tell you."

"What now? And why so formal?"

Realizing her childhood friend was behaving differently than normal, Theia straightened herself up and turned towards Ruth. As a result, they ended up looking directly at each other.

"I am well aware of how you're feeling, Your Highness. And I will say this knowing that."

Ruth looked straight into Theia's eyes and spoke with slow, assured words. They were overflowing with her desire for her childhood friend to be happy.

"Your Highness, do not hesitate to choose Satomi-sama. Living with him is not a sin in any way. He will surely be of help to the people of Forthorthe."

“Ruth...”

Theia looked at Ruth with earnest eyes as she realized what Ruth was telling her and what it meant. She also knew painfully well how Ruth must have felt to say those words.

“How can you say that? I myself... can’t find any reason for it...”

But even with Ruth’s encouragement, Theia couldn’t make her decision. It was already a matter of fact that Koutarou was special to Theia and Ruth, but that wouldn’t be enough to convince the citizens of Forthorthe that he was worth ending the Mastir family bloodline over. That’s what Theia was thinking of.

“I believe in Satomi-sama. He will surely leave behind a greater legacy than even the legendary Blue Knight.”

Ruth knew that Koutarou would contribute to Forthorthe even more than the Blue Knight. In reality, he already had. Since Koutarou was the Blue Knight himself, he had already contributed more to Forthorthe than the legends told of. He was even more than qualified to serve as Theia’s partner. If anything, Theia might not be qualified enough for him.

However, Ruth felt like Theia’s feelings towards Koutarou needed to be developed even further before she learned the truth. If not, she would surely regret it. Based on Theia’s personality, if she were to choose Koutarou because he was the Blue Knight, she would surely regret later that she hadn’t chosen Koutarou because he was Koutarou.

“Do you believe that Satomi-sama is inferior to the Blue Knight, Your Highness?”

“Of course not!”

Theia emphatically shook her head. She believed that Koutarou was the greatest knight. That he surpassed even the Blue Knight. And she wanted everyone else to believe that too.

“But... But you know he’s an alien! Even if we were to marry, we would never have children! I can never give him a new family!”

That greatly pained Theia. Since she had grown up with a single parent like Koutarou had, she had very special feelings about the significance of family. But if she married Koutarou, she wouldn't be able to give him one. Theia thought it would be a tragedy to tie him down that way. A sin.

"I don't care if it's Kiriha or Yurika! He needs to marry a human from Earth to be happy! I can't do that for him!"

Theia shouted through her tears as she grasped at her bedsheets.

Why an alien...? Why couldn't you have appeared to me as a man of Forthorthe...?

Theia had never begrudged being an alien this much. The fact that they could never become normal lovers was exceptionally painful for her. And that pain manifested as large tears that rained down on her sheets.

"Then you only need to give him double the happiness. Happiness comes in more than one shape, you know."

Ruth spoke out in a gentle voice as, one by one, she uncurled Theia's fingers grasping the sheet. And once her hand was free, Ruth held it gently.

"Ruth..."

Ruth's warmth and words sunk into Theia's chest.

A happiness greater than having a family... A different shape of happiness...

Theia and Ruth weren't related, yet they shared a great happiness together. So the same should be possible between Theia and Koutarou. That was what Ruth was trying to say.

"And you believe I can do that?"

"It's not a matter of believing. I know you will do it. It's not like everyone can have children anyway."

Infertile couples existed even in Forthorthe. There were all kinds of reasons, be it genetics, injuries, or anything else. But even then, they chose to love each other because they believed that they would be happy together. Ruth wanted Theia to do the same. She was sure she could do it. She believed in Theia as much as she did Koutarou.

“But... I’m scared.”

Theia could understand what Ruth was saying. That much made sense, but it wasn’t the only thing that was bothering her.

“Just what does a princess of Forthorthe have to fear?”

“I’m terrified! I shouldn’t have that kind of power over someone’s fate! This is the first time I have ever been this frightened!”

Theia’s tears overflowed from her eyes, and she tightly clutched Ruth’s hand.

“Your Highness...”

Theia’s hand was shaking. Ruth squeezed it to help stop the trembling, but it wasn’t enough.

“I am terrified of seeing Koutarou regret his decision!”

What Theia was scared of was what might happen after she took Koutarou back to Forthorthe with her. She feared that although everything might be fine at the start, as time passed, he might come to regret his decision to come to Forthorthe. Of course, he would probably never admit to it even if he did regret it. How could she ever know his true feelings? That thought frightened Theia.

“I don’t want to see him feeling lonely! I don’t want to see him looking up into the starry sky, longing for Earth! I alone won’t be enough to save him from that solitude...”

The image of Koutarou looking for his home among the stars—a tiny planet he would never find—drifted into Theia’s mind. It was something she often did herself. When she looked up at the night sky, she couldn’t help looking for Forthorthe even though there was no way she could see it. Theia had come here of her own accord, so she didn’t mind that. But what about Koutarou? And if that actually came to pass, what would she do? Theia didn’t think there would be anything she could do to help him.

“Then let us search for a way together, you and me, Your Highness.”

“Ruth...?”

Ruth had suggested the unthinkable, leaving Theia at a loss for words.

“If Your Highness alone can’t save him from his solitude, then the two of us together might be able to. We might be able to find a way.”

“The two of us...”

Theia had been surprised at first, but as it sank in, she felt Ruth might be right. She felt it might be possible if she and Ruth worked together. Besides, both Koutarou and Ruth were big parts of Theia’s ideal future. She also knew of Ruth’s feelings for Koutarou. With that in mind, she began to think that the two of them supporting Koutarou together might be the correct choice.

“...Ruth, be honest with me.”

However, Theia had a single doubt regarding what Ruth said. Still holding on to Ruth’s hand, she flashed her usual challenging smile.

Your Highness...

That smile alone was enough to tell Ruth that Theia had made up her mind. That she would walk together with Koutarou, no matter how difficult that path may be.

“You’re just planning on using me for your own happiness, aren’t you? I won’t be mad, so just be honest.”

“But of course.”

Ruth nodded firmly, but the gesture that followed held more meaning than her words did. The two girls tightly clasped each other’s hands.

“My happiness is on the other side of Your Highness’s happiness, after all.”

“...That’s one way to put it. But you’re being reckless...”

Theia sounded like she was amazed, but that was only on the surface. The feelings conveyed in her words held a very different meaning.

“That’s because you can’t go after him without being reckless.”

“...Ha, you’re right.”

And so like that, Theia was finally able to make her decision.

I will live together with Koutarou and Ruth...

As an alien, she still had her worries about the future. She knew that there would be hardships. But she would overcome those hardships, even if they seemed impossible. All to obtain a future that would make them happy. A future that would be valuable not just to them, but a great many people.

“Still... so that’s how it is...”

Ruth smiled.

“What is?”

Theia tilted her head and looked at Ruth.

“I was just remembering something you said, Your Highness.”

“What?”

Both Theia and Ruth’s expressions were exceptionally bright. The gloomy feelings they had been carrying for these past few days now seemed fleeting.

“Just a moment ago, you said ‘I shouldn’t have that kind of power over someone’s fate.’ I believe those are wonderful words from a princess of Forthorthe.”

“That’s true. But it’s thanks to my coming to Earth. The past me was so foolish.”

With their emotions now clear and united, the bond between the two girls was strengthened even more.

“Why not just be honest and say that it’s thanks to Satomi-sama?”

“...Even if I don’t say it, you will, right?”

“Heehee, that’s correct.”

After smiling at each other, Theia let go of Ruth’s hand and jumped off the bed.

“All right.”

“Your Highness?”

Upon landing softly on the carpet, Theia turned towards Ruth again and reached out her hand.

“There is something I have to do right away. Ruth, I need your help. Please lend me your strength.”

“...As you wish, My Princess.”

Ruth took Theia’s hand without any hesitation.

Valentine's Day

Friday, February 12th

Kenji was hiding behind the water tank on the roof of the school, eagerly waiting for Koutarou to appear.

"...Kou did get that letter, didn't he?"

"Yes, Master Mackenzie! We confirmed that Satomi read the letter!"

A few other boys were hiding behind the water tank with Kenji. They were all part of the unpopular boys alliance, but for some reason they were now working together with their supposed enemy.

Today was the final school day before Valentine's Day. Since this year's Valentine's Day fell on a Sunday, valentines were being handed out today. Of course, Kenji had already received a copious amount of chocolate from various girls. He'd used some of the excess to bribe part of the unpopular boys alliance. He was going to use them to prank Koutarou, and to that end, they were all lying in wait now on the roof.

The reason for this was because Koutarou had been preparing to prank Kenji himself. But before he could pull it off, he was betrayed by some of the boys that Kenji had bribed. With the scheme revealed, Kenji avoided the prank and instead set up one of his own.

"Man, hurry it up, Kou... It's not some girl waiting for you up here."

Kenji, trying to keep his cool, was standing there holding a sign in his hand that read "Got you!" He couldn't wait to see Koutarou's dumb face when he jumped out at him with it.

When Koutarou came up to the roof, he didn't see anyone else there.

"Huh? Nobody's here?"

During lunch, Koutarou had gotten a letter from an anonymous sender. In girly handwriting on pink stationery, it read: “I will be waiting for you on the roof after school.” Koutarou figured he would find out who sent it if he showed up, but sadly there didn’t seem to be anyone around. Curious, Koutarou decided to hang around for a while.

“Hmm... I wonder who the letter is from...”

While waiting for the sender to show up, Koutarou examined the letter again. He didn’t recognize the handwriting on it. Harumi and Shizuka both had extremely neat handwriting, and Theia and Ruth couldn’t write this well yet. Yurika’s writing was terrible, and Kiriha’s was practically calligraphy. That seemed to leave Sanae, but Koutarou suspected her writing would have more fluff to it. She would add in things like hearts or stars. And just as Koutarou was racking his brain...

“Satomi-kun!”

Someone called his name. When he turned to see who it was, he spotted Harumi waving her hand over by the door to the roof.

“Sakuraba-senpai!”

Koutarou shoved the letter in his pocket and ran up to Harumi. Going to her would be faster than waiting for her to come to him.

“So this is where you were, Satomi-kun.”

Harumi greeted Koutarou with a smile, but it was somewhat forced. Seeing that, Koutarou realized that Harumi had some business with him.

“Is something the matter, Sakuraba-senpai?”

“W-Well, actually...”

Harumi blushed slightly and started digging through her schoolbag.

“I was looking for you so I could give you this...”

Harumi pulled two flat, square boxes out from her bag. They were about ten centimeters wide and two centimeters tall, just large enough to fit in either of her hands. Both of them were wrapped in red paper and white ribbon.

“Could this be chocolate?”

Even Koutarou could tell that the boxes were full of homemade chocolate.

“That’s right! Since you’re always helping me out, I made some for you and Matsudaira-kun!”

Harumi spoke quickly and seemed a little anxious as she presented the boxes to Koutarou. She held out her arms stiffly, as if she was receiving a diploma.

“Please give one to Matsudaira-kun.”

“Thank you very much, Sakuraba-senpai.”

Koutarou didn’t think much of it as he accepted the boxes from Harumi.

“An obligatory valentine from Sakuraba-senpai, huh? I’ll get to brag to everyone about this.”

Since both of the boxes looked the same, Koutarou naturally assumed that they were generic, obligatory valentines. There was surely no way that they’d both be true valentines, after all. But an obligatory valentine from Harumi was still special, and Koutarou was pleased to have gotten some chocolate.

“Oh... Your names are written on them, so don’t take the wrong one, okay?”

“Ah, okay. Thanks.”

Koutarou looked under the boxes, and sure enough, “Satomi-kun” and “Matsudaira-kun” were written on them respectively.

“I picked out things I thought each of you might like.”

“Thanks, Sakuraba-senpai. You didn’t have to go to all this trouble for us.”



“I-It wasn’t really all that much! I always prepare all kinds of chocolates for my parents and the children at the hospital anyway.”

“I see. How kind of you.”

Koutarou realized what she was saying. She had made various chocolates for other people, including the children she was close to. She’d just been nice and made some extra for Koutarou and Kenji while she was at it.

Phew... Thank goodness he didn’t catch on...

Harumi felt a wave of relief as she watched Koutarou putting the boxes of chocolate in his bag. Little did he know she hadn’t been entirely honest with him. The box for Kenji did indeed contain some extra chocolates from her candy making endeavors, but Koutarou’s box of chocolate was different. It contained the best of the dozen or so chocolate recipes she’d tried.

Harumi had processed the chocolate until it was creamy and packed it into a small plastic case. In the box were also marshmallows and crackers that could be dipped in the cream. It was something she’d made just for Koutarou. Something she thought would appeal to both his tastes and his playful personality.

Because of the time it took to make and the quality of chocolate it required, there was no way Harumi would have made it for anyone else. Contrary to what Koutarou suspected, Harumi’s gift was indeed a true valentine.

“Well, happy Valentine’s Day! I’ll be off now!”

Having successfully handed over her chocolate, Harumi was quick to flee the scene. She had some other things to do, and she would be too embarrassed if Koutarou opened her chocolate in front of her.

“Huh? What about our club activities?”

“Didn’t I tell you last week? I have to go to the hospital this weekend, so we’re postponing.”

“Oh yeah... Ah, and you’re going to give out chocolate while you’re there, aren’t you?”

“Heehee, that’s right. So see you later, Satomi-kun.”

“You bet. See you Monday.”

Harumi gracefully waved her hand and smiled as she left the roof. As soon as she stepped back inside, she quietly closed the door behind her. It wasn’t long, however, before it burst open again.

“Whoa!”

“Ah, there you are, Satomi-kun!”

Koutarou instinctively jumped back when the door flew open. The girl who emerged this time was his classmate Maki.

“A-Aika-san?”

Leaping from the doorway, Maki landed lightly on the concrete floor and pointed a finger in Koutarou’s face.

“Heehee, Satomi-kun, I have something nice for you.”

Maki then reached into the pocket of her school uniform and pulled out a long, slender box wrapped in indigo paper.

“Here, a true valentine!”

Maki shook the box two or three times in front of Koutarou’s face before presenting it to him. Despite the gesture, Koutarou stared at it suspiciously.

“...So how much are you planning on charging me?”

Koutarou knew that this wasn’t any ordinary chocolate. It was the treacherous to-order valentine that had led most of the unpopular boys alliance astray. And it didn’t come cheap.

“Why, I won’t charge you a thing!”

“You can’t fool me! Tell me the truth! What are you after?! Is it White Day? Ah, that must be it. You want a gift worth three times as much in return!”

Koutarou had never—to his knowledge—gotten a true valentine before, but he knew it was customary to repay the favor a month later on White Day, March 14th. Traditionally, a boy was supposed to buy a gift worth three times as much for a girl who’d given him chocolate on Valentine’s. Koutarou suspected that this was Maki’s ulterior motive.

“Why won’t you just accept it?! It’s because you’re like this that you’re not popular!”

“Leave me be! You wouldn’t understand how I feel! All you do is play with innocent men’s hearts!”

“I just happened to get a cancellation on an order, so I thought I’d be nice and give it to you for free!”

“Then give it here!”

“As if I’d let you have it now!”

Maki started sulking over Koutarou’s accusations and puffed up her cheeks in a pout.

“...Well, seriously speaking, if you worked that hard to make a nice valentine, then give it to whoever you get along with the best. It would be a shame for the chocolate to go to waste.”

“Satomi-kun...”

The moment she heard Koutarou’s serious words, the air in Maki’s cheeks escaped and she returned to her usual expression. After looking down and flashing a small smile, Maki presented the chocolate to Koutarou once more.

“Then I really will give it to you.”

“Are you sure?”

“You’re my number one friend after all. Well, just consider it an investment in next year.”

Maki, still smiling, gave the chocolate to Koutarou.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means you should work hard so I’ll give you a real valentine next time around.”

“I hate to think what that’d cost me...”

“Jeez, why can’t you just say you’ll do your best?! That was your big chance to score a lot of points!”

“W-Was it?!”

But in the end, Koutarou ended up angering Maki. She stormed off, slamming the door behind her with the same intensity she’d opened it with when she first arrived. As it shut, a loud crash could be heard from the other side.

“Koutarou, come help!”

The very next moment, Sanae passed through the door. In a fluster, she was speaking quickly and frantically pointing towards the door.

“The door shut on Yurika and she’s not moving!”

“Wh-What?!”

Koutarou rushed immediately over. When he opened the door, he saw Yurika collapsed on the floor in front of him. She had a large bump on her head, indicating she’d crashed into the door with considerable force.

“We were about to come out on the roof when that Maki girl showed up with this really angry look on her face... Yurika tried to jump out of the way, but the door got her when it slammed shut...”

“I see... Sorry about that, Yurika.”

It seemed like Yurika had gotten caught in the wake Maki’s frustration, which meant that it was indirectly Koutarou’s fault for angering Maki in the first place. Feeling somewhat responsible, Koutarou picked up Yurika and sat her down on a bench installed on the rooftop.

“S-Shatomi-shan... the whorld... the whorld is shpinning...”

Even after being placed on the bench, Yurika still hadn’t recovered. She was clearly seeing stars as her head rolled in pointless circles.

“Let’s just give her a minute. So, what did you two come here for?”

Sanae was looking down at Yurika as she floated beside Koutarou, but when he asked about what they were doing on the roof, she clapped her hands like she’d just remembered something.

“That’s right! Koutarou, hurry on home today. I bought chocolate, so let’s eat it together!”

“Ah, I see. That’s what you’re after.”

“Yeah!”

Since Sanae was a ghost, she couldn’t eat anything herself. She’d need Koutarou’s help in order to taste it.

“Yurika, you too?”

“Ch-Chocolate... I bought shome too...”

Yurika still seemed dizzy, but she rummaged through her pocket and pulled out a piece of chocolate. Seeing it, Koutarou only had one word to describe it.

“...It’s so small.”

“Don’t say that. Yurika was going to buy a bigger one at first, but then she found a new flavor of instant noodles. That’s why this is all the chocolate she has.”

The new flavor of noodles, Kanto seaweed soy sauce, cost 78 yen a pack, and Yurika only had 100 yen. She was going to buy the ramen and two 10 yen chocolates, but fate was cruel. With tax, the total came to 103 yen, 3 yen over her budget. In the end, she only walked away with one chocolate.

“Valentine’s Day... shucks...”

“It must have been hard on you, Yurika... I know how you must feel...”

Upon receiving the chocolate from Yurika, Koutarou’s eyes began to tear up.

Yurika could only buy a single 10 yen chocolate. She couldn’t possibly give something like that to the boy she likes, so she gave it to me as an obligatory valentine instead. Poor girl...

Having misunderstood the situation, Koutarou sympathetically took her hand and nodded repeatedly.

“Yurika, I’ll eat your chocolate with great care...”

“S-Shatomi-shaaaaan... Aaauuuuuuugh!”

Nijino Yurika’s first high school Valentine’s Day ended in bitter tears.

“Okay! See you later, Koutarou. Make sure you hurry home, okay?”

Sanae had told Koutarou what she wanted to, so she was planning on heading home and waiting for him in the warmth of room 106.

“I know. Be careful on your way home.”

“Yeah! Come on. Let’s go, Yurika.”

“Hnnngh...”

Sanae dragged a staggered Yurika with her, though it was unclear if her moaning was crying or if she was just still dizzy.

“You don’t have to be like that. When we get home, I’ll give you half of my chocolate.”

“Really?!”

“...Actually, make that a quarter.”

“Whaaat?! You said half! Please make it half!”

As Koutarou watched Yurika now chasing after Sanae, he began worrying about her future.

“...Yurika, are you really okay with this? Is this really how you want to live your life?”

“If that’s how you feel, then you can just look after her yourself. I believe you would be a good fit as Yurika’s guardian.”

“Me?! Wait, what are you doing, Kiriha-san?”

“Oh, just playing around.”

After seeing Sanae and Yurika off, Koutarou realized Kiriha’s arm was wrapped around his. With their arms linked, they looked like lovers as Kiriha pressed herself up against him and smiled happily.

“I made a valentine for my love, but sadly I still haven’t been able to find him. I’d like you to serve as a substitute in his place.”

“I see, so that’s why you’re doing this.”

“That’s correct.”

Kiriha embraced Koutarou’s arm and drew her face closer to his. As she

leaned in, her bountiful breasts pushed up against his arm, but strangely enough, Koutarou wasn't panicking as much as he had in the past. If anything, he felt somewhat relieved. That was most likely due to the trusting relationship that they'd developed during these past ten months.

"Please accept it, Koutarou."

Kiriha presented Koutarou with a long, slender box. The box was brown and black, and had been wrapped in a cool-colored ribbon. Not only did Kiriha's chocolate have a mature flavor, it came in a mature package.

"That's not like you."

However, Koutarou didn't accept the chocolate. Instead, he pushed it back towards her.

"What do you mean?"

"Valentine's Day is the day after tomorrow. It's still too early to ask me to be your substitute."

Today was February 12th. Kiriha still had two more days left to find her first love, so Koutarou couldn't accept her chocolate now.

"Heh, now that you mention it... Since Shizuka is making a cake for today, I suppose it just feels like today is Valentine's Day."

"Landlord-san is making a cake?"

"Yes, it's a chocolatey cake. She wanted to eat it with everyone, so she's making a pretty large one. I promised I'd help her make it later."

"I see. I'm looking forward to it. I don't know how many years it's been since I last had a homemade cake."

Homemade treats like that were a rarity for Koutarou after he lost his mother, so he was excited at the chance to have one again.

"What about homemade chocolate?"

Kiriha presented her chocolate to Koutarou once again.

"I don't know how many years that's been either. But I won't accept it today."

"Then hold on to it."

“Hey...”

“You’ll help me look tomorrow and Sunday, right?”

“...Well, I guess it’s okay in that case.”

“You really are stubborn.”

“You’re one to talk.”

“I won’t deny it.”

And so like that, Koutarou finally accepted Kiriha’s chocolate. With her hands now empty, Kiriha wrapped both of her arms around Koutarou’s and looked at him with her provocative eyes.

“So in that case... can I look forward to White Day?”

“Aren’t you asking the wrong guy?”

Koutarou smiled wryly and shrugged.

“Don’t be so cold... Can’t you just play along a little?”

“I promise I’ll find your first love before you wear me out with all this playing around.”

“That’s a terrible way to turn down a woman.”

“If you don’t cut it out, even a nice guy like me is gonna smack you.”

“I know good and well you’re not that kind of man.”

“Seriously, what is up with you?”

“I just love you.”

“Hahh...”

The two continued to play lovers on the roof for a little while. Kiriha had some time to spare before she was due to help Shizuka.

With Koutarou’s constant stream of visitors, Kenji and the other boys hadn’t had an opening to spring on him. And now there was no point in coming out and telling him that he’d been pranked. He already had four valentines in hand. In the end, it seemed the joke was on them.

Am... Am I the butt of this joke?

Kenji was staring forward blankly as the sign in his hand flapped in the wind. It almost sounded like a dry laugh, and he felt like laughing with it.

“Curse you, Satomi!”

“What was all that about being one of us?! You said you’d only get one or two obligatory valentines! Quit messing around, Koutarou!”

“He’s getting valentines left and right!”

“You’re the real traitor, Satomiiiii!”

But unlike with Kenji, this was no laughing matter to the other boys. They waited for Kiriha to leave before jumping out from behind the water tank.

“To arms! Our target is Satomi Koutarou!”

“Get him!”

On that day, due to the betrayal of their charismatic leader, the unpopular boys alliance was disbanded.

After being knocked out, Koutarou came to as the sun was starting to set.

Ouch, that smarts...

He’d only woken up from the pain of his injuries. The unpopular boys alliance had given him quite a beating. If not for that, he would have been out a little while longer. But as he stirred, he could hear a voice—no, two voices—that helped bring him around.

“Is Koutarou all right?! Will he be okay?! He won’t die, will he?!”

“He’s all right. It seems they held back when they hit him.”

“I... I see... You fool. You surely could’ve beaten those boys off with ease. Why didn’t you put up a fight...?”

“That’s the kind of person he is. That’s our Satomi-sama.”

“I know that! But I’m still frustrated!”

“If you don’t like it, then you should stay by his side to keep these things from

happening.”

“Then I will! I will protect him!”

“I have never heard of a princess protecting her knight though.”

“I will simply do as I please! Who would dare defy the seventh princess?!”

“As you wish, my princess.”

Focusing on those two voices, Koutarou slowly came around.

Is that Theia... and Ruth-san?

By the time he could remember who those voices belonged to, he had gotten a sense of his surroundings. He was currently lying on something flat and wooden with something warm and soft under his head as a pillow. Even with his eyes closed, he could tell it was starting to get dark out, but strangely enough, he didn’t feel cold. Perhaps that was thanks to the two warm presences nearby.

“Hngh...”

Koutarou opened his eyes and blinked a couple of times. Since the day was nearing its end, it wasn’t like it was bright outside. He did it to help clear his mind.

“It seems he’s awake now.”

“I-I see...”

Upon opening his eyes, Koutarou saw Ruth’s face in front of him. Theia was standing a little bit behind Ruth, but she was turned away from him and wasn’t looking at him. She appeared to be gazing at the setting sun.

“Good morning, Ruth-san. You too, Theia.”

Koutarou looked around as he greeted them. He was still on the roof of the school, but he was lying on a bench. The warm pillow under his head was Ruth’s lap. After looking around some, he looked back at Ruth and Theia.

“I am glad you’re okay, Satomi-sama.”

“You look like a mess.”

Ruth was smiling, but Theia was sulking. They seemed to be giving off

opposite vibes.

“Yeah, well, I don’t have a lot to say for myself... Upsy-daisy.”

Koutarou smiled wryly and sat up.

“Owowow...”

His body didn’t let him forget he was wounded. His injuries from yesterday’s fight still hadn’t healed either, and he grimaced at the sudden rude reminder.

“Y-You fool! Just stay down! You’re in pain, aren’t you?!”

Theia, who had been sulking, rushed right over to Koutarou. She grabbed hold of his shoulders and pushed him back down. She looked rather worried, and her sour mood from a moment ago was nowhere to be seen now.

“I’m all right, Theia. You don’t need to worry that much.”

“I-I’m not worried! I’m just amazed!”

Theia finally realized what she was doing when Koutarou said something about it. She quickly took her hands off him and turned sulkily away.

“What are you getting all embarrassed for?”

“Sh-Shut up! I’m not embarrassed!”

Shaken, Theia’s voice faltered. Hearing that, Ruth swooped in to give Theia a helping hand.

“Forgive me for asking again, but how are you feeling, Satomi-sama?”

“Huh? Oh, I think I’m fine. I’m sorry for making you worry.”

“Phew...”

Koutarou’s attention shifted from Theia to Ruth so he could answer her question. Theia looked relieved.

What am I so shaken up for? I only need to act like normal...

Even with Theia talking herself through things, she wasn’t able to calm down.

“Well, the sun is setting, so let’s go home before it gets cold.”

Completely unaware of Theia’s feelings, Koutarou slowly got up. He was still

hurting, but it wasn't badly enough that it would keep him down. He'd rather suffer a little than freeze on the rooftop.

"Ah, w-wait!"

Theia grabbed the hem of Koutarou's shirt as he started to walk off.

"Theia?"

Koutarou stopped and turned to her. As he looked down at her, Theia's face instantly turned red.

"What is it?"

"Ah, u-um... Er..."

Theia's mouth was moving, but she couldn't say anything. Eventually she looked away and turned to Ruth for help.

"Ruth, please... I... I can't do this..."

"Of course, Your Highness."

Ruth nodded at Theia, stood up, turned towards Koutarou, and smiled. Unlike Theia, Ruth was her usual self.

"Actually, Satomi-sama, we came to deliver a valentine."

"A valentine?! For me?! Really?!"

Upon hearing that he was going get chocolate from Ruth, Koutarou forgot all about his pain. He leaned in towards her in anticipation.

Koutarou...

Seeing Koutarou like that, Theia's expression brightened up a little. She quickly tried to cover it up, however, and looked at Koutarou sulkily.

"Koutarou, are you happy to receive a valentine from Ruth?"

"Yeah, of course."

Koutarou answered Theia and nodded like the answer was only obvious. To him, getting chocolate from Ruth was a very happy thing indeed.

"Ruth is an alien, you know. Are you really okay with that?"

Theia continued to question Koutarou. It was like she was confirming his feelings one at a time.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

Koutarou understood the question that was being asked of him, but not the significance behind it.

“Ruth is an alien, and a noble at that. Even if her valentine is a true valentine... Even if this blossoms into a relationship and you become lovers, it might be hard to make a family... That’s what it means.”

“Ah, so that’s what you’re asking.”

Now that he was clear on that much, Koutarou thought about it carefully.

She’s asking me if I’m okay receiving a valentine from someone when our relationship might never get any further than this. In that case...

But he knew his answer right away.

“Of course. To be honest, I would be happy to receive a real valentine like this from anyone, alien, monster, robot, or otherwise.”

Really, Koutarou had known his answer long before Theia even asked. He was happy when he got his insignia of rank from Charl. The same was true when Alaia entrusted him with Signaltin. Alien or not, it didn’t matter. He saw them as people he cared about, and he was happy to receive their gifts. This was no different.

“...What? R-Really...?”

Theia was puzzled by Koutarou’s answer. Contemplating it, her mind began to wander.

You won’t mind, even if it’s an alien...? Then... could you be happy with me and Ruth...?

Theia wanted to know how Koutarou really felt. He might have answered without much thought. Without knowing how much his answer meant to her.

“Why are you so surprised, Theia? You said it yourself, after all.”

Koutarou put his hands on his hips and smiled wryly.

“Huh? Wh-What did I say?”

“What’s important isn’t the sword itself.”

“Wha—”

When she heard those words, Theia suddenly became very self-conscious. She knew what he meant by them. She realized that she’d been so obsessed over being an alien that she’d overlooked what really mattered.

“This is no different. I don’t care about your body or where you’re from. It would be a waste of chocolate not to take it, so fork it over!”

“Koutarou...”

Koutarou’s words filled Theia’s chest. They were light and warm, and pierced the dark clouds around Theia’s heart like sunbeams.

That’s right... What was I so worried about? I was the one who said that Koutarou was a true knight...

Theia had been so fixated on such a tiny detail that she’d lost sight of herself. She should have trusted her feelings. She should have trusted herself more. She should have trusted that she would be able to make Koutarou happy after revealing her feelings for him.

“The only thing I’m concerned about is...”

“Is what?”

“Whether or not it’s bitter chocolate.”

When she heard those words, large tears began flowing freely from Theia’s eyes. Without even trying to wipe them away, she smiled at Koutarou.

“Then you don’t need to worry. All of it’s milk chocolate. There won’t be anything bitter...”

Theia decided to believe. In herself, in Ruth, and in Koutarou. In all of their feelings.

Koutarou, please live with us... I promise if you choose me and Ruth, we’ll make the sweetest chocolate for you...

And most of all, she believed in their future. She believed that there was a

way they could all be happy together. And if there was no clear path to get there, she would make one. Theia would no longer hesitate. She would work towards that future with all her might.

“Your Highness...”

In that moment, Ruth was able to sense a change in Theia’s feelings. It was the first step towards the ideal future that Ruth strived for. It was the moment that everything was finally set in motion.

I see you’ve finally made up your mind, Your Highness... I’m glad. And I’m sure everything will go well from here. After all, Satomi-sama said that these past ten months have been fun...

Ruth trembled with joy. She looked like she would start crying at any moment, but she held those feelings in. She knew now was a time to be smiling.

“Theia, why are you crying?”

“It’s nothing. I was just ashamed of my own heart’s weakness. I’m fine now.”

At last, Theia wiped her tears away. As she did, her eyes began to shine. They no longer betrayed any worrying or suffering. It was like she had wiped away her hesitation and unease. What remained were her usual, powerful, clear blue eyes.

Theia...?

But one thing seemed different. There was a new feeling in those clear eyes, and Koutarou found himself unable to look away from them.

“Ruth, give me the chocolate.”

“Yes, Your Highness.”

Ruth pulled out a small, wrapped package from her bag and handed it to Theia. Theia then removed the wrapping, revealing a transparent case.

“Is this... Saguratin?”

“That’s right. Ruth and I made this together.”

Inside the transparent case was a small model Saguratin made from chocolate. Some of the detailed parts had been simplified, but they had

reproduced the unique design of the sword, including its ornamentation, very well.

“You helped?”

“Yes.”

Hearing that Theia had made the chocolate with Ruth, Koutarou was overcome with a mysterious feeling.

What is this...? It’s like during the ski trip, but this is more... It’s different...

A warmth spread through his chest. He felt comfortable, but he also felt strongly like he needed to protect this feeling. It was similar to the sense of security he felt with his parents and the desire to protect he felt when looking at a small child. Those two feelings intertwined and created a very complex emotion.

“Satomi-sama. We have only made this chocolate sword. There is nothing else.”

“Ruth and I poured our feelings into this one chocolate... Will you accept it?”

“Yeah... Thank you.”

Koutarou reached out with his hands like he was being drawn in. It was incredibly difficult for him to go against Theia right now. He presented his hands to her almost like she was controlling him.

“Thank you for everything, Satomi-sama.”

“And if possible, we want you to keep helping us in the future too.”

“That’s a given.”

Koutarou nodded firmly after receiving the case from Theia.

“A given, is it?”

Theia narrowed her eyes and slightly cocked her head. Her expression was more gentle than usual.

“Yeah. Is that so strange?”

“Of course it’s strange... If that’s your answer, I don’t know why we were

fighting all this time. Heh...”

Theia’s gently laughing voice was a wonderful sound to Koutarou’s ears. But just ten months ago, this would have been a prelude to a fight.

“But I won’t let you win right away.”



“I understand. I don’t want Kiriha to fall into any danger either.”

“...Thinking about it calmly, you’re right about it being strange, Theia.”

“Right?”

Koutarou and Theia laughed together, and they both appeared to be enjoying themselves. It was quite bizarre to see an invader and her target together like that. But to them, that was now part of their everyday life. And they wanted it to stay that way from now on.

They continued to laugh for a while longer. Ruth simply watched over her beloved master and the legendary knight. It was a beautiful moment, and she treasured watching this miracle come together right in front of her. Words were unnecessary for her right now.

Once the laughter finally died down, however, Ruth spoke up.

“Your Highness, Satomi-sama, I think it is time to go home. It is starting to get cold.”

The only worry Ruth really had now was for their well-being.

“That’s true. Let’s go before we catch colds.”

“I’m hungry.”

“Once we get home, Shizuka-sama’s cake might be ready.”

“That’s right. I almost forgot about that.”

They both readily agreed to Ruth’s suggestion, and the three of them headed towards the entrance to the rooftop. Ruth, who was in the lead, opened the metal door and entered the school building. Theia followed behind her, but before she passed through the door, she stopped and turned to Koutarou.

“By the way, Koutarou, that’s not all that’s strange.”

As she turned around, Theia’s golden hair caught the light of the fading sun and shone a brilliant, burning red. It was almost as bright as the smile on her face.

“Hmm? There’s something else?”

Koutarou followed her lead and stopped as well. They were now standing so close that they could feel each other breathing.

“Actually... it’s about the chocolate.”

Theia reached her hand out and touched the transparent case Koutarou was holding.

“What about it?”

“You see, this chocolate is without a doubt...” Theia looked up at Koutarou and flashed a mischievous smile. “...A real valentine.”

Theia said those words as if it was nothing, but Koutarou was quite stricken when he heard them.

“...Huh?”

His brain was frozen. It was like someone had suddenly cut the power to it.

“That’s all I wanted to say. Brrr... Let’s hurry home before it gets any colder, Koutarou.”

A satisfied smile crept across Theia’s lips as she left Koutarou behind and quickly entered the school building.

“...Huh?”

But Koutarou just stood there frozen on the roof for a little while longer.

The baking in Shizuka’s room, room 206, was currently on hold as the batter was in the oven. Since the plan was to eat the cake with some tea after dinner, it was more convenient to hold off on any more work until everyone was done eating.

Sanae and Yurika, however, were still pressed up against the glass of the oven door when Kiriha left Shizuka’s room to head back to room 106. Kiriha was planning on using her spare time before dinner to check on Koutarou’s wardrobe. She would patch holes and mend frayed hems for him. He was so active and rough that it was a job that needed to be seen to regularly.

“Now that I think about it, I haven’t touched this drawer yet...”

Standing in front of the wardrobe, Kiriha pulled open the bottom drawer. The wardrobe had several drawers, and Koutarou's clothes were organized top to bottom by season. The clothes got thicker the lower you went, so Kiriha hadn't needed to go into the bottom drawer with the heaviest winter clothes before today.

"He doesn't do as much in these clothes, but I'll still give them a check."

Kiriha pulled out the articles of clothing one at a time. After getting everything out, she would return everything that looked like it was still in good condition. That was her standard procedure.

"Oh?"

Once she'd taken all the clothes out, she spotted a paper bag pushed into the back of the drawer.

"What's this? It feels like it has clothes in it too..."

Kiriha picked up the paper bag and looked inside. It was filled with all kinds of things, not just clothing. There was a half-knit sweater, an old-fashioned but well crafted knife, a small wooden accessory with wool decorations, and more. None of the things in the bag seemed to have anything in common.

"Oh no... This was something I shouldn't have opened. Sorry, Koutarou."

Looking at it all, Kiriha realized that they were mementos of some kind and she decided to return the bag to the back of the drawer without touching anything inside. As she went to close it up, however, something in the bag caught her eye.

"Th-This is...!"

It was an antique necklace of polished jewels and fangs strung together by a colorful string. Its style gave away its age.

"What... H-How?!"

At first, Kiriha thought she was seeing things. It couldn't be real. Yet no matter how many times she blinked, the necklace in her hand didn't vanish.

"It's... It's real..."

Kiriha reached out to touch the necklace. Her heart was pounding and her hand was trembling. She was normally calm, but her heart was now racing and her mind was going blank. Her hand just wouldn't stop trembling, not even as her fingertips reached the necklace. The touch of it was familiar. Her shaking hand lovingly lifted the necklace out of the bag.

"Th-There's no mistaking it... This is my mother's necklace..."

The beads of the necklace clacked together in Kiriha's trembling hand. It was almost like the rhythmic ticking of an elaborate pocket watch.

"But... why is it here?! This is impossible!"

Even though it was right in front of her, even though she was touching it, Kiriha still couldn't believe it. But regardless of how unreal it felt, there was no denying the truth that confronted her.

"Even if I don't believe it... if this is here... then that means..."

And that truth meant something big for her.

The day Kiriha had been waiting for the past ten years had finally come.



Article 13
The oven is not to be opened during cooking,
no matter the reason.

Article 13 Postscript
It's not like you can just cook it again!
Yurika-chan, do you understand that?!

Corona Convention

New! February 14th, 2010

Afterword

Long time no see. It's the author, Takehaya.

The publication of volume 9 marks our return to the main story. Thank you very much for purchasing it. In this volume, the strongest invader legend finally manifests and begins to invade Koutarou's normal life. An unexpected problem arises for Ruth too. And with Valentine's Day rapidly approaching, everyone is starting to get antsy. Really, this volume is bursting at the seams. Ruth, who has mostly been in the background, even gets her turn in the spotlight.

While working on this volume, I had something on my mind. And that was regarding translation. As of writing this, there are two foreign versions of *Invaders of the Rokujouma!?*, a Taiwanese version and a Korean version. There's been talk of a third one, but these were the two I was thinking of.

In Japanese, we can distinguish the characters based on how they refer to themselves. Here's a list of how it generally works out.

Ore = Koutarou

Atashi = Sanae

Warawa = Theia

Watashi = Yurika

Waga = Kiriha

Watakushi = Ruth

Oira = The Haniwas

On top of this, the characters can be differentiated by what they're saying and their tone. When it's all taken together, dialogue tags to label the speaker aren't necessary.

But a question popped into my mind the other day. How would this work in

another language? Take English, for example. In English, all subjects refer to themselves as “I.” As a result, Sanae, the haniwas, and everyone else would all talk about themselves the same way. It would be impossible to distinguish them based on pronouns.

Moreover, there aren’t as many linguistic distinctions between genders and social groups as there are in Japanese. While that kind of thing could be conveyed through body language and such in person, it’s much harder to do with just words. I think that’s one of the reasons people speak using such colorful language in English novels.

But this isn’t about which language is superior. It’s just a difference in how we communicate. To someone who speaks English, Japanese must look like an incredibly inefficient language, trying to convey everything through words rather than using expressions and body language. Compared to Westerners, the Japanese have smaller eyes and flatter faces, so we’ve developed a language that didn’t rely on those things.

So how do the Taiwanese and Korean versions of this novel look? I’ve gotten copies as samples, but since I’m not very proficient in any foreign language, I can’t read either of them. But I’m sure there are lots of challenges like this in translation, so I imagine the translators have their work cut out for them in trying to figure out how to overcome that. So in conclusion, I’d like to tell all the translators that I’m very grateful for their hard work. I hope we can work together in the future as well.

This afterword is four pages (which I am sure will change depending on the translation—it’s a surprisingly tough job), so I’ll sign off here.

I would like to give my thanks to the editorial department that publishes this novel; to Poco-san who always manages to make amazing illustrations for the strange stories I write; my friends who take me drinking whenever I get stuck; and to all of you who bought this novel.

Well then, let us meet in the afterword of volume 10.

January, 2012

Takehaya

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Invaders of the Rokujouma!? Volume 9

by Takehaya

Translated by Warnis Edited by Morgan Dreher

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