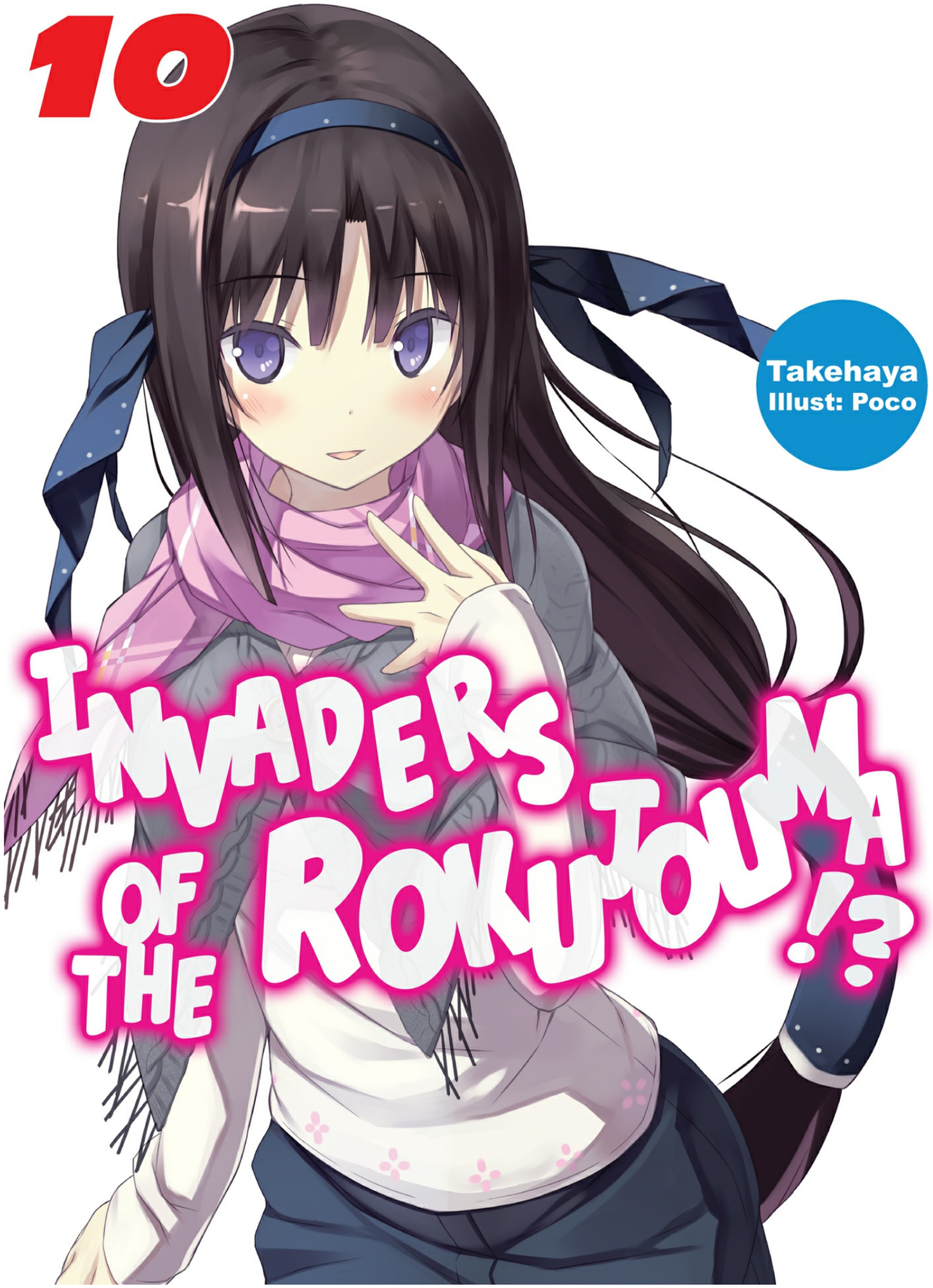
10



Takehaya
Illust: Poco

Invaders of the Rokujouma!?

THEY ARRIVED
ON EARTH IN 1999,
THE SAME YEAR
KOUTAROU'S MOTHER
PASSED AWAY.

INVADERS OF THE ROKUJOUMA !? 10




ENTERING A MOUNTAIN FOREST TO HIDE THE CRADLE, KOUTAROU AND CLAN MEET A YOUNG GIRL. THIS YOUNG GIRL, WHO CALLS HERSELF KII, IS LOOKING FOR A FALLEN STAR.


AS KOUTAROU TRIES TO HELP KII, MYSTERIOUS
GIRLS APPEAR BEFORE HIM ONE AFTER ANOTHER...


THEN KOUTAROU GETS
CAUGHT UP IN A FIGHT,
LIKE IT OR NOT.
WILL HE BE ABLE TO MAKE
KII'S WISH COME TRUE,
MUCH LESS HIS OWN?

TABLE OF CONTENTS

A Shooting Star and the Runaway Daughter

Searching for Her Mother

The Lost Tribe

A Grown-Up Date

The Heart's Balance

Choices and Consequences

What the Necklace Meant

Roller Coaster at Dusk

Afterword

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.

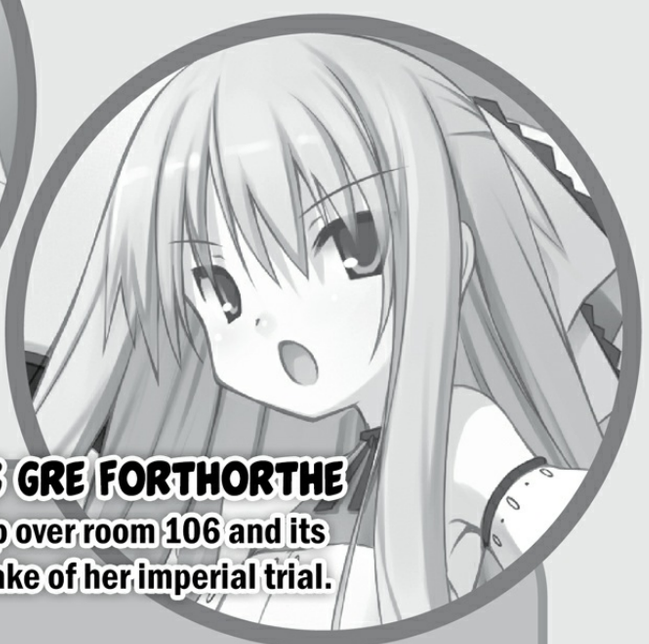
MAGICAL GIRLS



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

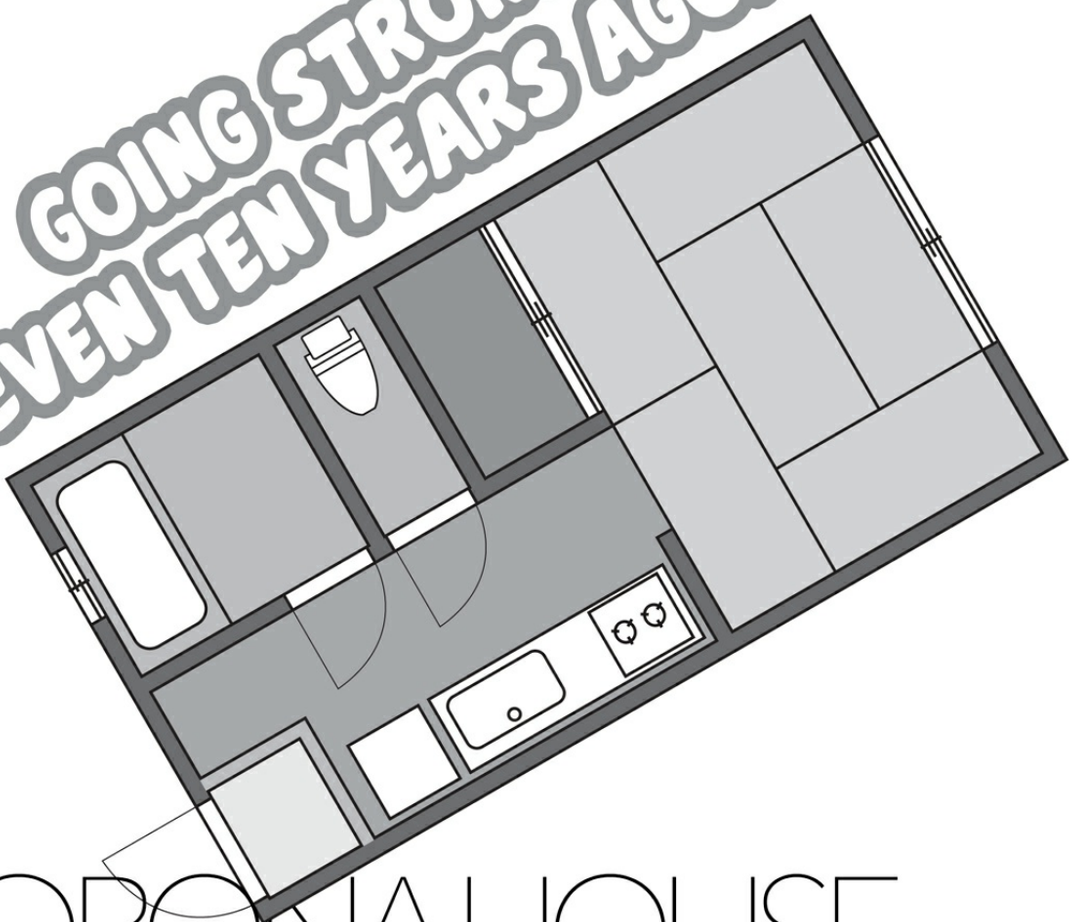


CLARIOSSA DAORA FORTHORTHE
Another alien princess and a rival of Theia's.



RUTHKANIA NYE PARDOMSHIHA
Theia's retainer and assistant.

GOING STRONG
EVEN TEN YEARS AGO!



CORONA HOUSE
ROOM 106

A Shooting Star and the Runaway Daughter

A mother's death was an unfathomable loss to a young girl barely six years old.

At that age, children are always with their mothers, whether they're playing, eating, or sleeping. As sure as the sun would rise in the east and set in the west, they're always by their mother's side even coming and going from kindergarten.

"Dad, you meanie! Can't you just listen a little?!"

Of course, the same was true for this young girl up until shortly after she turned six and lost her mother to illness. It was like the sun had stopped rising altogether. Having become mentally unstable, the girl would fight with her father over even the smallest things.

"I'm definitely going to go see the Kabutonga movie."

The reason for this fight in particular was the currently airing TV series, *Kabutonga, the King of Beetles*, an anime staring heroes with beetle motifs that was incredibly popular with kids. It had even spread to this girl's remote hometown. Whenever the kids opened their mouths, all they would talk about was Kabutonga. As a big fan of Kabutonga herself, she eagerly waited each week for the new episode.

"I don't care if I can't go to the surface."

The series was still airing, but its incredible success had warranted a theatrical version of the show. It took months, but it had finally been released nationwide. Sadly, however, the girl's hometown didn't have a movie theater. She wanted to see it so badly that she begged her father to let her go, but he refused.

For a six year old, this girl was very smart and gentle. Insisting on going to see the Kabutonga movie was a rare display of selfishness, but considering what she'd been through, it still wasn't particularly asking a whole lot. Having lost her mother, she naturally sought more love from her father. What she really wanted wasn't to go see the Kabutonga movie, but to go see it with her dad.

“Kii is leaving the house and won’t come back! I’m going to live on the surface! I hate you, dad!”

Sadly, her father hadn’t fully recovered from the shock of losing his wife either, and as a result, he failed to realize what it was that his daughter needed from him. Though they both really longed for the same thing, they misunderstood each other and tensions mounted on a daily basis. When the girl, Kii, had had enough, she decided to run away from home.

She ran from the town she was born and raised in, and headed towards Kisshouharukaze City. Back then, it was actually still called Harukaze City because it hadn’t yet merged with Kisshou City. It was Kii’s destination because she knew there was a movie theater there where she could see the Kabutonga movie.

Upon arriving, Kii was left breathless by the sight in front of her.

“Wow...”

There were several routes connecting Kii’s hometown and Harukaze City. The one she had taken ended in a tunnel that exited halfway up a small mountain. After jumping out from the dim underground passage, the Harukaze City skyline unfolded before her in the hues of the setting sun. Harukaze City was usually a bustling sight of many colors, but now that it was evening, it was all dyed the same calming orange. Only the dark silhouettes of buildings were visible against it, and while it was an everyday sight to the people of the city, it was absolutely breathtaking for Kii.

“I didn’t know the surface was this beautiful...”

Kii’s large eyes were sparkling as she looked around in wonder. Before her was the grandly illuminated city, to either side was a great forest, and above her was a seemingly endless sky. She had seen pictures of such things before, but this was the first time she had ever seen them for herself.

“Everyone should just live up here...”

Kii had never understood the feelings of those who wanted to leave her hometown for this place. That is, until she saw it herself. After beholding this

world with her own eyes, it started to make sense. The magnificent sights around her and the wondrous smell of fresh air stirred something deep inside. It was a strange sensation. Even though she'd left her hometown behind, she felt as if she had just returned home.

"Ah..."

As Kii continued to look around, the sky began turning darker and a point of light appeared to the east.

"Could that be a star?!"

The small pinpoint of light was indeed the twinkle of a star. Kii had spotted the first one of the night. Remembering something her late mother had once told her, she grew excited. She opened her eyes wide and stared hard into the sky. According to her mother, after the first star appeared, many more would follow.

"It's just like mom said! There are so many stars!"

Since it was still evening, there was only one bright star. But the longer she looked, the more faint stars she could see all throughout the sky. There were far more than she could ever count using her hands. And each time she spotted a new one, she let out a gleeful shout.

"This is amazing! There are stars all over!"

As time passed, the sky grew darker and the stars grew brighter. Even the ones that had started out just a dim glow were now bright little lights of their own. Like a box of brilliant jewels, the sky twinkled with the light of the stars.

"With this many, I might be able to find mom's star!"

That was the real reason why Kii was so fixated on the night sky.

"Don't cry, Kii-chan, even if I die. When people die, they become twinkling stars in the sky."

"Stars?"

"That's right... So if you ever go to the surface, then look for my star. It will be a glowing blue one, so I'm sure you'll see it right away."

“Okay! Kii will find it!”

And the unthinkable had come to pass. Her mother was now a star. That’s what she honestly believed as she looked all over for her in the sky.

Kii hadn’t run away from home just to see the Kabutonga movie. She had also come to see her mother’s star. In the end, it was all because she missed her mother. Her loss had left a void in Kii’s life. Wanting to go see a movie with her father and counting stars in the sky were both signs of how starved she was for love.

“Ah! It’s a blue star!”

When the sky turned completely black, a bright blue star appeared.

“It’s mom! It’s mom’s star!”

It was the blue star Kii had been looking for all this time. And now that she’d finally found it, her whole body cried out with joy. She reached out towards the star with both her hands and jumped up and down over and over again.

“Mom! It’s Kii! I’m right here!”

Her eyes were alive with hope and her heart was dancing with joy at the thought of reuniting with her mother. She called out to her repeatedly. Kii was desperate to see her mother again. She wanted to hear her warm, gentle voice again too.

“Mom! Answer me, mom!”

But no matter how many times Kii called out, the star didn’t respond. It simply twinkled in the sky without offering an answer.

“Mom...”

Eventually Kii’s voice faltered and her shoulders drooped.

“Is that star... not mom’s star? Or can she not hear my voice...?”

The blue star appeared to be indifferent to her, and that indifference inflicted a crushing loneliness on Kii. It reminded her of the weighty sadness she’d felt when her mother passed. The thought of it alone was too much.

“Mom... Mom...”

Large tears formed in the corners of her eyes. The slightest shake would send them running down her soft cheeks. But even with her eyes brimming with tears, Kii looked up to the sky once more. She couldn't give up. She touched the necklace around her neck and called out to the star again.

"Mom... it's Kii... I came to see you..."

But the star still didn't answer. It only twinkled in silence.

"Hnnngh... Hic..."

Unable to bear it any longer, Kii finally began crying. The sadness of losing her mother, the frustration of her father not giving her the attention and affection she needed, and the loneliness of being rejected by the silent star—her last hope. It was all too much for a six year old girl to handle.

"Hic... Hngh... Huh?"

Kii blinked twice. Tears scattered from her eyes, clearing her vision some.

"Mom's star is getting bigger...?"

The blue star she had first seen was just a glowing point of light. Looking at it now, however, it was much more pronounced. Kii was sure it had gotten bigger and brighter.



“Did she hear my voice?”

Kii’s tears immediately stopped as she realized something was happening. She didn’t know what, but just the thought that it might be her mother responding to her sent her heart racing.

“Mom! Kii is right here!”

Kii waved her hands and desperately called out to the growing star. Words couldn’t express how badly she wanted to see her mother again.

“It really is getting bigger... Mom!”

The star was already as big as a baseball and it was still getting bigger. Elated, Kii shouted louder and louder. In response, Kii heard an unfamiliar sound similar to a beast roaring or a car driving through a tunnel.

“What is that...?”

She looked up towards the sky and strained her ears. When she did, it sounded like the noise was coming from the star.

“The star is... growling?”

The star was definitely what was emitting the sound. She was sure of it now. And as the star grew to the size of a basketball, it quickly flew by overhead.

“What?!”

Kii hurriedly turned around to follow the star with her eyes. She watched as it disappeared into the shadow of the mountain, still growling.

“The star fell!”

The star had appeared to be getting bigger because it was getting closer and the howling sound was because it was moving so fast. Kii was a clever girl and easily able to piece that much together. And once she did, she hurriedly began climbing the mountain.

“It’s mom! Mom noticed me and came to see Kii!”

Kii ran with all of her might chasing after the fallen blue star. Her heart was pounding and she was having trouble breathing. But even then, she didn’t slow down. She pressed on without faltering.

“Mom! Mom! It’s Kii! Kii is right here!”

No matter how painful it got, Kii refused to stop moving her legs. Her mother, who she wanted to see more than anything else in the world, had come down from the sky just to see her.

As soon as they arrived on Earth, the first thing Koutarou and Clan did was hide the spaceship, the Cradle, they had used to return from Forthorthe. They were planning on burying it in the forested area of a small mountain outside of Harukaze City.

“Veltlion, this place really won’t be under any development, will it?”

“Yeah, it’s fine. This mountain will remain untouched. I came here hunting for beetles every year as a kid, so I’m sure of it.”

“I’ll take your word for it.”

Koutarou and Clan watched as the Cradle sank into the soil as if it were water.

Clan’s small spaceship, the Cradle, had been designed with the primary purposes of observation and research in mind. It was equipped with all kinds of stealth functions so it could study a subject without disturbing it or its environment. The ship’s ability to bury itself was one of said stealth functions. Using a barrier, it essentially created an excavator by repelling the dirt around it, allowing the ship to slowly sink into the ground. Once it had sunk down far enough, the only thing that would remain on the surface would be a hatch to enter the ship. There would be signs a hole had been dug, certainly, but nature would eventually cover that up on its own.

“So what do we do now?”

“We don’t do anything. We just freeze time inside the ship and wait until we leave for Forthorthe in this timeline.”

At first, Clan had planned to use her second Super Space-time Repulsion Shell to return home to the present from Forthorthe two thousand years in the past. By reversing some of the parameters, they could have hypothetically returned to where they’d departed from. However, the second repulsion shell had been used in their battle on Forthorthe. Clan had had to come up with another

solution.

Her plan B was to wait out the two thousand years somewhere they wouldn't be disturbed. By making some modifications to the technology used for warping, she was able to safely freeze time on board the Cradle. That way, they'd be able to sleep away two thousand years, and then simply return to Earth by normal means once they woke up in the future.

There was just one flaw in the plan. A specialized part of the Cradle had been damaged, leaving it incapable of spaceflight. Worse yet, the parts required to repair it wouldn't be invented until twenty years before they'd originally left Earth. Knowing that, Koutarou and Clan only slept 1,980 years so that they could wake up and repair the ship with then-modern technology. Once the repairs were complete, they then began their long voyage back to Earth.

Warp drive essentially opened up a hole in space to create a shortcut between two places. It was a quick way to travel long distances, which was exactly why Koutarou and Clan chose not to use it the whole way home. By predominantly relying on regular spaceflight, the trip would take nearly ten years. Using the warp technology inside the ship to manipulate the perceived flow of time, however, it only felt like a few days to them.

They'd chosen to take the scenic route, so to speak, in order to avoid spending longer than necessary on Earth. If they'd used the warp to reach Earth in a matter of days, they would have had to spend the remaining twenty years asleep on Earth's surface. But since Earth didn't have anywhere as safe as Veltlion's special territory in Forthorthe, it was a much riskier proposition. Ideally, they would spend as little time as possible asleep on the Cradle once they reached Earth in order to reduce the risk of being found. That said, if they took too long to get back to Earth and arrived after Theia was already there or on her way, they might get found out anyway. In order to be safe, they decided to split the difference and spend the first ten years in space, and the last ten years on Earth.

And now that they'd safely made it to Earth, all they had to do to finally get back to their own time was take one more long nap in the Cradle. In order to do that, they'd chosen a place Koutarou had frequently come to play as a child to hide the ship.

“How many years do we have to sleep this time?”

“Just hold on. I’m calculating that right now.”

Clan accessed her bracelet to determine exactly how long they would need to sleep in order to wake up at the right time. Clan had a nonchalant look on her face as she worked it out, but it was actually an extremely complex calculation with a great deal of parameters to factor in. It would take some time, and Koutarou soon began fretting.

“Clan, you could just make a rough estimate.”

“...”

Clan adjusted her glasses and unhappily furrowed her brows. She was trying to make an accurate calculation because he’d asked for it, so she was annoyed to hear him backpedal.

“Veltlion, you like just casually trampling all over a scientist’s values, don’t you?”

“I just feel like you’re wasting your time...”

“Wasting my time?! You’re the one—”

“You know, you’re cute and all, but it’s because of stuff like this that Theia calls you sly and whatnot.”

“...”

“Just chill out a little, you know? Be more— Huh? What’s with that face?”

“I-It’s nothing! Ahem, more importantly, I’ve finished the calculations!”

Clan cleared her throat as her face turned red and she changed the subject. She swiftly moved her fingers across the controls of her bracelet to display the results in hologram form.

“Sorry, I’m not wearing the armor, so I can’t read any of that. I might be able to if you use Ancient Forthorthian instead, though.”

Koutarou had picked up some Ancient Forthorthian during his time in past Forthorthe, but he couldn’t understand Modern Forthorthian at all.

“That’s right. I forgot.”

Clan had more or less started to think of Koutarou as a fellow Forthorthian, so she hadn't thought twice about using Modern Forthorthian as the display language. Once she remembered he couldn't read it, however, she simply decided to report the data to him herself.

"Well, getting to the heart of the matter, we need to sleep for ten years and 323 days, or just shy of eleven years."

"Ten years... Couldn't you have just counted that in your head?"

"Now you're just being mean, Veltlion! You know it's not that simple!"

"You're just so much more lively and fun when you're angry."

"I'm not having any fun at all!"

Though it had been dying down, Clan's rage erupted once more. That had been Koutarou's goal all along, but now that she'd gotten emotional, Clan didn't realize that much.

"Ten years, huh? Ten years..."

When Koutarou contemplated that, he realized something. As he did, his smile unconsciously faded into a stern frown.

"Besides, you— Wait, what's wrong?"

Seeing the change in his expression, Clan relented. They had spent so much time together that she realized whatever had come over him was serious.

"It's nothing. It's just... I was just thinking that my mom is going to die soon," he said as he forced a small smile for Clan.

Koutarou and Clan had been sent to Forthorthe on January 24th, 2010. Ten years and 323 days prior to that would make today's date March 7th, 1999. Koutarou's mother passed away on April 16th, 1999. In other words, just forty days from now, his mother was going to die.

"...I know how you feel. I'm sorry."

Clan glanced down at the ground before giving Koutarou a sympathetic look.

"Thank you, Clan... you should always be just like that."

"Don't be rude."

With the ability to cross space and time, Koutarou and Clan could have prevented all kinds of tragedies if they'd tried. Mutually, however, they'd come to the conclusion that that wasn't reasonable. It wasn't their place to change the course of history but so much, and they had finite resources as it was. As such, they'd agreed that they would only interfere in events that involved them, like the virus weapon in past Forthorthe. Other than that, they wouldn't abuse their knowledge of the future or actively seek out events to correct.

If they went around preventing all the tragedies they knew of, Koutarou and Clan would never make it back to their own time and place. And they weren't immortal, so they had limited time on their hands. Moreover, they questioned their place in interfering with the past. Who were they to decide who or what was worthy of saving? They had no right to decide whose life was important and whose wasn't. That said, they simply couldn't overlook the suffering that happened in front of them. It would be wrong to ignore those people. And so they reaffirmed the decision they'd made in Forthorthe: they would help where they could with what crossed their path, but they wouldn't go out of their way to find those in need.

Originally, their goal had been not to change the past at all, but things hadn't worked out that way. They'd had to settle for making minimal changes while doing what they believed to be right. They weren't gods, however, so there was a limit to what they could do. But in the interest of fairness, they'd agreed not to use the time slip for personal reasons. As such, Koutarou wouldn't be able to save his mother. Waking up in forty days to go save her would break the rules.

"Veltlion, this is your mother we're talking about, right? Why don't we just bend the rules a little bit for this one and go save her?"

"Clan..."

Clan's suggestion made Koutarou waver. It was his mother. The same mother he'd previously thought he'd do anything to save.

But... can I really do that to Clan?

When they had woken up to repair the Cradle ten years ago, a similar opportunity had presented itself to Clan. But she had held strong and returned to Earth without acting on it. Koutarou felt like bending the rules to save his

mother after that would be incredibly unfair. Both to Clan and to everyone else in the world who would never get that kind of chance.

And if I save mom, it will definitely change history...

That was yet another cause for concern. If Koutarou's mother survived, he likely never would have moved into Corona House. Once his dad had gotten the promotion, Koutarou would have just stayed at home with his mom. He never would have met the invaders that way. His life would be completely different, and Koutarou couldn't even get his head around what the consequences of that might be. Just like in sci-fi movies, he might lose his place to return to, or he might even disappear.

"Since we've come this far, I'll stick with you until the end, whatever you may decide. The royal families owe you an immense debt, after all."

Clan was well aware of what Koutarou was worrying about, including the dangers it might entail. But despite that, she still wanted him to follow his heart. It was both an expression of her friendship, and a token of gratitude on behalf of the royal families of Forthorthe.

"Thank you, Clan. But... can you give me some time to think? I can't decide right away."

Koutarou was happy over Clan's offer, but he wasn't sure what he should do. If possible, he wanted to save his mother. But at the same time, he wanted to return to his own world. That's what he had worked so hard for up until now. Moreover, he had no way of knowing what would happen if they did irrevocably change history. Koutarou felt what happened to him would be what he deserved for meddling, but Clan didn't deserve that. He didn't see an immediate solution that would satisfy everyone, so he couldn't make up his mind right away.

"We still have time. Take your time to think about it."

"Yeah..."

Koutarou nodded vaguely and looked up into the sky. The Cradle had already finished burying itself and had vanished underground, so silence had fallen over the area.

What should I do...?

Koutarou's mind, however, was a cacophony of thoughts. His emotions were in horrible disarray and his heart was pounding like he'd been doing heavy exercise. No matter what he chose, he would lose something important—either his mother or his life as he knew it. Both were precious beyond compare. Just the thought of losing either one send his mind spinning. He was so distraught that he barely even noticed the starlight twinkling in his eyes.

"Hey, Onii-chan."

A strange voice suddenly called out to the troubled Koutarou. Surprised, he abandoned his thoughts and looked in the direction of the voice.

"Did you see a star falling down around here? I am looking for it."

Koutarou saw a tiny girl, just a little too young to be going to elementary school. She was wearing a white robe and a long red skirt. It looked like a shrine maiden's outfit. Her hair was short, and her large eyes sparkled in the starlight. She looked like a healthy, energetic girl.

"A star, you say? Well, I haven't seen one..."

Koutarou tried to hide his shock as he answered the girl. It wasn't just her appearance that had taken him by surprise.

She's talking about us...

The star the girl was looking for was most likely the Cradle that Koutarou and Clan had flown in on. She must have spotted it landing in the area and came to take a look.

"Veltlion..." Clan whispered to Koutarou.

"Yeah, I know."

Clan had only said his name, but he knew what she was getting at. She wanted him to get more information from the girl—really, find out if there were any other witnesses.

"What about you, Onee-chan?"

"I-I haven't seen a star either."

Not used to talking to strangers, Clan forced an awkward smile as she answered the girl's question before quietly moving to hide behind Koutarou. She was planning on making him deal with the girl.

"Then did you hear a really loud sound? It went like wrooooom!"

The girl lifted her arms up above her head and swung them around in a wild gesture.

"I can't quite remember. An airplane might have passed by though."

"Hmm, I see..."

The girl nodded a couple of times and then politely bowed.

"Thank you for telling me. Bye-bye, Onii-chan, Onee-chan!"

After saying goodbye, the girl quickly turned and ran off. Like one could have guessed from her appearance, she was an active girl. Koutarou quickly called out to her, however, as he still had more he wanted to ask her.

"Wait a moment! Where are you headed?"

The girl stopped and looked back to answer Koutarou.

"I'm going to look around this area a little more! I want to find that star!"

"Wait a minute!"

With a few sweeping strides, Koutarou caught up with the girl. He couldn't just let her go like that. As he approached, the girl stared at him with wide eyes.

"What is it?"

"I'll come with you. It's dangerous for a girl to be alone at this hour."

There were two reasons Koutarou really wanted to go with her.

The first was because he was genuinely worried about her. The sun had already set and it was now pitch black outside. Moreover, they were in the middle of a mountain forest. It was hard to see where you were going, making it especially dangerous for a small girl to be walking around on her own.

The second reason was that he wanted to talk to her a little more. He wanted to make sure that there wouldn't be any others who would come looking for

the Cradle.

“Will you help me look?”

“Yeah.”

“Really?! Thank you, Onii-chan!”

Seeing Koutarou nod, the girl’s expression lit up. Her wide eyes were practically glowing, and her smile was beaming.

“You don’t mind, do you, Clan?”

Koutarou turned back to Clan to make sure, and she nodded in response.

“I’ll leave that to you. I will remain here and continue with preparations.”

“Yeah, good idea.”

Koutarou would tag along with the girl while Clan stayed behind to make sure things were in order for their return to the future. The division of labor seemed obvious enough. Of course, it didn’t help any that Clan was naturally shy.

“Oh, and Veltlion, take this with you.”

Clan tossed something to Koutarou, and he quickly plucked it from the air.

“This is...”

It was a silver bracelet just like the one that Clan was wearing.

“You wouldn’t want to get lost, right?”

“Ah, so that’s what it’s for.”

Koutarou looked over the bracelet in his hand.

The bracelet’s original purpose was to serve as a remote control for the Cradle and the Hazy Moon. Naturally, it was linked to both ships, and it sent and received all kinds of information. It displayed the Cradle’s current location, observed the wearer’s current condition, and more. So as long as Koutarou wore the bracelet, he wouldn’t have to worry about getting lost. Without it or Blue Knight’s armor, he would be in just as much danger as the little girl walking around a dark forest at night.

While Koutarou was staring at the bracelet, Clan approached the girl and

pinned something that looked like a small badge to her chest.

“And this is for you.”

“What is it?”

The girl tugged on her shirt to look at it.

“With this, we’ll be able to find you right away if you get lost.”

“I see. How smart.”

The girl let go of her shirt and smiled at Clan. Unused to having strangers complimenting her, Clan simply blushed.

“I don’t really get how to use this, but... thanks, Clan.”

After looking over the bracelet, Koutarou slipped it on his right wrist as he thanked her. The next moment, a small gem started glowing on the bracelet. It seemed to be a sign it had activated.

“That’ll do it.”

“Then let’s go!”

After he put on the bracelet, the girl grabbed Koutarou’s arm and started walking right away.

“Don’t be in such a hurry! It’s dangerous!”

“It’ll be fine. You’re such a worrywart, Onii-chan.”

“W-Well, I guess I’m off, Clan.”

“Stay safe.”

Pulled along by the girl, Koutarou vanished into the woods. After seeing them off, Clan crossed her arms and pouted.

“That Veltlion... Why wouldn’t he ask me to come with him? I might be uncomfortable around strangers, but still!”

Clan was shy and she had her own work to do, but she was still unhappy that Koutarou had been so eager to leave her behind.

Though she was looking for a star, it wasn’t like she had any leads. The girl

was relying on only her intuition as she walked around the black forest. The uneven forest floor was obscured by darkness, but the girl's steps were confident and firm. Seeing that, Koutarou realized how determined she must be to find this star.

"Hmm, it should have fallen around here..."

"Did you see it?"

"Yeah. It came from the sky and zoomed past me."

"And that's why you came looking for it?"

"Yeah."

"All alone?"

"That's right! I came alone! I came here the whole way on my own and I found the star on my own!"

Koutarou followed behind the girl as they talked.

She's never going to find it... I should come up with a good way to get her to give up...

Watching the girl's back, he tried to think of a way to get her to abandon the search. They'd been walking and talking long enough now that Koutarou had learned everything he needed to know. The girl had come up to the mountains on her own, and she just happened to spot the Cradle as it landed. She was the one and only witness. So as long as Koutarou could get her to give up her star search, there shouldn't be any problems.

Koutarou knew that her search was pointless because her "star" was actually the Cradle, which was already buried underground. No matter how hard she looked, she would never find it. They'd already moved a good deal away from where it actually was. But since Koutarou couldn't tell her that, he simply followed her lead. Knowing she was wasting her time, however, it was getting harder and harder to watch. Now that he had gotten the information he needed out of her, there was no reason to keep up the charade and get her hopes up.

"You know, it really is dark now. If you don't go home soon, your family will

get worried about you.”

“It’s okay. I’m looking for my mom.”

“Your mom?”

That certainly wasn’t what Koutarou had expected her to say. He was quite stumped by the response, but she just turned around and smiled at him.

“Uhuh. It’s been a while since I saw her last.”

“Weren’t you looking for a star?”

“Yeah, I am. My mom’s blue star.”

“Ah...”

It was in that moment that Koutarou understood what the girl meant.

I was worried about getting her hopes up, but this is worse... What have we done?

The girl’s next words confirmed his fears.

“My mom said when she died, she would become a blue star. And when I looked up at the sky before, I saw a blue star falling! My mom must have found me and come to see me!”

She’d mistaken the Cradle for a falling blue star, which had given her false hope that her late mother had come to see her. That’s why she was searching the mountain all on her own.

If this girl realizes that what she saw wasn’t her mom’s star...

If she didn’t find the star, she would likely be devastated. When he thought about that, Koutarou was overcome with guilt. If he and Clan hadn’t landed here, they wouldn’t have had to break this little girl’s heart.

“...I’m sure you’ll find her soon.”

Koutarou couldn’t find it in himself to tell this desperate little girl the truth. He knew all too well the pain of losing a mother. That’s why he said what he did, even knowing it was just a temporary comfort.

“Yeah! Thank you, Onii-chan!”

The girl gave him a big, bright smile. Koutarou couldn't help but want that smile to remain unchanged if possible.

More than four hours had now passed since Koutarou and the girl had begun walking through the mountain forest. After so long, even the energetic girl was starting to grow weary, so Koutarou suggested that they take a break at a nearby brook.

"By the way, I never got your name."

"Oh yeah, now that you mention it!"

The girl had been so focused on finding her mother that she hadn't even properly introduced herself. She'd immediately taken to calling Koutarou "Onii-chan," and since it was just the two of them, they hadn't had any trouble communicating. It was only now that they had a minute to take a breather that Koutarou thought to ask her name.

"I'm Kii!"

"Kii?"

"Yes!"

"That's a nice name..."

Koutarou had never heard it before, but he knew lots of kids these days had unusual names. He didn't give it much thought.

"What about you, Onii-chan?"

"Koutarou."

"Hmm, Koutarou, huh? What a weird name!"

"Is it weird?"

"Yeah!"

The girl—Kii—nodded with a broad smile. Seeing her bright expression lifted Koutarou's spirits.

I guess the name Koutarou isn't used as much now, huh?

“Can I still call you Onii-chan?”

“Sure. Can I call you Kii-chan?”

“Yeah! That’s what mom called me!”

Kii cheerfully smiled and nodded. It was an innocent, happy smile that revealed just how much she’d come to trust Koutarou these past few hours.

“Since dad calls me Kii, I like Kii-chan better.”

“Why’s that?”

“Because dad is always so mean. Even before when I said I wanted to go see the movie, he said no!”

“All right, then I’ll call you Kii-chan.”

“Thanks!”

Kii’s family was now motherless.

It’s the same as mine...

After the death of his mother, there was a time Koutarou’s relationship with his father was quite strained. Reflecting on that, Koutarou could vaguely understand how things were between Kii and her father. At the same time, he couldn’t even imagine how worried her dad must be about her. He probably didn’t even know where she was.

“Kii-chan, I’m sure your dad is worried sick about you at home. Why don’t you go home for now and continue looking for the star tomorrow?”

“No.” Kii puffed up her cheeks and shook her head. “I won’t go back home! I’m going to live on my own!”

“What?!” Koutarou’s eyes opened wide in surprise. “J-Just wait a minute! You mean you ran away from home?!”

“Yeah!” Kii declared with a smile and a nod. “Dad wouldn’t take Kii to see the Kabutonga movie, so I came by myself!”

She seemed quite proud of what she’d done, and she was just as satisfied that she was able to impress Koutarou.

“Th-This is bad! I have to take you to the police right away!”

“The police?”

“They’re the people who will take you home!”

If Kii had run away from home, her father might have filed a missing person’s report. With a child this young, they would probably be in the middle of a major search operation. That was bad enough, but if they came into the mountains, they might stumble across the Cradle. Kii seemed quite happy, but this was a potentially fatal threat to Clan and Koutarou.

“Hey, Clan—”

Koutarou immediately went to use the bracelet to contact Clan.

“No!”

Before he could, however, Kii reached over and pushed the button that Koutarou had used to activate the bracelet, which put it back in standby mode.

“Kii-chan?!”

“If you take me to the police, I’ll tell them that you kidnapped me!”

“Wh-What?!”

Koutarou existed in this world, but he should only be a child at this point in time. If he met anyone and had to give them his name and birthday, it would raise a lot of questions. He would likely be taken into custody and interrogated about his identity. Clan was in an even worse situation. The police would probably think they were illegal immigrants, which would lead to a whole new series of headaches. Being made out to be kidnappers would be the least of their problems at that point.

“Kii-chan, that’s not good! You have to go home!”

Koutarou frantically tried to persuade Kii to listen to him. If he didn’t get her to go home fast, the cops might show up.

“No! I won’t go home!”

But no matter how much Koutarou insisted, Kii refused and shook her head. She was resolute.

“I’m going to find mom, and we’ll go see the Kabutonga movie!”

“Kii-chan...”

Kii had run away from home after fighting with her father because she wanted to see the movie. She’d mistaken the Cradle for her mother’s star and come looking for it once it landed, but there was no way she would ever find it. If left to her own devices, she would spend the whole night just wandering the mountain.

“Say, Kii-chan, if you do find that star and get to see the movie, will you go back home?”

It was a particularly difficult situation for Koutarou, but he couldn’t just leave a young girl alone in the woods. He wanted to do what he could to help her. He figured that letting her search for the star until she was satisfied, then taking her to the movies would be the least problematic way to get her to go home.

“Hmm...”

Kii crossed her arms and began pondering Koutarou’s proposal. She furrowed her shapely brow, looking quite mature for her age.

Huh? This girl...

Watching her make that face, Koutarou got the feeling he’d seen it somewhere before. He couldn’t put his finger on who it was that this little girl reminded him of, but he soon brushed it off. There were more important matters at hand.

“In that case... I might go home... Maybe...” Kii said, pensively holding a finger to her chin.

She hadn’t had much of a reason for running away to begin with. It was really just a misunderstanding between her and her father born from the loss her mother. The only things that were keeping her from going back were the search for her mother’s star and the Kabutonga movie. If she got what she wanted, there should be no reason for her not to go home.

“Then I’ll help you out.”

“Really?!”

Kii's expression lit up once more after another unexpected offer from Koutarou. Her mature expression was replaced with a childlike grin.

"Then promise me that you'll go home once you're done with both."

"Okay! I promise!"

Kii accepted Koutarou's proposal with a wide smile. Really, it was a welcome offer. No matter how clever she was, she was still only six years old. Running away from home all alone was a big, scary adventure, and she had no reason to refuse Koutarou's kind hand now. After opening up to him over the past couple of hours, he felt like a friend.

"Okay, then here."

Still smiling, Kii looked up at Koutarou and presented him with her right hand.

"What?"

"A pinky swear. It's a promise, right?"

The young girl formed a fist with her right hand and stuck out her pinky. Koutarou did the same, and they crossed their pinkies over each other's.

"Pinky swear! Cross my heart and hope to die!"

With the promise sealed, they resumed their search together.



Searching for Her Mother

After their pinky swear, Koutarou and Kii returned to the Cradle. It was growing late. They'd already been at the search for a while, and continuing to wander around the mountain with no direction would be dangerous. So Koutarou decided to return to the Cradle for food and rest.

Koutarou had been worried that Kii might oppose this idea, but she was unexpectedly cooperative. She fully believed in the pinky swear that they had exchanged. She would find her mother's star and watch the Kabutonga movie together with Koutarou. To her, his word was gold. And to that end, she would do anything he asked.

"...And that's why I'll be looking after this girl for a little while."

"You really do attract trouble no matter where you go, don't you?"

When Koutarou gave Clan a rundown of the situation, she slumped her shoulders and gave him an amazed look. The first thing he'd done after returning to the Cradle was come to report the new developments to Clan. He'd left Kii in the Cradle's living quarters so he could talk to Clan alone.

"What else was I supposed to do? This isn't my fault."

"Well, that's true... but I have things to do, so you'll have to look after her."

"I know. I won't cause any trouble for you."

Clan had to make preparations for their return to the future. The plan was to freeze time aboard the Cradle, sleep for another ten years, and wake up when the time was right. Though it sounded simple enough, freezing time was a delicate procedure that involved a lot of prep work. That would be Clan's job, so the responsibility of looking after Kii naturally fell on Koutarou.

"Oh, and Clan, do you have anything you're willing to let go of that would be worth something?"

"Worth something?"

Unsure what he meant, Clan cocked her head to the side.

“I don’t have any money I can use. But I have to take Kii to the movies, so I’ll need a little cash.”

The money currently in circulation in this age would be reissued in a few years’ time. Koutarou had money from the future, but trying to use that would raise a lot of questions. So in order to blend in, he’d need currency from this day and age, which is why he wanted to know if Clan had anything that might be sellable.

“I’ll work to repay you later, so could you give me something that’ll be worth some money?”

“So that’s what you meant.”

As a princess, Clan was a bit naive in that department. The idea of trading something for money hadn’t even occurred to her. Now that she understood the situation, however, she approached a big cabinet that held materials she was using for research.

“Veltlion, platinum is a precious metal on this planet, isn’t it?”

“It should be, yeah.”

“I’m sure I had some to use as a catalyst around here somewhere...”

Clan opened the cabinet and began searching the shelves inside. Unlike the wardrobe in Koutarou’s room, Clan’s cabinet was neatly arranged and she was quickly able to find what she was looking for.

“Ah, here it is.”

She pulled a lump of platinum from a shelf and brought it back to Koutarou.

“How about this?” she said as she walked over to a desk.

Pure platinum was incredibly dense, making it much heavier than one would guess just by looking at it. As such, when Clan plonked the lump down on the desk, it made a surprisingly loud sound and shook the whole desk.

“This is just spare material, so I still have plenty more. Feel free to use it as you please. If that’s not enough, then just come back to me.”

Seeing the platinum, however, Koutarou flew off the handle at Clan.

“Are you stupid?!”

“Wh-What is it now?!”

Surprised by his sudden shouting, Clan visibly recoiled. But even so, Koutarou didn’t relent.

“As if I could sell this in a pawnshop! I only need a fragment of that!”

“I-Is that it?!”

The lump of platinum Clan had put on the desk weighed at least five kilograms. And since platinum was valued at four to five thousand yen per gram, the mass Clan had tried to give him would be worth at least twenty million yen. It was highly unlikely that a pawnshop or second-hand shop would have that kind of cash on hand.

“Just how spoiled are you?! You should learn what it’s like to be a commoner! You want to become the empress, don’t you?!”

“Th-Then I would just appoint someone that understands commoners to—”

“No one wants such an out of touch empress!”

It would be a while yet before Koutarou was finished with her and actually managed to get the couple of grams of platinum he needed.

While Clan was targeting Koutarou and Theia, she’d installed a TV in the Cradle’s living quarters. She used it as a means to gather information, study culture and language, and analyze broadcasting techniques to get a good estimation of how advanced Earth’s technology was. For example, by examining the strength of the encryption used in digital broadcasts, she could calculate the standard processing speeds of computers.

When Koutarou returned to the living quarters, Kii was glued to Clan’s TV, clearly invested in whatever was airing. Since the TV used one of the ship’s multipurpose monitors, it was over a hundred inches wide. Because of that, Koutarou could see the screen clearly despite Kii standing right in front of it.

“Oh... so they’re rebroadcasting that...”

The show playing was an old anime, but it was so famous that even Koutarou, who wasn't into anime, knew about it. It was *Kabutonga, the King of Beetles*, an animated hero show featuring characters designed after beetles. It seemed they were using reruns to generate some hype for the theatrical adaptation, a common promotional tactic.

"Look out, No. 1! Behind you!"

On the screen, the show's protagonist, Kabutonga No. 1, was in danger. Doing her best to help him out, Kii was clenching her small fists and desperately cheering for him. She was such a big fan of the show that she'd run away from home to see the Kabutonga movie that had been released just the other day. And her passion was obvious. She was so caught up in cheering for Kabutonga that she didn't even notice Koutarou entering the room.

"There! Give him your Kabutonga Kick!"

"Heh, she looks like she's having fun."

Kii looked so happy that Koutarou decided to leave her be. He quietly walked through the back of the room to get to the ship's kitchen, where he was going to prepare dinner while Kii was watching the show.

Wait, Kabutonga?

However, Koutarou stopped dead just as he entered the kitchen. The name "Kabutonga" tickled something in the back of his mind, but he couldn't quite put his finger on it. Unable to place it, Koutarou gave up on it and went back to what he was doing. Right now, dinner was more important than some old hero anime.

"Aaaaahhh! That's unfair, Scarab King! Stag-man, hurry! You have to save Kabutonga!"

With Kii's shouting in the background, Koutarou opened the pantry in the kitchen. Inside were all kinds of ingredients.

"We should eat these up soon..."

Koutarou pulled some of the containers from the shelves. The food in the pantry on the Cradle fell into two categories: food that had been there since

before the start of Clan and Koutarou's ordeal, and food that had come back with them from past Forthorthe. The former was packaged to be indefinitely preserved, but the same wasn't true for the latter. That's why Koutarou was planning on using up some of it for dinner. Though the pantry also functioned as a refrigerator, he didn't want to risk any of it starting to go bad.

"Stag-man! Your drill! You can just use your drill!"

"Ah, so today's episode is 'Kabutonga Dies at Daybreak.' No wonder she's so fired up..."

Koutarou talked to himself as he pulled some cookware from a different shelf and stuffed it into a basket with the ingredients he'd picked out. With the basket in hand, he then headed towards the storeroom where they kept most of what had come back from Forthorthe with them.

"Here we go."

Koutarou picked up a bundle of firewood. Then, with the basket tucked under his right arm and the firewood tucked under his left, he walked back through the living quarters.

"Kabutonga, open your eyes! Kabutonga!"

Koutarou passed behind Kii once more and headed out through the airlock to the outside. He was planning on making dinner outdoors. Since all of the ingredients he was using were from an age long since passed, he thought it was more appropriate to prepare them on a campfire than in a cutting-edge kitchen. It was like how an indoor barbecue was never as good. He also didn't like the Cradle's overly advanced kitchen, so he preferred cooking outside anyway.

"First off is..."

Once outside, Koutarou gathered some large stones to build a small wall to act as a shield around where he would make the fire. That way, even if the wind blew, the fire wouldn't go out of control. That was something he'd learned while in Forthorthe. Next, he placed the firewood inside the ring of rocks. The trick was stacking it in a way that still allowed for air to flow through. With experienced hands, he crafted an expert campfire.

"Now it's this thing's turn."

Once everything was ready, Koutarou took out a long stick he'd picked up from the warehouse. More accurately, it wasn't a stick, but rather a beautifully decorated staff about a meter and a half long. Holding it in both hands, he held the tip of the staff up in front of his face.

"Um... fire, appear!"

As if obeying Koutarou's words, a small flame lit up the end of the staff. Despite not having anything for fuel, it burned like a candle above the staff. It would have been a very bizarre sight for anyone who didn't know any better.

"Yurika is gonna freak out when I give her this..."

The staff was a present Koutarou had brought with him from past Forthorthe for Yurika. It was an authentic magical staff called Encyclopedia. It had been used by one of Koutarou's enemies, a man by the name of Grevanas who was the head of the court magicians. Though he'd been cast out of the universe in the end by Clan's Super Space-time Repulsion Shell, his staff had been left behind alongside several other tools.

Magical staffs were normally used to assist magicians in casting spells. A staff heightened a magician's concentration and amplified their mana to make their spells even more potent. There were also staffs that had special abilities on top of that. Encyclopedia was one such staff.

Encyclopedia's special ability was the power to read its users mind and cast spells using its own mana. As a result, the user of the staff could cast a spell of their own while simultaneously using the staff to cast another. It was an incredibly powerful tool that could give a serious advantage in a fight between magic users.

But thanks to its special ability, even people who weren't magicians could use the magic of the staff to cast spells. As its name suggested, Encyclopedia had access to a wide variety of spells. But as result, the power of each spell was lessened. The staff held a finite amount of mana, so the number of spells recorded in it was inversely proportionate to the power behind them. But even though its spells were weaker than most, with the power of Encyclopedia, even someone with no magical talent could become a mediocre magician. That was specifically why Koutarou had gone out of his way to bring it home for Yurika.

With it, she could be a magical girl like she'd always wanted.

"Magic really is convenient..."

Koutarou held the flaming tip of the staff to the firewood to start his campfire. It only took a few seconds for all the wood to ignite into a big, burning red glow of a fire. It was more than hot enough to use to prepare a meal. Since getting a proper fire going normally took a good deal of time, the staff was quite useful.

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

And so Koutarou began preparing dinner on the fire he'd started with magic.

Even after the show ended, Kii was still wired. The hero she adored had been defeated by his enemy, but then he'd made a miraculous recovery and won in a huge turnaround. She couldn't help being excited about it, and she was dying to talk to someone about such a thrilling episode of her favorite show.

"Onii-chan, where are you?"

That someone, of course, would be Koutarou. He was the only one she really had to go to, and she felt like he would listen to her.

"Where did he go?"

Kii looked around the living quarters. Since it was the residential area of a small spaceship, it was really only about as big as a normal living room. As such, it didn't take her long to realize that no one was around.

"Huh?"

As she looked around, however, Kii caught a whiff of something. She paused and took several sniffs to try and figure out what it was.

"Hmm, something smells really good..."

What she'd detected was the fragrant smell of cooking food. As soon as it hit her, Kii's stomach let out a growl, and she finally realized that it had been a while since she'd last eaten.

"It's coming from this way... isn't it?"

Lured by her curiosity, Kii's tiny nose twitched as she followed the smell. She left the living quarters and walked down a corridor that led to the hatch of the ship, which had been left open. Stepping outside, she identified the source of what she was smelling.

"Wow! It's a feast!"

There was a pot over a red flame, and inside it was a boiling soup made from seafood and vegetables. There was also a hunk of meat on a spit above the fire. Covered in lots of herbs, oils, and spices, the roasting meat was dripping meat juice all the way down to the ground. There was even bread laid out next to the fire to get warm and soft. The smell of it all was what had lured Kii outside. Though she had been completely focused on her show until just a moment ago, the only thing on her mind now was the food in front of her.

"You're finally here, Kii-chan."

"Did you make all of this, Onii-chan?!"

"Yeah, but it's nothing special."

Tonight's dinner was a fish and vegetable soup, roast chicken, and a bread made with a lot of nuts. While Koutarou had only warmed up the bread, he'd made the other two dishes all on his own.

Koutarou was competent when it came to domestic chores. He'd grown up with a single father, so he'd taken on things like cleaning to help out. He'd even learned to cook. But since the invaders were in charge of the cooking in Corona House, he'd never really had a chance to show it off to the girls.

Travelling to past Forthorthe, however, had given him all the chances to cook he could have ever hoped for. As a result, his outdoor cooking skills had improved considerably. Though he couldn't call himself a proper chef, he was good enough to serve others. That said, these were all simple dishes from past Forthorthe.

"That's not true! It looks really good!"

"Well, I guess we'll see when we dig in."

"I want to dig in right now!"

“It’ll be done soon, so just sit tight for a little bit.”

“Okay!”

Even though her stomach was still growling, Kii obeyed Koutarou and sat down on a log near the fire. As a clever child, she knew that she would be able to eat sooner if she didn’t get in the way of the cook.

“How’s the soup...? Ah, good, it’s come out nice.”

“Heehee...”

Obediently sitting down and waiting, Kii followed Koutarou with her eyes. As she watched him, she could feel a warm and fuzzy feeling rising her chest, and it wasn’t from the fire. Rather, it was the sensation of precious memories coming over her.

“Mom, is dinner done yet?”

“Not just yet, so have a seat for now.”

“Okaaay! What are we having today?”

“It’s your favorite, Kii-chan.”

“This smell is... fish!”

“That’s right. It’s almost done, too. We just have to be patient for a little bit to let it finish cooking, okay?”

“Okay! Kii will wait like a good girl!”

Someone she adored was making food for her. In that past, that person had always been her mother. She couldn’t help thinking of her as she watched Koutarou cooking, and those pleasant memories warmed her chest.

“Kii will wait like a good girl... so make it delicious.”

“I can’t make any promises, but I’ll do my best.”

It was a special warmth Kii hadn’t felt for a while now.

Koutarou turned the basket he had used to carry the ingredients upside down and made an impromptu table for Kii. He set it with tableware and served her

soup, chicken, and bread. Seeing it all in front of her, Kii's eyes sparkled as they went wide.

"Can I eat it now?! Can I?!"

"Go ahead. Make sure you don't get anything stuck—"

"Thank you for the food!"

"—in your throat."

Kii excitedly dug in before Koutarou could even finish his sentence. Holding a spoon for the soup in her right hand and a kabob of chicken in her left, she alternated between the two. Based on how quickly she was eating, it certainly seemed she was enjoying the food.

"I'm glad you like it."

Sensing that Kii was satisfied, Koutarou flashed a small smile and picked up some bread for himself. After splitting a roll open, he put some chicken between the two pieces of bread. This had been his favorite way of eating in Forthorthe. After a bite, a familiar and pleasant taste spread throughout his mouth. It was a nostalgic sensation that reminded him of his time in Forthorthe.

I'm sure Clan will give this a passing grade...

While eating his dinner, Koutarou's mind turned to his partner who had shut herself up in her laboratory. He'd saved her a portion of what he'd cooked, and he was planning on taking it to her later. Raised as a princess, she was picky about the taste of her food, but Koutarou was sure she'd compliment dinner tonight. He was rather proud of what he'd made.

As Koutarou was thinking about that, however, he realized someone was staring at him. He slowly looked up to find a pair of large eyes peering at him. It was Kii, who was intently focused on what was in his hands.

"I want to try too!"

Mimicking Koutarou, Kii split open her roll, put some meat in it, and took a bite.

"Delicious!"

She seemed to enjoy it, and took bite after bite of the sandwich. She looked like a squirrel chowing down a nut.

“If you eat that fast, you’ll—”

“Hueh!”

Before Koutarou could warn even Kii to slow down, a piece of bread got caught in her throat.

“Ack... Hrngh...”

“Here, drink this.”

Koutarou quickly presented Kii with some soup. She gratefully took it and began drinking directly from the bowl. After a few seconds, she finally lowered it from her lips and let out a big sigh of relief.

“Haaahh, I thought I was going to die...”

Fortunately, she’d managed to swallow down the troublesome bread. With the ordeal over, her expression returned to her normally cheerful smile.

“That’s what happens when you eat so fast.”

“But it’s just so good.”

As Koutarou admonished her, Kii blushed in embarrassment.

“I’m glad you like it, but nobody is going to take it from you. And there’s more where that came from, so take your time.”

“O-Okay, I will. Heehee...”

Eventually, she smiled and let out a little giggle. Seeing that, Koutarou smiled too and began eating again.

This kind of reminds me of everyone...

Koutarou was having a noisy but fun dinner, just like he would have in room 106 or past Forthorthe. He was ten years in the past from home, and lightyears away from Forthorthe, but he felt strangely close to both right now. It was thanks to Kii’s company.

“Heehee... Hee... Hnn... Hnngh...”

While Koutarou was reminiscing, the sound of Kii's laughter slowly changed. When he looked over at her, he could see the light of the fire reflecting off the tears running down her cheeks. She was crying.

"What's wrong? Did it taste bad?"

Alarmed, Koutarou took a sip of his soup, but it tasted just fine to him.

What is it then?

Koutarou looked back to Kii in confusion. Despite the tears running down her cheeks, she had a calm smile on her face.

"That's not it. It's good. It's really good. And I'm so happy..."

Kii shook her head as she spoke. The tears on her cheeks scattered to the left and right, illuminated by the firelight as they fell to the ground. But even though she said she was happy, she wouldn't stop crying.

"It's just... it's been a long time since I had such a nice, happy dinner... So, so I... Hnn, I don't... understand either..."

Hearing Kii's answer, Koutarou realized what was going on.

I see... Kii-chan really misses her mother...

After losing her mother, Kii had been at odds with her father. They had a hard time understanding each other, and that had driven Kii to run away from home. It had been quite some time since she'd had such a lighthearted dinner with someone she cared about, and that made her reflect on happier times. Just like Koutarou was reminded of being with his friends, Kii was reminded of being with her family. He had a pretty good handle on how she was feeling because he'd once been through something similar.

"But... But you know what? I made up my mind! Hnn... Wh-When I grow up, I'm going to cook! Hnnngh... I'll learn to cook as g-good, as Onii-chan..."

Kii resolved that if she was going to see her mother again, she wanted it to be over a delicious dinner like this with lots of smiles.

After that, Koutarou and Kii discussed all kinds of things while they ate. Though they had introduced themselves, they still barely knew anything about

each other.

“By the way, what do you do, Onii-chan? Are you a cook?”

“If I was, the food would be a lot better than this.”

Kii had finally stopped crying, and she now smiled at Koutarou with more affection than ever. Seeing that she had regained her smile, Koutarou was happy. A child her age should always be smiling, he thought.

“Maybe. But Kii knows better.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Taste alone isn’t what makes a dish delicious.”

Kii carried a kabob to her mouth as she smiled. She seemed to have taken a real liking to Koutarou’s cooking, and she chowed down on the food at a fearsome pace as she cheerfully chatted away with him. She was already on her third helpings of all dishes.

“Onii-chan could become a real cook.”

“Ahahaha, I’m flattered. But I’m not a cook. I’m actually a traveler in the middle of a journey.”

“A journey? Is that when you go far away?”

Unfamiliar with the word, Kii tilted her head as she asked Koutarou to explain. He gave her a firm nod in response.

“Yeah. To be more accurate, I’ve finished my journey and I’m now on my way back home.”

“Hmm... So is that why you were around here?”

“That’s about the size of it.”

Koutarou kept his explanation vague on purpose. He couldn’t exactly tell the truth, and even if he did, telling a six year old girl that he was returning to the future would only confuse her. Saying he was on his way back home seemed like the best compromise.

“Your home... like where you live, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Going back home, huh...?”

All the talk of home made Kii think of her own. The home she’d left behind when she’d run away. She shook her head as if to drive the thought from her mind and smiled at Koutarou again.

“So where did you come from, Onii-chan?”

“Hmm, that would be hard to explain, but...”

Koutarou racked his brain for a moment to come up with a satisfactory answer. It was difficult thing to explain to a six year old girl.

“If I had to say, from an endless time and an immeasurable distance.”

In the end, Koutarou answered with a theatrical tone and gesture. It was enough to distract Kii from the heart of the matter, and she started to laugh cheerfully.

“Ahahaha, you’re trying too hard, Onii-chan.”

“I was actually just thinking the same thing.”

Koutarou laughed bitterly.

I’m really not cut out for acting... I’ll have to retire after we finish the play...

After telling himself that, Koutarou looked at Kii and shrugged.

“So where is your home really?”

Kii understood that Koutarou’s answer was a joke, so after they’d stopped laughing, she asked him again.

“It’s not far from here, but getting there is a bit complicated, so I don’t think you can come with me, Kii-chan.”

“Is it like a maze?”

“Yeah. But when you grow up, I bet it’ll be really easy.”

“Hmm...”

Making a face that indicated she was uncertain about his answer, Kii looked towards the city at the foot of the mountain. She could still make out Harukaze

City in the dark, and thanks to the headlights of cars that occasionally passed by, she could even tell where the roads were.

I would get lost...

Koutarou's answer seemed believable. Kii was sure she'd get lost in the complexly intertwined roads of the city. Satisfied, she looked back at Koutarou again.

"But it's around here, right?"

"Yeah. Once I've taken a break here, I'll be going home."

Seeing Koutarou nod, Kii smiled.

"Heehee, I see..."

Kii looked especially happy. Curious as to what she was smiling about, Koutarou asked her about it.

"What is it?"

"It's nothing. It's a girl secret."

Kii refused to give him a real answer. She was hiding whatever it was behind that cheerful smile of hers.

"Girls have a lot of those..."

In that moment, Kii seemed just like one of the invaders. She was giving him the same smile they would whenever they were up to something or teasing him. So despite not getting an answer, Koutarou shrugged it off with a warm smile.

"Heehee! A maiden's heart is an eternal mystery."

In truth, Kii was smiling because she was thinking about what would happen after she parted ways with Koutarou.

If he's from around here, I'm sure we'll meet again...

Since Kii had promised that she would go back home after finding her mom's star and watching the movie, she would eventually have to leave him. But if he lived nearby, she might meet him again if she came to town some other time. That was very happy news to her indeed.

After finishing his meal, Koutarou left Kii with the fire and went to take Clan her dinner. She was still in her laboratory, working on preparations to get them back to the right time. While staring at a hologram floating in the air, she quickly calculated something on the computer. Koutarou went over and set the food down on a table she used for breaks. If he left it there, Clan would eat it whenever she took a break next. After setting out the dishes, he quickly headed for the door so as not to get in her way.

“Thank you, Veltlion.”

“I just hope you like it.”

That was all the two said before Koutarou left the room.

Really, I just hope she doesn’t ruin her health...

Koutarou had seen Clan in overdrive several times now, like when she was desperately trying to treat the virus in Forthorthe, or when she was trying to freeze time for the first time. When she got serious like that, her expression would stiffen and she would clam up. She would go from spoiled princess to serious researcher, focusing on her work at the cost of all else, including her own needs.

I can’t leave her on her own, but it’s different than with Yurika...

While Clan was in work mode, Koutarou’s job was to look after her. He would fix her healthy meals and take care of chores like the cleaning and the washing. If he didn’t, the Cradle would just end up a mess. As a result, he was practically working as her attendant at times like these.

“I guess I’ll clean up for now...”

Koutarou’s next job was cleaning up after dinner. He had to put out the fire, take care of the dishes, and put the leftovers in the fridge. It was plain, but important work. Koutarou rolled up his sleeves and left the Cradle again. Once outside, he saw that Kii had dozed off next to the weakening fire.

“Zzz... Zzz...”

Kii was exhausted after tromping all over the mountain while keeping up a

smile. So after a delicious dinner with Koutarou, she was both mentally and physically satisfied. She fell into a peaceful state, and the day's fatigue hit her all at once. She'd fallen asleep almost as soon as Koutarou left.

"Well, I guess it's only natural..."

Kii had run away after fighting with her father. That and everything that followed must have been quite an ordeal for a girl her age. Koutarou flashed a small smile and reached out for Kii. In order to make sure he didn't wake her while he was cleaning, he would put her to bed in the Cradle's living quarters first.

"Mmm... Mom..."

But before he could pick her up, she began mumbling in her sleep. Her peaceful expression turned melancholy, and Koutarou stopped to listen to what she was saying.

"Where... Where are you...? Kii is right here..."

Kii's hand moved slightly in her sleep. She seemed to be moving it in her dream, and her arm naturally obeyed in reality.

"She's even looking for her mom in her dreams..."

Koutarou could imagine what Kii was dreaming about based on what she was saying and the sad look on her face. She was wandering all alone through the dark forest of grief even now.

"I hope... she can at least find her mother's star in her dream..."

Koutarou was sad for her. He knew that Kii would never actually find her mother's star in the real world. And when she came to accept that, it would break her heart. Sadly, there was nothing Koutarou could do for her about that.

And now she was looking for the star while she slept too. But she must have known deep down that it was out of reach. Based on what she was saying, she was still alone even in her dreams. Koutarou found that incredibly sad. He at least wanted her to be able to see her mother again in her dreams.

"But there's not much I can do when she's dreaming, either..."

He knew that Kii was sad, but he had no way to comfort her. He could hardly

help her as it was, much less in her dreams.

“I couldn’t do anything that magical for her...”

Koutarou was overcome by a sense of powerlessness. It was hard for him to watch such an innocent child crying in her sleep. And it felt even worse knowing that it was ultimately his and Clan’s fault.

Wait, magical... something magical!

In his lamenting, Koutarou stumbled across a solution. It was a flash of brilliance—a revelation.

“That’s right, magic! I just might be able to help with magic!”

Koutarou stared at the staff lying next to the fire pit. It was Encyclopedia, the magical staff he’d brought back from Forthorthe. With it, he might be able help Kii.

“No... that might be even better...”

Next, Koutarou looked towards the Cradle. There was a sword stored on the ship with magic power much more potent than what the staff in his hands possessed.

“I’m sure Signaltin would do it!”

Alaia had always intended the power of Signaltin to be used to help people. Surely the sword imbued with her feelings would be much more effective than the staff. With that in mind, Koutarou rushed inside the Cradle.

Inside her dream, Kii herself wasn’t aware that she was dreaming. She was wandering the vast mountain, desperate and alone.

“H-Huh? What am I doing here...?”

Dreams often start in fantastical ways, but there is usually a connection—some semblance of reality—that makes them believable. People’s rational judgment is often diminished in these dreams, especially when they’re seeing something they want to be seeing or doing something they want to be doing.

“That’s right, I’m looking for mom!”

That was true even for Kii. She didn't question why she was on the dark mountain alone; she simply began wandering in search of her mother. Deep down, looking for her mother was all she really wanted to do, so nothing seemed strange about doing it in a dream. Her memories of dinner with Koutarou had all slipped away. This was, after all, a dream world.

"Mom! Where are you?!"

Kii wandered the dark mountain forest while calling out for her mother, but the only response she received was silence.

"Mom! Where are you! Kii is right here!"

Kii truly believed the blue star that had fallen from the sky was her mother. There was joy and hope in her heart, but also an unshakeable uneasiness. She was worried that she might not find it, or that her mother hadn't noticed her, or maybe even that the star wasn't her mother after all. None of those were possibilities she wanted to consider.

The truth was that this wasn't really the first time Kii had gone looking for her mother. Whenever she was at home alone and heard a noise elsewhere in the house, she'd rush to it thinking that her mother had returned only to discover that something had fallen off a shelf. Sometimes she would catch a glimpse of her mother in a crowd, too. But whenever she chased after her, it always turned out to be a complete stranger.

And so Kii's hopes of finding her mother had been betrayed time and time again. It was almost impossible for a six year old girl to accept that her mother was really gone. But even though she knew it was true, even though she knew it would only lead to disappointment, she couldn't help hoping. Something deep inside of her just refused to believe that she would never see her mother again.

"Mom! Don't be mean! I want to see you!"

But things this time were different. Kii had seen the falling blue star with her own eyes. It was just like what her mother had promised her, so she was certain she would find her mother this time. But even then, that certainty was tinged with the crippling doubt that her hopes would be betrayed yet again.

"Mom... why... why won't you come see me...?"

That doubt took hold of her dreams and manifested as despair. The forest around her grew darker, and silence fell over it. She was utterly alone. Despite all her hope, she was trapped in a nightmare.

“Can’t you hear Kii’s voice?! Or do you hate Kii now?!”

The woods grew so dark that Kii could no longer see where she was going. She grew more and more lonely by the second, which only exacerbated her doubts. In turn, those doubts darkened her nightmare even more. It was a vicious cycle.

“Come find me, mom! Kii’s been looking for you all this time!”

Kii desperately called for her mother. She was practically screaming, but there was no response from the dark forest. It was like the shadows of the night were absorbing her voice, swallowing her grief. As it did, it grew bigger and darker, slowly encroaching on her. Before she knew it, she was completely surrounded by pitch-black darkness. And she was still utterly alone.

“Mom! Hnn... Where am I?! Hngh... Hic... I’m scared, mom! Hnnngh, hurry, come save me!”

All Kii could do now was scream, repeating the same words over and over. She had been betrayed yet again. Her mother was nowhere around. Her heart, which could no longer bear the solitude, was starting to break. That was ultimately why she’d gotten into a fight with her father. She needed affection and warmth to heal her breaking heart, but he had none to spare. She’d run away from home to try and find it elsewhere.

“Nooo! I don’t want to be alone! Mom, mooom! Hnn... hnnngh... Waaaaaaaaaah!”

A clever girl for her age, Kii had bottled up the solitude and sadness inside of her. She had hidden her grief behind a smile for everyone else, but on the inside, she’d been crying all this time.

“Waaaaaaaah! Auuuaaaaagh!”

And just as Kii was about ready to give up hope once and for all...

“So this is where you’ve been, Kii-chan. I finally found you.”

She heard a nostalgic voice, and her crying immediately stopped.

“Ah...?”

She saw a soft blue light out of the corner of her eye. It was the same color as the falling star she’d seen.

“M-Mom...?”

Kii slowly raised her head and turned towards the light, eyes wide in disbelief.

“It’s been a long time, Kii-chan... I was waiting for you...”

Kii had finally found her mother. She was standing right in front of her, wrapped in a blue light.

“Mom! It’s you! It’s really you, mom!”

Her mother had a bright, gentle smile on her face, just like when she was alive. When Kii saw that, she went running.

“Mom! I came to see you just like I promised! I looked for your star and chased after you!”

Approaching her mother at full speed, she kicked off the ground with all her might. She leaped without fear, never doubting that her mother would catch her.

“My, my, that’s dangerous, Kii-chan.”

“Mom!”

And just as Kii had expected, her mother caught her in a warm embrace. Now that she was finally in the arms of the person she wanted to see most, she was never planning on letting her go again.

“Mom, mom!”

“What’s wrong, Kii-chan? This isn’t like you...”

Kii’s mother wrapped her arms around her small daughter. She could feel Kii’s warmth, and even the force in her arms as she hugged her tightly. Feeling such precious things, tears formed in her eyes too. Just like Kii had wanted to see her mother, her mother had wanted to see her.

Using Signaltin, Koutarou had made a wish: “I don’t care how, I just want Kii

to see her mother again, even if it's in her dreams." Because of that, he didn't actually know what exactly Signaltin had done. All he knew was that a large amount of mana had begun flowing out from the sword and into Kii.

"Did it... work...?"

A few seconds after the mana began flowing into Kii, the sadness and pain in her expression softened into a gentle smile. Her labored breathing slowed down, and Koutarou could even hear something that sounded like a little giggle between her calm, heavy breaths.

"Heehee... Mom... Heehee"

"I see... so you did get to see your mother..."

Based on Kii's smile and her mumbling, Koutarou sensed that he had succeeded. He then slowly returned Signaltin to its sheath, careful not to wake Kii up.

Thank you, Your Majesty...

At the same time, he thanked Alaia. He had been able to give Kii some peace of mind using Signaltin after his and Clan's arrival had stirred up some sad memories for her. Since he wasn't sure Encyclopedia would have had that power, he was especially grateful for Alaia's gift of the sword.

"Heehee... I was looking for you with Onii-chan..."

"Heh, do I make an appearance in this dream too?"

Smiling, Koutarou decided it was time to carry Kii inside the Cradle as he had initially planned. Surely she would have a nicer dream tucked into a warm bed than on the cold ground outside.

"Hmm?"

But just as Koutarou reached out to pick up Kii...

Someone else is here?

Sensing someone's presence, Koutarou turned to look behind him.

"..."

A few meters off stood a lone girl. Based on her appearance, she looked to be

around ten years old. She was wearing a school uniform and staring quite hard at Koutarou.

Why would a girl like that be out here at this hour?

It was already past midnight. Disregarding Kii who had run away from home, it was far too late for such a girl to be out and about on her own. She was certainly an odd sight on the mountain in the middle of the night.

"...What are you doing out here?" Koutarou asked.

The girl appeared to be older than Kii, but he still wanted to talk to her and make sure she got home.

"I'm looking for someone," the girl answered indifferently, without any change in her expression.

"Someone?"

"I thought it might have been you, but I was wrong."

"Is that so? Well, it's already late, so you should stop looking and go home for tonight."

Based on how the girl was acting, Koutarou could tell she was quite mature for her age. She was a lot like Alaia in that sense.

"Yes, I think I'll do just that."

The girl nodded and spun around, turning her back to Koutarou. She then casually walked away.

What a mysterious girl... Koutarou thought to himself as he watched her go.

The girl had clear and earnest eyes. He could also sense a strong will in them that seemed contrary to her youthful appearance. Koutarou had met several girls like that before, but this was the first time he'd met one so young. Moreover, the circumstances of the encounter were strange. She didn't look like she'd run away from home like Kii had, so Koutarou couldn't imagine what she'd be doing in the mountains in the middle of the night.

"That's right, there's one thing I want you to tell me."

Just before she was about to vanish into the darkness, the girl stopped and

turned around to look at Koutarou. Her earnest eyes were staring right at him again.



It's like she has Her Majesty Alaia's maturity and Flair's sense of duty...

Pierced by the girl's powerful gaze, Koutarou felt a strange sensation. It was especially strange coming from a ten year old girl.

"You... What were you doing to that girl with that sword?"

"Wha..."

The girl's question greatly shook Koutarou. He found himself at a loss for words and his heart skipped a beat.

Did she see me?!

Koutarou finally understood why this girl had appeared in front of him. She had come to confirm why he'd been pointing a sword at Kii.

How am I supposed to explain that...?

Koutarou hesitated. She probably wouldn't believe him if he said that he was casting a spell on Kii. And based on her behavior and way of talking, she probably wasn't going to buy any half-baked excuse he could come up with on the spot. He also didn't want to say anything suspicious or unnecessary that might get the cops called on him.

Swiftly gathering his thoughts, Koutarou decided to be honest and just omit most of the stuff about magic. He didn't think anything short of the truth would convince a girl with such earnest eyes. After taking a deep breath to calm himself, he carefully chose his words as he answered her.

"This girl just lost her mother. She was having a nightmare, so I was casting a charm on her with this sword. Apparently this sword has some kind of power."

Pretty much everything he said was the truth. It was about as honest as he could be without revealing Signaltin's true nature. And surely something superstitious like a charm would be easier to believe than straight up magic.

"I see... Then it looks like your charm worked. She appears to be having a nice dream."

Saying that, the girl smiled for the first time. Perhaps it was just because she'd had such a serious expression on her face all this time, but Koutarou felt like her

smile was especially gentle.

“Children have the right to have good dreams.”

“I agree.”

Still smiling, the girl nodded and turned away from Koutarou again.

“If you’ll excuse me then.”

“Yeah.”

With those few words as her goodbye, the girl then disappeared into the darkness.

How mysterious...

Though they hadn’t exchanged but a few words, Koutarou didn’t feel anything negative from her. Something about her presence told Koutarou she was a good person.

“Damn, I forgot to ask for her name...”

But even though he trusted her, her identity and purpose remained a mystery to him.

The Lost Tribe

After parting with Koutarou, the girl walked along a mountain path for a while before stopping again. She then silently waited without doing anything.

“Nana-chan!”

After some time passed, someone approached her. It was a woman with long hair in her late twenties, and she made quite an impression carrying a large bow in hand. She called out to the girl—Nana—who had been waiting for her.

“Kanae-san, it was a bust,” the girl replied.

Nana called the woman approaching her Kanae. Kanae was Nana’s ally, and they’d been working together for quite some time.

“Hmm, I see...”

Based on the fact that Nana had returned without fighting, Kanae could have guessed as much, but her shoulders still slumped a little. It was a disappointing outcome for her. Kanae was a gentle soul, so she didn’t like fighting. But in order to fulfill her wish, she knew she would eventually have to draw her bow. She had her own reasons for wanting a fight.

“Since there was a reaction for summoning, necromancy, and mind manipulation, I was sure this would be it... but it turned out to be almost the opposite.”

“The opposite? But if he used all that magic, he still must be our enemy, right? Didn’t he use necromancy to possess that girl?”

Summoning, necromancy, and mind manipulation was a powerful combination of magic that could summon the spirits of the dead and control them. It was a method that evil magicians, especially necromancers, liked to use. They often used the dead for their own gain.

“It looked that way at first, but that wasn’t the case. He was using the sword’s power to summon the girl’s dead mother so that they could meet in her

dreams.”

With the power of the sword, the man in question had summoned the mother’s soul in a temporarily stable form, and then connected her directly to the girl’s mind. Though he had used the same combination of spells that evil necromancers would, the end result was completely different from what Nana had expected.

Nana had approached the mysterious man to investigate what he’d done. Though she could confirm what types of magic he’d used from afar, she couldn’t tell how they were being used until she got closer.

“You’re saying he’s a good necromancer?”

“Yes. It’s an extremely rare case. This is my first time seeing one myself...”

As the girl said that, she glanced back up the mountain path. She normally had a stern look on her face, but her eyes betrayed a certain gentleness in that moment.

Nana had never seen a necromancer use magic like that for good before. If he’d only wanted to speak with the dead, divination magic would have been much more effective. Going through the trouble to actually summon a soul and invade someone’s dreams was just a waste of mana. But at the same time, going to all that trouble had made his good intentions quite clear.

He didn’t just let the two of them talk. He actually allowed them to meet and touch one another. It would technically be a kind of temporary possession, but... to think anyone would use necromancy in such a way...

In the organization that Nana was a part of, any personal use of magic was forbidden. That rule was established to prevent those who could use magic from using it unfairly for their own gain. It was much the same reason firearms were kept under strict control in most modern nations. As part of her job, Nana had fought against many people who used magic for selfish means. But what she’d just witnessed was indeed the opposite of that.

“If only the world was full of magicians like that, our job would be a lot easier...”

It was like a flower blooming on a bloodied battlefield. Nana felt that if that

flower were to spread its seeds, the future would become much brighter.

“But Nana-chan, don’t we need to report this?”

Regardless of reason, it didn’t change the fact that this man had indeed used magic for personal reasons. Nana had an obligation to report it to her organization and formally eliminate him. At least, in theory.

“There’s no need for that.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. Fortunately, he used magic of a different style than ours. And since there wasn’t any real abuse of power, it’s not our jurisdiction.”

Multiple styles of magic existed. Magic had been discovered in more than one time and place in the universe, so different societies had different ways of accessing and using it.

Nana’s duty was to keep people from benefitting from the private use of magic, but more specifically, she was officially only concerned with the type of magic that had come from her country. She also had an obligation to protect people from abuses of magic, regardless of style. But a situation like this where a different style of magic had been used and there was no apparent abuse of power was a bit of a gray area. No one had actually been hurt either, so Nana didn’t think it was necessary to file an official report.

“Hmm, that’s wonderful, Nana-chan.”

“What?”

“You look happy.”

When Kanae pointed that out, Nana touched her own face.

Maybe I am. Really, I wish for a world where magic and people can peacefully coexist like that...

Nana wouldn’t forget what she had witnessed today. It was an experience that would without a doubt inform the way she thought of and fought for magic in the future.

“I think I am happy. But I can’t get carried away. Our investigation is back at

square one now, after all," Nana said as she erased her smile and pulled her usual self back together.

She was currently trying to resolve an incident involving magic that had occurred nearby. She was happy to have met the mysterious magician with the young girl, but it left her without a lead on her investigation. If she didn't get to the bottom of things quickly, it might even have a negative effect on the magician she'd just met. Nana didn't want that, so she was especially motivated to try to get to the bottom of things.

"I hope my little girl and Soutarou-san are all right..."

As Nana's serious expression returned, Kanae gave an uneasy glance towards the city at the base of the mountain. Somewhere off in the distance was a large estate with her husband and daughter inside. Her worried look was aimed at the two of them.

Kanae's husband and daughter were actually victims in the case that Nana was investigating. More precisely, her daughter was the victim, and her husband was now using his own body to keep her alive. That was why Kanae was working with Nana to solve the case.

Kanae's husband, Soutarou, was the heir to an old shrine. Kanae had taken archery lessons there shrine, and that was how they'd met. They fell in love and eventually got married. Their daughter had inherited her father's lineage and was born with extraordinary spiritual energy.

With the dawn of modern science, even the oldest shrines had long forgotten the methods to control spiritual energy. So even though Kanae's daughter had it in abundance, she was still a normal girl otherwise. But to those who would abuse magic, people with large amounts of spiritual energy were quite useful. They could be used as catalysts for spells or even sacrifices to evil demons.



Kanae's daughter had been kidnapped by one such evil magician and used in a magical ritual. Fortunately Nana had swooped in to save her, but she was rapidly being drained of her spiritual energy even now as a result of the ritual. Her life was in danger as it was, so Nana had used magic to connect the girl with her father. Since Kanae's husband had a lot of spiritual energy himself, he could use it to protect his daughter for the time being. It was only a temporary fix, but it bought them some time. So Nana had teamed up with Kanae, and the two of them were in the midst of tracking down the culprit. Their goal was to defeat the evil magician and put a stop to the effects of the ritual, saving both Kanae's daughter and husband.

"Let's hurry. Kanae-san, put away your bow. We're moving out."

"Okay. Where to next?"

"To the river up ahead. It's faint, but the natural magic there is distorted."

"Then let's go back to the car. It'll be faster that way."

"Agreed."

The pair nodded at each other and vanished into the darkness.

While Nana and Kanae's hunt for the evil magician continued, the magician had appeared somewhere neither of them would expect. The evil magician was now in a country far beneath the surface of the earth.

"Certainly, the crest on that plate, though slightly distorted, is the same as the one recorded in this old codex. They wouldn't share such a similarity by chance."

"To be accurate, it's more likely the crest in the codex is what's been distorted. This stone plate was created at the same time as that book, and stone keeps much better than paper and ink."

"So the accuracy of our codex has deteriorated with time as it was handed down over the generations... That certainly seems plausible."

The evil magician Nana and Kanae were looking for was a woman in her late teens or early twenties. She wore an indigo outfit and carried a large staff with

her. She was currently speaking to two men dressed in what resembled traditional Japanese clothing. Their outfits were made of exquisite fabric and thread, indicating that they were of a rather high status.

“The lost seventh tribe... To think they actually exist, and that they prosper even now...”

“I have to say the surprise is mutual. To think I’d find a clue to the homelands of legend in a place like this...”

The three of them were talking while comparing a stone plate and codex. The woman had brought the plate, while the men had brought the codex. She had come at their invitation so that they could talk about these artifacts.

They were currently in the mansion of Shijima Tayuma, one of the two men standing with the woman. The Shijima family mansion had the design of an old Japanese house, but it was beautifully maintained and indicated Tayuma’s high social status. He was also attended by a man from a family that had served the Shijimas for generations. This man, the one with Tayuma now, was the one who had found the woman in indigo and brought her to him.

The Shijima family mansion was located inside a gigantic cave far underneath Harukaze City. But it wasn’t the only building there. Making use of the vast space, an entire city had been constructed in the cave. Its population was well over ten thousand people, but that was quite small considering the scale of the city. It had been several times that in the past, but the People of the Earth were now in a state of decline.

Since ancient times, the People of the Earth had had technology far more advanced than that of the surface, and they were very proud of their civilization and their achievements. However, as the surface modernized, the technological gap between the two cultures shrunk more and more. In the latter half of the twentieth century, the two were almost indistinguishable. While the people on the surface didn’t have anything that compared to spiritual energy devices, when it came to general life and everyday conveniences, their technology was about on par with that of the People of the Earth.

And with that hurdle cleared, the greatest divide between the two civilizations was a matter of lifestyle rather than technology. The underground

dwellers were quite proud of their society, but it was lacking in culture compared to the surface. They had been handing down the same stories, clothes, and entertainment for generations, whereas Japan had blossomed into a vibrant landscape of over a hundred million people. The People of the Earth couldn't help but be enamored with it once they were exposed to art and music from the surface, which was quickly followed by entertainment like books, movies, and even food. The final blow was perhaps the surface developing broadcast technology.

Once the surface began broadcasting TV programs, everyone underground wanted a TV too. And thanks to that, surface culture became much more accessible to the People of the Earth. As a result, the people became even more fascinated with it, and underground dwellers began leaving for the surface at an explosive rate. In just a few decades, the population of the People of the Earth actually living underground was reduced by more than half.

But on top of that, there was another contributing factor in the People of the Earth's decline. That was the exhaustion of resources. The People of the Earth had historically dug into their surroundings to get what they needed to survive, but when their population increased in the twentieth century, so did the demand for resources. They had now exhausted what was available nearby, and they were forced to tunnel farther and farther away to get the resources they needed. It made things work for the time being, but those resources would one day dry up too. It was only inevitable.

The future underground was as dark as the tunnels they had to dig. Meanwhile, the future on the surface seemed as bright as the sun. And that was inherently the problem.

It was clear that the People of the Earth would sooner or later meet their demise. People's response to that was divided. In the grand scheme of things, it could be said that the People of the Earth all wanted the same thing: to move to the surface. What they disagreed on was how to go about doing that. One side wanted to make the move discreetly and peacefully, while the other side wanted to invade the surface using military force to reclaim their former lands.

The faction that favored a nonviolent approach was led by the current chieftain of the People of the Earth, Kurano Daiha. The surface's prosperity and

the underground's rapid decline was obvious, and they didn't want to just sit around and wait for the end. Rather, they want to slowly but steadily make the move to the surface. Without the surface dwellers catching on, they would work to expand their territory and eventually establish a city for the People of the Earth. That was the ultimate goal of the conservative faction. They wanted to migrate to the surface while maintaining a good relationship with the surface dwellers.

That was in direct conflict with the views of the radical faction, led in part by Shijima Tayuma, head of the Shijima family. They called for a military invasion of the surface. To them, the People of the Earth were only living underground because they had been chased there by the surface dwellers long ago. They felt they had an ancestral claim to land on the surface, and taking what was rightfully theirs back by force would only be fair.

Of course, it would normally be hard for a civilization of only ten thousand to put up a fight against the surface, which would naturally have forces that far outnumbered theirs. However, the People of the Earth had a massive advantage when it came to technology. Weapons relying on spiritual energy overwhelmingly outperformed anything the surface had access to. As long as the People of the Earth could come up with a way to mass-produce their spiritual energy weapons, that would be their ace in the hole. And that was the radical faction's goal. Unable to put their history and pride behind them, they wanted to invade while their weaponry was still superior.

"She holds the power spoken of in our legends. And since she is knowledgeable about the surface, she should be perfect to deal with Kurano's daughter."

"I see... Yes, the forgotten tribe and their mystic arts... We won't have to worry about being suspected, and we won't have to ask for help from any surface dwellers either... Heh heh, I like it."

Tayuma was a very prideful man. Because of that, he simply couldn't stand the conservative faction's idea of kowtowing to the surface dwellers. And in order to prevent their ideas from gaining any more traction, he was always looking for ways to reduce the conservative faction's influence. As such, his ears immediately perked up when he received word that the Kurano family's

daughter had gone up to the surface.

If the chief's daughter was murdered by surface dwellers, the People of the Earth would surely never forgive them. If that happened, the radical faction would have an easier time rallying public opinion to their side. And to that end, Tayuma was plotting to assassinate the chief's daughter. However, Tayuma couldn't do it himself since the laws of the underground people prevented him from going to the surface. Even if he made the proper arrangements for such a trip, the timing would make it suspicious. That meant that he would have to hire someone to do it for him, but the idea of asking a surface dweller for help burned his pride. That was where the lost tribe talked about in the legends of the People of the Earth came into play.

According to their lore, the People of the Earth were originally castaways who had come from a distant land. Chased from their homeland, they had ended up in ancient Japan. However, on the long journey there, the seventh tribe had been separated from the rest. Now often known as the lost tribe, they were said to have had mysterious powers. And now someone claiming to be from the lost seventh tribe had appeared before Tayuma. It was the woman in indigo. As an ancient ally, Tayuma felt no shame in asking her for help. And since most believed that the seventh tribe was only a legend, no one would ever think to suspect that one of them was the culprit. In other words, this woman was a godsend to Tayuma.

"I have an interest in the new techniques that my comrades of the past have developed. Let us combine our powers for the profit and prosperity of our tribes."

"For the tribe's prosperity, you say? Ha, I like you already! Warrior of the lost tribe, what is your name?"

"It's Maya. In your style... my name as a warrior would be Dark Navy."

The woman named Maya introduced herself as Dark Navy and gave Tayuma a friendly smile. Contrary to her smile, however, there was scorn in her eyes.

What a prideful and simple man. All you have to do is stroke his ego. Well, that's all the better for me, but I don't want to be dragged down with him if he falls. It might be better to pull out once I've completed my objective...

Maya's real goal was obtaining the information and technology that the People of the Earth held. She might be able to learn something from their ancient codex that would give her and her allies an advantage in their battle. And since Maya was a magician that specialized in mind manipulation, she was extremely interested in the spiritual energy technology the People of the Earth had developed. For example, she would love to get her hands on something like a capacitor that could temporarily store a spirit's power. That would be the first step to turning magic into a practical weapon.

However, she knew the People of the Earth weren't just going to hand over their codex or their prized technology. Those were carefully guarded secrets that were only shared with specific, high-ranking people.

That was why Maya had set her eyes on Tayuma. He was a genuine People of the Earth supremacist, and he was easy to control. By catering to his pride, she could easily get him to hand over what she wanted. The problem was that she knew Tayuma's position was uncertain. He really only had power as part of a volatile faction. That was why Maya didn't want to have any long-term associations with him; she didn't want to be on the hook when he finally went down.

"So, who do I need to kill?"

With a serious expression, Maya urged Tayuma to get to the heart of the matter. Regardless of her true intentions, she had to establish a good relationship with him for the time being. To that end, she put on a friendly face and offered to make herself useful.

"This girl. She is the Kurano family's only child, and she's gone up to the surface for personal reasons all by her little self. There's no one protecting her, so she should be easy to kill."

Tayuma picked up a photo from his desk and handed it to Maya. It was of a young girl with black hair. She was the daughter of Kurano Daiha, who was both the leader of the conservative faction and the chieftain of the People of the Earth.

"The daughter of the conservative faction's leader, you say? Is the goal in killing this cute little girl to sour feelings regarding the surface among the tribes

siding with the conservative faction?”

“Indeed, indigo warrior. That’s correct.”

“If the goal is to break down the conservative faction, it would be best if it didn’t look like an accident, no? Do you have any requests for how the deed is done?”

“I’ll leave that to you. It seems you understand the subtleties of the situation, so just do it in whatever fashion is easiest for you.”

Hearing Maya’s answer, Tayuma’s lips curled into a twisted grin. She clearly understood the true nature of the plan, and Tayuma had no doubt that she would succeed. It was an ugly thing to be happy about, and Tayuma’s sick smile reflected that.

There were several potential methods to reduce the conservative faction’s influence, but the death of one of their own at the hands of the surface dwellers would produce the fastest results. It would be even more compelling if the victim were a young girl. That’s why Tayuma didn’t want the chief’s daughter to meet her end in an accident. He wanted to make it clear it was a murder.

The ideal scenario would have been if the government on the surface had, knowing she was from underground, tortured and killed her in an attempt to extract information from her. Setting that up would be extremely difficult, but as long as something along those lines happened, it would surely be enough to shake up the conservative faction. With the support they had now, it seemed their idea of peacefully building a base on the surface would soon become a reality. But the heinous murder of the chief’s daughter would undoubtedly cause a great deal of their supporters to reconsider the relationship they wanted with the surface. Her assassination would be Tayuma’s key to turning the tables on the conservatives.

“Very well. I’ll handle it as I see fit.”

Maya began thinking about how to deal with her target.

Hmm... Maybe I should use this girl as a ritual sacrifice as well. As long as I make it look like it was done by the police or the Self-Defense Forces... And if

that's too hard, maybe I'll pin it on some cult?

Maya herself wasn't too fond of the act of murder. If she had to kill someone, she at least wanted to make the most of their death. So she came up with the idea of using her target as a catalyst for magic, or in other words, a sacrifice. In short, this girl would meet the same fate as Kanae's daughter.

Kanae's daughter was still alive because Nana had saved her before the ritual was complete. Normally, however, a sacrifice's life force would be drained as the ritual progressed. It would ultimately kill them, but it would leave no trace of injury or harm. Maya would then just need to make it look like a murder, and she could pin it on someone from the government or even a local cult. Either one would be enough to make the People of the Earth wary.

Once she'd come up with a plan, Maya was satisfied and moved on to the next topic.

"And will you accept my demands?"

Really, she was asking about her reward.

"Of course. I will prepare what you have asked for. Take a spiritual energy capacitator with you as a down payment. I will prepare a transcript of the codex, so come collect it when the job is finished. I will present you with the other spiritual energy equipment at that time as well."

What Maya wanted as compensation for her help in Tayuma's scheme was a sample of spiritual energy technology and a copy of the People of the Earth's ancient codex. Since Tayuma supported a military invasion, he was influential in spiritual energy weapon research development. He was also capable of acquiring surplus parts through illegal channels. He even had similar access to the codex. And since Maya was from the lost tribe, their ancient allies, he had no problem offering her either one.

"That's good. In that case, I'll get to work right away."

"Please do. I will await good news from you."

And so both parties reached an agreement. Their end goals were completely different, and each of them felt like they were really just using the other. Despite that, both of them walked away from their arrangement with the same

dark smile on their face.

A Grown-Up Date

When Kii woke up, she rushed to the kitchen and launched headlong into telling Koutarou, who was preparing breakfast, about what had happened the previous night.

“Why were you asleep when mom came, Onii-chan? Jeez...”

“Sorry, I’ve been a bit tired recently.”

“When I told mom about you, she wanted to meet you, Onii-chan.”

“It’s a shame I was asleep. I’ll make sure to say hi if she comes by again.”

“She can’t come often, but she said she would come again. So I’m sure you’ll get to meet her.”

“I’m a really heavy sleeper, so make sure you wake me up when she does, okay?”

“Okay! I will!”

Kii believed that what had transpired in her dream was real. Of course, Koutarou had no intention of correcting her. She would come to understand on her own as she grew older.

This is like telling a kid that Santa Claus is real...

Sometimes it was just better to foster hope in a child rather than tell them the truth. The truth at the wrong time could be crushing. Koutarou thought this was one such instance, so he patiently listened to Kii’s story as if it were the truth while he continued to fix breakfast.

“So what did you tell your mom about me?”

“I said you were good at cooking.”

“I’m not that good though.”

“You are. Kii knows. Heehee...”

Kii had been chatting away cheerfully ever since she came flying into the

kitchen. She was overjoyed that she'd gotten to see her mother, and she was thrilled to have someone to talk to about it. She was glad that someone was Koutarou, but she was also a little sad that she couldn't tell her father. Her complex emotions regarding her father were beginning to sort themselves out after meeting with her mother.

"When I told her more things about you, she said that I should give you that."

"What is 'that'?"

"Eeheeheehee... It's a secret!"

"Another one of those, huh? You sure have plenty of secrets."

"Maybe. But I'll tell you everything eventually. Heehee..."

"Then I'll look forward to it."

Kii was sitting on a chair in the kitchen with both of her elbows propped up on the table. She stared at Koutarou as he went about his business in the kitchen, her eyes bright with joy all the while. It seemed her dream had restored her cheerful personality.

This is how children should be...

Even though she was sitting behind him and he couldn't see her, the glee in her voice and the energetic sound of her happily kicking her legs under the table said enough. And thanks to her, Koutarou was also in a cheerful mood.

After a while, Koutarou finally finished cooking and began setting the breakfast table. Still swinging her legs while waiting for food, Kii called out to him.

"By the way, Onii-chan..."

"Yes?"

Koutarou stopped what he was doing and looked up at Kii. When he did, he realized that something was different. Her cheeks were slightly flushed and her smile was timid.

"Uh, um, you see..."

“Go on. You can tell me.”

Kii seemed to be hesitating, so Koutarou smiled and urged her on.

“Y-You see... If you’re not too busy, um, would you go on a date with Kii?”

“A date?”

“Y-Yeah...”

Kii blushed even more and very shyly nodded.

Ah, so that’s what this is about...

Koutarou now realized why Kii was blushing. The word date was embarrassing for her to say, but at the same time, she wanted to be able to use it. In other words, though she was young, Kii was still a typical girl.

“You see, I made a promise with mom! I promised that I would go see the Kabutonga movie and tell her about it! S-So, um...”

Kii hurriedly tried to explain herself. Koutarou found her unusually flustered appearance to be quite heartwarming “But... if Onii-chan is too busy, that’s okay...”

As she was reaching the end of her explanation, she lost momentum but looked up at Koutarou with longing eyes. Seeing her like that, he realized something else.

I see... Not only was that hard to say for her, she’s worried about bothering me...

Yesterday, Kii had been so preoccupied with her feelings for her parents that she hadn’t even considered that she might be causing trouble for Koutarou. However, after getting to see her mother and having the night to settle down, that was quickly changing. She’d started to think about Koutarou and his needs, and she didn’t want to cause any problems for him. That’s why she’d said what she had. Realizing that, Koutarou nodded.

“All right, then let’s go on a date.”

“Really?! Are you sure?!”

Upon hearing Koutarou’s answer, Kii’s expression instantly lit up with a bright,

childish smile.

That's it. A good girl like you should always get to smile like that, Kii-chan...

He had already promised to take her to the movie, so he had no reason to refuse. On top of that, he wanted to do anything he could for her right now. People were naturally more inclined to spoil considerate children than selfish ones.

"It's fine. But I have something to do today, so I hope tomorrow is good enough."

Today, Koutarou had to go pawn the platinum he had gotten from Clan, and then use that cash to buy food and some miscellaneous goods. Since Clan couldn't leave the laboratory, the shopping fell on him.

"Then I will help you!"

Kii happily offered her assistance. The way she saw it, it was only fair that they work today if they were going to play tomorrow.

"Thank you, Kii-chan."

In reality, there wasn't a lot that Kii could help with. But since Koutarou believed that her willingness to help was worth rewarding, he honestly thanked her and patted her head.

"Heehee, all right! Tomorrow's a date!"

"You can call it a date if you want, but I don't have a lot of experience with going out to play with girls, so don't get your hopes up."

"Eeheeheehee, it doesn't have to be a grown-up date! The things I like are all things you wouldn't do on a grown-up date anyway."

Unlike his best friend, Kenji, Koutarou had almost no experience going on dates with girls. That's why he was a little worried this date wouldn't be exactly what Kii had in mind. However, Kii made it clear she wasn't expecting a so called grown-up date. Though she'd used the word "date," she was fine with something like going to play at the park or going out for ice cream.

"Well, if that's what you want, you can leave it to me."

“All that matters is that Kii and Onii-chan have fun together.”

“That’s... actually a pretty grown-up thing to say.”

Koutarou reached out and patted Kii’s head again. She happily smiled in response.

“So it is a grown-up date then?”

“It’s really an attitude thing.”

The two laughed together, and that was how Koutarou ended up promising to go on a date with Kii.

After exchanging the platinum for money at a pawn shop, Koutarou and Kii went shopping. Between food and other sundries, Koutarou actually had quite a long list of things he needed to get. After the next time freeze, Koutarou would be getting off the Cradle, but Clan would remain. And since she was occupied, he had to make preparations for her. He also believed it was best to stock up on supplies just in case something happened in the meantime. His battlefield experience in Forthorthe had taught him to take such precautions.

For their shopping, Koutarou and Kii visited large supermarkets and department stores. They bought enough supplies to fill an entire shopping cart plus three cardboard boxes, so it was quite a bit of work to carry it all around. Thanks to that, by the time they were actually done with the shopping, both Koutarou and Kii were exhausted.

“Good work.”

“Phew... We really bought a lot...”

They sat down on a park bench to take a break before pushing the heavy cart the rest of the way to the Cradle. It was an even more daunting task considering the Cradle was parked halfway up a mountain. Getting the cart there wouldn’t be easy, which is why they’d decided to take a breather first.

“Here, Kii-chan. You can open it now.”

“Really?!”

Koutarou pulled out a bag of candy from the cart and handed it to Kii. She

happily accepted it with a big smile on her face. Koutarou watched her out of the corner of his eye while he dug around in a bag and pulled out two plastic bottles so they would have something to drink.

“I hope it’s a good one...”

Kii carefully opened up the candy. It had a special Kabutonga-themed package, and it came with a trading card inside featuring a random character. When Koutarou saw Kii staring at it in the store, he’d picked it up for her.

“Aww, it was just Scarab King...”

After a quick glance at the trading card, Kii’s shoulders drooped. She’d gotten a card featuring one of the show’s villains, complete with a dark background and everything. Kii had wanted Kabutonga, or at least another hero if she couldn’t have him. She’d gotten her hopes up, so she was visibly disappointed at this result. Seeing her like that, Koutarou felt badly for her.

“Let’s get another one on our way back.”

He offered to buy her another one so she could try again as he handed her one of the juice bottles. He still had plenty of money from exchanging the platinum, so he could afford to splurge some on candy. He also knew there was a convenience store on the way back where they could stop to get more.

“No, that’s okay. I couldn’t eat all that candy.”

Kii’s smile returned as she stuck a piece of candy in her mouth. She clearly liked it, but she was right. A tiny girl like her couldn’t finish two or three packages of it. She was disappointed about the card, but she made the adult decision to endure it.

She should just be more childish when it comes to things like this...

Kii was never very selfish, and that made Koutarou want to do something special for her. Simply put, he wanted to see her happy.

Huh? Now that I think about it, this card...

Looking at the card together with Kii, Koutarou realized he’d seen something similar before. The colors weren’t the same, but he’d seen the same style of illustration and card design somewhere.

“Of course!”

“What is it, Onii-chan?”

“Hang on a sec, Kii-chan. I have something nice to show you.”

Koutarou smiled at Kii and reached into his breast pocket.

“What?”

“Here, look.”

Koutarou pulled out something to show it to Kii.

“It’s Kabutonga!”

When she saw it, Kii’s eyes shot wide open. Reflected in her eyes was a trading card depicting her beloved Kabutonga. And it wasn’t just any card. It was a rare card with a metallic foil sheen.

“Wow, how did you get this?!”

“I got it a while back.”

It was the card Koutarou had used as a bookmark in his play scripts. It was actually a recreation of the cards available from this year, handed out as a promotion for the reshowing of the Kabutonga movie. As such, it had a matching design to the card in Kii’s hands now.

“I’ll give it to you, Kii-chan.”

“Really?! It’s a sparkly card, you know?!”

“Yeah. You wanted one, right?”

Koutarou was planning on giving the card to Kii. He hadn’t been able to throw it away because of how it had come into his possession, but he had no problem handing it over to someone who wanted it so badly.

“Yes! Thank you, Onii-chan!”

Kii took the card from Koutarou and held it above her head with both hands. It almost looked like she was trying to use the sun to see through it, but the thick card wouldn’t let any light pass. It was simply an expression of her joy.

“All right! It’s a sparkly Kabutonga!”

“Take good care of it, okay?”

“Yeah, of course!”

It was actually something he’d gotten as a promotional item when he went to see the movie ten years in the future. Everyone else who’d seen the movie had the same card, but he didn’t see any reason to tell her that. Just like with Santa Claus, sometimes there was no reason to tell the truth.

That’s right. We can probably see the movie at the theater in the amusement park.

Thanks to the card, Koutarou remembered there was a theater there. He was planning on taking Kii to visit the amusement park as part of their date the next day, so he figured they might as well catch the movie there.

“Heehee, I’ll make sure to write my name on it later!”

Kii was in her own little world as she admired the card. The sight of Kii in such a childlike state pleased Koutarou.

I’ll check it out when we get to the amusement park tomorrow.

That’s what he quietly decided as he watched over Kii in high spirits.

Before now, Koutarou had only ever been on one outing that might qualify as a date. Using that as reference, he planned his day out with Kii. In the morning they would take a stroll through the forest park, and after eating lunch at a restaurant near the station, they would take the train to the zoo and the amusement park in the afternoon.

And just like Koutarou had hoped, the Kabutonga movie was showing at the theater in the amusement park. Though it had limited seating capacity since it was part of the park, it always carried promotional goods for whatever film it was screening. Koutarou knew it would be filled with stuff Kii would love.

“Wow... amazing...”

As soon as Kii entered the theater, she was completely awestruck with the sights in front of her. There was so much to take in and she didn’t want to miss any of it, from the big poster for the movie to information on the promotional

goods and more.

“Sorry for keeping you waiting, Kii-chan. Here’s a pamphlet.”

“Thank you, Onii-chan!”

However, her interest soon switched over to the ticket and pamphlet that Koutarou had bought for her. The pamphlet was exclusive to the amusement park, and the deluxe edition even had a small bonus figurine attached to it.

“All right!”

After receiving the pamphlet from Koutarou, Kii flipped through the pages wide-eyed.

“You’re better off not reading that until after the movie.”

“Huh? Why?”

Hearing Koutarou’s warning, Kii stopped flipping through the pages. While smiling at her, he pointed at the pamphlet.

“It spoils part of the story, so if you read that first, you won’t enjoy the movie as much.”

“Oh, I see! Then I’ll look at it later!”

Kii shut the pamphlet without hesitation and flashed a bright smile.

“Eeheeheehee!”

After Koutarou patted her on the head, she began intensely staring at the figure she’d gotten.

“Do you like it?”

“Yeah!”

Kii was in an especially good mood today. She’d experienced all kinds of new things, and now she was finally about to get to watch the movie she’d been dying to see. But what made her happiest of all was that someone was spending all this time together with her. And not just anyone. Someone she adored and someone who understood her. Koutarou’s company made everything ten times better.

Everyone should just come up here and make friends with the people. Just like I did with Onii-chan...

Recently, the adults around Kii had been talking about complicated things. They were arguing about whether or not they should get along with the people on the surface. It was more complicated than that, but the details of the situation were too much for a six year old to follow. And now that she'd come to the surface for herself, she had her own opinion on the matter. Being friends with Koutarou was fun. She didn't see why the adults were arguing about making friends like that.

Kabutonga says so too. Bravery is born from people supporting each other. When I grow up, I'll support Onii-chan!

Special feelings began budding in her small chest. It was something that she'd been dwelling on since the previous day. Koutarou had been so nice to her even though she was a complete stranger, but was it really okay just to rely on him like that? If what Kabutonga said was true, Kii wanted to do something for Koutarou too. Those were the thoughts racing through her mind.

But even then, Kii had a grasp of her own immaturity. She knew the position she was in. She was still a child and didn't have the power to support Koutarou. And so she began praying that she would become the kind of adult that could take care of him someday. In other words, young Kii had fallen in love. She wouldn't realize it until she was older, but Koutarou would be her first love.

After the movie was over, Kii and Koutarou took to riding the attractions in the amusement park. Since it was almost evening, Koutarou was worried about wearing Kii out, but his fears were unfounded. The movie had gotten her pumped up, and she was still full of energy even now.

"Wow..."

Up close, the ferris wheel was a staggering height to a six year old girl. It looked almost as if it touched the sky, and Kii stared up at it in awe.

"Kii-chan?"

Koutarou called for Kii when it was their turn to get on. The attendant opened

the door to the gondola for them. Since they were waiting on Kii, both Koutarou and the attendant had wry smiles on their faces.

“Sorry, I’m coming!”

Finally snapping back to reality after hearing Koutarou call her name, Kii ran towards him. When she caught up to him, she firmly grabbed hold of his hand.

“Here we go!”

Even though they were together now, she didn’t slow down. Still holding on to his hand, she leaped into the gondola.

“That’s dangerous.”

“Heehee, sorry.”

As if pulled in by Kii, Koutarou followed her in. Though he’d scolded her and she’d apologized, she was still beaming like she wasn’t the slightest bit sorry. Meanwhile, the door closed and the gondola slowly rose into the air without making a sound.

“If you do it again, I’ll have to punish you.”

“Eeheehee, it will be fine. Kii will probably be more adult when we meet again.”

“Huh?”

“I got to see mom, and I got to see the movie. Since I promised, I better go home soon.”

“I see, that’s true...”

Koutarou had almost forgotten, but Kii had run away from home. He’d even gone to go see the movie with her because that was part of the condition for her going home.

“But I think everyone is going to be mad at Kii. So... I don’t think I’ll be able to see you for a while, Onii-chan.”

Kii was aware that what she’d done was going to cause trouble, and she knew that would make it harder to return to the surface in the future. That’s why she was doing her best to enjoy today.

“That’s very good. I’m glad you’ve made up your mind.”

Realizing Kii knew what she was doing, Koutarou stopped scolding her. She was too clever for a six year old.

“I heard on the TV that travelling on your own makes you grow up faster.”

“Haha, you’re not on your own though.”

“Yeah. I was only alone for a little while. Heehee...”

She’d met Koutarou just a few hours after running away from home, and this was their third day together. In those few short days, however, she’d matured and even fallen in love. She would treasure them for the rest of her life.

“All right! With that said, let’s make sure we play our hearts out today!”

“Yeah!”

Kii would go home and Koutarou would go to sleep for ten years. Though sad, they would likely never met again. Knowing that, Koutarou didn’t see the harm in them having as much fun as possible on their last day together.

“Kii-chan, what do you want to ride next?”

“Um...”

The gondola they were in was just about to reach the top. The light of the setting sun illuminated Kii’s face as she peered out the window.

Ah...

Seeing her gentle smile like this, Koutarou was subtly reminded of someone else from a different time...

“I’ve decided! Onii-chan, let’s ride on that next!”

However, as soon as Kii excitedly shouted and pointed out the window, the similarity seemed to vanish. Koutarou was left unsure he’d even seen it in the first place.

“That thing spinning round and round and zooming by!”

“The roller coaster, huh? That sounds good. Let’s ride that next.”

But Koutarou didn’t let it bother him. Rather than spending his time trying to

figure out who Kii reminded him of, he wanted to spend his time focusing on her.

After getting off the Ferris wheel, they walked side by side towards the roller coaster. With the setting sun hanging over their shoulders, they cast one long shadow together. Everything else was bathed in the red glow of the evening sun almost like it had been kissed with fire.

“Hey, Onii-chan.”

Kii reached her hand out to Koutarou. Realizing what she wanted, he reached his hand out for hers in return.

“Heeheehee.”

Kii took Koutarou’s hand and wrapped her fingers around it just like he did hers. Now holding hands, they continued towards the roller coaster.

“You know, Onii-chan...”

As Kii started to speak, she gave Koutarou’s hand a firm squeeze. Because of that, Koutarou knew what she was about to say was important.

“When I go home, I’m going to apologize to dad.”

“Oh yeah?”

Kii had run away from home because she’d had a fight with her father, so he was curious what had made her change her mind about him.

“I actually shouldn’t have run away from home... Instead, I think that I should have held hands with dad like this.”

“Hmm...”

Rather than telling her she was right or wrong, Koutarou simply squeezed Kii’s hand back. He felt like that would be the best way to convey his feelings.

“Also, I think I’ve made him worry. That’s why I’m going to apologize.”

“That’s good. I’m sure he’ll be really mad at first, but you should get along with your dad.”

“Yeah.” Kii nodded and smiled. She was happy that Koutarou understood. “But I think it’s also a good thing that I ran away from home too.”

“No, it’s not good.”

“No, I know it’s not good, but, I mean...”

Kii pursed her lips together and pensively put her hand to her cheek. However, her smile quickly returned.

“But I became friends with Onii-chan, right? That’s not a bad thing.”

“It’s true we probably wouldn’t have met if you hadn’t run away from home.”

Koutarou laughed and shrugged at the same time. When he first met Kii, he had been worried about what would happen, but things seemed to have worked out just fine. They’d made friends, the police hadn’t gotten involved, and now she was going to go back home. Like Kii said, it wasn’t a bad outcome.

“Right?”

“Still, overall, I’d have to say it wasn’t a good thing.”

“You’re strict.”

“That’s what the adult world is like.”

“I think you’re still a kid too, Onii-chan.”

“Okay, fine. We’ll just say it wasn’t a bad thing then.”

“Ahahaha!”

They were still laughing as they approached the entrance to the roller coaster. Just as they reached it, a car flew by them on the track. The highest point of the coaster stood seventy meters tall, meaning a sixty-five meter fall back down. At this point in time, it was the tallest ride like it in the country, and it was well known for its speed too.

“Amazing...”

Seeing the car whiz past, Kii’s eyes went wide. The roller coaster left a completely different impression on her than the ferris wheel.

“Are you scared?”

“Nope! I wanna ride it!”

However, Kii’s eyes had apparently gone wide out of fascination rather than

fear. Seeing just how fast it could go, she was even more interested in it than before.

“Let’s go!”

Her eyes were sparkling as she excitedly grabbed Koutarou and passed through the entrance to the roller coaster. Since it was a new ride and had a reputation as the tallest coaster in the country, it always had a long line on the weekends. Fortunately, that wasn’t the case on weekdays like today and they didn’t have to wait long.

“Excuse me, you two.”

Before they reached the terminal, however, they were stopped by an attendant.

“Yes, what is it?”

“I’m very sorry, but I’m afraid this young lady can’t get on the ride.”

The attendant indicated Kii while speaking to Koutarou.

“Whaaat?! Why not?!”

Of course, being told that she wasn’t allowed to ride all of a sudden just wasn’t something Kii could accept. She walked right up to the attendant and protested with exaggerated gestures.

“Kii won’t do anything dangerous! I’ll sit still in the ride, okay?!”

“N-No, you didn’t do anything wrong. But you see...”

Under the pressure of Kii’s protest, the attendant pointed to a nearby signboard.

“In order to be safe on the ride, you have to be a little bit bigger. If you were to ride on the roller coaster now, something dangerous might happen, and we don’t want that.”

Clearly written on the sign the attendant had indicated were the words: “You must be at least 140 centimeters to ride this attraction.” Kii had only recently grown past the 110 centimeter mark, meaning she was almost a whole thirty centimeters short of the requisite height.

The roller coaster was equipped with a safety bar that lowered down on the passengers to secure them in place. Kii, however, was short enough that the safety bar wouldn't reach down far enough to protect her. With the gap between her and the bar, there was a high chance she would be thrown from the ride during curves or freefalls. As a safety precaution, the attendant simply couldn't allow her to get on.

"I am truly sorry, but would you consider choosing another ride instead?"

"N-No way..."

Kii's shoulders drooped, but she understood the reason she couldn't ride the roller coaster and didn't complain any more. She'd gotten her hopes up enough, however, that the overwhelming disappointment drove her to the verge of tears.

140cm以下は
搭乗できません

“I can’t grow big all of a sudden!”

“That’s too bad.”

“Aaauuuuugh!”

“I’m so sorry, but you can look forward to it when you get a little older.”

They parted ways with the attendant and returned down the path towards the entrance of the ride. As they passed by the other people waiting in line for the ride, Kii looked up at them with envy.

How do I put it? It’s like...

Koutarou felt badly for Kii, but seeing her so worked up over it was also strangely heartwarming. It was a complex emotion. He’d wanted her to be able to ride the roller coaster, but seeing her now, he felt nostalgic.

“It’s unfair that grown-ups get to have all the fun... jeez...”

That was a sentiment Koutarou understood well enough. When he was young, he’d often felt the same way. Looking at Kii going through it now, he almost felt like he was looking back on himself from long ago. So even though he felt for her, he couldn’t help but smile.

“You’ll become a grown-up soon too.”

“But I wanted to ride it today,” Kii said as she squeezed on Koutarou’s hand. “Together with you, Onii-chan...”

Kii was still looking up at the roller coaster and its cars of happy people enjoying themselves. She wanted a memory like that with Koutarou because she knew they would likely never be able to come here together again.

Jeez... She really is such a good girl...

When Koutarou got a better idea of what was going through her head, he could feel it tugging at his heartstrings. He knew he wanted to see her smile again.

“Then let’s ride something that we can only ride today.”

Fortunately, he managed to think of something right away. This was an amusement park, so there should be plenty of ways to make her smile.

“Only today?”

“Yeah. Something like that.”

When Kii, still on the verge of tears, looked up at Koutarou, he was pointing at something. Following his finger with her eyes, she spotted a large merry-go-round.

“What?”

When Kii saw the merry-go-round, she rubbed her eyes and tilted her head in confusion. It didn’t look like something that they could only ride today to her.

“If I’m not with a small girl like you, it’s far too embarrassing for a guy like me to get on.”

“Ah!”

Kii suddenly understood. The merry-go-round was full of children and their parents. There were also young couples riding it, but the men all looked uncomfortable. In the end, it seemed what Koutarou said was true; it would be hard to get on without a child as an excuse.

“Onii-chan, you want to ride something like that?”

A slight smile appeared on Kii’s lips. Seeing that, Koutarou nodded emphatically and flashed a mischievous smile.

“Yeah. Is that okay?”

“Of course it’s okay!”

After nodding her head too, Kii finally smiled brightly again. The look in her eyes then turned gentle.

“Say... you’re just enduring the embarrassment for Kii’s sake, aren’t you?”

“No, I want to ride it for myself. Isn’t that horse cool?”

“Hmm. Then I’ll leave it at that.”

Kii understood what Koutarou was really doing. She was a clever child after all.

“Despite my looks, I’m confident in my horseback riding.”

“Then let’s ride it together!”

And that was why Kii didn’t mind if she was riding the merry-go-round. What she was after wasn’t riding the roller coaster so much as it was making memories with Koutarou.

After playing in the amusement park until the sun set, Koutarou and Kii headed back to the Cradle. They took a train to the edge of the city. From there, it only would only take about thirty minutes to reach the Cradle from the station by foot.

“We’re back...”

Holding hands with Koutarou, Kii looked at the mountain growing larger in front of her. Koutarou had kept his promise, so now it was her turn to hold up her end of the bargain. It was finally time for her to return home.

“I was never planning on going back...”

“That’s just how it is. You don’t run away from home for long. You’re usually ready to go back after growing up a little.”

Excluding special cases involving things like abuse, children usually only ever ran away out of immaturity. Going back home was inevitably the natural result of maturing enough to see that.

And that’s exactly what had happened in Kii’s case. She had run away because of the friction between her and her father after her mother’s death. After getting some breathing room and calming down, however, she realized the error of her ways and was able to forgive her father. She understood that she wasn’t the only one grieving. Her father was suffering too. In the end, running away from home had helped her grow up considerably over the course of a few days.

“I’m sorry for causing you all this trouble, Onii-chan...”

“No, it’s okay. I think meeting you was a good thing.”

Deep down, Koutarou was truly happy they’d met. Kii was a sweet, gentle girl. Though she’d thrown him for a loop and been something of a pain at first, he

was now glad they'd become friends.

After all, if she hadn't met Koutarou, what would have happened to Kii? Would she have wandered the city on her own? What then? Thinking about it like that, Koutarou was especially happy they'd run into each other. Her running away from home still wasn't a good thing, but she'd lucked out in finding him.

Besides... there's just something about her...

Koutarou had gotten a strange sense of deja vu several times after meeting Kii. She reminded him of someone. He'd felt something similar a couple of times back in Forthorthe, but this was even more vivid than that.

"Oh, and thank you for the card."

Kii pulled out the metallic card and showed it to Koutarou.

"I made sure to write my name on it so I wouldn't lose it. Look!"

She'd written big letters across the front of the card in permanent marker. It was supposed to be her name, but in her childish handwriting, it mostly looked like scribbles.

"Ah..."

Another wave of deja vu came over Koutarou.

What? Impossible... I've... I've seen this before!

Koutarou had seen a card like this in the past, complete with scribbling on it. The one he'd seen, however, had lost most of its sheen. It looked like this one, but about ten years older.

Then, this girl is... No, wait... Can coincidences like that really happen?! Doesn't the handwriting just look similar?

Koutarou was getting confused. If what his gut was telling him was true, it would indeed be a rather remarkable coincidence. Compared to that, it seemed much more likely that the handwriting just happened to be similar.

"Kii-chan, could your name be..."

To figure it out, all Koutarou had to do was ask Kii's real name. That would clear things up. If Kii was just a nickname for something else, then...

“Is your real name actually Kiri—”

However, just as Koutarou was about to ask, a video billboard that had been installed on the exterior of a nearby building caught his eye.

“The time is now 6:06 PM. Here’s the weather report for today, the sixteenth of April. Skies will be clear over the entirety of Harukaze City—”

The moment Koutarou saw that large billboard, his mind was completely overtaken by a singular thought: the date. Any and everything else no longer seemed important.

“I-Impossible. It’s April 16th, 1999?!”

“What’s wrong, Onii-chan?”

Realizing the change that had come over Koutarou, Kii looked at him worriedly. Seeing his pale face, she squeezed his hand.

“That means the accident happens today! And in less than an hour!”

“Onii-chan, what are you talking about?!”

Kii didn’t know what was going on, but based on the way Koutarou was acting, she could tell it was serious.

“My mom is going to die!”

On April 16th, 1999, Koutarou’s mother died in an accident. It happened, rather, it would happen at 7 PM. In less than an hour’s time, his life would change forever.

The Heart’s Balance

Very soon, Koutarou’s mother would die. When that realization set in on him, he froze in place.

What should I do?!

Over the past three days, Koutarou had secretly been thinking about whether or not he should break the rules and step in to save his mother. If he did, he and Clan wouldn’t be able to return to their own world. In that case, Koutarou would have brought it upon himself, but the same couldn’t be said for Clan. Had this been Forthorthe, she wouldn’t have minded. Since Clan was royalty, she had a certain duty to protect the lives of her citizens. However, Clan had nothing to do with the people on Earth, and Koutarou had no right to force her hand in getting her involved. On top of that, Koutarou had made a promise with the invading girls as well as an oath to himself. But even so, he was having a hard time accepting the burden of just letting his own mother die.

Though unable to decide, he knew the time would come eventually that he had to make a choice. He hadn’t expected it to come so suddenly, but now there was no time to hesitate. In less than an hour, Koutarou’s mother would die. If he was going to do something, it had to be now.

“I... I...”

But despite knowing that, Koutarou couldn’t move.

If he acted, he would be sacrificing Clan’s happiness for his. He would basically be trading his mother’s life for Clan’s future. Even if he meant well, could that ever be forgiven? And what about the promise and oath he had left ten years in the future? That was why he’d fought so desperately to return home in the first place. That said, could he just abandon someone he loved to such a terrible fate? Could he ever be forgiven for that either, especially when it was his own mother?

Those were the questions that besieged Koutarou now, and there was no way

he could come up with answers in just a few minutes. Especially when the lives of his family and friends were at stake. The scales in Koutarou's heart were perfectly balanced. Neither choice was one he wanted to make because he didn't want to lose any of the people that were precious to him. It was an impossible dilemma that left him paralyzed by indecision.

"Let's hurry up and save her, Onii-chan!"

But Kii didn't see it that way. Kii had just lost her own mother, and she didn't want him to have to go through the same thing. And so she desperately pleaded for him to save his mother.

"It's your mom! You can't just let it happen!"

"But if I do that, something dangerous will happen to my friend! There will be people I can never see again!"

"But you still have to go! If you don't, your friend will be sad too! They'll think they killed Onii-chan's mom!"

If Koutarou didn't save his mother, Clan would probably feel bad about it. She would think it was her fault Koutarou hadn't gone to save her. That would weigh on her, and in Koutarou's heart of hearts, he knew the same would hold true for the other invaders. Would that really be the right choice then?

Kii didn't know who Koutarou's friend was, but if he didn't save his mother, she knew how this friend would feel because it was the same way she would feel.

"Let's save your mom and apologize to your friend! After that, you can just protect your friend so that nothing dangerous happens to them! That's for the best!"

"Kii-chan..."

Koutarou was at a standstill, but Kii was pushing him forward with all of her heart. And for each push she gave him, some of that emotional momentum was transferred to him. In the end, she tipped the scales in his heart.

"I got it. Thank you, Kii-chan."

Koutarou made up his mind. There was no path that wouldn't end with

regret. But knowing that, he would just take responsibility for what he'd done. With Kii's encouragement, he steeled his resolve.

"Let's go save my mom. I'll apologize to my friends later."

With those words, Koutarou's thoughts turned to his friends who weren't present.

Sorry, everyone... It doesn't look like I can fulfill our promise after all...

Koutarou had promised the invaders that they would make the play a success. He'd also made an oath to himself that he would help resolve each of their problems. But now that he had decided to save his mother, he was about to lose his chance to return to the future where he could do that. A pang of guilt struck his heart.

I am very sorry, Your Majesty... I even turned your offer down...

Alaia had wanted Koutarou to remain in Forthorthe, but he had turned her down on the basis that he had promises to fulfill back home. But here he was, about to abandon those promises. It made him feel like he was betraying Alaia.

And Clan, I'm sorry for getting you involved in this. I'll protect you... so please forgive me...

They had started as enemies, but now they were friends. To Koutarou, Clan had become as precious to him as the invading girls. He understood that he was about to decide her future for her, so he resolved to protect her to try to make up for it. That would become his new oath.

After thinking through everything, Koutarou decided to go save his mother. He believed it was the right thing to do, but he knew what it would cost. This wasn't like when the village's water supply had been poisoned during the harvest festival. This time, history would almost certainly change.

But even then, Koutarou simply couldn't look away knowing what was about to happen. He couldn't just let his mother die without even trying to save her. There was no virtue in that. It wouldn't be the knightly thing to do, and if anything, that was Koutarou's weakness.

"That's right! That's the way, Onii-chan!"

Kii smiled as she cheered for Koutarou. She was happy to be of help to him and repay the kindness he'd shown her, even if it was only a little.

"You don't have to do everything yourself! You can make mistakes! You're not Kabutonga, Onii-chan!"

Kii knew that Koutarou was just a normal teenager. That he wasn't a superhero that could tackle anything. And it was thanks to her being there—thanks to her understanding that struggle—that he was finally able to make up his mind and act. Regardless of what happened next, it would be far better than if he'd stood still and done nothing. Essentially, Kii had saved him. In her own way, this young but gentle girl had become special to Koutarou, much like the invaders and Clan.

Koutarou clearly remembered the site of his mother's accident. He was there when it happened, and after the accident, he and his father had visited the place several times. He knew it well enough that he could figure out the fastest way to get there.

"I am sorry, Veltlion. My calculations used the Forthorthian calendar, so it didn't properly translate to this world's date system. I should have double checked it."

"So that's why..."

On his way to the site of the accident, Koutarou had used his bracelet to get in touch with Clan. According to her original estimation, the accident wasn't supposed to take place for another month, so Koutarou wanted to know what had gone wrong.

As it turned out, Clan had used the clock on board the Cradle and Forthorthe's calendar for her calculations. Though they were now based off of the vibration frequency of gravitons, they originally used Forthorthe's revolutions and rotations as the standards of measuring time.

Forthorthe had roughly the same size and mass as Earth, and it was about as far away from its star as Earth was from the sun. Because of that, their cycles of revolution and rotation were extremely similar, but they still weren't identical. That created a margin of error when substituting one clock for another. It

wasn't enough to affect minor calculations, but when it came to calculating the passage of nearly two thousand years, it added up to a difference of about forty days. In the end, there wasn't anything wrong with Clan's math, she'd simply used the wrong calendar.

"I understand. Clan, I'm going to save my mom."

"Do as you please."

"I'm sorry for getting you involved in this. I'll properly take responsibility for it."

"I can't say I feel bad hearing that from a legendary knight."

"Thank you, Clan."

"Heh, just make sure you do things right."

In the end, Clan didn't so much as criticize Koutarou for his decision. Rather, she was smiling as she ended the call. She had suspected that this might happen from the very start, and she honestly thought it was for the best. She felt exactly the way Kii had predicted she would.

I'm really sorry, and thank you, Clan...

Koutarou thanked Clan as the call ended. Kii, who was running alongside Koutarou, had been waiting for him to finish up before she called out to him again.

"O-Onii-chan, don't worry about me! G-Go on ahead!"

Right now, Koutarou was matching Kii's speed as he ran. She knew that she was slowing him down, and she knew that the consequences would be dire if he didn't make it in time. As such, she urged him to leave her behind "No, it's fine."

However, Koutarou only shook his head and spoke to Kii in a calm fashion.

"We'll have enough time if we keep going at this pace. It's not that far from here."

"R-Really?"

Relieved, Kii's expression eased up a little. Koutarou had no trouble running at their current speed, but the same wasn't true for Kii. She was too out of breath

to even manage a smile for him.

“We could even stop for a moment on our way there.”

“Hahh... I-I’ll do my best so we won’t have to do that, Onii-chan!”

Kii was exhausted after having spent the entire day playing. But knowing that Koutarou’s mother was in danger, she still did her best to be of help. And Koutarou was honestly grateful for her. Right now, he felt much better to have her with him than he would have if he’d left her behind.

“Kii-chan, we’re turning at the next corner.”

“Okay!”

Koutarou ran a little ahead now and guided Kii as they went. They were about to leave the main street and enter an alley. It would make for a shortcut to their destination, and it would be easier to run with less people around. Since it was 6 PM on a weekday, the main drag was packed with people trying to get home.

“Once we get through here, we’ll be right next to it!”

“Just a little more!”

Entering the alley, Koutarou slowed down to match Kii’s pace again. It was basically a straight shot from where they were now, so there was no longer a need to lead the way. Instead, he ran beside her as they made their way down the dimly lit alley.

“...Hmm?”

Once Kii and Koutarou had made it about hallway down the alley, several men and women appeared in front of them. They were headed towards Koutarou and Kii, so the distance between them closed quickly.

What’s with these people...?

Normally, Koutarou would have just assumed they were passersby using the alley too, but their clothes, genders, and ages were all over the place. They had nothing in common. Moreover, he could sense something abnormal about their presence. The intuition he had nurtured on the battlefield was warning him. Abiding that warning, he took a closer look at the group and realized several things seemed strange about them.

Their expressions were feeble and pale. Not only that, but their steps were awkward. They were walking like puppets with their strings cut. Concerned, Koutarou used the spirit sight that he had gotten from Sanae to take a look at him. To his surprise, the flow of their auras was oddly distorted. From their necks up, their auras weren't properly cooperating with the rest of their bodies.

"Kii-chan, stop!"

Koutarou slowed down and grabbed Kii's arm to keep her from going any farther. He then glared down the alley at the strange crowd of people.

Could it be that these people are...

Koutarou unconsciously clenched his right hand hard. He had seen auras distorted like this before. His friend, the Fire Dragon Emperor Alunaya, had been in a similar state while he was being controlled by the evil magicians. At the time, Koutarou hadn't known what dragons' auras normally looked like, so he hadn't paid much attention to it, but thinking back to it now, it made sense.

But now that he was back in modern Japan, it was hard to believe that these people were actually being controlled by magic. He had to consider that they might be under the influence of drugs, machines, hypnosis, or something like that. Whatever it was, it wasn't normal, so Koutarou knew he had to keep his guard up. That's why he'd stopped running.

"Onii-chan?"

Koutarou was supposed to be in a hurry, but he'd suddenly stopped moving and now he was making a scary face. Not understanding what was going on, Kii grew anxious and squeezed his hand.

"Those people... are probably enemies."

"Enemies?! They're bad people?! Why?!"

"I don't know, but they aren't normal."

"They aren't normal?"

Kii took another look at the people in front of her after what Koutarou said. When she did, she saw what he meant. Their expressions and the way they were moving was strange even to her.

“You’re right. They’re kinda strange...”

“What are those people trying to do...?”

Koutarou mumbled as he glared at the group. Watching them, they started to spread out as if intent on blocking the path in front of him. He then sensed the intent to attack starting to develop.

Are they trying to kill us...? Why?

No one should have any reason to attack Koutarou in this day and age. As a time traveler, he had no connection to anyone here. The only person that might still wish him harm was Clan, his former enemy. Other than that, the possibilities were quite limited.

Did they just target us at random? Or...

Koutarou looked at Kii. There was a chance she was really the one they were after. She’d only said she’d run away from home, but if she was from a rich or affluent family, it was possible someone might be trying to kidnap her or worse.

“We can’t go this way. Let’s go back a little and take another road.”

Koutarou pushed Kii behind him and tried to put some distance between them and the strange group. Knowing this could be dangerous, especially with a child in tow, there was no reason to try and forge ahead recklessly.

“Onii-chan! There are people behind us too!”

“What?!”

Before they’d realized it, another group of people had appeared behind them as well. The ages and genders of the new group, just like the people in front of them, were all over the place. It came as no surprise to Koutarou that they had the same strange auras too.

The narrow alley went in a straight line, and with both exits now blocked, Koutarou and Kii couldn’t get away.

Regardless of the cause, this is a real problem... What do I do?

Their path of retreat had been cut off, and Koutarou still didn’t know what these people were after, but he could sense a growing bloodlust from them. It

was hard to imagine this ending peacefully, and there were too many people to forcibly push through. It would have been possible with his sword and armor, but he was unarmed and unarmored right now. On top of that, he had Kii to think about. Protecting her had to be his top priority.

I'm going to have to rely on Clan for help...

Clan often used her bracelet to summon weapons, so it might be possible to have one sent to him the same way. It would be Signaltin, ideally, but he didn't know if it that would work or not.

I should have made preparations for situations like this...

Koutarou hadn't expected anyone to attack him in this age, and running around with weapons and armor that would make him stand out would bring a different set of troubles. Assuming he'd be safe, he thought it was better to go without his sword and armor. Yet here he was, faced with an unknown enemy.

But there was no use crying over spilled milk. If he could get out of this safely, he would talk to Clan about making preparations to transfer Signaltin in case of future emergencies.

"But for now..."

All he could do was ask for help. He used his left hand to touch one of the gems on the bracelet around his right wrist. It was a switch that could be configured to activate one of many functions, and in this case it opened a communications channel with Clan. It was essentially a speed dial.

"Now, now, I can't have you calling for help."

However, Koutarou was unable to complete the call. A woman had appeared from the darkness and came at Koutarou with a large weapon. He was keeping an eye on the groups in front of and behind him, and he was distracted trying to get in touch with Clan. Because of that, it was perfect surprise attack.

"Whoa!"

All that he could do was use his bracelet to deflect her oversized weapon. It was a massive scythe reminiscent of the one the Grim Reaper was often depicted with. Koutarou managed to block the attack in the nick of time, but it

shattered the bracelet.

“Oh... to think you could block that. Very impressive.”

The woman who’d attacked was wearing an indigo outfit with an even darker indigo mantle over top of it. It was part of the reason Koutarou hadn’t noticed her. Dressed in such dark colors, she easily blended in with the shadows. Between that, the hood that covered half of her face, and her large, glowing red scythe, Koutarou thought she looked like the very personification of death.

“Whatever. You were targeting the bracelet in the first place.”

Koutarou had been able to block the attack, but he secretly felt a chill run down his spine. It was only because the woman was aiming for his bracelet that he’d been able to use it to shield himself. If she’d been after Koutarou’s life from the start, or Kii’s for that matter, would he have even stood a chance? Koutarou wasn’t confident.

This is bad... She’s calm...

What flustered Koutarou even more was the woman’s placid demeanor. Her first priority had clearly been to keep Koutarou from calling for reinforcements. Whatever she wanted with them would come after.

To kill Koutarou, she would have only needed to step in a little more during her attack. But since she was unsure of his capabilities, she targeted his bracelet first. It would have been problematic if she’d failed to kill him and he’d used that opportunity to call for backup. Conversely, killing him after destroying his bracelet should be easy.

It was thanks to his battlefield experience from Forthorthe that Koutarou could understand this woman’s intentions. It was also why he was panicking. He knew good and well that the most dangerous thing in a fight wasn’t a strong enemy, but a calm one.

“My, well, aren’t you scary? To understand that at your age... I’m really glad I waited for you to separate from your friend.”

“Damn it!”

If she had just been strong, she would have tried a brute force attack while

Koutarou and Clan were together. But instead, she'd bided her time and waited for a good opportunity. And without knowing any better, that was how Koutarou had gotten himself into this mess.

"That's why I have something I would like to ask."

The woman in indigo lowered her scythe. She dropped the end of it on the ground, and when it made contact, the people in front of and behind Koutarou all stopped moving. They then turned to face her as if awaiting orders.

Is she their leader...?

This strange display made Koutarou think they were her lackeys one way or another. He couldn't imagine what kind of relationship they had, but if they were working together, it was extra trouble for him.



“Could you just hand the girl over?”

The mysterious woman pointed at Kii with her empty left hand.

“You want Kii-chan?”

Koutarou carefully watched his surroundings as he answered. He couldn’t let his guard down for a moment.

“Yes, that’s right. What I want is that girl.”

As she said that, her lips peeking out from under the hood curled into a smile. But there was no hint of warmth or friendliness in it. If anything, it was freezing cold.

“I don’t care much for fighting, personally. If I can help it, I’d prefer not to tangle with you, boy. You feel the same, right?”

They were gentle words on the surface, but it was obviously a threat. It was an old trick to intimidate someone after showing off a bit of skill. It put pressure on the opponent to back down knowing a fight likely wouldn’t go in their favor.

“Onii-chan...”

Kii grabbed Koutarou’s sleeve. That alone told him she was afraid of this woman, whoever she was. It was clear she didn’t want to go with her. Koutarou touched Kii’s hand to reassure her and glared at the woman.

“What are you planning on doing with her? It doesn’t look like you’re here to take her back home.”

If she had just come to pick up Kii, there would have been no reason to attack Koutarou. She’d struck him with enough force to take off his arm if it hadn’t been for the bracelet. She was quite clearly hostile.

“It will be easier for you to hand her over if you don’t ask questions, boy.”

“So you really are planning on killing her?”

Koutarou could tell what she really meant based on what she was saying and how she was acting.

“I don’t recall saying anything about that.”

“What a barefaced lie...”

“I just want finish my job without any trouble. There’s no ulterior motive.”

Seeing Koutarou’s reaction, the mysterious woman smiled again. That smile told Koutarou everything he needed to know. This woman was after Kii’s life. It didn’t look like she was planning on killing her here, but that was her ultimate goal. Knowing that much, Koutarou adamantly put his foot down.

“I won’t let you have her. She’s my precious friend!”

“Onii-chan!”

Kii’s expression lit up. She knew that their current situation was bad, but she was happy Koutarou hadn’t abandoned her. And she was also happy to hear him call her his friend.

“My, you’re so suspecting. Honestly, I never said anything about killing her.”

The mysterious woman, still smiling, took her scythe in both hands and raised it high. She had expected that response from Koutarou based on his reactions this far. It seemed she wasn’t as much of a pacifist as she’d made herself out to be. It had been her intention to fight him from the start. Her words were just a trick to try and get a sense of his abilities.

I’m outnumbered and unarmed. And my opponent is a mystery...

Koutarou took a stance himself and clicked his tongue in his mind. The woman had called Koutarou scary before, but he was the one who was really scared. He was well aware that he had almost no chance of winning.

“Onii-chan...”

“It’s okay. Just stay back a little.”

“O-Okay...”

But regardless of the odds, Koutarou had no choice but to fight. He was the only one here to defend helpless Kii, and he had no intention of forsaking her. And so, like the brave knight he was, Koutarou defiantly walked into a fight he knew he probably wouldn’t walk out of.

The mysterious woman made the first move. Since Koutarou had to protect Kii, he couldn't make any bold advances, which meant that he naturally ended up in a position to intercept the woman.

"If you've got something hidden up your sleeve, now would be the time to use it! Do you think you stand a chance against me completely unarmed?"

"Show me an idiot who would walk into a fight with no plan!"

"You know, I don't hate that attitude!"

The mysterious woman's indigo mantle fluttered as she swung her large scythe at Koutarou. The wind pressure from the motion blew her hood back and revealed her face. She looked about twenty years old, but Koutarou didn't recognize her.

"She's fast! And that scythe isn't normal!"

The mysterious woman's movements were quick. It didn't look like the size or weight of her weapon were holding her back at all. When she swung it around, she was as stable as a spinning top. In fact, it looked like she was being stabilized by the spinning scythe. Koutarou couldn't believe that something like that was possible with a top-heavy weapon like a massive scythe. That kind of movement should only be possible if she were swinging around a stick or a staff. It was as if the blade on it just an illusion.

"That's because this blade doesn't have a physical form!"

"So that's it!"

Koutarou twisted his body as the large scythe grazed his side and tore open his shirt. He shivered when he saw the clean, eerily smooth cut it made. Despite her saying that the blade didn't have a physical form, the scythe was sharper than the real deal ever could be.

So the scythe is just a blade-shaped barrier on the end of the staff! I can't be fooled by the way it looks! This is on the same level as what Theia or Clan would use!

The only physical part of the scythe was the handle, which was originally a staff. And through some means, energy had been focused at the top of it,

creating a curved blade. As a result, it handled like a staff, but it had the power and range of a scythe, creating one absurdly formidable weapon.

Koutarou thought it was the product of some kind of barrier technology, but that wasn't the case. The blade had been created by this woman's magic. This woman, Maya, was a powerful magician who went by the codename Dark Navy.

"Oh... it seems like you're a special boy."

Maya stopped her attack, stepped back, and praised Koutarou.

This boy isn't just any ordinary child. It seems he's seen weapons made from energy before...

Maya had revealed the secret of her scythe to gauge Koutarou's reaction. Someone with no knowledge of magic would have either failed to understand what she meant or simply thought she was taunting them. Koutarou, however, had taken the point and responded quickly. That indicated he knew about magic, or something similar to it. Maya didn't think there wasn't much of a chance he was a magician, though. If he were, he should have used magic by now.

But I'm even using enhancement magic to improve my physique, and he's still keeping up...

Maya was impressed Koutarou could keep up with her in a fight even while unarmed. Before making her move, she had cast a spell on herself to improve her basic combat abilities, including strengthening her muscles, increasing the speed of her reflexes, and enhancing the activity in her brain. Because of that, she was fast. She was moving almost faster than the human mind should be able to comprehend, and yet Koutarou was somehow able to follow her movements. And without a weapon, at that.

Is he a natural manafist? Or perhaps he's a psionic soldier? It's not just his physical prowess, either. He seems to be quite experienced... I can't let my guard down just because he's unarmed. Who knows what tricks he might be hiding...

Though extremely rare, there were cases of natural magicians who could instinctively control mana without any training. Magicians like that often didn't realize their own power, and tended to focus their mana on their body and

maintaining their health. As a result, they would end up as a kind of superhuman. The same thing could happen with psychic powers. Maya suspected that might be the case with Koutarou.

Seeing how he moved, she realized that he had an abundance of actual combat experience. His footwork was disciplined and flawless. It was the kind of skill that could only be gained through real, frequent fighting.

Koutarou was slower than Maya while unarmed, but just barely. She could tell that if they were on equal footing, Koutarou would have the advantage in skill. That was why she praised him.

“Nah, I’m not very special myself. I’ve just been part of a few wars.”

“All truly strong people call themselves weak. It’s funny, considering those who call themselves strong usually end up dying... It looks like I can’t take it easy this time around.”

Maya smiled again and readied her scythe again. Though her lips were smiling, the eyes peeking out from under her hood were anything but.

“An enemy on the same level as Theia, and I’m unarmed... Seriously, I’m not Landlord-san...”

Koutarou took a stance as well and lamented his current predicament. But despite how bad it looked, he still hadn’t given up.

“Onii-chan, don’t get hurt.”

“I don’t know if there’s anything I can really do about that, but I’ll try my best.”

Koutarou had Kii behind him. She was the reason he couldn’t afford to lose. He was all that stood between her and danger.

Victory belongs to those who make the first move!

Koutarou didn’t want to advance too far and leave Kii behind, but he couldn’t hold back against this opponent. She had a longer reach and more power. If he stayed on the defensive, she would always have the advantage. He knew he had to get in range to be able to hit her.

“You can do it, Onii-chan!”

With Kii cheering for him, Koutarou dashed forward. As he did, he unleashed the spiritual energy that Sanae had implanted in him and pushed it to the limit. That instantly increased his speed.

I'm counting on you, Sanae! Last just a little longer!

In reality, Koutarou's psychic powers had been growing weaker and weaker. He wasn't a psychic to begin with, and he was only able to use spiritual energy after Sanae had forged spiritual circuity within his body specifically for that purpose. It wasn't permanent, however, and his ability to use it gradually weakened with time. Sanae would be able to give him a tune-up of sorts, but the longer he went without seeing her, the worse it got. As things stood now, his powers were less than half of what they'd been when he'd first been sent on his journey. That was partially why Koutarou was slower than Maya, but it was all he had right now. He just had to pray it would last long enough to make it through this battle.

"Good call, boy! You might even be able to beat me!"

"I'll wipe that smug grin off your face soon enough!"

Maya swung her scythe down, grazing Koutarou's hair. While a portion of his bangs were scattering through the air, he poured all of his force into his fist and thrust it at Maya.

"Our biggest drawback is that we're weak in close combat, but—"

Maya showed no signs of trying to dodge the blow. Koutarou's fist was headed right for her stomach, but she just stood there defenseless.

What is this? No, just keep going!

Koutarou noticed Maya's strange behavior, but he ignored it and continued thrusting his fist forwards. Hesitating in a fight would spell his doom.

"Through thorough preparation, one can make up for that weakness."

Koutarou's fist never reached Maya.

"Urgh! You've put up a barrier here too?!"

"Precisely!"

Just before his fist was about to slam into Maya, it stopped like it had collided with an invisible wall instead. It was her defensive magic, which suddenly appeared in the form of a translucent yellow light that acted like a shield.

“Which means I can focus on just attacking!”

Maya never had any intention of physically defending herself. Instead, she’d readied her next attack. Her scythe was such a large weapon that it left her open while attacking, but through the use of defensive magic, she didn’t have to worry about that. She could simply focus on offense. Clever use of tricks like that made even magicians serious threats in close range combat.

“How about this?!”

The massive scythe came for Koutarou again, this time emitting an indigo light.

I can’t take that!

Koutarou instinctively sensed the danger and tried to distance himself by kicking off of the handle of Maya’s scythe. But that was when something strange happened.

“Urgh! You’ve put up a barrier here too?! Huh...?”

After kicking the handle, Koutarou stopped moving momentarily and then repeated what he had said a few seconds ago. He was puzzled. The last thing he remembered was throwing his fist at Maya, but it appeared he’d just kicked off her scythe.

“Impossible! What just happened?!”

Maya didn’t miss the opening Koutarou gave her. She removed her left hand from the scythe and pointed it towards Koutarou. She then recited an incantation like a verse of beautiful poetry.

“Thunderbolt! Modifier: Short Range! Area Effect!”

There was a white flash. A powerful electric shock flew from Maya’s hand. Though her words had been beautiful, they unleashed a devastating magic. The electric shock was coming right for Koutarou.

“Oh crap!”

Koutarou realized his error and hurriedly moved to evade. However, Maya had specifically designed her attack to cover a wide area, so he couldn't completely avoid it.

When snared in an electric shock, the body's reaction isn't to convulse like many people believe. It feels more like getting hit with a powerful impact all over, and the entire body cramps up instantly. The victim then goes numb and loses control of their body. And that's exactly what happened to Koutarou.

"Onii-chan?!"

"You really are special. You almost completely dodged it."

Maya's favorite way of fighting was challenging someone in close combat. She would cast a spell on her weapon that caused a few seconds of memory loss on contact, and while her opponent was temporarily disoriented, she would unleash a wide area attack. It was her favorite combination of skills, and she'd never seen anyone who wasn't a magician capable of dodging it before. Of course Koutarou hadn't dodged it completely either, but he'd managed to avoid the majority of the electricity. That was more than enough to surprise Maya.

"D-Damn it..."

Koutarou tried to get back up, but he still hadn't fully regained control of his body.

Please move, body! I can't fall here!

Even then, Koutarou didn't give up. He mustered all of his strength, and through sheer will alone, he convinced his body to respond. Using his limbs as support, he forcibly stood himself up, but his movements were slow and awkward like a zombie from a horror movie.

"Onii-chan! A-Are you okay?!"

"...Yeah. Somehow."

Koutarou smiled at Kii, whose face had visibly gone pale. Of course, Koutarou wasn't really in a condition anyone could call okay. It was all he could do to stand.

In the past with Yurika's defensive spell in full effect, he probably wouldn't

have taken this much damage from such an attack. But a lot had happened since she first cast it, particularly while Koutarou and Clan were in Forthorthe. The powers he had gotten from the invading girls were reaching their limits.

“I won’t lose! Absolutely not!”

But even so, Koutarou didn’t feel weaker. Even if he knew the powers they’d lent him were fading, the hope they’d given him was still alive and well inside him. That was how he was able to stand even now. If he didn’t, he knew he couldn’t protect Kii. He knew he wouldn’t be able to fulfill his promises and keep his oath.

“I must say I am surprised. To think you could stand in that state... Wouldn’t it be easier if you just stayed down?”

“Have you ever seen someone not struggle when they’re drowning just because it’s easier to give up?”

Koutarou formed a fist and glared at Maya. In his head, he tried to work through what had happened and come up with a way to fight her.

Even though I got up, I don’t know what she did a moment ago. It felt like time flew out the window, and it’ll be problematic if that happens again...

In reality he had lost a portion of his memory, but to Koutarou, it simply felt as if time had stopped and his body had been moved without his consent or knowledge. He was supposed to have been swinging his fist, but he’d come to just as he’d kicked off Maya’s staff. There was the problem of what to do if something like that happened again, and then there was the problem of the barrier protecting her. Really, there was no end to his problems.

“That’s true.”

Maya calmly ignored his glare and readied her scythe once more. She could imagine what was going through Koutarou’s head since he wasn’t coming at her right away.

Even if he notices the gap in his memory, he won’t believe that I erased it. But he will suspect it was something I did... which means he’ll be careful about where he aims now...

As Maya paused to reflect on her own situation, Koutarou made his move. He was planning on finishing the fight by channeling all the power he had left. His opponent used strange powers and a strong weapon, meaning he would only be at more of a disadvantage the longer the fight went on.

Not missing his chance, I see! This is that boy's scariest side!

Maya quickly began moving too. She swung her scythe down at Koutarou, the blade glowing with an indigo light. She'd imbued it with the same memory loss spell as before.

"Hyaaaaaaaah!"

"And his aim is...!"

They clashed. Koutarou swung in a kick aimed at Maya's lower body. The barrier protecting her activated automatically upon being hit. However, in order to maintain her balance when running, she couldn't completely cover her legs. There was a slight gap at the bottom to keep the barrier from hitting the ground, and that was Koutarou's target "I thought you'd do that!"

However, a second barrier blocked his attack. Having predicted that Koutarou would attack her feet, Maya had created another barrier that specifically protected her feet inside the automatic barrier.

"It's not over yet!"

But Koutarou didn't stop there. His real aim was Maya's face after she looked down in response to his attack. More precisely, he was going for her chin sticking out from under her mantle's hood.

"I see, you're aiming for the force field's cooldown time to—"

Koutarou's fist grazed Maya's chin, but just that was enough to disturb her vision considerably.

"It was too shallow?!"

Koutarou realized that his attack had failed to connect properly, and he attempted to distance himself from Maya by moving to her side. Maya aimed for his back as he moved away, but she was still thrown off by the glancing blow to her chin and only caught air with her blade.

“I thought so. You’re not good at using multiple layers of defenses at the same time.”

Koutarou turned back to Maya and grinned.

“Oh, how scary. Just who are you?”

While stroking her chin, Maya flashed a confident smile. But on the inside, she was horribly surprised.

He took the fact that I rely on force fields for my defense into his calculations and intentionally aimed for the gap in the field knowing I would create a secondary one. And since I’m using my mana on my scythe’s blade and two force fields, there’s a good few seconds where I’m defenseless and waiting for my mana to recover. That’s when he launched his real attack. He’s strong...

Since Koutarou was used to using his armor, he was well versed in how barriers functioned. He couldn’t draw more power than what the capacitor allowed for, and there was a slight time gap between when a barrier went down and when it could be recreated. He didn’t know if Maya’s barriers worked the same way, but he figured the chances were high that sustaining two barriers and a blade at the same time would be hard.

“But knowing that’s what you’re going to do, I have ways to counter it.”

Maya cancelled the automatic barrier protecting her. She then shifted her stance to a more compact, defensive posture. She was going to use the scythe to defend herself as well. A staff was a suitable weapon for defense, and since the blade on her scythe had no physical form, it didn’t hold her back in any way. She also had it infused with memory loss magic, so the moment Koutarou touched it, it would activate. That reduced the strain on her while increasing her defenses without sacrificing offensive power.

“That’s assuming I attack the same way.”

Koutarou flashed a confident smile of his own.

Not good...

However, it was only a bluff. If Maya was going to defend using her scythe as well, it would be hard for him to get through both that and her barriers.

“I don’t think there’s anything else you can do though.”

“Then just bring it. You’ll find out soon enough.”

Koutarou desperately racked his brain while continuing to bluff. He had to find a way out of this and protect Kii.

“I’ll think I’ll take you up on your offer!”

But before Koutarou could come up with his next plan, Maya began her assault. Koutarou was forced to stop thinking and moved to intercept her.

“Come on, what’s wrong?! Don’t you have an ace up your sleeve?!”

“Damn it!”

Maya unleashed a flurry of attacks at Koutarou, and all he could do was avoid them. Unlike before, Maya’s attacks utilized smaller motions. All she was aiming to do now was touch him to trigger the memory loss magic. Then she would go in for a heavier attack. But with smaller, tighter strikes, her attack speed increased significantly, forcing Koutarou onto the defensive. It also considerably shrunk his window of opportunity for counterattacks. She’d had no trouble blocking everything he’d been able to throw so far.

“Onii-chan, you can do it!”

Unable to silently watch, Kii cheered for Koutarou. Despite not having any experience fighting, even she could tell that Koutarou was being cornered.

“Quit moving around!”

But even though she’d cornered him, Maya was always one step short of finishing him off. That was thanks to Koutarou’s spirit sight, even in its weakened state. He could see her attacks coming and dodge them at the last second. Eventually Maya grew irritated of this pattern and changed up her tactics.

“Then how about this! Flash!”

“Oh crap!”

All of a sudden, a white flash appeared. It was far brighter than the electric shock from before. So bright, in fact, that Koutarou was temporarily blinded by

it.

“And that’s not all!”

Maya spun around and struck Koutarou, who was staggered from the flash, with the handle of her scythe. It was a direct hit.

“Damn it! Wh-What, my eyes?!”

He was once again deprived of several seconds of his memory, which included the bright flash. Now not only was he blinded, but also confused. Taking advantage of that, Maya swung her scythe in a large, sweeping motion. She no longer needed to worry about her form. She put all her weight into a single attack to finish him off.

“Onii-chan, look out!”

“I see! This is that thing!”

Kii screamed out a warning to the frozen Koutarou. Thanks to that, he realized that he was in the middle of one of Maya’s attacks.

“You’re too late!”

Maya’s attack was just about to hit. There was no longer any time to dodge it.

I’m going to get hit! I won’t make it!

Koutarou braced himself to get cut, but he wasn’t planning on going down just like that.

“Now it’s over, boy!”

“No, not yet!”

His spirit sight let him see the scythe’s trajectory as it drew near. Koutarou crossed his arms in front of himself and pushed them towards Maya’s incoming attack. He used them to catch the handle of the scythe, which stopped after just digging into his shoulder. He’d managed to avoid a fatal blow, but he’d still been hit and blood was flowing freely from the deep wound on his shoulder.

“Onii-chan!”

“Boy... You still can’t even properly see. Though you’re an enemy, I’m still pretty impressed.”

Maya had planned to cut Koutarou in half with her blow, but Koutarou had survived it. He'd still taken a hit, but Maya was willing to praise him simply for being alive after that.

"I already told you... that you'd find out soon enough...!"

Koutarou didn't stop there, either. He endured the pain and forcibly grabbed on to Maya.

"I see, boy, so this is what you were planning!"

Though her defenses were tough, she still left herself exposed when she made large attacks. Koutarou had let her attack like that on purpose. Even if he couldn't see, as long as he could grab hold of her, that wouldn't matter. That was his ace up his sleeve. It was an extremely dangerous gamble with his life on the line, but he'd won the bet.

"I let my guard down! He's no rookie!"

While Koutarou was holding Maya down, he shouted out to Kii.

"Kii-chan, now's your chance to run away!"

"But I can't leave you behind, Onii-chan!"

"Just go! They're after you!"

Koutarou was gradually regaining his vision, but considering Maya's strength, her flunkeys, and Koutarou's wounded condition, this was Kii's only chance to escape. She'd have to break through the crowd of Maya's servants to do it, but now while Maya was distracted would be her best bet.

"Onii-chan, I understand! I'll go call for help right away!"

Kii had objected at first, but she soon decided to listen to Koutarou. Maya was too strong. Kii knew she couldn't save Koutarou herself. Her only option was to get through the people that had surrounded her and call for help. It was the best a six year old girl could do.

There! I might be able to get through that gap!

Keeping her wits about her, Kii looked around and spotted a slight gap between the buildings. It was so small that she would barely be able to get

through even with her small body, but she made a break for it without hesitation.

“Not a chance! Don’t let her get away!”

Despite being held down by Koutarou, Maya wasn’t going to let Kii get away that easily. Since she couldn’t move, she ordered the people blocking the exits to capture her. On command, they swarmed around Kii.

“Kyaaaaah! Nooooo, let go!” Kii screamed.

Unfortunately, there was nothing she could do to escape Maya’s minions. They outnumbered her and were far stronger than she was.

“Kii-chan?!”

Koutarou couldn’t tell what had happened to Kii since he was in the middle of wrestling with Maya, but he could tell that she was in danger.

“Hey now, I’m your opponent!”

In the moment he was distracted by Kii’s screaming, Maya punched Koutarou’s shoulder.

“Guaaaaaaaaaah!”

Koutarou was struck with an acute, numbing pain. Maya had aimed specifically to further tear open his wound, and the pain felt like a blisteringly hot metal rod was pushed through him. Blood poured out of his shoulder, dying his clothes red.

“You did well, boy, really! However...!”

Maya kept her fist pressed against Koutarou’s wounded shoulder and focused on it. She was going to shoot magic directly into him. Using magic in close combat was difficult as it was, and she couldn’t even get a proper grip on her staff right now. But Koutarou was still reeling from the pain, so Maya saw an opportunity to get off at least a simple spell. Even that should be fatal when injected directly into an open wound like this.

“Guaaaaaaaah!”

While concentrating on her spell, Maya continued to dig her fist into

Koutarou's wound. He was about to pass out from pain and blood loss. Normally he would dig deep and put up a fight, but his consciousness was growing faint.

"Onii-chan, Onii-chan! Let go of Onii-chan!"

Hearing Kii's voice, however, reached him loud and clear *Kii-chan is... crying again...*

Kii was screaming, and it wasn't because she had been captured. Even in her own predicament, she was worried for Koutarou.

I have to do something... something... so she can live happily... She's already cried more than enough...

The image of Kii crying appeared in Koutarou's fading mind. He wanted to make her smile again, but he didn't know how. He couldn't move his body, and his enemy's attack was just around the corner.

What... What can I do to keep her from crying...? Just what...

All Koutarou could do now was try and think of something, but he was still left defenseless. Maya began her incantation.

"Quick and Still Cast: Tiny Explosion!"

Maya had chosen a basic explosive spell that she could cast even while grappling, and she cast it with a modifier that eliminated the need for gesturing the spell required. When she finished her incantation, her fist began glowing red. The next time she slammed that fist into Koutarou, the spell would activate.

"It's over, boy!"

Maya was convinced of her victory, and she raised her fist, dyed red by both blood and magic, at Koutarou one final time. In just a matter of seconds, the spell would cause an explosion inside Koutarou's shoulder that would blow his arm clean off.

"Stoooooop!"

Kii screamed, but that wouldn't stop Maya. She plunged her fist straight for Koutarou.

“It will be okay...”

However, just as that fist was about to rob Koutarou of his life, something unexpected happened. A white light appeared around his shoulder and created a round shield that protected it from Maya’s fist. It was thanks to that shield that Maya’s attack never reached Koutarou.

“Impossible! He cast a force field in that condition without any warning?! He even dispelled my magic?!”

Aghast, Maya quickly distanced herself from Koutarou.

The range might have been limited, but he just cast a force field without any sign of a gesture or incantation, and it even had the properties of anti-magical shield! And what is with this pure white mana?! I’ve never heard of this kind of mana!

Maya couldn’t understand what she’d just seen with her own eyes. It simply defied a magician’s common sense. She’d launched an attack at the perfect time with enough power behind it that it should have been unblockable.

But what perplexed her the most was the color of the mana around Koutarou. Normally mana manifested in the seven colors of the rainbow. Summoning magic appeared blue, defensive magic appeared yellow, and so on. But Koutarou was enveloped in a white glow. A mana that shouldn’t exist was protecting him.

That’s not possible... The wound on his shoulder is closing... A single type of magic is protecting and healing him at the same time? Just who is this boy?

Maya moved away from Koutarou out of fear of this unknown mana that he was controlling. Her intuition as a warrior told her that he was very dangerous right now.

“Just what is...”

However, Koutarou was just as surprised as she was. All of a sudden a white light had appeared, blocked Maya’s attack, and now it was healing the wound on his shoulder. He was understandably astonished.

Ah...

Yet something about this warm white light was familiar. It was the same mana that Signaltin emitted.

“I see, Her Majesty saved me...”

Koutarou could feel Alaia’s presence within the mana. It was the same thing he felt when he used Signaltin. Even with the sword far from Koutarou’s hands, Alaia’s oath continued to protect him.

“You guys, stop that boy!”

Maya was quick to retreat. Now that Koutarou was displaying unknown power, she readily gave up the idea of fighting him and decided to prioritize her original goal.

“You’re coming with me.”

“Nooo, Onii-chan!”

Maya turned her minions on Koutarou. She was planning on taking the girl herself and making a run for it.

If I’m going to fight against that boy, I’d prefer it if that was my only goal. After all, to quote a proverb of this country, they say you can’t chase two hares at the same time!

Maya had at first assumed that her battle with Koutarou would come to a swift end, but he’d defied her expectations. She couldn’t afford to have the plan of using Kii as a sacrifice fail because she took a risk continuing to fight against Koutarou and his unknown power. Instead, she made the calculated decision to take off with Kii.

“Wait! Leave her behind!”

“Heh, let us meet again if fate allows it, boy!”

“Onii-chan!”

Kii struggled as best as she could to get away, but she lost consciousness after Maya cast a spell on her. Maya then fled the area while carrying the sleeping Kii in her arms. Koutarou tried to give chase, but he couldn’t break through the group of people blocking his path. Moreover, the wound on his shoulder was still bleeding and he hadn’t fully recovered from his fight with Maya. He also

didn’t want to hurt the people that were being controlled, likely against their will.

“Damn, I don’t have the time for this!”

Koutarou swung his fists and to try and knock out person after person standing in his way, but he just wasn’t making any progress. Since Signaltin’s power was focused on keeping him conscious and healing his wounds, he couldn’t use it to attack the way he wanted. And since he was receiving the sword’s power remotely, the most help he could get was discharging some of its power as he punched. Because of that, Koutarou was still stuck in the zombified crowd long after losing sight of Maya.

“Damn it, at this rate, she’s going to kill Kii!”

Koutarou started panicking once Maya and Kii were gone. The longer he took, the lower his chances were of finding Kii. His frustration towards the group in front of him, whose numbers just weren’t decreasing, grew rapidly.

“Kanae-san, the bow.”

“Okay! I’m counting on you, Nana-chan!”

“Sonic Web! Modifier: Nonlethal! Charge Weapon! Effective Area, Large!”

That was when a single arrow came flying Koutarou’s way through the group of people. It had only sailed past them, but everyone in its line of fire was sent flying, opening up a path for Koutarou.

“What?! What just happened?!”

After knocking out the person he was fighting, Koutarou looked around him and spotted two people about ten meters behind him. One of them was a woman in her late twenties wearing a suit and holding a bow. The other was a girl wearing a pink mantle. Koutarou hadn’t seen the woman with the bow before, and he couldn’t get a good look at the girl with the mantle’s hood hiding her face. They were a strange duo that he had no recollection of meeting before.

Did they... help me?

He wasn’t sure, but that was all he could think considering the situation. To

confirm his suspicions, he called out to them.

“Who are you?!”

“There’s no time to talk! You have to hurry after that vicious woman!”

The woman with the bow readied another shot as she called out to Koutarou. She let a second arrow fly, clearing more of the crowd before him.

“But...”

Koutarou couldn’t decide how to respond right away. These mysterious women were strangers too, and they’d appeared out of nowhere. But while Koutarou was hesitating, the girl in the pink mantle spoke up.

“Listen! That woman in the indigo mantle is our enemy too! We want to chase after her ourselves, but we can’t leave this place like it is!”

“That voice...”

Koutarou had heard it before.

Is that... the girl from that night?

The voice of the girl in pink sounded quite similar to that of the girl Koutarou had encountered on the mountain after he’d used Signaltin to relieve Kii of her nightmare.

“If you chase after her, we can take care of things here! We’re better equipped for this kind of thing than you!”

“Okay, then I’ll leave it to you!”

Koutarou called back to the girls and rushed off through the path created by the arrows.

There’s no time to hesitate! I just have to believe in that girl!

At this rate, Kii would be killed. In order to avoid that, Koutarou had no choice but to accept help from this mysterious duo. If the girl in the pink mantle was the same girl he’d met that night, he thought it would be okay to trust her. After all, underneath that hood should be clear, earnest eyes.

“Uraaaaaaaagh!”

The people being controlled let out guttural cries as they tried to stop Koutarou from breaking through, but another arrow came flying through and knocked back the people who were about to jump on him.

“Thank you!”

As a result, he only had one or two people to push past, and he could evade them with swift movements. Before long, Koutarou had broken free from the group surrounding him, and he vanished down the alley as he chased after Maya.

“Nana-chan, was that boy that necromancer?”

Drawing her bow again, the woman in the suit spoke to the girl in the mantle. The arrow in her hand had been enchanted by the girl in the mantle, and once fired, it would unleash its power on the approaching crowd, forcing them to a stop.

“Yes. I am certain that he can pull it off.”

The girl in the pink mantle pulled out a staff. With its many decorations, it was hard to imagine it had any practical use as a walking stick. Rather, it was a tool that enhanced her powers—it was her loyal partner that always fought at her side.

“He had such earnest eyes, after all.”

“But that doesn’t change the fact that it’s dangerous. We have to release these people as fast as possible and go after him!”

The girl in the mantle held her staff above her head. As she did, her hood shifted and revealed her face. Just as Koutarou had suspected, it was the girl he’d met on the mountain that night.

In the current situation, she believed their best chance was to let Koutarou go on ahead. Considering her original goal, she wanted to chase after Maya right away, but she couldn’t just leave the people being controlled as they were. And knowing they’d be delayed freeing the people of their mind control, she sent Koutarou ahead of them. It was a plan that put a great deal of faith in Koutarou’s abilities, but she was confident in her intuition. Though she looked young, she was a seasoned warrior that had survived many battles.

“Kanae-san, I’ll leave this to you for a moment!”

“Okay, I’ll buy you some time!”

Her name was Nana, but those who knew her called her Rainbow Nana with respect. Nana was a magician of Rainbow Heart, a special force of the magical kingdom of Folsaria. At the young age of ten years old, she was a prodigy that held the highest rank of archwizard, earning her the title of Rainbow. And as the strongest magical girl of Rainbow Heart, she stood on the frontline of the battle with Folsaria’s greatest enemy, Darkness Rainbow.

Thanks to the help of the mysterious duo, Koutarou had been able to escape the alley and was now in hot pursuit of Maya. He was tracking her by following her aura, but the traces of it were hard to distinguish, and she would pass by populated streets from time to time, blending her aura in with bustling crowd. When she did that, it took some time to pick up her trail again, and the longer it took, the weaker the traces of her aura grew—a vicious cycle.

“If only Sanae was with me at a time like this...”

Sanae likely would have been able to pick Maya out without a problem. But with Koutarou’s weakened spirit sight, this was his limit. But it was his only option right now too, so he pressed on even as his sense of panic grew stronger.

About fifteen minutes after Koutarou left the mysterious duo behind, Maya’s aura passed by yet another populated street.

“This is bad...”

At that point, the traces of her aura were barely visible as it was. Mingling on a busy street like this, she blended in perfectly and Koutarou finally lost track of her. He was left at a loss.

Where did she go? Should I just check every nearby alley, one at a time?

Because it was a major street, there were many connecting roads. Checking each and every single one of them now seemed like his only option, and it would be a difficult and time-consuming undertaking.

“Damn it.”

Even as he hesitated, his chances of finding Kii were diminishing. With no time to waste, he swiftly made up his mind and took action.

“I finally found you, Veltlion.”

Just as Koutarou turned off the main road to check one of the cross streets, he heard a familiar voice from above.

“Clan?!”

“W-Wait, what’s with that wound on your shoulder?! Are you okay?! Did you properly treat it?!”

Koutarou looked up and saw a mass of metal about a meter in diameter above him. It was Clan’s unmanned reconnaissance craft that had gotten quite a workout in Forthorthe. The reconnaissance craft descended to the elevation of Koutarou’s head and began spinning around him. Clan was using the device to examine him and see if he was all right.

“Good timing, Clan!”

Koutarou smiled, grabbed hold of the reconnaissance craft with both of his hands and began shaking it up and down.

“Huh?! Wh-What?!”

As he did, the hologram of Clan showed a confused expression.

“Clan, do you know where Kii is right now?!”

“Kii was that girl, right? Now that you mention it, you’re not together, are you?”

The reconnaissance craft rotated its cameras, looking for Kii. Koutarou then shook it once more.

“I’m in a hurry! Do you know where she is or not?!”

Clan was startled by Koutarou’s vehemence, but she nodded.

“I-I can find out. When I gave you your bracelet, I also gave that girl a transmitter to—”

“Well done! I love you, Claaan!”

Koutarou did a one-eighty when he heard Clan's answer. His desperate expression burst into a beaming smile, and he began shaking the reconnaissance craft even more vigorously than before. After losing sight of Maya, he was overjoyed at the prospect of being able to track down Kii again.

"Whaaaaat?! Y-You love me?! B-But even if you say that all of a sudden, I-I'm not prepared...!"

Clan was so shaken by what Koutarou had said that her face turned bright red. In contrast to Koutarou's explosive joy, Clan felt like her head was what had exploded.

"Quit your yapping, Clan! Where is Kii?! Where is she right now?!"

As soon as they pinpointed her whereabouts, Koutarou immediately took off after Maya again.



Kii was still wearing the transmitter Clan had pinned on her. Either Maya hadn't noticed it, or she couldn't tell what it was since it was Forthorthian technology.

Clan had her reconnaissance craft follow the transmitter's signal and guided Koutarou towards it. As he ran after the reconnaissance craft, he explained what had happened to Clan.

"...That was then those two let me go on ahead, and that's why I'm chasing after Kii."

"Since she's being targeted, it must mean that she's more than just some runaway."

"Yeah, seems like it. Her father might be the president of a company or something."

Maya was quite clearly after Kii. If she was just after a child, she wouldn't have gone through the trouble of targeting Kii who was with Koutarou. It would have been much easier to target a child without a guardian. Based on that, Koutarou thought it was pretty clear Maya had some reason for coming after Kii specifically.

"I'm also not so sure about that mysterious duo, though."

"I don't think they're bad people."

"You're too trusting."

"Really? Well, it's not like I fully trust them like I do you, but I don't think there's any need to worry. That's just how I feel."

Koutarou didn't actually have much a reason to trust either of the people who'd showed up. All he had to go on was what they'd said, and the earnest eyes of the girl in the mantle. Neither of those things were sure bets.

But Koutarou didn't doubt them. They'd helped him get away, and if they were after his life, they would have taken it in that alley. It would have been easy to shoot him in the back. They'd also been careful not to kill any of the people that were being controlled. It was all circumstantial evidence, but it was enough for Koutarou.

“...Y-You fully trust me?”

“What’s with that weird face?”

“Ahem, i-it’s nothing!”

Clan’s face turned bright red again for some reason. When Koutarou questioned her about it, however, she cleared her throat and looked away.

This is strange... Why do I feel so happy?

When she first met Koutarou, Clan had despised him as a bitter enemy. Looking back on it, she was puzzled by the emotions she felt welling up insider her upon hearing that he trusted her.

“By the way, Clan, why were you around here anyway? I couldn’t contact you.”

“W-Well, you see...”

Clan paused to take a deep breath. She still hadn’t quite calmed down from her fluster.

“I received a warning that the bracelet had been broken and then Signaltin started shining an awful lot, so I could tell something was up.”

“So that’s why you came looking... Thanks, you’re a big help.”

“Th-There’s no need for thanks. We’re in this together, after all.”

“That’s true.”

Being thanked by Koutarou sent Clan’s heart racing all over again.

Trust, huh...? But if I were to do something against Theiamillis-san, Veltlion would most likely erupt with anger...

Clan didn’t want to betray Koutarou, who had been with her through heaven and hell. Now she was more interested in getting him to respect her as a princess. It was a pretty serious change of heart for a girl who spent all of her time cooped up inside a laboratory and rarely spoke to other people if she could help it.

And if she listened to that desire, she would only fight Theia fair and square in the future. Assassinating her was out of the question now. Not only would

trickery like that make Koutarou angry, but Clan herself had started to think it wasn't how a respectable princess should handle things. It was quite a reversal of how she'd felt when she'd first come to Earth, and that had led her to realize something else.

"But with this, I can understand why I lost when I fought against you."

Clan had lost to Koutarou in the past because she wasn't a splendid princess that her citizens could take pride in, though she'd only been able to reach that conclusion after everything they'd been through.

"What do you mean?"

"It's Signaltin. Even though we'll be frozen here for ten years, that sword will still be in this city. That sword has always been protecting you. That's why I lost."

In the world of magic, there were spells that could control even time. That meant mana wasn't restricted by time, and could move about freely in ways that people couldn't. It was similar to the way gravity wasn't constrained by three-dimensional space.

Signaltin had been on Earth for over ten years by the time Clan and Koutarou fought. Though the sword itself was safely stowed aboard the Cradle, its mana wasn't restricted by its physical location. It could leave the ship to protect Koutarou or the people close to him. That was the true identity of the mysterious power that Koutarou had wielded from time to time.

But even then, its power was not limitless. Its energy could only manifest but so far away in terms of time or distance. That was why its mana couldn't reach Koutarou all the way in ancient Forthorthe. In order for him to use its power there, the seal had to be broken first.

"I see... so that was what happened back when Sanae was captured..."

"I am not aware of that event, but yes, that was most likely why. Signaltin... No, Alaia-san's will protected you all."

The sword that had been imbued by the oath of Alaia, the Silver Princess and the most respected princess in all of Forthorthe's long history, had chosen Koutarou over Clan. That told her she wasn't truly worthy of being royalty.

Will Signaltin protect me in the future, I wonder...? I'm more worried about that than becoming empress...

Perhaps it was because she'd realized that, but Clan was no longer as obsessed with becoming empress as she had been in the past. Even if she were to become empress, if Signaltin rejected her, it would be a hollow victory.

What was more important to her now was whether Signaltin considered her worthy of protection or not. Was she worthy of Alaia's goodwill in the sword? Was she worthy of Koutarou's loyalty? Becoming empress was second to all that. Little did she know that it was in realizing that that she became Theia's most powerful rival.

"That's right, about Signaltin, could you send it to me? Like, the way you always summon weapons, you know?"

Warping in weaponry was a convenient technology. If Koutarou could use holes in space-time to freely retrieve Signaltin, he would have an easier time in future fights.

"It's not possible right away. It'll take time to register it."

However, Clan shook her head. Forthorthe's technology seemed all-powerful to Koutarou, but even it had limits. Proper preparations were necessary in order to use space-time holes. Since objects could be replaced in the event of an accident, transporting them didn't require as many safety precautions as living creatures, but precise measurements and various parameters still had to be calculated. It wasn't something that could be done instantly.

"I see... Clan, if Signaltin is going to take some time, could you send me a different weapon?"

If Signaltin wasn't possible, he was willing to make due with something else she had on hand. Koutarou trusted Clan's creations as much as he trusted Signaltin.

"Time? That's right, Veltlion, the time!"

However, Clan responded in an unexpected manner. Her expression grew stiff and she leaned forward as if staring into the camera. It almost looked like Clan's hologram being emitted from the reconnaissance craft was trying to kiss

Koutarou.

“What is it, Clan?”

“Don’t give me that! Isn’t your mother about to be in an accident?!”

“Right, I forgot about that!”

Thanks to Maya’s ambush, Koutarou had lost track of time, but Clan was right. They were quickly closing in on the hour Koutarou’s mother would lose her life.

“What time is it right now?!”

“On this planet, the time is 6:50 PM.”

“So I’d just barely make it from here...”

Koutarou was about ten minutes away from the site of the accident, which would happen just after 7 PM. So in order for Koutarou to save his mother, he would have to head there immediately.

“But... I can’t leave Kii-chan...”

Koutarou stopped in his tracks and began grinding his teeth. Should he go chase after Kii, or save his mother? Koutarou was once again pressed to make a decision. If he chased after Kii, his mother would die, and if he saved his mother, Kii would die.

“Clan, do you have a map of this area?”

“I’m sorry, I don’t. If I had known this was going to happen, I would have made more thorough preparations...”

Clan looked down with an apologetic expression. She felt responsible for the current situation after getting the date wrong.

“No, there was nothing we could have done.”

Koutarou didn’t blame Clan, but he clenched his jaw even harder as he started to panic. He had wondered if he could send Clan’s reconnaissance craft to save his mother in his stead, but Clan didn’t know the city and would never make it in time. He didn’t have the time to give her detailed directions himself, and it was also too late for Clan to observe the region and create a map.

Maya’s sudden ambush had created a complicated situation and Koutarou

found himself unable to decide if he should save his mother or if he should save Kii.

“What are you going to do, Veltlion?!”

“I... I...”

If he ran to save his mother, getting there and back would cost him twenty minutes. By then, it would likely be too late to save Kii. On the other hand, if he went to save Kii now, there was no way he’d be able to save his mother in time.

What should I do?! I don’t know!

Kii, or his mother... Koutarou was forced to choose one of their lives. It wasn’t what he wanted, but he was no god. There was no way to save both of them.

Choices and Consequences

Kii had been taken to an abandoned building on the outskirts of town. Since Maya had robbed the owner of their deed and memories, nobody would come anywhere near the building for some time yet. As such, the building was unattended, and though it wasn't old, it was dusty and there were cobwebs here and there.

Maya took Kii to the basement of the building. The vast space was originally used as an underground parking lot, but Maya had used it to build an altar for her ritual magic. The altar itself was about ten meters wide and the majority of it was covered with a geometrical pattern that had been painted using a special dye. It formed what was known as a magic circle.

There was a curious machine sitting at the edge of the magic circle. Contrasting the classic look of the candles and other ornaments decorating the magic circle, the machine was more modern and it quite clearly stood out sitting on the altar. Kii had been left next to the machine inside a cage made of metal and glass. The machine and cage were hooked up by multiple cables, making it clear they had some connection to each other.

"Hmm... So this girl has quite a bit of power as well. Is her lineage still present even after so many generations, I wonder? With this, I should be able to get better results than expected with the spiritual energy capacitator."

Maya operated the machine with a satisfied smile. The altar served to enhance Maya's mana, and enabled her to use large-scale magic. Large-scale magic could be used to cast a spell on an entire city or do something like summon a powerful demon.

Maya's plan was to use Kii as a sacrificial catalyst for the ritual. First the machine, the capacitor, was going to drain Kii's spiritual energy, and once it had taken as much as it could, the spiritual energy would be immediately converted into mana using the magic circle. The end result would be that Kii would die from having her life force drained, and Maya would obtain vast amounts of

mana.

Normally an altar only consisted of a magic circle and a cage that would contain the catalyst, but Maya had added the capacitor to her configuration. It was a piece of equipment she'd gotten from her dealings with the People of the Earth. It was capable of temporarily storing spiritual energy, and because of that, it greatly reduced the requirements of the catalyst. Up until now, only someone with abundant spiritual energy like Kanae's daughter would work as a sacrifice, but with the capacitor even a normal person should suffice. Maya was pleased at that prospect, and she cheerfully prepared for the ritual.

"...Onii-chan..."

Meanwhile, Kii was obediently sitting inside the cage. Though she had struggled and resisted at first, she had no chance against Maya. The cage was also robust, so she couldn't break out of it on her own. That left a young girl like her with no other option other than to sit and wait for rescue.

"...I'm sure Onii-chan went to save his mom..."

However, Kii wasn't expecting anyone to come save her, not even Koutarou. She was sure he'd gone to save his mother instead. Even her six year old mind realized that Koutarou saving both of them would be a near impossible feat.

"...But this is for the best, Onii-chan... It's really sad when your mom dies... You'll be all alone until you find her star..."

Kii knew what it felt like to lose a mother. It left you alone and afraid, searching for her warmth even after it was long gone. How could she expect anyone to abandon their mother when they had the possibility of saving her? If he didn't, surely the grief would break Koutarou's heart into tiny pieces. That's why Kii wanted him to save his mother so badly. She didn't want him to feel that way. That was just how much she'd come to love Koutarou.

"...Kii met... with her mom. I'm sure that even if I die... I'll become a star next to mom. But you're different, Onii-chan... You'll be in pain until you find your mom's star too... so don't come save Kii, Onii-chan..."

Kii was already preparing for her own death, but she didn't fear it. The thought that she would meet her mother again alleviated her fears. That's why

all she felt she needed to do now was pray that Koutarou could save his mother.

“You sure are calm... Aren’t you scared?”

Kii was behaving very differently from all the catalysts that Maya had used before. Curious, she tried talking to her.

“I am a little scared of dying, but I’m more scared of what will happen if I’m saved.”

“You think that boy is coming? That’s impossible. Nobody can approach this place.”

Maya had cast Sanctuary, a magical barrier that kept people out of a designated area. It not only blocked electromagnetic waves, visible light, and sound, but it also actively repelled people by using something of a hypnotic suggestion to keep them away. Just like the name of the spell suggested, the building had become an inviolable sanctuary.

And that was why Maya had hurried back here. Even for a magician, it was difficult to find a good place to cast Sanctuary on quickly. Maya had chosen this place ahead of time to keep from wasting any of her precious ritual time. And with her preparation in place, the moment she made it back here, Maya was confident she’d succeeded. Now all that remained was to complete the ritual.

“I see... then I’m glad...”

Koutarou wouldn’t come. Once Kii heard that, she was relieved and smiled. That meant even if he’d tried to come save her, he surely would have given up by now and gone to save his mother. If what Maya said was true, then Koutarou’s mother wouldn’t die. That’s why Kii was smiling.

“You really are a strange child... even though you’re about to die...”

“Don’t you have something that you’d rather die for than lose?”

“...I do. But if that’s how you feel, I’ll make sure you suffer as little as possible.”

“Thank you...”

Maya felt respect for the young girl nodding in front of her.

If this girl had grown up and become the leader of the People of the Earth, they just might have survived...

Comparing the surface to the underground, Maya was certain that even if Tayuma's group came out on top and declared war on the surface, they would be ruined in the end.

Regardless of how advanced their technology was, they were still only ten thousand strong at best. And the outcome of war wasn't determined solely by technology. It was decided by numbers, including the manpower and financial strength of the nations involved. That was because regardless of how powerful their weapons may be, they didn't last forever. And the numbers the People of Earth had just didn't stack up. At best, their "war" would be considered terrorism.

Tayuma and his group didn't understand that, or their pride simply kept them from accepting it. Either way, the end results would be the same in the end. They would be stamped out as terrorists by the people on the surface, and they would slowly perish without actually accomplishing anything.

However, Maya could sense a future in the girl in front of her. She was smart and resolute beyond her years. She was still young, of course, but she had the qualities of an excellent leader. That was why she respected this little girl. Granted, she had no intention of sparing her life. Maya also had a clear goal and resolve. But she didn't see the point in making Kii suffer needlessly. It wasn't that she felt sorry for her. If anything, she empathized with her.

Maya turned her back to Kii and began further adjusting the machine as she closely examined the spell she would be using. She wanted things as precise as possible to spare Kii of any undue suffering, just as she promised. Little did she know, however, that the time spent making those adjustments would change Kii's fate.

"Hmm...?"

While she was tuning the machine, something caught Maya's attention and she looked towards the entrance behind her.

"What...? This place was found? And the barrier was easily broken through..."

What Maya had sensed was the presence of an enemy passing through her ward.

“Just as I was about to get started, too!”

Maya stopped what she was doing and picked up her staff. She would have to defeat this enemy before she could start the ritual. If she hadn’t paused to make the adjustments on the machine, however, she would have already been well into the process and it would be too late for Kii. Since Maya was only making the adjustments as an act of kindness toward such a remarkable young girl, it could be said that Kii’s intelligence is what really saved her.

“Could it be...”

Looking at Maya, Kii realized that someone was approaching. She realized who it was too, but it brought her no happiness. She knew what his being here meant.

“Why did you come?! You should have just left me, Onii-chan!”

Though she’d wished and wished for him not to come, Koutarou had arrived in the underground parking lot Maya was using for her ritual.

Koutarou had found the place thanks to Clan’s transmitter. Since it used gravitational waves, it wasn’t affected by Sanctuary. Magicians might have known about electromagnetic waves and visible light, but they had no way of knowing about gravitational waves, and so the spell hadn’t been designed to block them out.

“I’m here to save you, Kii-chan.”

Upon entering the parking lot, Koutarou was relieved to see Kii’s face. Unfortunately, the feeling wasn’t mutual.

“Onii-chan?! What about your mom?!”

“I’ll take you with me to go save her.”

A dazzling light extended from the short metal bar Koutarou was holding. It was one of the two beam swords that Flair had used in their battle against Maxfern. Out of what Clan had to offer him, it was Koutarou’s weapon of

choice. He picked it both because he wasn't used to ranged weapons—most of Clan's arsenal—and because she had personally recommended it.

"Then you won't make it! You have to go right now!"

"Don't worry. I'll defeat her right away and then we'll go save my mom."

Koutarou held the beam sword with both hands like he would a knight's sword. He traced a circle in the air with the tip of the blade and then pointed it at Maya. Since the beam sword weighed so little, he felt somewhat off balance, but Koutarou was planning on fighting using the Forthorthian style.

"Why did you come save someone like me?! If Onii-chan's mom dies because of me, then I... I...!"

Kii wanted Koutarou to run off and save his mother right away. She knew the odds of him successfully saving both her and his mom were incredibly low, and at this rate, his mother was going die. Koutarou himself might even die, and that was the last thing Kii wanted.

"Like I said, don't worry. This is what a knight is supposed to do. I'll save you and then we'll go save my mom together."

"Onii-chan... b-but..."

Koutarou didn't really know if he'd made the right choice. If he'd reversed the order, he might have been able to save both, but he had prioritized Kii.

But now that he was here, he couldn't exactly say why he'd made that decision. If he were pressed for one, he might have said that it was because he remembered why his mother had died. She'd given her life protecting Koutarou after he jumped out into the road. Without even a second thought, she traded her life to save the child in front of her. Koutarou was just doing the same thing, even if he wasn't aware of it. Koutarou simply just couldn't leave Kii to such a cruel fate.

"Are you really underestimating me? Do I really look that weak to you? ...Twilight Wing! Recall Precast Category Alpha!"

A large scythe blade then formed at the end of Maya's staff. And at the same time, her whole body began glowing an array of colorful lights. With just a few

short words, she released the power of over ten reinforcement spells that she had incanted ahead of time. With that, her physical abilities improved considerably. She had cast some reinforcement spells in her earlier fight against Koutarou, but this was on a different level.

“You won’t be able to beat me that quickly, boy.”

And she wasn’t lying. Seeing Koutarou with a weapon in hand this time, Maya knew she would need to be better prepared to fight him. She’d gone all out specifically to make sure Koutarou couldn’t beat her.

“...Even so, I’ll still defeat you right away.”

Koutarou understood Maya’s strength perfectly. Just looking at her aura told him that she was much stronger than before.

She’s about as fast as Flairhan, and her attack power is as high as Theia’s. She might even be stronger than Landlord-san. What a problematic opponent...

Predicting that the upcoming fight would be intense, Koutarou made sure to get a firm grasp on the beam saber’s handle. Any slip on his end could be fatal.

“Well, come at me whenever you want, boy!”

Maya swung her scythe around. It handled well enough originally, but now that her physical strength had improved, she was brandishing it with ease.

“Here I come!”

Petty tricks wouldn’t work at an opponent of her level, so Koutarou boldly charged at her from the front. He would have to best her with skill alone.

“Tiny Memory Flash! Modifier: Touch Trigger!”

As Koutarou and Maya closed in on each other, her glowing red scythe was wreathed in an indigo light. It was the spell that erased memories.

“That thing again.”

Koutarou didn’t know that the indigo light was a memory loss spell exactly, but he knew that strange things happened after it turned that color. He knew that getting hit with it or even touching it could be bad news.

I’m trusting you on this, Clan!

But Koutarou swung his sword anyway, aware of the potential danger. Maya moved to use her scythe to protect herself. She was going to block the sword with the scythe on purpose to activate the spell.

Clang!

Just like Maya had planned, her scythe caught his sword. Now she just had to wait a moment for the spell to take effect.

“What?! Could that sword be...?!”

“Good job, Clan!”

Much to Maya’s surprise, Koutarou wasn’t affected by the memory loss. The indigo light dispersed from her scythe as it came into contact with the sword without affecting him. While Maya was taken aback, Koutarou launched a flurry of attacks. Since the top of his sword had struck the scythe on his first attack, he twisted his body to use his momentum to target Maya’s side.

“Quick Cast Force Field!”

However, Maya summoned a shield to protect herself from Koutarou’s strike. Seeing that, he jumped out of the range of Maya’s scythe before she could counterattack. She took a swing at him as he moved away, but she was still knocked off balance by the initial blow and didn’t reach him.

“Good, I can fight like this!”

After getting some distance, Koutarou readied his sword again. Maya did the same with her scythe, but she was still visibly confounded.

“I am surprised. Just what is with that sword?”

Maya had thought at first that Koutarou’s sword was capable of extending and retracting like a police baton since it wasn’t emitting any mana. If she’d sensed mana from it, she would have suspected it were a weapon created out of magical energy like her scythe. But since she couldn’t detect any mana from it at all, she had to assume it was a product of modern science. She’d guessed that it was an extendable weapon, and she’d assumed it had electricity running through it since it was glowing.

But both of those guesses were wrong. If it had been a product of modern

science, her spell still should have activated. But since it hadn't, that suggested the sword didn't have a physical form. If the blade was ethereal, that would explain why the spell hadn't flowed through the blade and into Koutarou—they wouldn't be physically connected. But since she couldn't sense any mana from the blade, that was impossible. Maya was well aware that modern science on Earth wasn't capable of creating material without physical form. She knew that, and yet here it was right in front of her. She was having a hard time believing it.

Clan had suggested the beam saber for exactly this reason. After Koutarou told her that strange things happened when he touched Maya's scythe, it was the first thing that came to mind. Essentially, the beam sword behaved very similarly to a beam cannon fired at point-blank range. It was just high density energy given the form of a blade. That was why the blade and grip weren't strictly connected. Clan had suspected that even if the blade connected with the scythe, nothing strange would happen. It was just a hunch, but it had paid off.

"You are full of surprises... But isn't that sword cheating just a little bit?"

Not even a magician like Maya could get her head around alien technology like this.

Maybe it's a blade created out of force fields designed not to leak mana? But can all traces of mana be erased so thoroughly? And what's the point in doing that? Or could it be that... the underground people gave him one of their weapons?

Maya tried to piece together an explanation based on the information she had, but her guessing only took her further away from the truth.

"Look who's talking. That scythe of yours is pretty cheaty."

"I guess that just means that we know nothing about each other then!"

"That's right!"

Their fight had only paused for a moment. Realizing that contemplating each other's powers wouldn't get them any answers, they decided to focus on the fight at hand. Their goals hadn't changed. Each of them was still intent on taking the other out.

Koutarou's sword and Maya's scythe clashed repeatedly, releasing a bright flash of light each time as both blades were made of pure energy.

"It's been a while since I've fought someone that could keep up with me in this state!"

"There are many more stronger than me!"

"Then I'll make sure not to fight them!"

"A wise decision!"

Since his sword could protect him from Maya's favorite memory loss spell, Koutarou was able to put up a better fight than he had earlier. Maya could move faster than him now, but he was more skilled than she was at predicting movements. In the end, they were fairly evenly matched.

Not good! At this rate mom will die!

Koutarou was starting to panic internally. He was already short on time, so getting held up here would definitely keep him from saving his mother. He needed to finish his fight with Maya immediately, but he didn't have anything that would allow him to make the decisive blow.

I'm not in a good situation... If we keep fighting like this, my reinforcement magic will run out eventually... and if that happens, I'm finished!

It wasn't just Koutarou; Maya was starting to panic as well. She was greatly enhancing her physique through magic, but that consumed a great deal of mana to maintain for an extended period of time. At this rate, she wouldn't be able to keep it up for much longer. The mana that Maya had stored from the ritual using Kanae's daughter was currently being held in a crystal she had on her. She could use that to keep her reinforcement magic up for a longer period of time, but that would be a major setback for her plan. If possible, she wanted to finish the fight without having to go that far.



It'll be a gamble, but it's all I have!

I can't risk a drawn out fight, I'll have to finish things here!

Koutarou and Maya both reached their conclusion at the same time and dashed toward each other.

"Let's finish this!"

"Let's finish this!"

The both shouted out as their weapons clashed at close range. Their blades sparked as they locked and pushed up against one another with great force. But that wasn't the end of things.

"Quick and Still Cast: Multiple Thunderbolts! Modifier: Maximize!"

Maya cast a new spell from that position. She sped up the casting time and omitted the gestures required while incanting to cast several thunderbolts at maximum strength. Because she was maintaining several reinforcement spells, they still weren't all that powerful, but when fired from a locked stance in close quarters, even Koutarou would have a hard time dodging them.

But at the same time, it was a dangerous move for Maya to make. She had released the automatic barrier she used in order to protect herself from any swift attacks that Koutarou might make. Since a person could only cast one spell at a time, Maya would be defenseless in the instant after she fired her thunderbolts.

I've got you now, boy!

But even so, Maya took the risk and was convinced that she had won. She was holding Koutarou's sword back with her scythe, which kept him just out of range of kicking or punching her either, so she thought she would be fine even without her barrier to protect her momentarily. And in that moment, electricity would assault Koutarou from close range. There was no way he could dodge it.

"Nooooowww!"

However, that was when Koutarou did something unexpected. He pressed a button on the grip of his beam sword and the blade vanished.

“Oh n—”

Maya’s eyes shot wide open in surprise. At the same time, since Koutarou’s sword had vanished, she fell forward with all the weight she’d been using to push on it. Koutarou slipped under her scythe and approached her. The next moment, electricity shot out from the tip of her scythe as planned, but it diffused in empty air. Since he was now between Maya and her scythe, he had avoided getting hit.

“Take thiiiiis!”

Koutarou let his momentum carry him forward and he crashed right into Maya. At least she’d gotten one thing right and it wasn’t a punch or a kick. Instead, while Maya was still caught off guard, he leaned in for a headbutt. Maya, who had been unable to stop her own momentum, took it straight in the chin.

Im... possible...

In that moment, Maya realized her defeat even though she could scarcely believe the situation. Whether she believed it or not, however, there was no arguing with her darkening vision and fading consciousness. She had taken massive damage, and by the time she hit the floor, she was already out.

“I did it...”

Koutarou relaxed his shoulders some and looked at Maya. Based on her aura, he could tell that she had fainted. It didn’t look like she would be out for long, but Koutarou didn’t have any time to deal with her. He had to save Kii right away and then rush to his mother.

“Kii-chan!”

“Onii-chan! Hurry! Your mom, your mom will...!”

“I know!”

Koutarou reactivated his beam sword and struck the lock of the cage holding key. It easily crumbled under the energy blade, and Kii jumped right out.

“Hurry, hurry! Your mom is going to die!”

Kii was in tears. Being such a sweet girl, she was concerned about Koutarou’s

mother like she would be her own. She just couldn't stand the thought of anything bad happening to Koutarou's mother because of her. Driven by that powerful emotion, she rushed ahead of Koutarou towards the exit, paying no mind to the tears streaming down her cheeks.

Thank you, Kii-chan...

Koutarou turned off the beam sword while watching Kii run. Seeing her so desperate to save his mother made him feel like coming to rescue her had been the right decision.

"But for now...!"

Koutarou put the beam sword in his belt and chased after her. He didn't have the time to stop and think about anything else right now. He had to hurry on to his mother's side.

Maya came to just as Koutarou took off. Her injuries weren't all that serious, and thanks to the reinforcement magic she had cast on herself, her regeneration had been greatly increased.

"I... I can't let her get away..."

Maya could see Koutarou and the young girl moving away from her. After shaking her head repeatedly to clear her mind, she picked up the staff lying next to her. She was going to use magic to finish off Kii from a distance.

For the sake of both her own personal goals and those of Darkness Rainbow, she still needed Tayuma's power. The knowledge and technology he had would be a great help to Maya and her allies.

"E-Energy Bolt... Target Option: Sidewinder..."

Though she was conscious now, she still wasn't fully recovered from Koutarou's blow. Her vision was somewhat distorted, keeping her from taking proper aim at Kii. That's why Maya added a modification for the spell to automatically seek its target by heat source. Once the spell was cast, it would most likely target Kii who had a higher body temperature since she was a child.

"Go!"

A glowing red bullet shot out from her staff and it snaked its way along the

ground, following after Kii and it quickly closing in on her.

“Quick Cast Flare.”

However, just before it could reach her, the bullet changed direction and charged towards a ball of red light that had suddenly appeared.

“Angel Halo! Recall Precast Silence.”

And as the bullet crashed into the ball of light, they both vanished without a sound. As a result, Kii was saved without even realizing the danger she was in, and she left the parking lot with Koutarou.

“Is that—”

“It is, Dark Navy.”

As if replacing Koutarou and Kii, another duo appeared in the parking lot. One was a girl around ten years old, wearing a pink outfit and holding a large staff. The other was a woman in her late twenties wearing a suit and holding a bow. It was Magical Girl Nana and her partner, Kanae.

“Nana... to think you’d appear now.”

“Completing your duty without being noticed is an ironclad rule.”

Maya slowly picked herself up as Nana calmly watched her.

I still have no chance of winning, huh?

Maya knew she was in trouble. Though Nana looked young, she was the strongest magician in Rainbow Heart. She also had an archer cooperating with her. She was already spent from her fight with Koutarou too, and with almost no mana left, the odds were utterly against her.

“We also had to clean up after you. It took some time before we were able to release everyone in that alley.”

“I see... So that boy got here quicker than expected because you helped him.”

Maya gave Nana a discerning look as she spoke. She knew she couldn’t fight in this condition, so she had to find some other way out of this predicament.

“Navy, just surrender. If you comply, we’ll at least spare your life.”

“But I’ll be executed either way after the trial, right? I’d rather die fighting.”

The magicians of Darkness Rainbow used magic to fulfill their own wishes. Though there were a few exceptions, the majority of its members used magic to commit crimes. Maya was no different, and she had sacrificed a lot of people. On top of abusing magic, her body count was well into the double digits. Even if she surrendered peacefully, she knew she wouldn’t be able to avoid the death penalty.

“Is that so? I thought you were a bit smarter than that.”

“Smarter...?”

Maya and Nana stared at each other. As they locked gazes, Maya desperately racked her brain. She felt like Nana was implying something.

Smarter...? Does she mean that I could escape after being caught? Or could she mean... No, more importantly, why is Nana saying this in the first place?

Struggling to reach a conclusion, Maya looked back at Nana, who was reaching her empty left hand out towards her.

“But regardless of what you do, you’re going to give me the focus gem you used for the ritual.”

A focus gem was a gem that would occasionally emit light in all the colors of the rainbow. It served as a storage mechanism for the mana created from Maya’s ritual, and it held a vast amount of it. Nana was holding out her hand to retrieve the gem from Maya.

“You don’t mind, do you?”

The corners of Nana’s lips lifted up as she said that.

I see, so that’s what she means... It must be hard to be an ally of justice. The rules are so complicated...

She was smart. She had a focus gem. Between those two things, Maya finally realized what Nana was asking of her.

“Okay, I’ll give you the gem.”

Now that she understood the situation, the corners of Maya’s lips lifted just

like Nana's.

Really... Not only are her magic skills to be feared, but her bargaining skills as well... Is this girl really just ten years old...?

Maya was amazed on the inside, but without saying a word, she jumped at Nana's offer.

"Isn't that great, Kanae-san?"

"Yes! Thank you, Nana-chan!"

Rather than Nana, Kanae was the one who rejoiced at the prospect of getting the gem. She was actually the one who wanted it.

"Here, this is the gem! Catch!"

Maya pulled the gem out from her bosom and threw it towards Kanae. It sailed through the air in a large arc, and at its greatest height, it let out a dazzling flash.

"Kyah!"

Kanae, who was staring directly at it, was temporarily blinded by the flash. Thanks to that, she missed catching it, but she could hear it hit the floor and roll along.

"Oh no!"

Afraid that Maya would steal it back, she dove to the ground and began searching for the gem. It was an extremely hard task considering she still couldn't see anything.

If I don't hurry, my little girl and Soutarou-san will...!

But Kanae was panicked. If Maya managed to steal the gem back, she wouldn't be able to fulfill her goal. With the time limit closing in, she had to obtain that gem at any cost.

"...It's okay, Kanae-san. The gem is right here."

Kanae looked in the direction of Nana's voice. She could vaguely make out a pink colored outfit. She was gradually regaining her vision. And though she couldn't see anything clearly, she was certain that she was looking at Nana.

“Where is she?! Where did that woman go?!”

Kanae blinked repeatedly and looked around the area.

“She ran off using that flash to hide her escape.”

“Nana-chan, was it okay to let her go?”

This was a perplexing situation to Kanae. Based on the way Nana was acting, it seemed like she hadn’t been affected by the flash. Despite that, she hadn’t chased after the fleeing Maya. And that was hard to imagine considering Nana’s position.

“Yes, it was that kind of deal.”

“Deal?”

Kanae had now almost fully recovered her sight, and the first thing she could really see was the young girl dressed in pink. She was holding the gem that was shining all colors of the rainbow, and she looked at Kanae with a calm smile.

“What do you mean?”

“In exchange for Navy not doing anything to this gem, I let her go.”

Nana answered Kanae with a smile. She then put the gem in Kanae’s hands.

“If we had fought, Navy would have almost certainly used the mana in the gem.”

“Ah...”

“But if she did something like that, your daughter wouldn’t have survived it. That’s why I let her escape in exchange for the gem. Like I said, it was that kind of deal.”

Of course, that wasn’t everything. If Nana had fallen for the flash like Kanae had, Maya might have tried to make one last desperate grasp for the gem. That hadn’t come to pass, however. Nana had taken a chance on trusting Maya, but in the end it paid off.

“Thank you Nana-chan. For my sake...”

“Don’t worry about it. I still didn’t just let her run away.”

Nana had a spell up to track the whereabouts of Dark Navy. After she had finished her work here, she would go chase her down.

“It looks like Navy has taken a lot of damage, and she has also lost her altar and gem. Not even she would try anything major again right away. I only need to capture her before she can act again.”

“But won’t they get angry at you, Nana-chan?”

Nana was a magician, but more importantly, she was a member of Rainbow Heart, a special division of Folsaria’s army. Letting an enemy escape because of a personal judgment was a serious offense.

“What could I do? She managed to escape while the flash blinded me.”

Nana smiled brightly. She was going to tell the top brass that Maya had managed to escape by blinding her.

“I see... So that flash had a meaning behind it too...”

One could say that Maya using a method like that to escape was part of the deal. If she hadn’t made it look like she was escaping, Nana would have had to punish her. If Nana had followed her actual mission to a T, she would have ignored the gem in the first place and made her move to defeat Maya. But if Nana had taken that approach, Kanae would be unable to fulfill her own objective. That’s why Nana had struck a deal with Maya. It was a last resort of sorts. Being an ally of justice truly did put her in a difficult position.

“Now then, Kanae-san, let’s go home after destroying this altar. We have to return the mana in that gem to your daughter’s soul as quickly as possible.”

As Nana said that, she raised her staff above her head. She was going to use a powerful attack spell to destroy the altar. And while Kanae watched on, she firmly held on to the gem and let her anxiety leak out her lips.

“Will she survive...?”

“I’m sorry. To be honest, I don’t know either. But she shouldn’t die right away. I can at least guarantee that.”

Kanae’s daughter’s spiritual energy, which had forcibly been drained from her body and converted into mana, was stored in the gem in question. Maya had

already used a portion of its mana, so there was no guarantee that it would properly merge with Kanae's daughter again. However, if they destroyed the centerpiece of the ritual, the gem, after returning her mana, Kanae's daughter should at least be able to escape the drain of the ritual. And if they could keep her spiritual energy from continuing to leak out, that should save her life. It would also take a great burden off of Kanae's husband.

"I am really sorry. This is all because you got involved in our fight..."

"It's unfortunate, but there is no need for you to feel responsible. You're still so young, Nana-chan... It's okay to act your age sometimes."

Kanae's daughter might not survive for much longer, but Kanae wasn't going to blame Nana for that. Dark Navy was clearly the culprit in this situation. And no matter how strong she may be, Nana was still a child. Kanae couldn't be harsh with her since she wasn't much older than her daughter.

"Thank you, Kanae-san..."

"Don't cry, Nana-chan. It's not your fault..."

Kanae gently embraced Nana. Really, the biggest reason she held no ill will for her despite what had happened was because of the bond they'd formed while working together. This small girl would be continuing her fight all alone, and knowing that, Kanae wanted to do everything she could for her. Right now, she thought of Nana both as her own daughter and as a partner she could stick with through thick and thin.

"...I'm casting a spell, Kanae-san..."

"Right. Sorry for getting in your way, Nana-chan..."

And so the two of them foiled Dark Navy's plot and successfully managed to save Kanae's daughter.

What the Necklace Meant

After dashing out of the parking lot of the abandoned building, Koutarou headed straight to the site of the accident where his mother would meet her tragic end. He paid no attention to his surroundings as he went. He ignored traffic lights, and he bumped into people left and right, but he simply pressed forward. The time was already 7 PM, so if Koutarou remembered correctly, the accident would happen just after the turn of the hour. Since he wasn't sure of the exact time, he wasn't sure if he'd make it or not. But he still had to try. He was banking everything on that small chance she was still alive.

That corner! It's just around that corner!

Koutarou was now only a little bit away from the site of the accident. His heart was pumping as fast as it could manage, his lungs were screaming for oxygen, and his legs were slowing down from exhaustion. The pounding of his pulse was so loud that he could barely hear anything else. But Koutarou ignored all of it and forced himself forward. His mother was about to die in an accident just around the corner. Now wasn't the time to be worried about his body.

All right, I just turn here!

Koutarou slowed down a little to turn the last corner. As he did, he could hear the loud screech of a siren blaring behind him. The large, white van approached and passed him as it turned the same corner. The side of it read: "Harukaze City Fire Department." There was a red warning light flashing on top of it too. There was no doubt about it. It was an ambulance.

There was a large crowd of people in the direction the ambulance was heading. The people were gathered around something. It looked like there was a stopped car that had slammed into the guardrail in the middle of the crowd. And right next to that guardrail was a lone boy, sitting on the road and embracing a half-knit sweater. Scattered on the ground around him were the remains of a bamboo basket and the various knitting tools it had been holding. Then there was the woman collapsed in front of the boy. She looked as if she

were floating as she lay motionless in a pool of red liquid.

“Ah...”

The moment Koutarou saw it, he stopped in his tracks. Strength left his body and he froze on the spot. Koutarou simply stood there and watched how things developed. The emergency responders rushed past the boy to get to the fallen woman. The crowd continued growing, eventually keeping Koutarou from seeing the boy, the woman, or the emergency personnel.

“Veltlion...”

A woman wearing glasses and a long dress appeared next to Koutarou.

“I am so sorry... By the time I found the place, it was already...”

Clan had an apologetic look on her face. After she had guided Koutarou to the abandoned building where Kii was, she’d done her best to follow the brief directions he’d given her to the scene of the accident. It wasn’t easy, however, and by the time she finally found the right place, it was already too late.

It was almost as if Clan’s calm and sympathetic voice was the straw that broke the camel’s back. Koutarou lost all strength in his legs and slumped down where he was standing. He looked no different than the boy who was embracing the half-knit sweater.

“Onii-chan! Onee-chan!”

That was when Kii caught up. Koutarou had left her with Clan’s reconnaissance craft and rushed on ahead. That was why she was running a bit behind him in getting there.

“What happened to your mom?!”

Kii still didn’t know what had happened, but she had a bad feeling when she saw Koutarou sitting on the ground. She just didn’t want to believe it was true.

“We didn’t make it in time...” Clan said in a sorrowful voice and shook her head.

“No! Then did Onii-chan’s mom die?!”

Kii screamed out as tears flooded her eyes. She didn’t want to accept that

Koutarou's mother had died any more than he did.

I didn't make it... Mom... died again...

Kii's screams carved the reality of the situation into Koutarou's frozen heart. It was like the pain burst some kind of emotional dam. Memories of the days after his mother had died rushed over him all at once.

Koutarou's mother had left behind only a half-knit sweater. Like Kii, Koutarou had searched for her repeatedly after losing her. His father took to alcohol to drown out his own sorrows. Their relationship steadily grew worse, and it took a long time to repair the damage that had been done. Things were fine between them now, but Koutarou had had to grow up a good deal before that was possible.

One could say that Koutarou's childhood had been lonely. Once he got home from school, he was always alone. And being all alone in a house full of memories of his mother was hard. His father always came home from work late, and they didn't see eye to eye on things anyway. Really, they were both just having a hard time adjusting to their loss, but they took it out on each other. It took a long time for them to be able to reconcile because of that. Before time and friends could heal his heart, Koutarou would spend a long time alone. That was also one of the reasons he'd devoted himself so utterly to baseball.

Reflecting on all of that, Koutarou was overcome with deep loneliness and an intense sense of defeat. Now he'd lost his mother not once, but twice.

"Damn it, I couldn't save her! I couldn't save mom!"

Koutarou slammed his fist into the hard concrete pavement. The strong blow shredded the skin on his knuckles, and blood poured freely from the wound almost like it was meant as a substitute for his tears.

"I was almost there... I was almost there!"

Koutarou continued pounding his fist into the concrete without a single care for the bloodstain he was leaving. It was just something he had to do. If he didn't, he felt like his heart would break into pieces. The pain of his knuckles meeting the pavement felt like it was the only thing keeping him sane.

“Even if you call me a knight, I can’t save anyone! I couldn’t change anything! History is still repeating itself! God damn it!”

Koutarou screamed. The sight of his mother dying in front of him a second time was more painful than he could have ever imagined. It was crushing. He couldn’t save anyone. He couldn’t even help anyone. Everything was proceeding as if according to some script or preplanned history. And he was powerless to do anything about it. Overcome with despair, solitude, and grief, Koutarou looked like he would shatter if he was so much as touched.

“I’m sorry! I’m so sorry, Onii-chan!”

But there was one person still intent on protecting the fragile Koutarou. It was Kii, who had desperately chased after Koutarou all the way here. Not caring in the least about bloodying her own clothes, she grabbed Koutarou’s fist and embraced it, holding it to her chest with all her might. It was if she was trying to transfer the emotions of his clenched fist to herself.

“It’s... It’s all Kii’s fault! If Kii hadn’t run away from home, Onii-chan’s mom...! Onii-chan’s mom would still...!”

Kii couldn’t help herself now. Her soul was screaming out. She felt responsible. Koutarou had lost his mother because she had gotten captured by Maya. And looking back at it, she’d only been captured because she ran away from home. Kii’s selfish actions had deeply hurt Koutarou, and that broke her heart.

Kii also understood Koutarou’s feelings better than anyone. He was feeling now just like she had before she found her mother’s star. She had felt that same despair. That same weighty sense of loss.

More than anything, however, Kii loved Koutarou. Her desperation to help him was really the pleading innocence of a young girl’s first love. Her heart was crying, telling her that she couldn’t leave him. That she had to save him.

“I promise you, Onii-chan! Kii will never let you feel lonely! Kii will always be by your side! So, so...!”

Just like Koutarou had healed her heart, Kii believed that it was now her turn to heal his. She wanted to be the one to do it because she loved him more than

anyone else. She would always stay by his side so he wouldn't feel lonely. She would learn how to cook. She would do the cleaning and washing. She would do all of the things a mother might do for him. She wanted to shower him with warmth and get through to his broken heart. She believed that together, they could save each other from the emptiness inside.

"So please don't cry! You're not alone! Kii is right here! Kii will always protect you, Onii-chan!"

Tears scattered from Kii's eyes as she screamed out her true feelings. It was like her warm, gentle feelings jumped straight from her chest to his, and they began to wrap themselves around his wounded heart like a bandage.

"Kii-chan..."

Kii's desperate cries called Koutarou back to the brink. She gave him something to hold on to, and that kept him from breaking completely. Thanks to her, he managed to calm down a little. It wasn't like the sorrow of losing his mother had vanished, but he managed to recover from the shock of losing her for a second time.

Kii's shirt was stained red with his blood. Her cheeks were wet with tears. Her body shook and her voice was desperate. All of that told Koutarou he wasn't alone in this grief. He seized that feeling and turned it into the power he needed to be able to stand up again.

"...Thank you, Kii-chan. I feel a little better... thanks to you."

Koutarou somehow managed a smile for her.

"Onii-chan..."

After showing a concerned expression for a brief moment, Kii smiled too.

"I-I'm so glad... I'm sorry, I'm so sorry, Onii-chan... I am really, really sorry..."

Kii reached out and touched Koutarou's cheek, gently wiping his tears away. Relieved to hear Koutarou finally say something, she now cried tears of relief. Koutarou reached out to wipe her tears away too.

"You don't need to apologize. You didn't do anything wrong."

"But, but...!"

“It’s okay. Thank you, Kii-chan.”

“Onii-chan! Hnnngh... Waaaaaaaah!”

Deeply moved, Kii threw herself at Koutarou and hugged him tightly.

She’s crying for my sake...

Koutarou embraced Kii’s trembling body and gently patted her back while feeling grateful that she had cried for him. It was only because she’d shed the first tears that he’d somehow managed to choke back his own.

Exhausted from crying and overcome with relief, Kii feel asleep while still hugging Koutarou. Picking her up like that, he was now carrying her back to the Cradle.

“She really is a child. Just look at how soundly she’s sleeping...”

“It’s better if she has a childish side to her like that. She’s too good of a child, really.”

“That’s true. Besides, if she were always awake, I would lose my turn to console you.”

“You’re awfully childish in your own weird way.”

“Shut it!”

By now, Koutarou had managed to collect himself. The grief hadn’t vanished, but he was on his feet again with the support of Kii and Clan. He could act like his usual self again thanks to them.

I really am grateful, Clan. I’m so glad we’re together...

Thinking about what it would have been like to go through all of this alone, Koutarou was overcome with gratitude for Clan. He just couldn’t bring himself to tell her how he really felt because there was still a certain distance between them. He was a little too embarrassed to tell Clan his honest feelings.

And speaking of Clan, this might be for the best for her...

If he had saved his mother, Clan would have lost her ability to return home. That fact alone helped ease his grief. She was an important friend to him, so

even though he lamented the loss of his mother, he was satisfied knowing that Clan would now get her life back.

“By the way, Clan, what do we do now?”

“I’ve finished my calculations, but I’d like to wait a little for our departure.”

“Why?”

“This girl knows where the Cradle is, right? After we get her home, I’d like to relocate it.”

“Okay, I’ll leave that to you. I should practice my acting too, so no hurry, I guess.”

“Oh yeah, there was that thing too.”

As Koutarou and Clan discussed their plans, they reached the mountain where the Cradle was buried. Since they would be walking on a paved path for a while yet, the terrain was easy and smooth. Kii still hadn’t woken up, even being carried.

As Koutarou and Clan had made it about halfway up the mountain, the bracelet on Clan’s right arm sounded off an alarm.

“Warning. An unidentified group is approaching from ten o’clock. Four units. Threat of weaponry is low. Energy reactions are also low. Maintaining threat level one.”

“Veltlion, someone is coming.”

“Looks like it.”

Though slower than the Cradle, Koutarou had also noticed.

They don’t seem to be very hostile, but...

Koutarou’s spiritual energy senses were growing weaker, but he could feel the presence of four people approaching.

“Maybe we should wake the girl up.”

“Yeah.”

A mysterious group was approaching them from the left. There was no path in

that direction, only an abundance of trees and bushes. It was hard to imagine it was just someone gathering mushrooms and plants at this hour, so they decided to stay on guard.

“Kii-chan. Wake up, Kii-chan.”

“Hmm... Mmmh...”

Koutarou gently shook Kii while calling out to her, and she soon began moving. She moved her arms that were around Koutarou’s neck and rubbed her eyes.

“Good morning, Onii-chan... What is it?”

“Some strange people are coming. They don’t seem like enemies, but we thought it would be best to wake you up.”

“Okay.”

Kii seemed satisfied with this explanation, as she nodded and got off of Koutarou’s back without further ado. Rubbing her drowsy eyes, she followed Clan’s glance and looked off to the left. A bush in front of her shook and four men appeared from it. There was an elderly man in the front with three other men behind him, and all of them were wearing expensive-looking suits. Based on their formation, it looked like the three men were the elderly man’s guards.

“Uncle?!”

“My lady!”

When the men stepped on to the asphalt road, Kii and the elderly man called out to each other. Not a moment later, the elderly man rushed over towards Koutarou and the two girls.

“I finally found you, my lady!”

Upon seeing Kii, the elderly man smiled broadly and teared up. He ran as fast as he could to her. He didn’t even seem to care who Koutarou and Clan were at all.

“Kouma-sama, please wait! We don’t know who the others are yet!”

“As if I care! My lady!”

The three men behind the elderly man seemed cautious about Koutarou and Clan, so they hurriedly tried to stop him. The elderly man, however, completely ignored their warnings. The three men then exchanged glances and reluctantly chased after him.

“Kii-chan, do you know them?”

Based on the elderly man and Kii’s reactions to each other, Koutarou could tell they weren’t enemies. But since someone had come for Kii’s life just earlier today, he decided it would be best to keep his guard up.

“Yes. That’s Uncle Kouma. He works in my house.”

“Like I thought, she seems to be the daughter of an influential family.”

As Kii started to explain the situation to Koutarou and Clan, the elderly man—Kouma—finally reached them. He squatted down in front of Kii to match her eye level.

They seem okay...

Seeing such a polite and affectionate gesture, Koutarou figured these men weren’t anything to be worried about. The tension in his shoulders finally relaxed.

“Just where have you been these three days?! I was worried sick and looking all over for you!”

“I’m sorry, uncle...”

Kii apologized to Kouma, who was in tears. She now had a better understanding of the trouble her selfishness had caused.

“Of course, the master also worried for you. I had to stop him personally when he said that he would go look for you himself, and that’s why I’m here in his stead.”

“Dad said that...?”

“The master heard that someone was after your life, and he had to use everything at his disposal to keep his enemies at bay. He was deathly concerned about you.”

Kii's father had realized his political adversaries would try to use the fact that Kii had run away from home to sway public opinion. As the mastermind, Tayuma, had hired Maya, Kii's father hadn't been able to locate the culprit, but he used everything in his power to keep his political adversaries in check. Only those doing dealings under the table, like Tayuma and Maya, had been able to make a move. As a result, Kii's father was in something of a political deadlock and couldn't actually leave to go look for his daughter. In his stead he'd sent Kouma, his trusted vassal. Really, he'd done everything in his power to try and bring her back safely.

"Um, about that..."

Koutarou, who had been watching over the two of them, finally spoke up. There was something he had to tell Kouma.

"Kii-chan here was just attacked by some stranger, so please take her somewhere safe as fast as possible."

"Onii-chan!"

Kii's eyes opened wide at what Koutarou said, but Kouma's reaction was even more exaggerated.

"I-Is that true?! We can't stay here! Men, secure our surroundings! And contact the master!"

"Understood!"

Kouma gave out orders and the men behind him, who sprung into action at once. One of them used some kind of device to survey the surroundings, and another pulled out a small gun. The third used a communications device to contact somebody. They were preparing for an ambush while planning their retreat.

"We somehow managed to keep her safe, but the attacker might come back again... so please hurry."

Koutarou and Clan didn't know who Maya was. All they could imagine was that she was an assassin Kii's father's enemies had sent. They didn't know what was going on behind the scenes either, and as far as they knew, they might still be under pursuit. There was a limit to how well Koutarou and Clan could

protect Kii by themselves, so they wanted her to be taken somewhere safe as soon as possible.

“I see... Normally I would like to formally thank you, but since this is an urgent matter, we will be taking our leave at once. Please excuse the rudeness.”

Kouma politely bowed his head to Koutarou. Koutarou nodded in acknowledgement.

“I think that’s for the best, so please don’t think anything of it.”

Koutarou only vaguely knew what was going on, but he knew there could still be danger afoot, so he agreed with Kouma’s actions. They should get Kii somewhere safe immediately.

“I am most grateful.”

Hearing Koutarou’s words, Kouma deeply bowed once more. It was the most gratitude that he was able to express in the moment.

“My lady, let us go.”

“No! I won’t go back!”

Despite Koutarou and Kouma having come to an understanding, Kii herself was for some reason fiercely protesting. That surprised both of them.

“What’s the matter, Kii-chan? Didn’t you say you’d go home before?”

“M-My lady, why?!”

Koutarou tilted his head in confusion and Kouma grabbed Kii’s shoulders in concern. Both of them were quite surprised. Since Kii had told Koutarou that she was willing to go home not long ago, he had no idea what had made her change her mind all of a sudden.

“I made a promise to Onii-chan! That I would be with you! That Kii will protect you so that you won’t feel lonely!”

“Kii-chan...”

Kii had changed her mind for Koutarou’s sake. When he’d lost his mother, she’d promised to stay with him to keep him from being sad. And she wanted to keep that promise, so she wanted to stay with him even now.

“...It’s okay, Kii-chan.”

Koutarou squatted down next to Kii and put his hand on her shoulder. Seeing that, Kouma decided to leave the convincing to Koutarou and stepped away for the moment.

“It’s not okay! Onii-chan did so much for me, so now it’s Kii’s turn!”

Even with Koutarou, she fiercely shook her head and began tearing up.

“Kii promised to protect you! I definitely won’t go home!”

“Kii-chan, you’ve already protected me enough. You can tell, can’t you? The only reason I’m able to cheerfully talk like this is thanks to you.”

Koutarou had lost his mother twice over, and Kii had been the one to ease that pain. It was because she’d lost her own mother that her feelings were able to reach him. That’s why Koutarou could confidently say that she’d done more than enough for him. The tears she’d already shed for him were still protecting him.

“That’s why it’s okay. Thank you, Kii-chan. I am really grateful.”

“Onii-chan...” she said in a soft voice.

Since Kii was clever and sensitive to the feelings of others, she understood Koutarou. She knew he wasn’t just lying to her to make her feel better. He wasn’t just saying all this to get her to go home. And knowing that, her argument lost its momentum. She understood that it was time for the two of them to part ways.

“I will never forget that you cried for my sake. And as long as I don’t, I won’t be alone. Right?”

“Yeah...”

Kii would return home, and Koutarou would do the same. But the bond the two of them had formed wouldn’t be severed so easily. As long as they remembered the time they had spent together, neither Koutarou nor Kii would ever be alone. They would both always know that there was someone out there that understood them, and with that, they would be able to walk confidently down their respective paths.

Though for the other party to be a six year old girl in my case might be just like me...

While amazed with himself for being so encouraged by a six year old girl, Koutarou was undeniably grateful that he'd met her. It meant there would be a special sadness in their parting, so he closed his eyes for a moment and prayed for her future to be bright.

"Take care, Kii-chan."

"Yeah... You too, Onii-chan."

"Yeah... I'll be okay."

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

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

"Ahaha, this is almost like a confession."

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

"That's true."

A smile finally reappeared on Kii's lips. She had accepted that it was time to part ways. Sensing that, Kouma—who had been patiently watching from the sidelines—spoke up.

"My lady, it's about time..."

"I know. But just wait a little."

The time to say goodbye was upon them. Kii knew it all too well. She had no more intentions of being selfish, but she had one more thing she had to do.

"Onii-chan, take this."

Kii tugged lightly on the collar of her shirt and pulled out a necklace. The necklace was of polished jewels and fangs strung together by a colorful string. It had a unique charm quite different from modern jewelry. It had a simple, profound beauty to it, and it suited Kii very well.

"I want you to hold on to this, Onii-chan."

Kii took off the necklace and presented it to Koutarou.

“My lady, that’s...”

Kouma instinctively tried to stop Kii. He knew just what this gesture meant to her.

“I know. That’s why.”

“...If you are aware, then I will not interfere.”

“Thank you, uncle.”

Kii smiled and nodded at Kouma, then handed the necklace to Koutarou.

“Here, Onii-chan. Think of this as a special present from Kii and take good care of it.”

“Are you sure? Isn’t this something precious to you?”

Judging from Kouma’s reaction and the look of the necklace, Koutarou imagined it was something valuable. And he wasn’t wrong. If Koutarou had heard what it was worth, he definitely would have tried to give it back to Kii.

“Yes, Kii is sure! This is my thanks for the card! From today on, this will protect you instead of Kii! And... I would be happy if you looked at it from time to time and thought of Kii,” she said with a smile.

There was a certain custom in Kii’s hometown. Couples who pledged to marry one another would exchange items they regularly wore or carried as proof of their engagement. Koutarou had given Kii his card, so Kii decided to give Koutarou her necklace—a keepsake of her mother’s. Kii had been able to find her mother’s star and even see her mother again, so she no longer needed the necklace as a memento. She thought that it would be better if she gave the necklace to Koutarou so her mother would protect him. So really, the gift of the necklace had two meanings to Kii.



However, Kii had no intention of telling Koutarou that. Since he lived somewhere else, he didn't need to understand the meaning of her gift. She also knew it would be a long time before she could see him again, so she didn't want to push her feelings on him. She had learned what kind of trouble selfish actions could cause.

She was planning on telling him about it one day, but not until they met again. When that day came, she hoped that he would remember her and accept her feelings. Until then, she would keep them to herself. Koutarou only needed to think of the necklace as a charm.

"I understand. Thank you, Kii-chan."

"Yeah! Make sure you take care of it!"

Kii had now done everything she wanted. Satisfied with that, she smiled. It was such a graceful, mature smile that it was hard to think of her as a six year old girl in that moment. During the past three days, she had grown immensely, and it seemed she was now about to enter the beginnings of adulthood.

"Okay, I'm going now."

Kii kept smiling like that and waved her hand. She looked a bit lonely, but not sad. It was important to her to say goodbye with a smile.

"Yeah. See you."

"Take care, young lady."

Koutarou and Clan saw Kii off with smiles themselves. Kouma bowed to Koutarou and Clan once more, and the other three men did the same. This would be their formal farewell.

"Bye-bye, Onii-chan! Onee-chan!"

Kouma held Kii's hand and led her back the way he and the other men had come from. Kii continued waving at Koutarou and Clan until she could no longer see them.

"See you!"

"Goodbye! Let's meet again!"

There was no guarantee that they would ever see Kii again. If anything, it seemed highly unlikely. Clan and Koutarou would now be returning to the future. Even if they ever encountered each other again, she probably wouldn't recognize them when she saw them. But there was no need to bring any of that up.

"Wait for me! When Kii grows up, I will definitely come back to you, Onii-chan! So wait for me, Onii-chan! I love you!"

However, as Koutarou watched Kii, something told him that they might indeed cross paths again in the future. He couldn't help feeling that way seeing her bright, hopeful smile.

Roller Coaster at Dusk

Sunday, February 14th

Not only did Valentine's Day fall on a weekend this year—Sunday, to be precise—but the amusement part was holding a special event to celebrate it. Because of that, despite it being cold, there were plenty of people visiting the park and the surrounding area. Families and couples alike surrounded Koutarou and Kiriha as they walked along. They were all smiling and enjoying the holiday.

"Kiriha-san, where are we going today? You said you found a clue."

"Calm down, Satomi Koutarou. There's a proper procedure to these things."

Kiriha had brought Koutarou to the amusement park to help her find someone. Since he had helped her look many times before, he readily agreed this time as well. Since Koutarou considered Kiriha to be a precious friend, he had no reason to refuse. On top of that, it wasn't just anyone Kiriha was looking for. She was trying to find her first love. Of course he wanted to help a dear friend with that. And since she'd said she had a clue this time, Koutarou was pretty excited about coming.

When they entered the amusement park, Kiriha took the lead. They definitely seemed to be headed towards the attractions in the park, but Kiriha wasn't telling Koutarou her plan for some reason. Confused, Koutarou had asked her about it, but she had only dodged the question with a smile. Giving up, he simply followed along.

Still... I'm getting a strange feeling about this...

Since they had left Corona House late that afternoon, the sun was already setting. The orange sun cast long shadows on the ground. The sight stirred Koutarou's memories, and he felt like he'd seen it before.

Well, I've come here several times now, so...

This wasn't the first time that Koutarou had come here with Kiriha, either. In

fact, he had been here with her more than anyone else. Once was under the pretense of a date, and they'd come a couple of times since then to look for her first love. The date in particular had left quite an impression on him, so it was only obvious that he would think of it coming here with her again. However as they walked along, other memories came drifting to mind as well. Specifically, he was thinking of a day long in the past that had had a profound effect on him. It didn't have anything to do with Kiriha, but he waxed a bit nostalgic as he walked along with her.

"Here we are."

Kiriha stopped in front of a certain attraction. She then turned towards Koutarou and flashed a cheerful smile. It was a pure and bright smile, completely different from the one she normally revealed. It wasn't unlike the smiles of the children standing in line for the attraction.

"This is..."

Kiriha had brought them to the roller coaster. When Koutarou looked up, he could see people shoot by, spinning and twisting in the cars along the tracks. This was the most popular attraction in the amusement park.

"I was thinking that we should ride this today."

"Wait, didn't you want to ride this with your first love? Or did you give up?"

Kiriha suggested riding the roller coaster together, but Koutarou objected. In the past, they had decided that Kiriha would ride the roller coaster with her first love since it was something she'd always wanted to do with him. If she gave up on looking for him or if she found him and he rejected her, then Koutarou would ride it with her. But not until then.

"No, I haven't given up. In fact, I may have found him. My Onii-chan, the man I've always been in love with..."

When Koutarou heard her say "Onii-chan," he almost saw someone else in her.

"I've decided! Onii-chan, let's ride that next!"

"That thing spinning round and round and zooming by!"

The person Koutarou was thinking of was a young girl that had just turned six years old. He'd met her by coincidence a month or so ago and spent a few days with her. Koutarou knew he was talking to Kiriha now, but he was certain he'd caught a glimpse of resemblance.

Could it be...? No, that's impossible... Do coincidences like that even really happen?

Koutarou was near speechless. A strange idea had crossed his mind, but it was far too strange to be true. The truth was this wasn't actually the first time it had occurred to him, but each time he considered it, it seemed more and more delusional. Even simpleminded Koutarou knew that it was impossible to have an effect before a cause.

That's why when the same strange thought occurred to him even now, he didn't know what to do. Confused, all he could do was stand in place. And while he was rendered speechless, Kiriha smiled and began to slowly speak.

"Ever since I came up on the surface, I've been looking for him using the wrong method. That's why I couldn't find him."

Kiriha's tone was different from normal. She was still polite, but not formal. She sounded like a regular girl her age. It was unusual, but Koutarou didn't find it strange. If anything, this seemed more natural than the way she ordinarily spoke. She was normally too mature about this kind of thing.

"The person I met ten years ago was the same age I am now. That's why I assumed that his mother would at least be in her thirties, and more likely in her forties. Going off of that, I went through records of traffic accidents involving women in that age range during the dates in question. But no matter how hard I looked, I always came up emptyhanded."

Kiriha had tried to find her first love with what she knew about him, and that included that his mother had passed away in a traffic accident. Assuming that her first love had been around fifteen years old when she met him, it was only natural to assume his mother was at least fifteen years older. And so she'd investigated traffic accidents involving women in their thirties or older. She'd found a few that matched the description, but she still hadn't been able to find her first love.

“I’ve tried other methods too, but I just couldn’t seem to find him no matter how I tried. I started to think that he wasn’t even real to begin with. Maybe that it had all just been a dream...”

Kiriha had tried other tactics to find her first love, but all to no avail. Nothing was working, and that frustration made her start to doubt that her precious memories were even real.

“But... you know what? The day before yesterday, I found this...”

Kiriha’s eyes filled with tears and she reached into her purse and carefully pulled out something.

“Thanks to this, I finally understood why I couldn’t find him... Why his mother didn’t exist in the records I was looking at...”

Kiriha held in her hand an antique necklace decorated with polished jewels and fangs.

“...Th-That’s...”

The moment he saw that, Koutarou gasped. The necklace she was holding was a memento that he’d kept hidden in his wardrobe. That Kiriha had found it, that she recognized it, and that she’d brought it here told Koutarou that what he’d been suspecting for a while now was actually the truth.

“There was no way I ever would have found him like that. As it turns out, he was only six years old back then...”

That information was rightfully startling. Kiriha remembered the boy she’d met being around the age of sixteen, so it was hard to understand the apparent age difference.

“I gave this necklace to him when we parted ways.”

But when Kiriha reinvestigated her first love assuming she was looking for a six year old instead of a sixteen year old, things started to fall into place. Only one person fit the description, and now she’d even found this necklace as proof of his identity. All that was left was for her to confirm one last thing.

“I gave it to him as thanks for this card.”

Kiriha pulled out a trading card from her purse. It was originally metallic, but it

was old and had lost most of its sheen with age. The card depicted a beetle-themed superhero, and it had a young child's handwriting scrawled across it.

Koutarou had seen that card before, handwriting and all. It looked just the same as the card the six year old girl he'd met recently had.

"This necklace was a keepsake from my mother. I gave it to him, hoping that my mother would watch over him so he wouldn't feel lonely and cry on his own."

Kiriha was in tears. She had never displayed this kind of intense emotion in front of people before, but now she was crying without a care in the world for who saw her. She looked both happy and sad at the same time. Her expression betrayed all kinds of emotions, and those overflowing emotions were welling up in her eyes as tears. As they rolled down her cheeks one by one, they sparkled in the light of the setting sun.

"I've always been worried these past ten years. Is he happy? He's not feeling lonely, is he?"

It was as if Kiriha could no longer control what she was feeling. Her body was trembling and she was weak in the knees. Just standing up was the best she could muster. She looked like she would collapse to the ground if someone so much as tapped her on the shoulder.

"So please tell me, Koutarou! Is the owner of this necklace still happy? He's not feeling lonely... is he?"

That was the real reason why Kiriha had been looking for her first love. Before confessing her feelings, she wanted to know if he was happy.

Kiriha still loved him, but she didn't demand the same from him. He would have his own life, and that might already include a lover or even a family. Kiriha had no intention of forcing her way into his life. After ten years of not seeing him, just being able to confess was enough.

But above all else, she wanted to know if he was happy and make sure that he wasn't lonely. Those feelings were why she'd given him the necklace in the first place, and what she'd wished every time she'd stared at that card all these years. And without knowing that he was happy, she wouldn't be able to move

forward in pursuing her own happiness.

“...Could you stand over there for a moment?”

Koutarou didn’t answer Kiriha’s desperate appeal. Instead, he smiled and pointed to something behind her. His expression and tone were calm like nothing was out of the ordinary.

“Huh...? O-Okay...”

While Koutarou had regained his calm, Kiriha’s mind was still a mess. She wanted to hear his answer, but this strange request had thrown her for a loop.

“Like this?”

Though confused, Kiriha obediently followed Koutarou’s instructions. Koutarou had pointed to a signboard in front of the roller coaster, and Kiriha walked over to it as asked.

“Yeah, just like that.”

Once Kiriha was in position, Koutarou walked over to her.

“Ah...”

As Koutarou approached, Kiriha’s body stiffened and she instinctively grasped the card and necklace she was holding in her hands. She was anxious. Even if she had proof, she still couldn’t be completely sure. And so she supported herself with the necklace and card as she wondered what Koutarou was going to do.

“Hmm...”

Though Kiriha was anxious, Koutarou smiled and nodded. But rather than at her, he seemed to be looking behind her. Wondering why, Kiriha turned around. Then she saw it.

The sign she was standing in front of read: “You must be at least 140 centimeters to ride this attraction.” The height limit had been written in large letters on the side of the sign, and next to it was a large illustration that demonstrated the requisite height.

Koutarou happily looked at it before putting his hand on top of Kiriha’s head.

“...You’ve sure gotten big, Kii-chan.”

This time, Koutarou made sure to look at Kiriha while he was talking to her, and he gently patted her head a few times.

“Ah...”

In that instant, Kiriha was able to confirm that her wildest dreams were indeed a reality. At the same time, her emotions erupted and she fumbled for words. She desperately tried to say something, but her mouth simply opened and closed without making a sound.

“Since you’re this tall, it looks like we can ride it together now.”

The illustration only reached up to Kiriha’s shoulders. She easily cleared it.

Surely the attendant won’t stop us this time...

Koutarou smiled as he remembered the first time they’d tried to ride it.

“I couldn’t tell it was you, really.”

“O-Onii-cha... You really are Onii-chan, right?”

Tears began overflowing from Kiriha’s eyes again. Her heightened feelings made her body shake.

“Yeah. That’s right.”

Koutarou firmly nodded. He had also been surprised by this development, but he wasn’t as shaken as Kiriha since he’d had a month and a half or so to think about it. Seeing both Kii and Kiriha cry had played a pretty big role in it. Knowing that Kii had cried for him, he wanted to be strong for her, and he felt a very similar feeling whenever he saw Kiriha in tears.

“Ah...”

Strength left Kiriha’s knees and she lost her balance. The whirlwind of emotions she was experiencing kept her from catching herself properly, and it looked like she was about to fall right over.

“Hey now.”

However, before she could, Koutarou was there to support her.

Even though you've grown, you're still light, Kii-chan...

Being able to support the girl that supported him made Koutarou happy. And while he was grinning to himself, Kiriha put her arms around him and held him tightly. She looked as if she was clinging to a lifeline.

"...It's Onii-chan... You really were Onii-chan all along..."

Kiriha completely entrusted herself to Koutarou like a small child wanting to be doted on by her parents. Though surprised for a moment, Koutarou readjusted his hold on her body to properly support her.

"...Back then you were more of a tomboy, and less like this."

Koutarou held Kiriha while smiling wryly. Right now, she looked even younger than Kii ever had.

To think she really was Kii-chan though...

Kii, who had been hiding inside of Kiriha all this time, had now come out to the surface. She had peeked through here and there before, but he'd never thought that much of it. Of course, he was surprised when he realized the truth, but also happy. And as things came together now, he didn't have any trouble looking at her and believing they were the same person.

"Stupid... Even if it's only been half a month for you, it's been over ten years for me, Onii-chan. Can't you just let me stay like this a little longer?"

Kiriha kept her arms firmly wrapped around Koutarou. She poured enough feeling into them to make up for ten years of not seeing him, and the feelings that overcame her now served as her new promise to him. She would protect Koutarou from solitude, and always warm up his heart.

Just like Koutarou had supported Kiriha and Kii, they would support him back. As her best friend and first love became the same person, her desires merged. Her wishes melded into one and became even stronger together.



“I’m sorry. I’ll listen to whatever you say today, so please forgive me.”

“Anything?”

Kiriha looked up and smiled at Koutarou as she tilted her head to the side curiously.

“Yeah.”

“I might say something incredible.”

“You won’t. That’s not the kind of girl you are.”

“Heehee...”

Kiriha giggled happily and entrusted herself to Koutarou once more. She then leaned in to quietly whisper into his ear.

“Onii-chan, you still haven’t answered my previous question, so I want you to give me a proper answer.”

Was Koutarou happy or not? Kiriha really already knew the answer to that question because she’d met him in the past. Ten years ago, he was anxious to get home, and that was a good sign he was happy there.

But still, Kiriha wanted to hear Koutarou say it. Had she been able to protect him during the ten months they had been together, and had Kii been able to warm his heart since they had met? Had Kiriha and Kii been able to support him? She wanted Koutarou to answer her in his own words.

“Now that you mention it, I didn’t, did I?”

Koutarou smiled bitterly and gathered his thoughts as he looked up into the sky. What meaning did these past ten months since he’d met Kiriha and these past couple of weeks since he’d returned home have for him? It wasn’t a very difficult question for Koutarou to answer.

“...The owner of this necklace is pretty stupid, you see. He couldn’t even tell who the girl in front of him was. And it’s because of things like that that he’s always getting into trouble with the people around him.”

Koutarou smiled as he answered her. But it wasn’t his usual smile. Both the look on his face and the way he was talking to her were different. It was like he

was interacting with a small child.

“But... when he unexpectedly ended up somewhere far away, strangely enough, he missed all the fighting. He then worked hard to be able to come home. So I think... that he’s happy. At the very least, I don’t think he’s feeling lonely.”

Koutarou spoke as if he was talking about someone else. It was almost too embarrassing just to be honest, especially when one of the reasons he’d wanted to return home was right in front of him.

“I’m... I’m so glad...”

However, Kiriha didn’t seem to care about that part. The moment he had said that he was happy, intense emotions began welling in her chest, and they overflowed without end. Kiriha didn’t know what to do, and so all she could do was cry and embrace Koutarou.

However, there was one thing she knew for sure. She no longer had to worry about whether her first love was happy or not. On top of that, she could genuinely support him from now on. She would also be able to see his smile for herself from now on, and she would do what she could to protect that smile.

It all made Kiriha happy too, but all she could do was cry more tears of joy and put more strength into her arms wrapped around Koutarou. Whether she realized it or not, she was acting just like her younger self.

“But still, to think you were Kii-chan...”

“You’re so slow... Jeez... Couldn’t you have noticed half a month ago...?”

“I’m sorry.”

Like that, Kiriha continued crying and holding on to Koutarou. Since she had so many emotions pent up inside, it would take some time to let it all out. And Koutarou would be there to silently support her all the while.

Kiriha did eventually calm down, and she took half a step back to look up at Koutarou.

“Say, Onii-chan...” she whispered with a smile.

“Hmm?”

“I have a little bit of a dilemma.”

As Kiriha said that, she hung the necklace she’d been holding in her hand around Koutarou’s neck. To her, that was its rightful place. After that, she showed the card in her hands to Koutarou and then dearly clasped it to her chest. That was also its rightful place.

“And what’s this dilemma?”

Kiriha continued crying as she talked to Koutarou. Tears trickled down her cheeks and fell from her chin, wetting her hands and Koutarou’s necklace. Seeing them, Koutarou reached his hand out to her cheek to wipe them away. The gesture made Kiriha incredibly happy, and she shed one final tear with a smile.

“Kiriha and Kii are arguing inside of me. Kiriha wants to trouble you more, but Kii wants to stay like this.”

“Ah, then there’s no need to argue.”

Koutarou let out a small sigh and shrugged.

“Why not?”

Kiriha tilted her head like Kii would. Nothing about her face was different than usual, but she looked especially childlike to Koutarou in that moment.

“People have been glaring daggers at me for a while now. They must think that I’m making you cry.”

By having Kiriha rely on him like Kii, Koutarou was already being troubled. In the end, the results were the same, regardless of whether it was what Kiriha or Kii wanted.

“You are making me cry, jeez...”

After giving Koutarou a very Kiriha-esque mischievous smile, she hugged him like Kii would. The two girls melded into one and threw their mutual feelings at Koutarou. She knew that she could get away with it. That he would be the only one to accept her feelings like that, past, present, and future.

“Then let’s go.”

Koutarou smiled bitterly as he whispered to Kiriha. Strangely enough, he remained calm even as Kiriha was hugging him. As a result of his feelings for Kiriha and Kii merging, he started to feel like their hugging was normal. It was something similar to the way he felt about Sanae.

“Where to?”

Eyes closed and still hugging him, Kiriha whispered back to Koutarou.

“We’re getting on the roller coaster, obviously. I’m tried of people glaring at me. It hurts...”

That was making Koutarou more uneasy than Kiriha hugging him.

“Trying to get a girl in a good mood by taking her on a ride... Don’t you think you’re being a little too simple?”

Kiriha looked up and smiled. She then let go of Koutarou and held his hand instead. Though she had criticized his idea as simple, she seemed rather amenable to it. That was, of course, only obvious considering she’d been waiting ten years for this moment.

“I don’t. I told you before, didn’t I? I’m actually very interested in roller coasters myself. I want to give it a try.”

Koutarou began walking. Kiriha naturally accompanied him, and she gently rested her cheek on his shoulder. They passed through the entrance to the roller coaster, walking along like they were old lovers.

“By the way, Onii-chan, who were those words for? Was it Kiriha, or was it Kii?”

“I forgot. Does it even matter?”

“Heehee. I’ll just leave it at that. Koutarou and Onii-chan are both so shy.”

“Shut it.”

On this particular day in the middle of February, the cold had more bite than usual. The sun was setting, and the evening began growing colder. In the amusement park painted orange in the hues of the setting sun, the roller

coaster cars clacked along the track at full speed.

Nothing special had really happened on this day. A boy with an antique necklace and a girl with an old trading card had just gotten to ride a roller coaster together. It was just like any other holiday in the park, but it would change the relationship of that boy and girl forever.

Midnight sometime just past the middle of March. A car was parked in a dark alleyway near the station. A fat man was alone inside the car, fast asleep in the passenger seat. The driver's seat was empty, and the sleeping man was waiting for the driver to return.

"Zzz... Zzz... Zzz..."

The man had been asleep for over an hour, but all of a sudden, the door on the driver's side opened and a slim man jumped in.

"Wake up, Hachi! This is an emergency!"

Despite the slim man's shouting, the fat man called Hachi didn't wake up. He simply continued drooling in his sleep. Panicked, the slim man grabbed hold of him and violently shook him.

"I told you to wake up! Can't you at least wake up right away when it's important!"

"Hwah?! A-Aniki...?"

"That's right! Wake up! It's an emergency!"

"Aniki... what happened?"

Hachi rubbed his sleepy eyes and asked the slim man what the occasion was. The two men had been working on a surveillance job for several months, but nothing before now had ever warranted this kind of commotion.

"Things have changed! That girl's apparently in critical condition now!"

"Th-That's terrible!"

The moment he heard the words "critical condition," Hachi's eyes opened wide and his hazy mind snapped awake. He now understood the dire nature of

the situation.

“That’s why I said it was an emergency! Hachi, you contact Nee-san right away!”

“I’ll call her right now! What about you, Aniki?!”

“I’m going back to the hospital! I’ll set up this spiritual energy stabilizer that I got from Nee-san to make sure that she doesn’t die! I just hope I make it in time!”

These two men were the ghost hunters that Koutarou and the girls had encountered once upon a time, but things were different with them now. They’d given up their ghost hunting ways and taken on a new gig. Their job now was to regularly report on the condition of the hospitalized girl. It was a fairly plain surveillance job, but it paid well, so the two men had worked on it for months without complaint.

“Nee-san! Kiriha-neesan! It’s me, Hachi!” Hachi had used his cellphone to call Kiriha. “Bad news! That girl, Sanae-chan is dying!”

The name of the girl they were watching over in the hospital was Higashihongan Sanae.



Article 14
The items listed below may under no circumstances be brought into Corona House:
-Any articles that use beetles or beetle themed designs as a motif

Corona Convention

New! February 16th, 2010

Afterword

Long time no see everyone. It's the author, Takehaya.

We have now reached the ten volume mark quite quickly. No, I guess it wasn't that quick. It's been three years since the first volume was published. In commemoration of that, I was thinking of telling you about how this work came to be by taking a look back from the first volume, but since I don't have much space left for this afterword, I will do so next time if possible. For now I'll just go through what happened in this volume like always.

This story takes place in Harukaze City ten years in the past as Koutarou and Clan are on their way home from ancient Forthorthe. It's also Koutarou's second secret.

Having reached Harukaze City in Clan's spaceship, they encounter a girl named Kii looking for a shooting star. Koutarou worries that Kii might have seen their spaceship descending, so he tags along with her to find out more, but then the story develops in an unexpected direction.

Because of the setting, the invader girls don't appear in this volume. I was originally thinking of calling this volume 9.5, but compared to the other side stories, this has a much more direct relation to the main cast and story, so I decided to treat it like a proper volume after all. In other words, it's a very 9.5-esque volume 10.

Whoops, I'm already out of space, so I guess it's time to say goodbye. As always, I would like to thank everyone at the editorial department; Poco-san for drawing proper illustrations for this restless story; my group of friends that comes to play whenever I get stuck on my work; R, my friend's son who finally remembered my name; and finally everyone who bought this book.

Let us meet again in the afterword for volume 11.

April, 2012

Takehaya

Table of Contents

Cover

Color Illustrations

A Shooting Star and the Runaway Daughter

Searching for Her Mother

The Lost Tribe

A Grown-Up Date

The Heart’s Balance

Choices and Consequences

What the Necklace Meant

Roller Coaster at Dusk

Afterword

About J-Novel Club

Copyright



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Invaders of the Rokujouma!? Volume 10

by Takehaya

Translated by Warnis Edited by Morgan Dreher

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