Takehaya
Illust: Poco

Invaders of the Rokujouma!?

11




LOVE
IS
ALL
INVADERS OF THE ROKUJOUMA!?
11


...
NOT UNDER-STANDING HER PREDICAMENT, YURIKA INSTINCTIVELY CALLED OUT TO KOUTAROU FOR HELP. BUT ALAS, HE WAS THE SOURCE OF HER PAIN RIGHT NOW.
"LIKE THIS, SANAE."
"OH, I SEE."
"OW, OWOWOW! SATOMI-SAN, HELP, IT HURTS!"


“Say, Koutarou...”
“What is it?”
“There’s something I want to tell you while I can.”
“Can’t it wait for later?”
“I just feel like I can tell you without any misunderstandings right now. And I don’t have to worry about anyone else overhearing.”

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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.

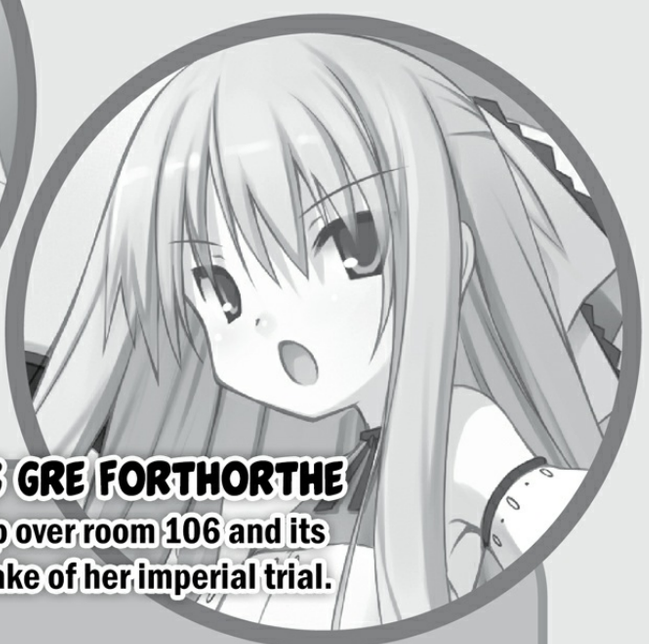
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AIKA MAKI
A member of the evil magical girl group, Darkness Rainbow. Yurika's enemy.



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.

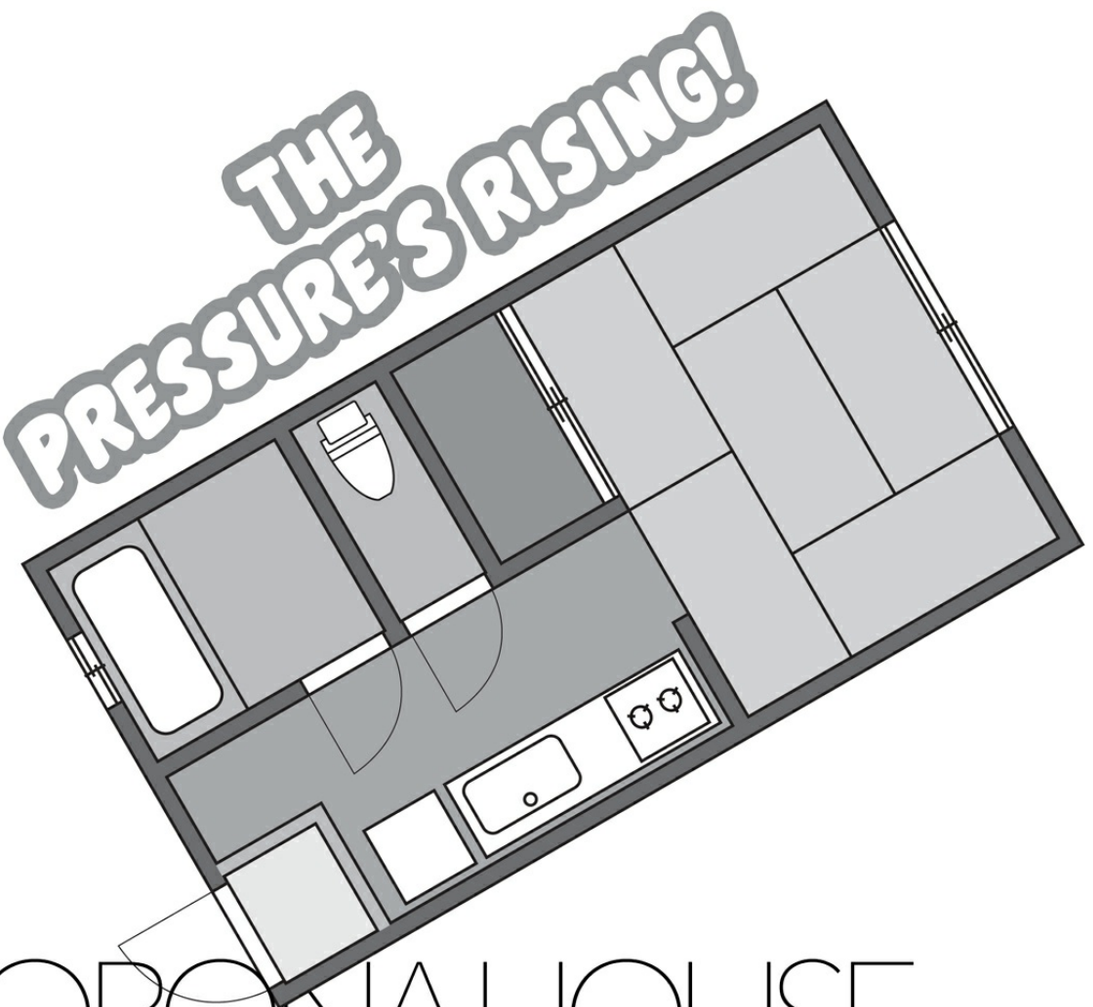
ALIENS



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



RUTHKANIA NYE PARDOMSHIHA
Theia's retainer and assistant.



CORONA HOUSE
ROOM 106

Tulip

Tuesday, March 16th

As March begins, school clubs have an important job to do: recruit new members.

As a public school, Kisshouharukaze High School holds its entrance exams on two different dates, and the results are announced on the 5th and 20th of March accordingly. But since clubs are such a big part of school life at Harukaze High and all of the students take their clubs seriously, no one is willing to wait until the school entrance ceremony to try and start recruiting new blood. No, the intense battle to recruit promising new students starts on the days the entrance exam results are announced.

Of course, both Koutarou and Harumi of the knitting society would be taking part in the recruiting battle too. And in preparation for that day, they had come to the shopping street to purchase some supplies. They were feeling especially motivated, and were prepared to spend their own personal money in addition to their remaining club funds.

“We have to recruit some fresh faces this time around.”

“I’m sorry I wasn’t any help...”

“Th-That’s not what I meant!”

Since they hadn’t had any luck on the first announcement date for the entrance exams, they were hedging their bets on the second round of announcements that would come on the 20th.

On the first announcement day, Harumi had been whisked away by the drama club and forced to wear a princess dress to help them promote their club. Koutarou was left to recruit for the knitting society on his own, and the results were lacking, to say the least. The knitting society wasn’t very popular to begin with, and having an athletic-looking guy recruiting for them drove just about

everyone away.

But after that, Koutarou and Harumi put their heads together and decided they'd put their all into recruiting on the second day.

"It doesn't look good if the president of the society isn't present, does it?"

"Don't worry. The drama club is supposedly changing up their tactics for the second day, so we shouldn't have a repeat of last time."

The drama club was ordinarily a small one, but they'd seen a great surge in applications this year. The two plays they'd put on recently had had quite a showing and really helped spread interest in what they were doing. That's why they'd wanted Harumi around in her Alaia costume to help get people's attention.

It had been so successful, in fact, that they'd gotten plenty of applications already, so they were planning on trying a different approach for the second day. This time around, they were going to line up their best-looking boys and crossdressing girls to attract a different crowd. Since neither Koutarou nor Harumi would be any help with that, the knitting society would be off the hook, allowing them to properly do their own recruiting.

"But..."

Despite that, a small worry was budding in Harumi's chest.

I would be happy if we got more members... but then it wouldn't be just me and Satomi-kun anymore...

As the president of the club, Harumi absolutely wanted new members. She wanted to keep the knitting society from being shut down before she graduated, and she was hoping to recruit at least one new girl before then. It was obvious what would happen if Koutarou was left to recruit on his own next year.

But at the same time, she also secretly wanted to protect the time she had alone with Koutarou. To her, club activities were a way to spend time with the boy she loved. That was precious to her. As a girl, she hoped that no one would join so that things would continue as they were with the just two of them.

Those two conflicting desires tugged at Harumi's heart, and she couldn't help the introspective look on her face as she turned them over in her head.

"Is something wrong?" Koutarou asked, peering over at her.

"Oh, u-um... I was just thinking that if we get more members, w-we'll probably have to change how we do our activities..."

Harumi hurriedly gave an ambiguous answer. She couldn't even imagine admitting what was really on her mind, so that was the best she could manage.

"Ah, right, it's always just been the two of us. If we get more people, we'll probably be able to do more, so I guess we do need to think about that too."

Koutarou took Harumi's words positively and nodded. Since he'd been in the baseball club in middle school, he knew what getting more members could mean for them. There was a big difference between having eighteen members and being able to play practice matches within the team, for example, and only being able to play against other teams because they didn't have enough people to fill every position. Of course, the knitting society was probably nothing like a baseball team, but having more people around would still mean more opportunities for them as a group. At least, that was the conclusion Koutarou came to—and he couldn't have been further from what Harumi was really thinking.

"I'm more concerned about what we *won't* be able to do..." Harumi mumbled in a whisper so that Koutarou couldn't hear her.

She wouldn't be able to feed Koutarou cookies she'd baked herself. They wouldn't be able to listen to new CDs together. She wouldn't be able to get Koutarou to try the new boxed lunches she'd made. And she wouldn't be able to secretly have Koutarou rest on her lap when he fell asleep. If they got more members, they wouldn't be able to do anything intimate like that anymore, and that was a serious problem for Harumi.

"I'd love to do an exhibit during the cultural festival. Of course... I'm sure my handiwork would be a disaster."

However, Koutarou was still oblivious to Harumi's real worry, and was excitedly thinking about what they could do with more members in the club.

Seeing that, Harumi pouted childishly.

“What’s with that face?”

“Satomi-kun, you nincompoop.”

She looked so adorable to Koutarou when she said those words that he couldn’t contain himself.

“Wh-What’s this? Ahahaha!”

“Nincompoop! I said you’re a nincompoop, Satomi-kun!”

Harumi hadn’t revealed how she truly felt to Koutarou because she thought it was still too early for that. But even so, she was frustrated that he didn’t understand her. She couldn’t just let it go, so it would be a while yet before she stopped pouting and Koutarou stopped laughing.

After finishing buying the supplies they needed, including a foam signboard and a permanent marker, they walked to the bus stop. Harumi would be taking the bus home from there.

“From time to time, you’re extremely cute, Sakuraba-senpai.”

Koutarou recalled Harumi’s uncharacteristically pouting face from earlier and began chuckling again. In response, Harumi blushed and looked down.

“P-Please forget about that.”

“No way. I’ll remember that for a while whenever I need a good laugh.”

“Satomi-kun, you meanie...”

Her face dyed red, Harumi glanced up at him pleadingly before looking away again. She was blushing so hard now that even her neck had turned red, and given her ordinarily pale complexion, it stood out quite vividly.

I guess I went a little too far. I’ll stop it here.

After deciding to back off, Koutarou paused for a moment to put his shopping bags on the ground and began swinging his arms in circles.

“What are you doing?”

Noticing his movements, Harumi curiously raised her head. She follow his arms with her eyes, looking quite confused. She was gradually returning to her normal self.

“Actually, my shoulders have been feeling stiff lately.”

Koutarou stopped swinging his arms as he answered Harumi’s question. He then formed a fist with his right hand and beat at the scruff of his neck. Stiff shoulders wasn’t something he’d invented just to change the subject. It was something he struggled with from time to time, but it had indeed been getting worse lately. He’d been through so much over the last year that he figured it was a sign of fatigue.

“Stiff shoulders...?”

After watching Koutarou for a moment, Harumi finally revealed a big smile.

“Then let me massage them for you, Satomi-kun.”

Harumi seemed quite pleased with her idea as she began pantomiming rubbing his shoulders in the air in front of her with a big smile on her face. It was even more adorable than her pouting, and Koutarou almost burst out laughing all over again. But he did his best to hold it back. She’d offered to help him out, and he didn’t want to get on her bad side again.

“P-Please do.”

“Then let’s have a seat over there, Satomi-kun.”

A cheerful Harumi beckoned him towards the bench by the bus stop. Koutarou obliged, still trying to hold in his laughter. He had to be careful. If he slipped up even a little, he was still primed to bust a gut.

“You do seem really stiff.”

“Pfft...”

Harumi took Koutarou’s odd behavior as a sign of his condition, and she eagerly sat down next to him on the bench. He was lucky that he’d already turned his back to her and couldn’t see her adorably grinning face. If he had, he wouldn’t have been able to keep his laughter in any longer.

“Here I go.”

“Okay.”

Harumi put her slender fingers on Koutarou’s shoulders.

Satomi-kun’s back...

Harumi froze. With Koutarou’s broad shoulders and muscular back right in front of her, she was seized with a strong urge to hug him. When she imagined embracing Koutarou and whispering a confession into his ear, Harumi’s heart began racing and her face turned red. Her body stiffened and she was unable to move.

“Senpai?”

Confused that Harumi had suddenly stopped moving, Koutarou turned around to look at her. His carefree glance freed her from her frozen state.

“Is something wrong?”

“Um, it’s just been a while since I massaged someone’s shoulders... so I was wondering how I should do it...”

“Ah, feel free to be rough. I’m built pretty sturdy.”

Koutarou smiled and looked forward again. He didn’t seem to have any idea what Harumi was really thinking.

“Okay, then...”

Relieved by that, Harumi collected herself and began to move her fingers again. Since Koutarou had told her not to hold back, she put some pressure into it.

“Sakuraba-senpai, that kind of tickles.”

“Oh? Then... should I do it harder?”

Harumi’s eyes opened wide in surprise. She felt like she was being rather forceful, but as weak as she was, it was nothing more than a tickle to Koutarou.

“Y-Yeah, go for it. Right now, that just... Wahaha!”

“Okay... Then I’ll do it a little harder...”

Seeing Koutarou laughing, Harumi poured all of her strength into her fingers.

“Ah, now it’s getting good.”

When she did, Koutarou stopped laughing. Harumi had finally reached the kind of force that he desired.

“...Y-You’re not just big, Satomi-kun, you’re tough too.”

Harumi felt honest admiration for Koutarou as she massaged his shoulders with all of her strength. To her, Koutarou didn’t exactly look like a body builder. But as she touched him, she could tell that his muscles were all well defined and regularly trained. It was nothing like rubbing her father’s back.

“I’m working hard at my part-time job at the dig site, after all.”



Koutarou's physique had undergone a transformation during his continuous training in Forthorthe. But it wasn't like he could tell Harumi that. Since Harumi was the spitting image of Alaia, he often found himself almost talking about Forthorthe with her. But he knew that bringing it up would only confuse her, so he took care not to say too much.

"Your part-time job sounds rough."

"Well, thanks to that, I'm getting buff... Take a look!"

With that, Koutarou looked back towards Harumi and flexed a little.

"Kyah!"

The shoulders that Harumi was massaging tensed up and pushed back against her slender fingers.

"Jeez, Satomi-kun! I can't give you a massage like this!"

Harumi clenched her fist as she complained to Koutarou, but it was hopelessly unconvincing. Adorable, peace-loving Harumi didn't look like she could even hurt a fly.

"Pfft!"

And it was that very contradiction that caused the strength to leave Koutarou's shoulders. He saw Harumi's puffed up cheeks and her small fists held up in front of her chest, and couldn't take it anymore. All of a sudden, the laughter he'd held back before come roaring to the surface.

"S-Sakuraba-senpai, pfft! Ahahahahaha!"

"Satomi-kun!"

"I-I'm sorry! Y-You just looked so adorable, I couldn't help myself... Ack, ahem..."

"You don't have to laugh so hard you choke!"

Harumi fussed at Koutarou while he suffered through his laughing fit. It lasted until Harumi's bus came, so Koutarou didn't end up getting any help with his stiff shoulders.

After parting ways with Harumi, Koutarou headed for home alone. His steps were light since he was in a good mood.

“Sakuraba-senpai has really been beaming lately, like she’s coming out of her shell. It seems like having her participate in the play kinda did the trick.”

Koutarou and Harumi had met roughly a year ago now, when Koutarou came to get his own exam results. Back then, Harumi was introverted and guarded. She hardly ever revealed how she felt. At best, Koutarou only got to see a smile every now and then during their club activities. But that had all changed over the past year. Harumi had gotten to meet lots of new people, and she’d made friends in her class. Before that, her only friends were Koutarou and Yurika, so this was all a big step forward.

“I guess this is all really thanks to Theia.”

Theia’s manuscript had served as the catalyst for Harumi’s change. It was being chosen as the heroine of the play that had gotten her proactively involved with the people at the drama club. And it wasn’t like she could do the play by herself; she’d had to practice and work together with the other actors, too. And after being the center of attention on stage, she’d even built up some courage. As a result, she was a stronger person now. And tracing it all back to the start, Koutarou felt like it was thanks to Theia that Harumi had been able to make such progress.

“Well, Theia’s changed too, honestly...”

Theia was also a different person than she was a year ago. She’d had to learn to cooperate with everyone for the sake of the play. Koutarou was convinced it had been a positive experience for everyone involved.

“Oh?”

It was then that Koutarou spotted a familiar girl up ahead. Her golden hair stood out even from afar. It was Theiamillis Gre Forthorthe. Since he was just thinking about her, Koutarou reflexively smiled when he saw her.

“I see... I didn’t know it was such a pretty flower...”

Theia was squatted down in front of a storefront, staring at something in the window. Koutarou wondered what she was doing, so he walked right over to

her to find out.

“Hey, Theia.”

Standing next to her, Koutarou lightly tapped Theia on the head to get her attention.

“Hmm?”

In the past, that alone would have been enough to enrage Theia to the point of summoning weapons from Blue Knight. But not anymore. Instead, she looked up to see who it was, and when she saw Koutarou, she smiled happily.

“Oh, Koutarou.”

“What are you doing here?”

Theia was staring into a small flower shop. Now that it was the second half of March, the shop was filled with colorful spring flowers. Koutarou could tell that there was something in particular that had caught her eye, but since there were so many possibilities, he decided to just ask her outright.

“Well, I came to look at the tulips.”

As Theia said that last word, she lightly touched her cheeks and smiled softly. She then looked back into the store, right at some crimson tulips in full bloom.

“Tulips, huh? Oh yeah, reminds me of your old nickname.”

During their first meeting, Sanae had stopped Theia’s rampage by flipping her voluminous dress up over her head. It made her look like an oversized flower, so Koutarou had taken to calling her Tulip for a while. But as time passed and his relationship with Theia changed, he gradually started calling her by her real name.

“Yeah. As I was thinking about it, I realized I didn’t know much about them. So with that in mind, I came here to see one.”

Theia had never seen a tulip before. Back when Koutarou was calling her that, all she knew and cared to know was that he meant it as an insult. She’d never felt the need to research something he was using to make fun of her. But now Theia had grown curious about tulips. She wanted to know what kind of flower the boy she loved had compared her to.

“So what do you think?”

“I never imagined it would be so pretty.”

Theia’s face was practically pushed up against the glass as she intently stared at it through the display window. The moment she’d spotted it, she was left breathless by its beauty. The big, vivid crimson petals that formed the flower made a strong impression on her.

“You’ve taken a liking to it?”

“Yes. It is a simple, yet dynamic and beautiful flower.”

Looking at Theia’s profile as she stared at the tulips, Koutarou could see the incredibly gentle look on her face. It was something a little out of the ordinary for her—a glimpse into the feminine side of her that she hid away.

I guess Theia’s a normal girl too after all...

As Koutarou came to that rather obvious realization, Theia unexpectedly looked over at him.

“Say, Koutarou, if you so wish, I will allow you to call me Tulip again,” she said with a happy smile.

“Hey now...”

However, Theia’s offer puzzled Koutarou. Tulip was the nickname he’d used to tease her over a rather compromising incident. It wasn’t particularly playful or friendly since he’d always intended it to embarrass her.

But as time passed, Koutarou had developed a real friendship with Theia and grown to respect her. Though she was still stubborn and he enjoyed fighting with her from time to time, he no longer had the desire to heckle her like he used to.

So if he did start calling Theia “Tulip” again, it would have a very different meaning now. He would be comparing her to the real thing, like calling her a pretty, vividly colored flower in full bloom.



Koutarou felt like it was a nickname truly befitting Theia now. It was her dignity as a princess that made him feel that way. She was in no way inferior to these pretty flowers. But with such complicated circumstances intertwining inside him, Koutarou felt a certain resistance to calling her Tulip again. It was embarrassing. Maybe if they hadn't gotten so close to each other, it might have been a little easier.

"There's no reason to call you by a rude nickname anymore, is there?"

So Koutarou decided to try to dodge the issue. Comparing her to a flower honestly would just be too much for him.

"I no longer find such a nickname offensive."

But Theia immediately shook her head. She didn't mind being called Tulip anymore, even if he meant it to be mean.

"It's true that it comes from a rather embarrassing time, and even that is a precious memory to me now."

If Koutarou called her Tulip to tease her, she would just have to work hard to be more like the real flower. And if he called her that affectionately, she could take pride in what she'd done to earn such a nickname. Either would make her happy, and it would give her a way to gauge her own self-improvement. That was how much she trusted Koutarou.

"...You sure are whimsical."

"Yes, I suppose I am."

But there was one more reason Theia wanted him to call her that again. She wanted a special bond between just her and Koutarou, and a nickname would do the trick. It's the wish of young, love-struck girls everywhere—no matter the planet or era—to receive such special treatment from the object of their affection.

"Go ahead. You have my permission."

"You saying that makes it harder..."

To Koutarou, calling Theia "Tulip" was almost like telling her how he honestly felt about her. It was a very difficult position to be in.

“...Tulip...”

After some hesitation, Koutarou was finally able to say it. And the moment he did, Theia answered him with an especially happy expression.

“What is it, pleb?”

That was what Theia had called Koutarou in the past out of contempt for the people on this undeveloped planet.

Theia...?

But despite using the same word now, it didn’t sound like it held the same meaning. That was because it was now a sign of her love, disguised as contempt. Hearing it, Koutarou stared blankly at her in admiration.

“Heh...”

Seeing him like that, Theia’s smile turned into a grin of satisfaction. She could tell what Koutarou was thinking.

“Wh-What? You’re the one who told me to say it...”

Koutarou responded to her defensively as he suppressed the awkward feelings inside. Ever since Theia had confessed to him on Valentine’s Day, she would throw him for an emotional loop every now and then. But she didn’t push any more than that. She understood that if Koutarou entered a relationship, it would cause serious problems for Kiriha. That’s why all she did was make her feelings for Koutarou clear to him. Apart from that, things were the same as always.

Don’t let this get to you... Just keep it cool like normal... That’s the best for everyone...

However, despite knowing all of that, Koutarou was having a hard time keeping his own feelings in check. Compared to the Theia before him now, dealing with Theia when he first met her was much easier. Right now, he felt like his heart would be stolen away the instant he let his guard down.

“That’s right, I did.”

Theia flashed a small smile, and awkwardly tried to stand up after squatting in front of the shop window for too long. Koutarou reflexively offered her his

hand, and Theia took it without hesitation.

“Say, pleb.”

Once standing, Theia turned to Koutarou. Still holding his hand, she looked straight into his eyes.

“One day, I will become a splendid flower of a princess that you will be proud to embrace. So keep walking the knight’s path, just the way you are.”

Theia believed that Koutarou was an exceptional knight. That’s why she believed that as long as she could become an exceptional princess, their paths would never part. As things stood, she couldn’t draw a clear line between her desire to become a splendid princess and her desire for Koutarou. Those desires merged into one and lit the way for her.

“I...”

“Your Highness! Satomi-sama!”

Just as Koutarou was about to answer Theia, they could hear Ruth calling to them from a distance.

“Ah...”

As a result, Koutarou cut himself off mid-sentence.

“You’re finally here, Ruth! Come on, let’s go, pleb!”

Flashing a bright smile, Theia let go of Koutarou’s hand and began running towards Ruth, who was smiling just as brightly. Rather than following immediately after her, Koutarou was left standing there for a moment wondering to himself...

What was I just about to say...?

Not even Koutarou himself knew for sure how he was going to answer Theia after declaring she’d become a splendid flower for him.

“Ruth.”

Theia held her hands out to Ruth as she ran up to her.

“You may give me half the bags.”

Ruth was on her way home from shopping. In her right hand was her regular shopping bag, and in her left hand was a plastic bag filled with everything that wouldn't fit in the shopping bag. Theia had wandered off while Ruth was in the checkout line in order to come look at the flower shop.

"I'm honored, Your Highness, but I can't have you carrying shopping bags."

"If I were any ordinary princess, I suppose not. But we made a promise the other day that we would do everything together from now on."

"...So we did. In that case, they're a little heavy, but please take one of my bags."

"Leave it to me. Besides, I'm stronger than you are."

"Heehee, that's true."

At first Ruth was resistant to let her master carry anything for her, but she ended up giving Theia the plastic bag with a smile. Theia smiled in return, and contentedly checked the contents of the bag. Seeing Theia in a good mood, Ruth already knew what had happened, but she decided to ask anyway.

"By the way, Your Highness, were you able to see the tulips?"

"Yes! They're exceptionally pretty flowers!"

"How wonderful."

Theia said exactly what Ruth had thought she would, but there was more to it. Based on her beaming smile and the fact that Koutarou was with her, it seemed like something truly special had happened. Whatever it was had made her princess happy, and that made Ruth happy too.

"They're lined up in the display window of that flower shop, so you should take a look too, Ruth."

"Yes, I would love to see—"

Theia took Ruth's hand and was about to lead her back to the flower shop when...

"That won't be necessary," said Koutarou.

As he said that, Theia felt something large bump up against the back of her

head. It wasn't very hard, but she couldn't imagine what it was based on the size. It was at least as big as her head.

"You fool, I..."

Despite Theia's insulting words, she didn't really sound like she was in a bad mood.

"Ah..."

And when she turned around, what she saw wasn't Koutarou, but a bouquet of tulips with the stalks bundled in white wrapping paper.

"Tulips..."

"Here."

As Koutarou pushed the bouquet on the puzzled Theia, he took her plastic bag from her. Theia, scarcely able to process this turn of events, just stood there holding the bouquet in both hands.

"Satomi-sama, could these tulips be a present for Her Highness?"

"Something like that."

Embarrassed, Koutarou scratched his head as he nodded in response to Ruth's question.

"They're... for me?"

"Yeah. I'm repaying you for the Valentine's Day chocolate... or something like that."

Koutarou had decided to repay all the girls he'd gotten valentines from, but since he was inexperienced with this kind of thing, he had an extremely hard time thinking of what kind of presents to get them in return. Such a hard time, in fact, that even though White Day had passed already, he still hadn't gotten anything for most of the girls. Theia was on the list, but after seeing her look at the tulips today, he decided that would be her thank-you gift.

"I see. Well done—No. Thank you, pleb."

Now that she understood the situation, Theia smiled happily.

"Y-Yeah..."

Seeing Theia's moist eyes, Koutarou grew even more embarrassed and looked away.

"Isn't that great, Your Highness?"

"Yes... Huh?"

The wrapping paper crinkled in Theia's hands. Looking down, she realized that she was holding not one, but two bouquets.

"There's a second one, pleb...?"

Confused, she looked to Koutarou for an answer. Though he was still looking away, he quickly answered her question.

"I can't just give you flowers, now can I?"

Koutarou had gotten Theia flowers as thanks for the valentine, but Theia wasn't the only one he needed to thank for it.

"Apparently these are for you."

Theia quickly realized who the second bouquet was intended for, and happily presented them to her.

"Oh my!"

The second bouquet was none other than Ruth's. She and Theia had worked together to make Koutarou's valentine, so he wanted to thank both of them equally.

"Isn't that lovely, Ruth?"

"Yes! Thank you very much, Satomi-sama!"

Receiving the bouquet, Ruth held it to her chest like a child would a precious toy. It was an unexpected present from the boy she loved. Since she hadn't expected to get a bouquet herself, it made her especially happy. With large tears streaming down her cheeks, she repeatedly thanked Koutarou.

"Thank you, Satomi-sama! I will take great care of them!"

"Thank you, pleb. And I'm glad you didn't forget about Ruth."

"S-Sure..."

Koutarou couldn’t help but feel embarrassed with both Theia and Ruth looking at him with stars in their eyes. He was inexperienced in this kind of gift-giving, so he didn’t know how to handle their overflowing gratitude, either.

“I’m... gonna go on ahead.”

“Satomi-sama?”

“What’s wrong, pleb?”

That’s why, after taking Ruth’s shopping bag too, he quickly made an exit like he was trying to run away. He wanted to get away as soon as possible to catch his breath.

“Heehee... We were only thanking him, so he should have just proudly accepted it.”

“But that’s just how Satomi-sama is.”

“Indeed.”

With tulip bouquets in hand, Theia and Ruth watched Koutarou as he hurried down the street. After he disappeared around the next corner, Ruth looked down at the flowers she was holding.

“Your Highness, do you know the meaning of tulips in the language of flowers?”

Hearing Ruth say that, Theia also looked down at her bouquet. The crimson tulips were beautiful, but with the tears welling in her eyes, she couldn’t appreciate them in their full glory.

“No. I only just learned what they look like, and I’ve never bothered to look up what they symbolize.”

When Theia shook her head, her tears spilled from her eyes and fell onto the bouquet she was holding.

“They say crimson tulips represent true love.”

“True... love...”

As Theia repeated those words, she looked up at Ruth. Their gazes met, and they simply stared at each other for a moment. With a light nod, Ruth

continued.

“But since it’s Satomi-sama, he probably didn’t know that.”

Kenji might have been able to pull off something slick like that, but it was hard to imagine Koutarou picking out flowers for their meaning. He’d only gotten them because Theia seemed to have taken a liking to them. That was the conclusion the two alien girls game to.

“Even if he did choose them on purpose, he probably wasn’t thinking of the love between a man and a woman. But even then—”

“That is, without a doubt, true love.”

Theia finished Ruth’s sentence for her. Gently squeezing the flowers in her arms, the paper wrapped around them crinkled.

“Yes, I think so too.”

Ruth agreed with a smile. Theia had taken the words right out of her mouth.

“Seriously... what a difficult man...”

“Master... thank you very much...”

Both Theia and Ruth knew that the flowers standing for true love was only a coincidence, but they didn’t doubt at all that the gifts they’d received were indeed a sign of true, honest love. They knew Koutarou treasured them, and although they were a bit disappointed it wasn’t romantic love, they were grateful for his feelings for them.

That Day's Room 106

Tuesday, March 16th

Trying to preserve the beautiful flowers that they'd gotten from Koutarou, Theia and Ruth passed right through the apartment and headed straight for Blue Knight when they got back to room 106. Koutarou had intentionally taken the scenic route home, so by the time he got back himself, they were long gone.

"What are you doing, Satomi-kun?" Shizuka asked.

"N-Nothing much..." Koutarou replied as he stood there peering in the front door.

The two of them had bumped into each other on the way home and walked back together the rest of the way. As of late, Shizuka had been spending more time in room 106 than in her own apartment. It wasn't unusual for her to stop by like this before going home after school.

"You've been acting strange today. Did you get into a fight with someone?" Shizuka, who loved gossip, leaned in intently.

"No, it's not like that, but..." Koutarou smiled wryly and politely pushed Shizuka out of his personal space.

"Oh? That's too bad."

"What did you think it was?"

"A lover's quarrel."

"Landlord-san..."

"Welcome home, Koutarou, Shizuka."

Kiriha welcomed the disappointed Shizuka and the amazed Koutarou with a smile. Wearing an apron and with chopsticks in hand, she appeared to be in the middle of preparing dinner.

“Thanks, Kiriha-san.”

“Yeah.”

Shizuka entered first, with Koutarou following after her. Kiriha had welcomed her home the same as she had Koutarou, and no one thought the slightest thing of it. She was already part of the family in room 106.

“Let me help, Kiriha-san.”

After removing her shoes by the entrance, Shizuka walked into the kitchen and took one of the aprons hanging on the wall. There were three in total: one each for Shizuka, Kiriha, and Ruth. After putting hers on, Shizuka walked over and stood next to Kiriha at the sink.

“Very well, but all that’s left is cutting up some vegetables.”

“Then I’ll do that. Will you prepare the tea, Kiriha-san?”

“Gladly.”

Shizuka washed her hands and began chopping vegetables for Kiriha. With her hands free thanks to Shizuka’s help, Kiriha got out the tray and tea set. Kiriha was better at preparing tea than Shizuka, and she knew it. Shizuka hadn’t just switched places with Kiriha because she wanted to help, but also because she wanted to drink some delicious tea.

“Oh, so we’re having hot pot tonight?”

After putting the groceries he’d brought home in the fridge, Koutarou walked past the two girls. Seeing the big pot on the stove, he could tell immediately what was for dinner.

“It’s still cold, but it’s almost April, so I figured we should have hot pot one last time before spring.”

Kiriha stopped what she was doing and smiled. She then lifted the lid of the pot and showed its contents to Koutarou. The miso and cooking stock created a fragrant smell that wafted throughout the kitchen. Dinner tonight would be mushroom hot pot.

“Nice. That looks great.”

“Heehee, I’m happy to hear it.”

Kiriha returned the lid to the pot and smiled again. There was nothing special in the gesture, but the look on her face conveyed deep love and gentleness to Koutarou.

“Koutarou, could you take the bag on the upper right shelf into the inner room?”

“Sure.”

Koutarou did as Kiriha asked and pulled a bag from the shelf. Inside it were rice crackers that Kiriha was planning on serving with the tea.

“I’ll bring this too.”

“Thank you, Koutarou.”

Koutarou took the tray out of Kiriha’s hands and carried it to the inner room. Kiriha followed after him, a few steps behind.

“Look out, Love Love Heart!”

“Run away! Hurry!”

In the inner room, Sanae and Yurika were glued to the TV. They were so focused on their favorite show that they hadn’t even realized Koutarou had come home. Koutarou thought it was rather cute, so he said nothing to interrupt them and set the tea tray down on the table without a word.

“I’ll leave the rest to you, Kiriha-san.”

“Certainly.”

Actually making the tea was Kiriha’s job, so Koutarou got out of the way in order to let her work her magic. He pulled a magazine he’d bought while shopping with Harumi out of his bag and sat down next to Kiriha as she began preparing the tea.

“Here it comes! The combination friendship attack!”

“Special Attack: Love Killer Heart Punisher!”

Koutarou started casually reading his magazine, but he gradually began paying attention to Kiriha. Nothing was wrong, however. In fact, that was

practically the problem.

“Say, Kiriha-san...”

“Hmm?”

As Koutarou closed his magazine and started talking to her, Kiriha put down what she was doing and looked at him. Since she was in the middle of letting the tea leaves steep in the pot, she had a few minutes to spare anyway. Once he had Kiriha’s attention, Koutarou continued.

“Why are you still the same?”

Koutarou couldn’t help being a bit puzzled. On Valentine’s Day, Kiriha had learned that her first love was actually Koutarou. But it hadn’t really changed anything between them. Kiriha simply acted the same as she always had. She didn’t want to be doted on like Kii, and she hadn’t asked him to become her lover. It was almost as if the events of Valentine’s Day had never happened.

And that confused Koutarou. She had been searching so desperately for her first love, but now that she’d found him, she wasn’t acting on it. Koutarou had had enough trouble accepting that Kii and Kiriha were the same person, but she didn’t seem to have any such trouble with him.

“Heehee...”

Realizing what Koutarou was really asking after thinking about it for a moment, Kiriha smiled as she held her hand up next to her mouth. She then leaned in and whispered into Koutarou’s ear.

“But if Kii showed herself now, wouldn’t that just be trouble for you, Onii-chan? That goes for everyone.”

As Kiriha whispered that, she flashed a childishly Kii-like smile. But when she was done and sat back up straight, her normal mature expression returned.

“The surface invasion is proceeding smoothly. While things are going well, I still have to keep the opposition in check. That means I have other things to worry about, and Kii can’t get what she wants just yet.”

“I see...”

From that short explanation, Koutarou understood what Kiriha really meant.

Kiriha-san is prioritizing the situation with the People of the Earth over her own feelings...

Really, Kiriha was in a similar situation to Theia.

“Besides, Koutarou, judging from your personality, even if I did act on my own feelings, that would only make you push me away, wouldn’t it?”

“That might be true.”

Kiriha understood Koutarou’s position as well as he did hers. There was no way he could settle into a serious relationship with any of the invaders until all of their personal troubles had been resolved. Otherwise, the balance of power would shift unfairly, and that was something Koutarou wanted to avoid.

“So if I continue to behave as I have, you have no reason to try and push me away.”

And since Koutarou couldn’t choose, trying to force his hand in the matter would only mean getting rejected. So conversely, if she kept with the status quo, Kiriha knew that she would at least get to stay by Koutarou’s side. That’s all she wanted for now. It would make her personally happy, and it would put her in the best possible position for facilitating the surface invasion.

“We can worry about things like that in the future once everything else is taken care of.”

On top of it all, Kiriha knew that she wasn’t the only one who had feelings for Koutarou. Ignoring that and putting her feelings first would go against her way of doing things. She wanted to wait until everyone was fairly lined up at the starting line.

“Besides, you know how I feel for you. As things are, I can see your happy smile and feel your warmth nearby every day. What more could I ask of you than that?”

For these past ten years, all Kiriha had been able to do was project her feelings from a distance. But now, the boy she loved was right in front of her. They could laugh together and support each other this way, and that was enough for Kiriha for now.

“Even after everything has been resolved... I still might not choose you, you know?”

“It’s true. I know there’s a chance that might happen, but I won’t be pessimistic.”

Kiriha also had another reason not to rush her relationship with Koutarou.

Koutarou most likely won’t be able to choose even when all of our problems are resolved. A definitive piece is still missing...

Based on their relationship up until now, Kiriha felt like something about Koutarou’s approach towards women was lacking. Although she had no proof, after spending a year together with him, Kiriha felt like Koutarou had built a wall around his heart. Without understanding why, pushing her feelings on him would only end poorly for both of them. So before that, she needed to find a way to get over that wall.

And Kiriha knew she wasn’t the only one. No one else currently had the means to get through to Koutarou’s heart right now, and that put her at ease in a way. There was no hurry to try and make her move on him.

“But that’s—”

Kiriha’s decision was convenient for Koutarou. Too convenient, really. And the same could be said for Theia and Ruth as well. Regardless of how complicated the matters of room 106 were, even someone as ignorant in love as Koutarou knew that making these girls wait until he could make up his mind was bad.

That’s why he tried to object.

“Stop.”

But before he could, he was interrupted by Kiriha.

“You might not understand, but regardless of how low the chances of us ending up together might be, I have a good reason for waiting to hear your decision. That’s just how worthy of a man you are.”

Kiriha had no intention of backing off. Even if the odds were remote that Koutarou would pick her in the end, she still loved him dearly. And that sincere love—made ten times stronger by the past they shared—was the reason for her

patience. Perhaps it was because she felt fate at work, but Kiriha couldn't imagine herself together with anyone but Koutarou. And she believed that Theia and Ruth felt the same way.

Kiriha told Koutarou she would wait even knowing he couldn't choose anyone. Koutarou was happy that she was so caring and understanding, but making her wait for nothing felt cruel. Those complex feelings intertwined and escaped his lips in the form of some particularly blunt words.

"That's just stupid."

"I know. But I am confident."

In contrast to the worried Koutarou, Kiriha was full of confidence. She lightly patted her chest and smiled at Koutarou.

"Let me remind you of what I said in this room nearly a year ago."

Tucked into her shirt underneath her hand was an old trading card. That card was the source of her willpower.

"Kii has waited underground for over ten years."

"Ah..."

A particular memory popped into Koutarou's head. About a year ago, they'd met here in room 106 for the first time—or, at least, what they thought was the first time. Back then, Kiriha had threatened Koutarou with very similar words.

"Heh, really, Kii and I have waited for ten years. But how long can you endure? Half a year? Maybe a year? We'll do anything to make you nod your head."

Kiriha was confident. After everything else had been resolved and Koutarou was able to see the invaders as love interests, she would use any means necessary to make Koutarou look at her. Between the bonds they shared now and everything that would deepen their relationship in the future, she was sure that Koutarou wouldn't be able to say no to her—Kiriha or Kii.

"Wahahaha! How foolish, Love Love Heart! There's no use resisting!"

Overflowing with more confidence than the villain in the TV show the other girls were watching, Kiriha was convinced that that warm feeling connecting her

and Koutarou would bind them for all eternity.

As Kiriha finished preparing the tea, Shizuka finished preparing dinner, and Sanae and Yurika finished watching their anime, everyone gathered around the tea table.

“Ah, it’s rice crackers today.”

“Let’s eat!”

Sanae’s eyes sparkled. But Yurika grabbed some crackers and went into the package before her tea was even served.

“Don’t be so greedy, jeez...”

“Hey, Yurika, wait!”

Yurika’s mouth was wide open and she was just about to pop some crackers into it when she heard Koutarou sternly tell her to wait. She looked up at him with dissatisfaction in her eyes.

“Whaaat, really?”

“Are you sure you want to go with such a defiant attitude, Yurika? Don’t mind me, of course.”

“Woof...”

Yurika started to tremble at those words, and she timidly returned the crackers to the tray on the table. She knew she’d blown a good deal of her food budget for the week on shoujo manga, so she was depending on him to stay fed. She was at his mercy, and he was practically lording over her.

“Good girl. Just sit still for a while.”

“Woof!”

Yurika straightened her posture and stared longingly at the rice crackers. Meanwhile, Kiriha was placing tea cups out on the table. She set two down in front of Koutarou: one for him and the other for Sanae, who was currently clinging to his back.

“Paw.”

“Woof!”

“You may eat now.”

“Woof! Woof!”

Once everyone had their tea, Koutarou gave Yurika permission to eat her rice crackers. Once she got the signal, she swiftly snatched them up, opened her mouth wide, and began gobbling them down. Watching her, Koutarou’s shoulders slumped.

“...Can’t you be at least a *little* bit more proper, Yurika?”

As of late, Koutarou had taken it upon himself to try and improve Yurika’s manners. He couldn’t boast that he had the best table manners himself, but he just couldn’t stay quiet when he saw Yurika behaving this way.

“You’ll be a second-year high schooler soon, you know that?”

“Haff fooo hee?”

“Swallow you food before you talk.”

“Hokhay.”

Yurika picked up her cup and took a swig of tea to wash down the rice crackers.

“Hwoa!”

However, when she did, her expression changed.

“Fhaaah! Hoht, hoht, hoht!”

Since the tea had just been poured, it was still quite hot. It burned all the way down when she swallowed it, which took her by surprise, so she ended up spitting out the rest and flailing about in a panic.

“H-Hey, it’s tight quarters in here as it is, Yurika! Enough of that!”

“B-Buh iz hoht!”

“Ah jeez...”

Intervening, Koutarou grabbed Yurika with both arms, picked her up, and carried her into the kitchen. He poured her some cool water and made her

drink it to soothe the burning sensation from the hot tea.

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

After drinking the water, Yurika seemed to be back to her usual carefree self.

“Yurika... why are you always like that?”

Koutarou, however, sounded utterly disheartened. Yurika could keep it together in an emergency, but when it came to everyday life, she fell short at almost every turn. Koutarou was seriously worried about her future. Scolding her was simply the result of that worry.

“B-But this was your fault, Satomi-san.”

“How, exactly?”

“It’s because you rushed me to swallow. It wasn’t my fault!”

“No, it definitely was your fault!”

“Oh? Are you going to carry me back like this too? Let’s gooo!”

“Walk there yourself!”

“Kyaaah!”

Crash!

Koutarou stomped back into the inner room in a sour mood. Yurika followed behind him, with both of her hands on her forehead and tears in her eyes.

“Satomi-kun.”

“Yes?”

Waiting for Koutarou to sit back down at the table, Shizuka turned to him with a grin.

“Please continue to look after Yurika-chan forever.”

“Me?!”

“Yes. I don’t think anyone else could manage her.”

“Forever?!”

“Yes. If you give up on her, she’ll probably drift down the wrong path.”

Shizuka was serious. She had been observing Yurika all this time, and her conclusion on the matter was that Yurika was nothing short of a total mess. It was bad enough that Koutarou sometimes ended up brushing her hair because he couldn't stand it anymore. She only got by as it was because she had the responsible and dependable Koutarou taking care of her. The moment he gave up on her, her life would surely spiral out of control. But at the same time, Yurika was way too gullible and lax, especially around members of the opposite sex. If it weren't for Koutarou, Shizuka was worried that Yurika would be taken in by some man with bad intentions.

"She's right. I have a right to live too."

Yurika sat next to Koutarou and nodded repeatedly. Even she knew that she would be in serious trouble without him.

"I don't want to hear that from you!"

"Come on, Satomi-saaan! You know you love meee! Don't be like thaaat!"

"You airhead! Do you want me to seriously hit you?"

"No way, Satomi-san. A gentleman like you would never—"

The distinct sound of fist meeting forehead rang out in room 106.

"...I-I will take some time to seriously reflect on my lifestyle. I'm so very sorry..."

"As long as you understand."

"Yes, sir. May I eat a rice cracker?"

"I will allow it, private."

"Thank you, sir. It's an honor."

"Satomi-kun..."

Seeing Koutarou easily whip Yurika into line, Shizuka was even more convinced.

I definitely couldn't do that... Satomi-kun is the only one I can entrust Yurika-chan to after all...

Shizuka knew that Yurika needed to stick with Koutarou, regardless of who

became his lover in the future, or something terrible would happen to her. So for Yurika's sake and the sake of everyone who worried about her, Shizuka vowed that she would convince Koutarou's future girlfriend to let Yurika stick around.

After that, there was some time to kill until dinner. The girls all sat around sipping tea, chatting, reading shoujo manga, and watching the news on TV.

"Koutarou, what is that you're reading? Are you studying?"

Sanae didn't have anything better to do, so she was clinging to Koutarou's back as per her usual. But that alone was boring, so she took to peeking at what Koutarou was doing.

"Nah, it's a magazine. Check it out."

"'Professional Wrestling Monthly'? So it's about professional wrestling?"

"Yup."

Sanae used her psychic powers to control Koutarou's hand and flip through the pages. After skimming the magazine, she stopped on a particular page.

"Koutarou, I wanna try this move."

"The scorpion deathlock, huh?"

Sanae wanted to try out one of the professional wrestling joint locks, the scorpion deathlock. It was performed by grabbing the legs of an opponent who was lying face down, and then bending their body backwards like a bow in order to strain several joints at the same time. Since it was a relatively easy technique to pull off even for an amateur, it seemed like a good start for Sanae, who knew nothing about wrestling.

Putting too much strength into the hold could make it hard for the opponent to breathe, so it was important to be careful to not overdo it. But that wouldn't be a problem for Sanae. If her opponent was in pain, she would be able to tell right away thanks to the change in their aura. All around, it seemed like a good first technique for Sanae to learn, so Koutarou readily agreed to it.

"Sounds fun. Let's try it."

“Yeah!”

When Koutarou agreed, Sanae nodded excitedly.

“Okay, Koutarou, lie down.”

“Okay, okay.”

Sanae smiled as she pointed at the tatami mats. Koutarou followed her instructions and got down on the floor.

“Eeheehee!”

Sanae straddled Koutarou’s waist and eyeballed the wrestling magazine sitting on the tea table. She thought carefully about how the move was pulled off, and then decided to give it a try.

“Sanae-chan, if Satomi-kun has a hard time breathing, you have to stop right away, okay?”

Shizuka, who was well versed in martial arts, decided to offer a friendly word of warning. She knew of the risks involved with the technique, and that people got hurt from time to time trying to perform it.

“Ah, it’ll be fine. I won’t do it to the point Koutarou’s in pain.”

Sanae had no intention of hurting Koutarou. She was happy just to be playing around with him, and didn’t want to do anything to jeopardize that.

As of late, there had been some developments in Koutarou’s relationships with the people around him. Nothing was really different on the surface, but looking at their auras, Sanae could see the changes in Theia, Ruth, and Kiriha’s feelings. The auras they emitted were always gently enveloping Koutarou now. Sanae didn’t know what had caused it, but she imagined that Theia and the others had strengthened their bonds with Koutarou.

Sanae was envious, but it wasn’t outright jealousy. She felt like she was being left out, and that made her lonely. She wanted to get along with Koutarou just as much as the others did. That’s why she treasured these playful moments with him, even while wrestling.

“Here I go, Koutarou!”

“Yeah, give it all you’ve got.”

“Take this!”

Sanae held Koutarou’s legs and pulled, imitating the pictures in the magazine. As she tugged and lifted up Koutarou’s legs, they did somewhat resemble the tail of a scorpion. But all the while, Sanae took great care not to hurt Koutarou.

“How is it?”

“I can feel it stretching my lower back. It feels great, honestly, which... probably means something’s a little off.”

Sanae did her best, but she was still an amateur. She didn’t have a good grasp on the technique and her hold was weak. She was using her spiritual energy to try and pull it off, but her control of it wasn’t great unless it was an action or gesture she was familiar with, so she had a hard time replicating a wresting move she’d never used before.

“You have to interlock the legs.”

“Like this?”

“No, not like that. Like this.”

“How about this?”

“Hmm... You’re almost there, but...”

Koutarou tried to give Sanae pointers, but it was a bit difficult while she was practicing on him.

“Sanae, let’s stop for a minute.”

“Okay.”

Koutarou had her let him go temporarily so he could demonstrate the move. He figured that would be faster.

“Hey, Yurika,” Koutarou called, beckoning to her.

“Yesh?” she answered with a mouth full of rice crackers as she looked up from her shoujo manga.

“Could you lend me a hand for a moment?”

“Wha ish iht?”

Yurika had been so absorbed in her shoujo manga that she didn’t know what Sanae and Koutarou were up to. She approached, her mouth still stuffed with crackers.

“Could you lie down on your stomach here?”

“Ish iht somehing pervehed?! An in fron ohf Sanae-fhan?!”

“Of course not.”

“Then thas fhine... lihe thif?”

“Yeah, just like that. Thanks.”

“Hokay...”

Yurika didn’t understand, but she followed Koutarou’s directions. She stretched out and laid flat on her stomach on the tatami floor. Since there wasn’t much else she could do like this, she simply kept munching away on her crackers.

“Fuah?!”

Suddenly struck with an acute sense of pain, however, most of her mouthful of crackers ended up spewed onto the floor as she cried out.

“Wh-What is...?!”

Yurika was rendered completely immobile. The joints in her legs were locked and wouldn’t move. And with her legs raised up into the air, her upper body was being pushed into the floor, which made it hard to move. Her arms were free, but despite her best efforts to swing them in protest, she couldn’t escape.

“Ow, owowow! Satomi-san, help, it hurts!”

“Like this, Sanae.”

“Oh, I see.”

Not understanding her predicament, Yurika instinctively called out to Koutarou for help. But alas, he was the source of her pain right now, so calling for him didn’t do her any good. She was being used as a guinea pig for Koutarou and Sanae to try their technique on.

“Koutarou, I want to try too.”

“Before you do, you should hang on to me and get a feel for the technique.”

“Good idea! Okay... Here goes!”

“Gyaaaaaaaah!”

“Sanae, hold back a little.”

“Right. Sorry, Yurika.”

“S-Satomi-shan... i-isn’t this a little much... j-just for skipping on cleaning up the bathroom?”

“Actually, never mind, Sanae. You don’t have to hold back.”

“Got it.”

“Gyaaaaaaaah!”

Sanae was a diligent student, and thanks to that, it would be a while yet before Yurika was released from her punishment.

After Sanae had properly mastered the scorpion deathlock, she gave Koutarou a massage as thanks. She recalled him saying that stretching his back felt good while they were practicing the move.

“Koutarou, you can’t just sit on this kind of thing. Your circulation has gotten really bad.”

“I got it. I’ll let you know the next time I notice.”

“Good. Now just leave this to Sanae-chan!”

Sanae rubbed Koutarou’s back and shoulders like she always did. She roughly massaged his muscles with her Poltergeist powers while using her psychic powers to improve the flow of his spiritual energy. While Koutarou was receiving a nice massage, however, there was someone lying on the floor next to him and groaning.

“This... is just too cruel...”

It was none other than Yurika, their wrestling test dummy. She looked up at Koutarou with tears in her eyes, continuing to whine as she had been for a

while now.

“If I had known this was gonna happen, I would have preferred something perverted...”

After being held in a joint lock for so long, Yurika was unable to move anything below her shoulders. All she could do was complain to Koutarou.

“I’m sorry, Yurika. We overdid it a little.”

Koutarou did feel a little bad. He’d gotten riled up and had gone too far. He hadn’t actually intended to hurt Yurika, so he honestly apologized.

“If you have to apologize for it, then please don’t do it to begin with!”

But that alone wasn’t enough to satisfy Yurika, and she continued to gripe about it. In stark contrast to earlier, she was now the one lording over him.

“But you’re the only one I can ask for things like this.”

The moment she heard Koutarou say the words “you’re the only one,” Sanae’s hands unconsciously twitched. No one seemed to notice it. Not Koutarou, not Yurika, and not even Sanae herself.

“You didn’t ask! You just did it all of a sudden!”

“Did I?”

“Yes, you did! And why me?! There are plenty of other people you could have asked!”

Yurika flailed her arms in a wild gesture indicating the other girls in the room. Kiriha and Shizuka were there, as well as Theia and Ruth who had just returned. They weren’t there when the incident had started, but either Theia, who Koutarou often got into fistfights with, or Ruth, who frequently had combat training with him, would have been a good fit for the job. Including Yurika, Koutarou had had five choices to pick from, yet he’d singled her out. She wanted to know why.

“That’s because they’re all girls, you know?”

After glancing at each of the other girls in turn, that was his answer. They were all teenage girls, and Koutarou was reluctant to ask them to do that kind

of thing. It would have been especially hard to ask Theia, Ruth, or Kiriha since they'd all recently shared their feelings with him. Using wrestling moves on them was practically the last thing he wanted to do with them. It would just be too awkward. But Yurika didn't like that answer.

"I'm a girl too!"

She was rightfully displeased. It was like Koutarou was saying he didn't consider her a girl. Hearing Yurika's outburst, however, the other girls began intervening.

"Well... if it's Satomi-kun, I wouldn't mind. He wouldn't touch me inappropriately on purpose."

"We wouldn't really mind, right, Ruth?"

"That's right. Her Highness and I are always doing similar things with Satomi-sama."

"I wouldn't mind myself. I'd just make him return the favor later on."

Shizuka trusted Koutarou pretty implicitly, and she loved martial arts. None of the other girls had a reason to turn him down either. If anything, they would have been happy to help. But it was exactly because of that goodwill that Koutarou couldn't ask them. That didn't apply to Yurika.

"See?! Even they're saying so! So why did you pick me?!"

"That's because you're... How do I put it?"

Koutarou had asked her because he felt like he couldn't ask any of the others. But like she'd said herself, she was a girl too, so there had to be some other reason he'd specifically asked her.

"I demand a proper explanation!"

"It's because you're... uh..."

But whatever the reason, Koutarou couldn't think of it.

Yurika looked like any other airhead, but Koutarou knew that she could be trusted in an emergency. He'd learned that firsthand when Maki had gone missing in the snowy mountains. Koutarou knew Yurika treasured her friends

and worked hard for them.

And from what Koutarou could tell, Yurika was getting better at using Encyclopedia's magic. Since she was so obsessed with magic, she'd seriously put her mind to learning it and was making great progress. As a result, in terms of ability, she was starting to catch up to Theia and Kiriha. She was no longer completely defenseless on her own.

On top of that, Yurika was a good friend to Harumi. They would give each other advice and go out to play from time to time. Harumi would always smile when she talked about Yurika, and there was no doubt in Koutarou's mind about how much they meant to each other.

Adding it all up, Koutarou definitely cared about Yurika. He wouldn't bother looking after her otherwise. So in that sense, Koutarou did think of Yurika as a girl too, and he wouldn't ordinarily ask a girl to let him practice wrestling moves on her. Despite that, he'd had no problem asking her. Thinking about it after the fact, he realized that not even he understood why.

"...Why *did* I pick you?"

"Please don't ask meee!"

Koutarou couldn't come to a solid conclusion on the matter. It was quite a conundrum, but it slowly led to the realization that Yurika was indeed very special to him.

I wonder what this means...

Koutarou tilted his head in confusion. But since not even he understood his own feelings, the answer to the question he was pondering would evade him for a while yet.

"Satomi-san hates meee!"

"That's not true. In fact, I was thinking of feeding you for free today."

"Really?! I knew you were a good person the day we met! All riiight! Satomi-san really does love me after all!"

"So help me out with some more wrestling techniques."

“Sure! W-Wait, no! I absolutely refuse!”

Listening to Koutarou apologize to an unhappy Yurika, Theia mumbled to herself as she opened the box for the day’s board game.

“In the end, Koutarou might be the most open with Yurika...”

She was only talking to herself, but Kiriha who was sitting next to her heard every word. After taking a sip of her tea that was starting to cool, she offered her own insight on the matter.

“That might be true. Compared to us, his guard around Yurika is surprisingly lax.”

Ruth, who was sitting on the other side of Theia, spoke up too.

“Satomi-sama only ever asks anything of Yurika-sama, after all.”

Kiriha and Ruth had noticed the same thing Theia had. Koutarou was incredibly kind to the people he got along with, but it was a one-sided affair in that he never asked for anything in return apart from simple favors like taking out the trash and the like. As far as the girls could tell, Yurika was the only exception to that. She was the only one that Koutarou had no problem asking for things, big or small.

Asking her to be a guinea pig for today’s wrestling lesson was just one such example. During their school trip, he’d made her go skiing with him. And before that, the two had stayed up all night writing manuscripts for their plays together. The list went on and on, but whenever Koutarou made a request like that, it was always Yurika he would ask.

“I’d like to know why...”

Kiriha revealed a small smile as she watched Koutarou and Yurika, who were lying on the floor and arguing. Though she wasn’t aware of it, Yurika was breaking through the wall that Kiriha had sensed around Koutarou’s heart. That’s why she was the only one in such a special position. Though she still had a ways to go before she broke through the wall completely, Kiriha wanted to know her secret. She’d have to break through that wall herself one day.

It was about that time that Sanae, who was massaging Koutarou, stopped.

“Now that I think about it...”

Sanae could hear what Kiriha and the others were whispering about too. Perhaps it was more accurate to say that she felt it, since it was spiritual waves she was picking up rather than sound waves. As long as a voice had strong feelings behind it, she could hear it even if it was just a whisper.

Koutarou has never asked me for anything either...

It wasn’t until she heard Kiriha and the others whispering about it that Sanae realized her relationship with Koutarou was also one-sided. She only ever relied on him. Even the massage she was giving him was something that she’d insisted on doing. When she thought back, he’d never asked her for one since they’d met. Or anything else, for that matter. Koutarou hadn’t asked her for a single important thing since they became friends. Even if Koutarou accepted Sanae’s reliance on him, it wasn’t like he needed her.

But Yurika is different... Why...?

Koutarou didn’t hesitate with Yurika—not even when it came to wresting moves. That told Sanae something. Koutarou needed Yurika.

I...

Sanae’s spiritual energy unconsciously flared up because of her desire to build a stronger bond with Koutarou. If someone with the ability to see spiritual energy had been around, they would have seen Sanae’s energy flooding not just room 106, but the entirety of Corona House. That was just how deep, strong, and pure her feelings were for Koutarou.

“Koutarou just respects me the most.”

“You sound quite confident, alien princess.”

In contrast to Sanae who was getting anxious, Theia remained confident. While she pulled the game board out from the box, she smiled as though she were completely unconcerned.

“But of course. I am a proud princess of the Holy Forthorthe Galactic Empire. As long as I am the noblest royal, the strongest knight will obey me.”

Theia no longer felt envious of what the other girls had going for them. She

was determined to win Koutarou over with her own strengths. She would break through the wall around Koutarou's heart in a different way than Yurika.

"That makes sense."

Kiriha honestly admired Theia's attitude, and she began thinking that she should do the same thing. She shouldn't be mimicking what Yurika and Theia were doing; she should win Koutarou over the way Kii would.

I might have fallen behind from the start...

Kiriha flashed a bitter smile. While Yurika wasn't aware of it, she was gradually slipping past Koutarou's wall. And Theia was planning on breaking down that wall with sheer will. They'd both made more progress than she had. Kiriha was confident she could get over the wall herself, but it seemed she'd gotten a late start. That irritated her a little.

"What is everyone talking about?" Shizuka asked as she returned to the room with a tray in hand. She had gone into the kitchen to fetch more tea.

"We were just talking about how Koutarou and Yurika get along so well."

"It really does look like it, doesn't it? Just the other day, Mackenzie-kun was asking me if the two of them are going out."

Shizuka loved that kind of gossiping, so Theia and Kiriha were willing to drop the conversation there.

"Koutarou, Sanae, Yurika, since we've got more tea, why don't we play one game before dinner?"

Theia called for the others to gather as she spread out the game board on the table, but she couldn't help laughing at herself for doing so.

Does this game even have any meaning apart from entertainment anymore?

In the past, Theia had planned to seize control of room 106 through games. But now the games they played were just games. If she were being honest, Theia no longer cared if she lost all of her points. It was important for her to be a good sport as a princess of Forthorthe, but she was no longer obsessed with winning. With that kind of attitude, she believed Koutarou would one day follow her.

In that sense, Theia's victory was no longer required to clear her trial. In fact, she started to think that the ideal outcome would be if Koutarou won the battle for room 106 for her. That said, Theia couldn't back down from a fight. And considering Kiriha's circumstances, throwing the game now wouldn't be good for anyone. That's why Theia continued to play—to uphold her honor as a princess.

"Yeah, sure. Let's go, Sanae, Yurika."

"Okay..."

"Satomi-san, please help me up. I can't move yet."

"What am I going to do with you...?"

"This is your fault, you know, Satomi-san."

"I know, I know."

Oblivious to the other girls' complex feelings, Koutarou casually carried Yurika over to the tea table.

"Can you sit up?"

"I want to lean against the wall."

"Can you reach from there?"

"You move the pieces for me, Satomi-san."

"Fine..."

Koutarou sat Yurika down in front of the wall and started to crawl over to the closest spot at the table so he would still be near her.

"All right—"

Just as Koutarou was about to say "let's get started," his view went dark and he lost his sense of balance.

What...?

He was overcome with a sudden case of vertigo as he was crawling across the floor. It was bad enough that he couldn't keep himself upright and collapsed onto the tatami mat.

“Koutarou?!”

“What’s wrong?!”

“Satomi-san?!”

The girls all shouted out in surprise when Koutarou suddenly went down, but fortunately, he was quick to recover.

“Mast— Ah... Satomi-sama, are you okay?”

Ruth reached out to Koutarou, who had collapsed in front of her. He took her hand and picked himself up.

“Thank you, Ruth-san. I think it was just a little dizzy spell. Not a big deal.”

Koutarou smiled at the girls who worried for him. In truth, his head was still spinning a little, but he felt like it would pass soon. He was sure the girls were all concerned over nothing.

“Koutarou, do you get these kinds of dizzy spells a lot?”

Kiriha was especially worried, and she gave him a very serious look.

“It’s been a long time since I last got dizzy. I think it’s just because I was lying down for so long.”

Koutarou himself wasn’t particularly worried. He had been lying on the floor so Sanae could massage his back, and he suspected the dizziness was just a result of getting up too quickly.

“It’s nothing to worry about.”

“All right... If you say so...”

Despite Koutarou’s reassuring smile, Kiriha still had a grave look on her face. That puzzled Koutarou, but he took it as a sign of her concern for him and chose not to press the issue.

“Don’t scare us like that, Satomi-kun.”

“It seems like you haven’t trained well enough. I’ll have to reforge you.”

“You might have an iron deficiency. Let’s have liver or something similar tomorrow.”

“I don’t really like liver. But since it would be a waste not to, I’d still eat it.”

“Koutarou, I’ll give you a massage again later.”

Seeing Koutarou acting fine, everyone seemed to ease up. Sanae was even relieved enough that her complex expression softened into a smile.

“I’m sorry for startling you guys. Now let’s start the game. Dinner’s waiting, after all.”

And so Koutarou and the others began playing games like normal. They no longer looked like invaders fighting for territory, but like children that had gathered in the family room to play.

Sanae's Crisis

Tuesday, March 16th

Today's game was held three times, with dinner in between. After all three rounds, Yurika and Theia were in the lead with Koutarou and Kiriha behind them, and Sanae in last place.

With those results, Kiriha lost her lead and Theia took first place on the points scoreboard. Koutarou held his position as third, and Yurika barely managed to pull ahead to take fourth place. Granted, the average of Koutarou and Sanae's point total still exceeded Yurika's. Sanae was only in last place now because she'd given some of her points to Koutarou. Assuming he would eventually return them, Yurika was still effectively in last place.

"Oh, ooh! I'm finally no longer in last place!"

"Good for you, Yurika."

Sanae, the one that had fallen to last place instead, congratulated Yurika. And nobody thought anything of it. That in and of itself was quite indicative of the current state of affairs in room 106. Everyone felt as though things were strange, but certainly not in a bad way.

"Thank you very much, Sanae-chaaan!"

Yurika grabbed Sanae's hands and shook them up and down enthusiastically. Yurika was originally deathly afraid of ghosts, but you would never know it now. She seemed to have no problem touching Sanae, and the two of them got along well.

"Koutarou, now I'm in last place!"

After praising Yurika, Sanae flew towards Koutarou and leaned in expectantly.

"So why don't you cheer me up?"

"I'm sorry to hear that."

Koutarou patted Sanae's head and comforted her. When he did, Sanae smiled happily. Everyone who saw it suspected that she had intentionally gotten last place just for this moment.

"You have to pour more love into it."

"Oh, my always adorable Lady Sanae, I sympathize with your feelings. Please allow me, Koutarou, to do anything in my power to cheer you up, my lady."

Since this was a common occurrence, Koutarou was used to it. He continued patting Sanae's head as he told her what she wanted to hear. Since Sanae was a ghost, she liked coming into contact with people's auras. Koutarou patting her on the head was just one way to do that, but he knew it was one of her favorites.

"Mm, very good." Satisfied with her consolation from Koutarou, Sanae imitated Theia and gave him a satisfied nod.

"Your praise is wasted on me, my lady."

"Heehee."

Still smiling, Sanae moved around to Koutarou's back. Since he had homework to do, he couldn't just keep patting her head forever. So until he was done with his homework, she would just cling to him instead.

"Okay, let's study, Koutarou."

"Yeah. Yurika, it's time for homework. That's enough manga for now."

"Whaaat?! Can't I just read a little more?!"

"You've never settled for 'a little.'"

"He knows your game, Yurika."

"Why can't I just start once you've finished all of your homework, Satomi-san?"

"Ah, so that's it. You're planning on copying my work, you brat!"

"When I copy your homework, there are errors here and there and that makes it more believable!"

"She's hopeless..."

Sanae laughed as she wrapped her arms snugly around Koutarou's neck.

It wouldn't be too bad if things were always like this...

At some point, the desperate feelings of the little girl who wanted nothing more than to see her parents had started to change. She still wanted to see her parents, but now she was happy where she was waiting for them, too. She loved her life. And what she loved most of all was the warmth in her arms right now. As long as she could feel that warmth, she could endure the loneliness of not being able to see her parents.

But... I can't become a real part of his family...

Sanae focused on what she was holding in her right hand—a charm with the words "family safety" embroidered on it. That charm was protecting her, and it was proof that Koutarou treasured her. But Sanae didn't want things to stay that way. Just like the charm protected her, she wanted to protect Koutarou in return. Yet, sadly for her, only a flesh and blood human could do that. "Family safety" was a charm meant to protect someone's family. And as a ghost, Sanae could never really become part of Koutarou's family. She would never be able to have children, either. So even though she was happy where she was, she was also stuck.

The only way for a ghost like Sanae to become a real part of Koutarou's family would be to enter samsara and be reborn. But Sanae didn't really want that either. She didn't want to leave Koutarou's side. She wanted to forever embrace his warmth, and be embraced by it. It wasn't like she could just go back to being alive, but the path ahead was blocked off for her too. It was like she was at a perpetual dead end, but something would happen shortly to turn that on its head.

"Kyah!"

With a jarring sound similar to a lightbulb shorting out, Sanae's arms passed through Koutarou's body. Though Sanae didn't have a material body to begin with, if she focused, she could grab on to a person's aura. That's how she normally held on to Koutarou, and it's what she'd been doing until now, but her arms had suddenly passed right through him without explanation.

"Wh-What is going on?!"

When the surprised Sanae looked down at her arms, she saw that their distinct shape now appeared blurry, almost like they were liquid and dripping. They were flickering too, sometimes disappearing altogether. Even scarier, the phenomenon wasn't limited to just her arms. It was happening to her entire body.

"What's wrong?!"

Koutarou had a bad feeling when he heard Sanae scream and immediately turned around to see what was wrong. When he did, he could see that Sanae's figure was starting to fade.

"Koutarou!"

"What is it?!"

Koutarou had never seen Sanae like this. While she could make herself invisible, it didn't happen in stages like this. She also had no reason to go invisible right now.

"What's going on?!"

Koutarou was surprised by Sanae's strange appearance and wanted an explanation, but Sanae could only shake her head in response.

"I don't know either! What is this? This has never happened before!"

This was a first for her too, and she was overcome with a strong sense of fear at the sight of it. She didn't understand what was happening to her. And though she was terrified, she simply stood there blankly staring at her own body.

"Sanae-chan?!"

"Ruth, what is happening to Sanae?!"

"I don't know, Your Highness! The circumstances regarding Sanae-sama's body are outside of our knowledge base!"

Shizuka, Theia, and Ruth were equally surprised. They didn't understand much about ghosts. They could tell that something was wrong, but they were at a loss as to how to help.

"Just what is— That's right!"

Koutarou had an idea. Even if something had happened to Sanae, the spiritual circuity she'd forged in him should still be working. With that thought, he activated his spirit sight to try and figure out what was going on with Sanae.

"What is this?!"

However, seeing her that way only shocked him more. Whenever he'd looked at her with his spirit sight before, Sanae's body was always aglow with a dazzling light. But not now. Her light was weak, about half as bright as it usually was.

Sanae ordinarily appeared to be glowing because a portion of her vast spiritual energy leaked outside of her body. It was what was called an aureola in Buddhism, or something like an angel's halo in Christianity. That glow diminishing was a sign that the spiritual energy that made up Sanae's body had diminished, and it wasn't by a small amount. That much was obvious just by looking at her weak glow now.

And it wasn't just that her light was dim; it was also flickering like it could hardly maintain itself. Something about Sanae's body had grown unstable, and it only appeared to be getting worse. Koutarou could tell that much, but that was it. He didn't know what to do for her.

"Koutarou, what's her situation?!"

Only Kiriha would be able to help.

"Sanae's spiritual energy has been cut in half! And it's strangely unstable!"

"Karama, Korama!"

After hearing what Koutarou said, Kiriha quickly called for her two haniwas.

"Yes! Ho!"

"Sanae-chan, we'll save you right away! Ho!"

The two haniwas were usually lurking nearby in stealth mode. By the time they were visible to Koutarou and the others, they were already floating in the air in front of Sanae.

"Karama, use the spiritual energy stabilizer! Expand the area! Activate Class II! Prioritize stabilizing control!"

“Understood! Activating spiritual energy stabilizer! Operating mode Class II! Expanding area! Nee-san, a warning, ho! With my spiritual energy batteries, I can only operate Class II for 238 seconds, ho!”

“I know! Korama!”

“Yes, ho!”

“Connect your spiritual energy battery to Karama! Send all the energy apart from what you need for basic operation to Karama!”

“Should the output pattern be emulated after Sanae-chan’s aura? Ho!”

“Yes, perform the analysis!”

“Understood, ho!”

Kiriha ordered her haniwas to help. She was planning on using Karama to stabilize Sanae’s spiritual energy while using Korama’s battery to replenish Sanae’s spiritual energy. Simply explained, it was like patching up a hole in a balloon and reinflating it.

All that’s left is...!

Without waiting for her haniwas to get started, Kiriha moved on to the next step. She pulled a cellphone from her pocket and went to make a call. But before she could even dial the number, her phone was already vibrating. The person she was going to call had contacted her first.

“Kiriha speaking!”

Kiriha quickly pressed the answer button and held the cellphone up to her ear.

“Nee-san! Kiriha-neesan! It’s me, Hachi!”

The voice coming from the other end of the line was one of the ghost hunters that had kidnapped Sanae at the beach last summer. After Koutarou and the others had gotten Sanae back, Kiriha had offered to buy information about Sanae off of them, and they were now essentially working as her subordinates.

“I’m aware of the abnormality! What information do you have?!”

“Bad news! That girl, Sanae-chan, is dying!”

“What about the spiritual energy stabilization device?!”

“Aniki just left to set it up!”

“I’ll leave that to you then, but stay on the line!”

“Roger that!”

Learning what she needed to know, Kiriha’s already serious expression turned even more severe.

I can only pray we make it in time...

Kiriha had given the ghost hunters a specialized device for this kind of situation, and if they activated it properly, Sanae should temporarily be able to recover. The question was if she could buy enough time with her haniwas for them to be able to set it up.

“Nee-san, the spiritual energy stabilizer’s output is now stable, ho! Operation can continue for another 230 seconds! Continuing the countdown, ho!”

As Karama said that, Sanae’s body regained its distinct form. The yellow light emitted from the haniwas appeared to be stabilizing her.

“I have connected the battery to Sanae-chan’s aura through Karama’s spiritual energy stabilizer, ho! The converter is currently stable, so we should be fine for a while now, ho!”

The light Koutarou could see around Sanae grew a little bit brighter. It was still weaker than normal, but it was shining with a constant brightness and no longer appeared to be unstable. Sanae had recovered a bit, but Kiriha’s expression was still grave.

“Only 230 seconds... We might not make it in time...”

Kiriha calculated in her head the time it would take the ghost hunters to activate the device. Even with Korama and Karama’s help, it still seemed like they would be about half a minute short. Sanae would just have to hold on in her unstable form during that time, and that was a dangerous gamble that Kiriha would rather not have to make.

“Kiriha-san, just what is going on?!”

Based on everything that Kiriha had done, Koutarou figured that she had some kind of information, and he wanted her to explain the situation. Knowing that Sanae was in danger, he wasn't willing to just take a backseat in all this.

"Sanae's spiritual energy supply has decreased, and she is starting to disappear."

Kiriha bit her lip. She had made preparations to keep this exact thing from happening, but the situation had deteriorated far faster than she had imagined.

"Disappear?!"

Koutarou's worst fear turned out to be exactly what was happening. His face twisted with emotion.

"What do you mean by disappear?! As in die?!"

Hearing that she was disappearing, Sanae ran up to Kiriha with a terrified expression. After the scare she'd just had, what Kiriha said sounded all too believable. Sanae knew she was in danger, but all she could do was tremble in fear in the face of it.

"Sadly, that's precisely what it means. There is insufficient spiritual energy to stabilize your body. If left like this, you will dissolve and assimilate with nature's spiritual energy."

Ghosts were beings that used a mystical power to gather spiritual energy to a single point. Without that power, they would merely become an unbound mass of spiritual energy and would eventually disperse much the way air does out of a deflated balloon. It would diffuse into the surrounding air until it became indistinguishable.

"No, I don't want to disappear!"

Now realizing the crisis she was in, Sanae was seized with an even greater fear than before. Her hair was disheveled and tears filled her eyes.

"Sanae-chan, sit still, ho!"

"If you move or if let your emotions run wild, you'll use up more spiritual energy, ho!"

Since they were what was keeping Sanae stable, the haniwas had to follow

closely behind Sanae as she moved around.

“How can I just sit still after hearing that I’m going to disappear?! What do I do, Koutarou?!”

Scared, Sanae leaped at Koutarou. Fortunately, since the haniwas were stabilizing her body, he was able to catch her.

Sanae...

Sanae was trembling in Koutarou’s arms. To try and stop it, he embraced her tightly.

“Kiriha-san, isn’t there anything we can do?! She can’t just suddenly disappear!”

Sanae’s crisis wasn’t Kiriha’s fault. Koutarou knew that. But she was the only one he could turn to for answers. He was desperate to help Sanae.

“I have people on it already. All we can do is hope for the best.”

Kiriha showed Koutarou her cellphone. Seeing she was on the line with someone, he realized she’d already set something in motion.

“But there might not be enough time. I can’t say with 100 percent certainty that it will save her.”

“Koutarou!”

Hearing Kiriha’s words, Sanae squeezed her arms around Koutarou.

No, I don’t want to separate from Koutarou! Anything but that!

Sanae’s internal screaming channeled itself as force in her arms, and she unwittingly held on to Koutarou even tighter.

It’s so warm here! And I’m happy here! So, so...!

She clenched her right fist harder than anything. Inside of it was a charm embroidered with the words “family safety.”

“Hold me, Koutarou! So I won’t disappear!”

That was Sanae’s only wish right now. To be together with Koutarou. In the year since they’d met, Koutarou had become irreplaceable to her.

Even though Sanae had once tried to chase Koutarou out of the apartment, she could no longer imagine life without him. She always wanted to wake up next to his peacefully sleeping face. Without him, she didn't know who she would say good morning to.

"You said not enough time, Kiriha. How much time are we talking here?"

Koutarou poured more strength into his arms and held Sanae tightly in return. It may have just been the tension of the situation, but he definitely didn't want to lose Sanae either. But whatever the reason, he was answering Sanae's wish. And it wasn't just pure coincidence, either. As their feelings overlapped in that moment, it was only inevitable.

Koutarou... Ko... tarou...

Sanae entrusted herself to Koutarou. If she was going to disappear, she would rather melt into Koutarou and become one with him.

"One or two minutes... No, it shouldn't take two minutes."

"Less than two minutes..."

Hearing that, Koutarou lightly clenched his right hand and brought it up to his face.

"Master..."

Just by seeing that movement, Ruth could tell what Koutarou was about to do. He was going to use the bracelet on his right wrist to call forth Signaltin in order to buy enough time for Sanae.

I have to get Her Highness out of here...

Koutarou didn't want Theia to know about Signaltin. But with Sanae in danger, he wouldn't hesitate to bring it out. The best compromise then seemed to be Ruth taking Theia somewhere else to avoid the conflict altogether.

"Your Highness, let us do what we can as well."

"Ruth?"

"Let us return to Blue Knight and retrieve our space-time stabilization devices."

Not only did Ruth want to get Theia away for Koutarou's sake, she also wanted to make preparations in case Signaltin didn't work. Ruth was worried for Sanae too.

"Very well!"

Theia quickly agreed. Sanae was a precious friend to her as well. Moreover, she was also a rival competing for rulership over room 106, so Theia wanted to be able to defeat her fair and square. She could take no pride in a victory gained by the untimely demise of one of her rivals.

"Let us hurry back to Blue Knight then!"

Theia got up and made for the far wall of the inner room so she could use the teleportation device that had been set up there.

"Yes, Your Highness!"

Ruth nodded and tossed a knowing glance Koutarou's way.

I will leave the rest to you, Master...

Seeing Koutarou respond with a nod of his own, Ruth chased after Theia. But someone stopped them before they could use the gate back to their ship.

"Please wait!"

When that voice rang out in room 106, everyone's eyes opened wide. It was Yurika, who had been silently watching what was unfolding until now.

"What is the meaning of this, Yurika? We are in a hurry!"

Theia was angry that she'd been held up. With literally only minutes to spare, Theia wanted to return to Blue Knight quickly as possible.

"I'll hear what you have to say later!"

"Ah, p-please wait! Listen to—"

"I don't have the time for that!"

Theia forcefully rejected Yurika and turned back toward the teleportation device. But then Koutarou called for her too.

"Wait, Tulip!"

“P-Pleb?!”

Because Koutarou had called her Tulip, Theia instinctively turned around as she stood in the threshold of the gate to Blue Knight.

“Believe in her!” Koutarou shouted to Theia with determination.

“Ah, okay...”

Those few words were enough to stop Theia. There had to be a reason he’d called her Tulip, and that alone stopped her in her tracks. She could feel how serious Koutarou was.

“So what is it, Yurika?! Out with it!”

Koutarou knew he could believe in Yurika right now. She had the same look in her eyes as when Maki had gone missing on the snowy mountain.

“Satomi-san...”

Yurika was surprised. Normally Koutarou never believed her and was quick to write her off. She could hardly believe he’d taken her side like that.

But this...

Yurika had seen that earnest look in Koutarou’s eyes once before. It was just like when Maki had vanished during their ski trip. It was the same look he’d given her when he offered to help Yurika find her.

I don’t really understand why, but Satomi-san believes in me right now!

Yurika didn’t realize that she was the one who’d changed. She wasn’t aware of her own growth. But even then, she could clearly feel that Koutarou believed in her. And that gave her faith and confidence in herself. Someone believed in her, and that feeling awakened the true courage sleeping within Yurika.

“Magic! I can use magic to buy the two minutes we need!” she declared bravely.

No one present in that moment doubted for even a second that Yurika was a real magical girl.

In a way, Yurika was just suggesting a different approach to what Kiriha was

already doing. She would try and stabilize Sanae while supplying her with additional energy. The only difference was that she would be doing it magically.

“What can we do to help, Yurika?!”

“Please stand in a circle around Sanae-chan!”

Dressed in her magical girl outfit, Yurika held out her large staff and pointed its tip at Sanae. She was currently holding Encyclopedia. The staff she ordinarily used, Angel Halo, had fused with her clothes just like it had during her battle against Maki. It could be seen in a series of ornaments now adorning her outfit, including the wings on her back.

“I will then transfer everyone’s spiritual energy to Sanae-chan.”

“Is something like that possible?!”

“I’ve never tried it, but it should be!”

Yurika’s idea was to activate her magic right when the haniwas ran out of power in order to maintain Sanae’s energy for the maximum amount of time. And since Sanae needed energy, Yurika was planning on borrowing it from the other six people in the room. She would use Encyclopedia to stabilize Sanae while casting a spell to facilitate the energy transfer. It was a bold plan made possible because Yurika could use two spells at once with the power of Encyclopedia.

But because it was such a bold plan, it required a complex spell and a great deal of control to make it work. It would take longer than normal to activate. Yurika had stopped Theia and Ruth because she knew she wouldn’t have enough time otherwise. It might have been possible without them, but it would have increased the strain on the remaining four by 50 percent. Since transferring spiritual energy was similar to the energy drain attack that vampires used, Yurika didn’t want to risk doing anything unnecessarily dangerous.

And even though Yurika was using such a serious spell, no one in the room thought anything of it. Since Encyclopedia saw everyday use in the apartment, they’d grown completely accustomed to the idea that Yurika could use magic. They all knew how good she’d gotten with wielding the staff, too. They’d sent

her to drive away a stray cat once, and she’d used the staff to chase it off with supersonic waves without harming it.



But despite what it seemed like, Yurika hadn't actually gotten better at using Encyclopedia. She had been capable of making full use of its power from the start, but she'd intentionally held back. Now that she was using her own powers more freely, it simply appeared that she'd grown stronger and more capable with magic. By carefully choosing which spells she cast in front of them and slowly using more serious magic, she could now use the full extent of her magical girl power in front of them under the guise of Encyclopedia.

A magical girl that was just supposed to be cosplaying was really using powerful spells. That unthinkable reality was unfolding in front of them. But even though she was allegedly just a cosplayer, everyone put their faith in Yurika and her magic. There was no longer any point in arguing about whether Yurika was a cosplayer or the real deal. Her courage and her magic were real, and that was enough for them.

"All right! Let's start!"

"Yes! Precast Energy Converter—"

Yurika immediately begin incanting her spell. While listening to her voice, Koutarou whispered to Sanae. For the spell to work, she would have to be in the middle of the room surrounded by everyone else. She couldn't just keep clinging to Koutarou.

"Sanae."

"But..."

But the uneasy Sanae didn't want to let him go. She clung to him and grasped at his clothes.

"Don't worry. You can believe in Yurika right now."

"Really?"

"Yeah. I'd even bet my prized bat on it."

"...Okay."

Koutarou's prized bat was one that had been used and signed by a legendary slugger known as "the god of batting." Sanae knew how much Koutarou treasured it, so if he was willing to bet that, she decided she could trust in his

judgement. She reluctantly let go of Koutarou and floated to the center of the room. Once she was in position, her six friends surrounded her.

“Okay, Yurika!”

“We’re counting on you, Yurika-sama!”

“Right!”

After Theia and Ruth called to her, Yurika nodded with an usually serious expression and continued her incantation.

The main spell is Transfer Soul Energy. On top of that, I need three modifiers on it: an invocation delay, a target expansion to cover six people, and a time extension to make it last two minutes. And while I adjust the energy of six people through the Energy Converter spell to match Sanae-chan’s energy, I have to use the staff’s magic to keep her stable. Even if I prolong the casting time to reduce the mana used, I only have one shot... Can I really do this?

As Yurika went through the procedure in her head, she realized how difficult of a job she had. Doubt reared its ugly head and she grew nervous.

“Don’t be scared! You can do it!”

Seeing the anxiety manifest in Yurika’s face, Koutarou encouraged her.

“Y-Yes!”

When he did, her expression returned to the sharp and serious one from before. Seeing the two of them interact like that, Shizuka was astonished.

As expected of Satomi-kun... For better or worse, he understands Yurika-chan really well.

Koutarou had noticed a change in Yurika that no one else had. And with just a few words, she was back to normal. The powerful mutual trust seen between them now made their day to day arguing all seem like some kind of a joke.

Really, it meant that their relationship was much deeper than it appeared to be on the surface. Beneath it all, they trusted each other more than anything. And seeing that in action for herself, Shizuka once again felt that only Koutarou would suffice as Yurika’s guardian.

“Say, Satomi-kun...”

She wanted to ask him about it.

“What is it, Landlord-san?”

“...Actually I’ll ask you later. Now’s not a good time.”

In the end, she decided to hold off. Even a gossip-loving girl like Shizuka knew that there was something far more important at hand. She couldn’t bring herself to ask Koutarou if he actually loved Yurika while Sanae’s life was hanging in the balance.

“Sure...”

Koutarou found Shizuka’s behavior odd, but he quickly put it out of his mind. Like she said herself, now wasn’t the time for it.

“Karama and Korama have almost reached their limit! Only fifteen seconds left!”

“Please start, Yurika!”

“Okay!”

After nodding at Koutarou, Yurika readjusted her grip on her staff one last time and loudly spoke the words to activate the spell.

“Encyclopedia! Release Invocation Delay! Recall Precast Energy Converter!”

Yurika cast three spells in rapid succession. The first was using Encyclopedia, which had the ability to read its user’s mind and activate magic on its own. Yurika had entrusted the staff with the easiest of the three spells she needed: the one to stabilize Sanae’s body. Based on the type of spell, the staff emitted a blue light as it was cast. That light enveloped Sanae and healed her body in place of Karama and Korama.

The next spell she activated was one intended to steal Koutarou and the others’ spiritual energy and forward it to Sanae. Since it had been delayed in order to match the timing, it activated right when Encyclopedia’s spell kicked in. A purple light reached out from Yurika and snaked its way in tendrils over to all six of them. It hit them each with a strong impact and they could feel their strength leaving them. It came with a stabbing pain all over their bodies that

made it hard to breathe.

“Ugh...!”

“Kyah!”

“S-So this... is the spell that steals spiritual energy...”

It felt something like being struck with a whip while running a marathon after being pushed to their very limits. Their bodies felt heavy, and just standing up was painful. Regardless of how much they gasped for air, they couldn’t shake the sensation that they were slowly suffocating. Being drained of spiritual energy was the same as directly draining the life force from someone. The acute pain and fatigue they were feeling were signs their lives were in danger.

No wonder... she wanted Theia and Ruth-san to stay...

Without them, the strain would have been increased on everyone else. They likely wouldn’t still be standing, and there was no telling what kind of condition they’d be in after enduring that for two full minutes. Koutarou struggled to keep his heavy body upright as he realized why Yurika had acted the way she did.

“Hnnngh...! Can’t... lose consciousness!”

But the one in the most pain of all was Yurika. Since she prioritized reducing the strain on everyone else, she was draining spiritual energy from herself as well. Sanae required so much spiritual energy that it was unclear what kind of damage this much drain would do even with all six of them helping out. Yurika knew she had to do her part too. She couldn’t just let the others take the brunt of it. So she steeled herself to endure the pain while controlling her third spell.

Yurika’s third spell gathered and merged the spiritual energy taken by the second spell. Spiritual energy had different wavelengths depending on the individual, and if those wavelengths didn’t match Sanae’s, the energy would be of no use to her. So for her third spell, Yurika had to synchronize the wavelengths of six different people at the same time.

It was a lower difficulty spell than the energy drain, but because she had to make minute adjustments to six different spiritual wavelengths while her own spiritual energy was being drained, it was effectively the most difficult spell of

them all.

“Yurika, fight! Yu...rika... fi...ght!”

Yurika cheered herself on while she did her best to concentrate on controlling the spell. If her focus wavered for even a moment, the wavelengths could desynch and disperse before they even made it to Sanae.

“You can do it, Yurika... You’re our only hope right now...”

Koutarou was frustrated that all he could do was pray. He’d wanted to help Yurika by using Signaltin, but he couldn’t control its mana as well as Alaia could. He had no confidence he would actually be of any help with something like this that required precise control.

He could completely leave it up to the sword like he had when dealing with Kii’s nightmare or healing Maki’s injury, but he didn’t know if that would work now. With Sanae’s life on the line, he didn’t want to take any risks, but he was still willing to use it as a last resort. So until it came to that, there was nothing Koutarou could do apart from praying he wouldn’t need to go that far.

“I... will definitely... save... Sanae-chan...!”

Yurika desperately focused her mind to maintain her magic as she was racked with pain. Ten seconds passed, then twenty, thirty... It was the kind of time they could easily spend laughing with each other over nothing, but the seconds seemed to crawl by now. It was the longest two minutes of Yurika’s life.

“I will become... an amazing magical girl... like Nana-san...!”

But Yurika didn’t back down. Despite the intense pain, she kept up her spell with an iron will.

One year ago, a task like this would have been impossible for Yurika. After being separated from Nana, Yurika had her hands full just escaping from the assassins of Darkness Rainbow. Her potential for magic aside, Yurika’s personality was wholly unsuited for the intense lifestyle of a magical girl.

Yet Yurika had grown immensely in the year since she’d started living in room 106. She butted heads with Koutarou and the other invaders, and their constantly chaotic lives had been good training for her. But most importantly,

Yurika was no longer alone.

She wanted to graduate from Kisshouharukaze High School together with Koutarou. She wanted to see the finale of her favorite magical girl anime together with Sanae. She wanted to recover the corpses of Yurika, Yurika A, and Yurika B that Theia had left behind in a dungeon in one of her video games. She still hadn't tasted all of Kiriha's cooking. She was also still in the middle of reading some manga that she'd borrowed from Shizuka. And she wanted to do something to help Harumi win over the boy she loved.

"I am... the princess... of love... and courage...!"

Yurika now had lots of things she wanted to do and many people she cared about. So even in a terrible situation like this, she would do her best for their sake. Over the past year, she'd learned that kind of love and hope, and she'd harnessed the courage to not run away when things got hard.

"Yurika... you..."

Sanae's opinion of Yurika was completely transforming as she watched her work. The same was probably true for everyone else in the room. Nobody had expected her to work that hard. No one except for Koutarou, who had believed in her from the start.

"That's right... You can do it... You always pull through!"

There was less than a minute to go now. Yurika was having a hard time breathing, but Koutarou was convinced that she could do it. And she likely would have been able to if circumstances hadn't conspired against her.

There was an unexpected screech and a loud crash from outside. There was a traffic accident not far from Corona House. A car had been unable to fully make it around a turn and crashed into a wall, but fortunately nobody had been harmed.

"...Ah?!"

But it was enough to startle Yurika out of her intense concentration. The sound had surprised her, but she also couldn't help being worried that someone might have been injured.

If she hadn't been such a caring soul and had only been shaken up by the loud, sudden noise, she probably would have been able to manage. She was much braver than she used to be. But she was more sympathetic than anything, and her worry got the better of her. In other words, her qualities as a magical girl would be her downfall this time.

"Oh no!"

As her focus wavered, the six spiritual energies she was synchronizing into a single wavelength began returning to their usual patterns. If spiritual energies of two different wavelengths collided, they would cancel each other out and lose most of their power. And with six of them crashing into each other like that, the results were disastrous. Yurika tried to regain control, but what she ended up with was less than a third of the original spiritual energy.

"A-Again?!"

Sanae's body began fading. Since Encyclopedia was still stabilizing her body, she didn't lose her form. Instead, she grew transparent as she grew weaker. She was now consuming more spiritual energy than Yurika could supply.

What do I do?!

Yurika desperately racked her brain trying to figure out a way to recover from the current situation. Even after recovering the spell, it would take time to readjust the six spiritual energies so Sanae could use them. That said, the little energy she had a hold of now wasn't enough to sustain Sanae. If she could somehow double it, she was sure she could make it through the two minutes before Sanae disappeared. There was only one way she could think of to make that happen, but it would be risky.

"Satomi-san, this is our only hope! Lend me your power!"

And in a situation like this, as expected, Yurika ended up relying on Koutarou. She firmly held her staff in both hands and pointed it at him.

"Yurika?! Gaaaaaaaah!"

The strain on Koutarou suddenly began increasing rapidly. The shock and pain assaulting him doubled proportionally to the amount of spiritual energy now being drained from him.

“I’m sorry... Satomi-san... there’s... no other way!”

The same was true for Yurika. While enduring twice the pain, she desperately tried to keep Sanae alive. Reunifying six different wavelengths right away would be difficult, so Yurika had instead decided to focus on Koutarou’s since his was very close to Sanae’s, and her own since it was easier to control. Of course, that dramatically increased the strain on the two of them, but it was a quick way to get their energy output back up. It was an incredibly dangerous gamble, and Yurika was betting everything on it.

“Yurika! Koutarou!”

Sanae could only watch as two people she loved suffered for her sake. Unable to bear it any longer, she closed her eyes and prayed that time would pass by as quickly as possible so that no one would get hurt.

“I’m sorry... Hnnngh...”

Yurika felt bad for doing something like this to Koutarou without his permission, and for not being able to properly apologize. But it was all she could to do right now to stay conscious and maintain her spell. Sweat poured down her forehead and her throat was as dry as a desert. Unable to stand up any longer, she slumped down to the floor. She was already well past her limit. She was determined to keep up her spell, but she was expecting to pass out at any moment.

“...D-Don’t worry, Yurika! You’re... right!”

Koutarou raised his voice in an attempt to encourage Yurika.

“You’re someone... who always pulls through! You save people! Who cares... what you’re like normally?! You’re... You’re a splendid magical girl!”

With Yurika and Koutarou’s spiritual wavelengths synchronized into one, their souls were partly connected. And without the other four in the mix, she could clearly sense Koutarou’s feelings.

Satomi-san... really does believe in me...

Koutarou’s words weren’t just reaching Yurika’s ears. His emotions were being projected directly into her soul. He trusted her. He believed in her, and in

a future where he, Yurika, and Sanae would all be able to play around without worry again. In his imagined future, Yurika was still clumsy and often failed. But right now, Yurika wished for days like that more than anything too. And that wish turned into power.

“Haaaaaaaaaaah!”

As she let out a determined shout, Yurika’s mana exponentially grew. It flared up so much that even people without any talent for magic could see it glowing around her. If Yurika had been fighting someone in that state, she surely would have been able to take out her opponent no matter how strong they were. That was just how terrific the power that Yurika had mustered really was.

Just a few seconds before the full two minutes had passed, Kiriha heard a voice coming from the other end of the phone.

“Nee-san! I got a report from Aniki! The device has been set up!”

“Well done!”

The normally stoic Kiriha clenched her fist in joy.

“How is she?!”

Not a moment later, Sanae’s faded body recovered its light and color. Her appearance was now as vivid as normal without any hint of what had been wrong.

“Yurika, that’s enough! We made it!”

Seeing Kiriha’s behavior and Sanae’s appearance, Koutarou realized that the plan had succeeded. He called out to Yurika, who was still pointing her magical staff at Sanae.

“...Ahh...”

Hearing that they’d made it, all of the tension left Yurika’s body. All the spells she had cast were released, and she collapsed on the spot. She’d used every ounce of strength she had, and didn’t even have the energy to right herself. And so she went crashing into the floor face first.

“Yurika!”

Seeing that, Koutarou forgot his own exhaustion and rushed over to her.

“Keep it together, Yurika!”

“Yurika-sama!”

“Yurika-chan!”

Theia, Ruth, and Shizuka followed suit. Kiriha was still on the phone, but she watched over Yurika with a worried look.

“Koutarou, how’s Yurika? Is she okay?!”

But the one worried most of all for her was Sanae. They’d been getting along especially well lately, and she’d just risked her life to save her. Sanae was naturally worried about such a good friend.

“Hang on...”

Koutarou checked Yurika over. He checked her breathing, her pulse, her complexion, and lastly her spiritual energy. Then, to Sanae’s relief, he smiled and nodded.

“She’s fine. She hit her head, but she’ll be fine. She’s just unconscious.”

“Thank god...”

Yurika had fallen down and hit her head, which wasn’t all that uncommon. Normally everyone would simply be dumbfounded at her lack of coordination, but this time was different. They were all concerned, and relieved to hear she was okay.

“Seriously, to think she’d face plant at the very end... Just what you would expect from Yurika.”

“It’s much more like the Yurika-sama we know, certainly. But what splendid work...”

“I just hope it doesn’t leave a mark on her face...”

All the girls smiled and spoke fondly of what Yurika had managed to do. They were impressed, and it showed in their affection for her. If she’d been awake to hear it, Yurika probably would have cried tears of joy.

“Thank you too, Koutarou.”

“You better thank Yurika once she wakes up too, okay?”

“I will.”

Sanae smiled as she stared at Yurika in Koutarou’s arms. Then she finally looked down at herself.

“Hahh... I wasn’t sure what would happen for a moment there...”

Sanae stared at her arms and then inspected her body and legs. Things appeared to be normal again, and there wasn’t even a sign anything had been wrong in the first place.

“Isn’t that great, Sanae?”

Koutarou finally relaxed some too. Since they had escaped the immediate crisis, he let out a deep sigh of relief.

“Yeah!”

Sanae cheerfully nodded and clung to Koutarou’s back like always. She then poked her face over his shoulder and stared at Yurika. Once she woke up, everything would indeed be back to normal. And so Sanae watched over the sleeping Yurika with a cheerful smile.

“Koutarou.”

Only Kiriha still appeared to be quite concerned. After putting away her cellphone, she put her hand on Koutarou’s shoulder.

“What’s the matter, Kiriha-san?”

“I’m sorry to say it, but this isn’t over yet. Sanae’s recovery is only temporary. The fundamental problem hasn’t been resolved.”

“What?!”

Koutarou’s face went pale when he heard that. He knew that Kiriha could be taken at her word, so to hear her say something like that sent a chill down his spine.

“You’re kidding?!”

And if Koutarou trusted her, Sanae inherently did too. She leaned forward from Koutarou’s back and looked at Kiriha.

“What do you— No, wait a minute...”

Koutarou was about to reflexively question her, but he realized something midsentence.

“Now that I think about it...”

Even at the start of the incident, Kiriha had responded swiftly and with a great deal of composure. Almost like she’d known it was going to happen. She’d arranged something with someone over the phone to save Sanae, but that too was odd. The person she’d been speaking to wasn’t anyone he knew.

“Kiriha-san, what do you know? And what kind of situation is Sanae in?”

That’s what Koutarou ended up asking Kiriha. Sanae wanted to know too, but she left the talking up to Koutarou. Her hold around his neck naturally grew stronger as she waited for an answer.

“Explaining will take a long time, but we don’t have that. It will be faster for you to see for yourself. Come with me, Satomi Koutarou.”

Quick to action, Kiriha immediately began heading for the front door. Her destination apparently wasn’t underground, but somewhere on the surface.

“Okay! Let’s go, Sanae!”

“Yeah!”

“We’re going too.”

“Yes, Your Highness!”

“I’ll be right behind you after I lock up!”

Koutarou and the others quickly followed after Kiriha. They still didn’t know what was going on, but they all wanted to help Sanae.

Someone was watching Koutarou and the others as they all dashed out of room 106.

“Oh, looks like things are getting more interesting now...”

It was a woman. One that couldn’t be seen. She was a ghost, but she didn’t have a body as clearly defined as Sanae’s. She had run out of spiritual energy

and was on the verge of passing on or disappearing.

“Heh heh. With this, I might be able to get revenge on them... Hahaha!”

She bore a strong hatred for Koutarou and the others, and that powerful hate was what barely managed to keep her anchored to the world of the living.

“It’s their fault that I died... that I can’t wear my beautiful clothes... all of it...”

Her grudge really boiled down to unjustified resentment. She was one of the ghosts that had been hired by the ghost hunters to attack Sanae. After Koutarou’s counterattack, all of the other ghosts with her had passed on. She alone remained. Her hatred and her obsession with the land of the living were stronger than the power that had tried to make her pass on. But ever since then, she’d been waiting for her chance to get her revenge on Koutarou and the others. It was that steady diet of resentment that kept her tethered to this world, and seeing Koutarou and the others looking happy only fueled her appetite more.

“I may have failed before... heh heh... But I won’t this time... I’ll show them...”

This ghost had been the reason for the traffic accident that had broken Yurika’s concentration earlier. Her plan was to make Yurika’s spell fail, steal the gathered spiritual energy, and absorb Sanae. Yurika had prevented that all from happening, but that only stoked the fires of her hatred.

“Heh... If I wait just a bit longer, my chance will come... I only have to wait a little longer... Hahahaha!”

The temperature was slowly on the rise now that it was the latter half of March, but the air around this ghost of a woman was still freezing cold.

When she woke up, Yurika was on Koutarou’s back.

“...H-Huh...?”

Koutarou was carrying her as he ran down the sidewalk. It was dark outside, and the only light was coming from the weak streetlights overhead.

“U-Um...”

The last thing Yurika could remember was passing out in room 106. And now

Koutarou was carrying her through the middle of the city at night. Naturally, she was quite confused.

“Where... Huh? Why is Satomi-san...?”

“Koutarou, looks like Yurika’s awake.”

Sanae, who was floating nearby, reported Yurika’s condition to Koutarou.

“I see. Thanks, Sanae.”

Koutarou glanced over his shoulder and saw Yurika’s drowsy eyes blinking as she looked around. Seeing her back to normal, Koutarou felt a little better.

“You awake, Yurika?”

“Y-Yes...”

Still not sure what was going on, Yurika nodded hesitantly. The next moment, her mind cleared up and she remembered something important.

“Th-That’s right, Sanae-chan! Where is Sanae-chan?!”

Yurika had blacked out right after Koutarou had told her that they’d made it, but she had no idea what had become of Sanae after that. Concerned, she wildly began looking around for Sanae.

“I’m right here.”

Sanae turned around and flew backwards in front of Koutarou so that Yurika could see her face. And when Yurika saw Sanae’s cheerful smile, her eyes went wide.

“Sanae-chan! You’re okay!”

“It’s all because of you. Thank you.”

“Th-Thank god... I wasn’t sure what was going to happen there for a minute...”

Relieved, the tension left Yurika’s body and she leaned on Koutarou. Filled with a sense of fulfillment after having accomplished the hard work she’d set out to do, she felt like leaning on him forever.

“Um, so, what are we doing now?”

Now that she'd had a chance to collect herself a bit, Yurika was curious what they were all doing outside. When she'd looked around for Sanae, she'd realized that everyone from room 106 was there with them. She could tell that they were headed somewhere, but she didn't know where or why.

"We're still not in the clear yet. We're headed for the hospital."

"The hospital? Why?"

"Because Kiriha-san said so."

They were currently en route to the local hospital—the same one Koutarou had been taken to after he had hit his head at work last spring.

"Can Sanae-chan be treated at a hospital even though she's a ghost?"

"Who knows? Kiriha said that it would take time to explain, so we don't know anything either yet."

Koutarou nodded in Kiriha's direction. She was on the phone and trailing a bit behind everyone else. She'd been on the phone this entire time and hadn't offered much in the way of an explanation.

"We'll be there soon, so we'll find out then."

"I just hope it's not something scary..."

"I don't want that either."

"Wouldn't you be scared if a ghost or something appeared?"

"I'm a ghost too, you know."

"You're you, Sanae-chan. Real ghosts are way scarier."

"...Weren't you scared of me at first?"

Koutarou found it heartwarming that Yurika and Sanae had begun carefreely chatting away like normal, but his expression turned serious once again when he saw the front gate to the hospital in front of him.

"Satomi-kun, someone's there."

Shizuka, who was running next to Koutarou, pointed up ahead just in front of the entrance to the hospital property. She had good eyesight and hadn't had

any trouble spotting the two people standing there in the darkness.

“You’re right...”

From their silhouettes, Koutarou could tell that it was a tall, slim man and a short, fat one. They were facing Koutarou and the others as they approached, almost like they’d been waiting for them.

Could those be the guys Kiriha-san was talking to? Are they underground dwellers?

Koutarou’s mind was racing as he approached. When he got closer, the two men stepped out of the shadows. Finally seeing their faces, Koutarou let out a wild gasp of surprise.

“Wait, these guys again?!”

Koutarou had seen them before. They were the pair of ghost hunters they’d encountered at the beach last year.

“Satomi-kun, do you know them?”

“You know them too, Landlord-san! They’re the perverts from the beach!”

“Huh?! Seriously?!”

“What?! Y-You’re right! They’re those perverts!”

“Huh? There were perverts there?”

“They are the ones who kidnapped Sanae-sama.”

“Oh yeah, you were captured by the cosclub, so you couldn’t come...”

They were the ghost hunters that had captured Sanae and planned to sell her. In the process, they had been mistaken for perverts.

“Koutarou, do you think they’re up to something nefarious again?”

“Satomi-kun, do you think maybe they’re the ones who did something to Sanae-chan?”

“Those creeps! How dare they show up again?!”

After what they’d tried to do to Sanae last time, Koutarou and the others were still hostile towards the two offending ghost hunters. So much so that

they were ready to finish them off for good this time.

“Ohoho, I’m afraid your luck’s run out now that we’ve crossed paths again.”

“Do it, Theia! Send those lolicons flying!”

“Your Highness, since it’s after dark, you should keep the power and noise levels low.”

“I know. Allow me to show you just how considerate I can be! Blue Knight, the anti-personnel laser!”

Out of all the weapons aboard her spaceship, Blue Knight, the anti-personnel laser was one of the weakest. And since lasers didn’t make much noise when fired, it was the perfect weapon for night combat. The hunters were mere seconds from being incinerated.

“Aaaaah, stop! Wait!”

“We haven’t done anything bad!”

Seeing the weapon Theia summoned at her side, the hunters began panicking. They finally realized that their lives were in danger.

“We haven’t laid a finger on Sanae-chan!”

“We just watch over her every night!”

“Yeah, they’re clearly stalkers after Sanae-chan.”

“Theia, shoot them.”

“Roger. Release the safety. I’ll leave the shooting to you.”

“As you wish, my princess.”

“Nooooo! Nee-san, d-did you not explain anything to them?!”

“Oh, right... Theia-dono, please hold your attack.”

Just before Theia’s laser cannon was about the fire, Kiriha called for her to halt.

“Why stop me?”

“They are not the enemy. They are subordinates that I have employed.”

“Employed?! Wh-What do you mean?!”

Koutarou was baffled by what Kiriha had said.

Why would she need to employ them? They’re the same guys who did all that awful stuff to Sanae!

Koutarou spoke in an accusatory tone, but that was because he knew what kind of a shady past these men had. If it hadn’t been Kiriha vouching for them, Koutarou probably wouldn’t have listened.

“I will explain everything, including that. We’ve reached our destination, after all.”

Kiriha calmed Koutarou as she walked over and looked up at one of the taller buildings in Kisshouharukaze City: the Kisshouharukaze municipal hospital. That was their destination.

Despite being the middle of the night, the hospital wasn’t completely empty. There were nurses on the night shift, doctors on duty, and guards patrolling the halls. Yet despite that, Koutarou and the others didn’t come across a single person as they entered the building. Kiriha had arranged a clear path for them while they were on the way. Thanks to her assistance, they were able to proceed ahead without being stopped.

“Well done, you two.”

“We’re fortunate this happened overnight. If it had been during the day, that hyper-intuitive mother would have been here, and things might have been a little problematic.”

“Here we are.”

The short, fat hunter who was leading the way stopped in front of a private patient room on the top floor of the hospital. They were in the wing where long-term patients were hospitalized. The short, fat hunter slid the door open. It was thick, and designed to stay sealed shut in order to prevent viruses or pathogens from getting in or out of the room. And after opening it, the fat hunter stood aside to let everyone in.

But nobody moved. They were all hesitant to enter a patient's room. The darkness inside the room only made them even more hesitant.

"Everyone, please hurry on inside. We can't allow ourselves to be seen by the other patients," Kiriha said, urging the skeptical group inside.

"Y-Yeah."

Koutarou was the first to react, and warily stepped forward. After taking the lead, the others followed him inside.

Since this is a patient room, someone is probably hospitalized in here...

Entering the room, Koutarou looked around for who might be inside. In the dim light of an emergency exit sign, he could see someone asleep on the bed at the far end of the room.

That must be them...

Though the reason was unclear, Kiriha had brought everyone here to meet this patient. Looking for an answer as to why, Koutarou slowly stepped closer to the bed. That was when Kiriha, who had entered the room last, flipped on the lights. The overhead lights revealed the face of the girl sleeping in the hospital bed.

"What?! How could this be?!"

"Whaaat?!"

"No way!"

Koutarou, Yurika who was resting on his back, and Sanae who was floating next to him were so taken aback by what they saw that they felt like their hearts were about to leap out of their chests. Yurika was so surprised that she had jumped off of Koutarou's back and rushed over to the bed.

"What's wrong?!"

"Ruth!"

"Yes!"

Seeing Koutarou's reaction, Shizuka, Theia, and Ruth also approached the bed. The six of them crowded around it, and they were each rendered

speechless as they looked at the face of the sleeping girl. It was a good ten seconds later before the silence was broken by Koutarou and Sanae.

“S-Sanae! This is Sanae!”

“It’s me! I’m sleeping here!”

To everyone’s surprise, the girl sleeping on the bed was indeed Sanae. The Sanae on the bed looked a couple of years older than the one they were used to, but there was no mistaking it. Everyone was convinced right away that it was her.

“That’s right. This is Sanae. I was just as surprised when I saw her here for the first time myself.”

Kiriha approached the rest of the group. Since she and the two ghost hunters already knew, they were able to remain calm even amidst all the surprise in the room.



“What is the meaning of this?! Why is Sanae here?! It’s not just a look-alike, right?!”

Koutarou had already used his spirit sight to inspect her aura and confirm for himself that it was Sanae. Both the color and pattern of her spiritual energy were identical to that of the ghost floating next to him. The only difference was her age and the strength of her aura. But that was all the more reason for Koutarou to doubt his own eyes. The Sanae he knew was no longer living.

“Allow me to explain. That is why I brought you all here.”

Kiriha calmly responded to the excited Koutarou, but there was a hint of sadness in her eyes. She already knew the cruel fate that awaited.

Kiriha had found Sanae in this hospital over half a year ago. After Koutarou and the others had defeated the ghost hunters, Kiriha had struck a deal with them. In exchange for a large sum of money, she demanded that they never come after Sanae and that they surrender all the information they had on her. The hunters happily agreed and accepted the deal.

The information they’d turned over included that the real Sanae was a patient of this hospital. Several years ago, she had been afflicted with an unknown disease and grown weak, and was ultimately admitted to the hospital for it. In other words, Sanae wasn’t the ghost of someone who had passed away. And the reason her parents hadn’t returned to room 106 was because they had moved in to their family home, which was closer to the hospital.

Kiriha had been skeptical about all this at first, but after doing her own investigating, she came to the conclusion that this girl was indeed the real Sanae. She then devoted herself to trying to treat her, despite the fact that she had no real reason to other than sheer goodwill. Kiriha disliked fighting and she was keenly aware how painful it could be to wait for a loved one. That’s why she wanted to return Sanae to her parents as soon as possible.

Of course, that would be a problem for Kiriha, who wanted to prolong the battle for room 106. If Sanae recovered and bowed out of the fight for the apartment, the balance of power would shift just enough to incite the radical faction. Kiriha knew she wouldn’t be able to hold them back if they saw an

opportunity like that. And Kiriha began laying the groundwork to treat Sanae early on, working under the assumption that Sanae would secede from the battle.

As Kiriha did what she could to stave off the radical faction. She began using underground technology in an attempt to treat Sanae. But as she continued her investigation, Kiriha ran into a rather large hurdle. She discovered that the Sanae in the hospital was conscious.

If ghost Sanae had just been a soul that had escaped its body, it would have been a relatively simple matter to fix. Kiriha would only have needed to use spiritual energy technology to rebind the soul to the body. There was a known procedure for that, and something like it had been used successfully in the past. But it wouldn't help if the Sanae in the hospital was a normal girl by all accounts. And that considerably puzzled Kiriha.

With that, Kiriha took a step back and assessed what she did know. The ghost hunters had targeted Sanae because she was a forgotten, loose spirit. If her real body could function on its own just fine, nobody would miss the ghost Sanae if they captured her. To them, she was the perfect target, and they wouldn't have to feel bad about kidnapping her if it wasn't going to hurt anyone. Investigating from there, Kiriha learned that the ghost Sanae she and the others knew was a mass of the original Sanae's spiritual energy that had separated from her body and was wandering around in a ghostly form.

A few years ago, spiritual energy had begun separating from Sanae, which caused her body to grow weaker. When her parents realized the toll it was taking on her, they moved to their family home and took her to the hospital. When they left, however, the spiritual energy of Sanae's that was left in room 106 coalesced into the Sanae they knew now. She stayed there in room 106 where she chased out tenant after tenant, and eventually met Koutarou.

Kiriha didn't know why Sanae had begun losing spiritual energy in the first place. It might have been a condition she had been born with, or perhaps her soul had been through some kind of trauma in the past. But regardless of the reason, Sanae's current condition was troubling.

With the majority of her spiritual energy making up her ghost self, Sanae's

body grew ever weaker. And after several years of this, she was now in an incredibly precarious condition. In order to save her, they'd have to rejoin the two Sanaes as soon as possible.

But therein lay the problem. Uniting them meant that they would need to reduce her ghost form to raw spiritual energy in order to be able to channel it into her body. But that kind of case was unprecedented even for the People of the Earth, and they didn't have the technology to make it happen. It would take time to develop, so as an act of kindness, Kiriha had initiated that project long before Koutarou and the others even found out about Sanae's condition. She didn't want them to spend the time it would take to develop fretting over what might happen.

But now Sanae was growing weaker at a pace that outstripped the progress being made on the technology to save her. Tonight it had gotten so bad that it was clear her life was in imminent danger. And with Sanae's real body in trouble, her ghost form was too. They were still connected in that regard.

"...Strictly speaking, the Sanae that we know isn't any normal ghost. In fact, it would be more accurate to say that the Sanae sleeping in this bed unconsciously created an artificial ghost with her psychic powers."

When she finished her explanation, Kiriha turned and pointed to a wall of the hospital room.

"That's why, despite being a ghost, Sanae can freely change her clothes. Of course, her choices are limited to what she owns..."

The wall Kiriha indicated was lined with hanging clothes—the vast majority of which were familiar to Koutarou and the others. They were all clothes they'd seen ghost Sanae wear before.

"Ah..."

While she looked at the clothes, Sanae could hear the voice of her other self.

When I get better, I'm going to wear them... That's why I have to hang in there...

It was the voice of the girl sleeping on the bed. That's what she would think to

herself every day as she looked at her wardrobe. And that's why ghost Sanae could freely change her outfit. It was Sanae's wish to be able to go out dressed as she pleased.

"Y-You're kidding... That can't..."

Sanae was quite shaken. She'd been somewhat skeptical of what Kiriha had been saying up until now. But seeing the clothes and hearing that voice convinced her. The girl sleeping in front of her was indeed her other self.

"Sanae..."

Kiriha gave Sanae, whose eyes were wide open in astonishment, a sympathetic look. The others did too. It was obvious that Sanae was shocked, and there was hardly anything they could do to ease that shock. The wrong words, even if they meant well, might make things worse at a time like this. But not being able to do anything at all for a friend frustrated them.

"That's not possible! Because, because... Koutarou!"

With tears in her eyes, Sanae flew towards Koutarou and pleaded with him loudly.

"If Kiriha is right, then that means that papa and mama won't come back to room 106, right?!"

That was the biggest shock to Sanae. Compared to that, everything else almost seemed inconsequential.

"It's a lie, right, Koutarou?!"

"That's..."

"Please just say it's a lie! Please!"

Sanae already knew that it was the truth. But even then, she couldn't accept it. Sanae just couldn't believe that her parents had abandoned her, even if they hadn't meant to, and that they were never coming back for her. It was enough to make her question the reason for her own existence. If she admitted that her parents weren't coming back, it would be like admitting everything she'd done up until now had been for nothing. And she just couldn't believe that.

"Waaaaah, uwaaaaaaaah! No, I don't want this! I don't want to be alone! I

don’t want to, Koutarou! Waaaaaaaaaah!”

Sanae leaped at Koutarou, crying loudly as she wrapped her arms around his neck. After being told that she’d effectively been orphaned, she felt like Koutarou was all she had.

“Sanae... why do you think you’re alone?”

“Because, because... Ngh, uwaaah! Because! Papa and mama... Papa and mama won’t...!”

Sanae tried her best to convey her feelings, but she couldn’t put them into words. They mostly came out as sobs.

“Your parents brought you to the hospital. They want you to get better. Doesn’t that mean that they want you to come back?”

Sanae’s parents wanted Sanae to regain what she had lost. They wanted her to be well again, and they were doing everything in their power to make that happen. They hadn’t given up on her, and they absolutely hadn’t abandoned her.

“Hnnngh... But, but... I waited and waited there for... for so many years! And it was all... It was all for nothing, waaaaaaaah!”

What Koutarou said was perfectly rational; it was just nearly impossible for Sanae to accept in such an emotional state. She had spent too long alone. That’s why she continued crying, without an outlet for her feelings.

“Say, Sanae...”

Koutarou gently embraced the crying Sanae.

“It’s been a long time since you, me, and everyone else met, but...”

“Waaah! Koutarou, Koutarou!”

Sanae desperately clung to Koutarou, as if she was trying to replace the warmth she had lost with his.

“Was it really that boring? Was meeting all of us all for nothing?”

“What...”

With those words, Sanae stopped moving and her crying gradually quieted

down, but she only held on to Koutarou tighter.

“Sanae-chan! You’re my precious friend! You’re definitely not alone!” Yurika declared with a smile.

Sanae was her friend. If she wasn’t, Yurika never would have broken the rules to use magic for personal reasons and save her.

“That’s right, Sanae. At the very least, I have matured after meeting you. And if you say that means nothing, I would be sad. Standing at the top of the mountain isn’t the only goal of mountaineering, right?”

Theia felt much the same way Yurika did. Over the past year, they’d been through all kinds of ups and downs together. They’d grown together. Theia refused to believe that meant nothing, and she wanted Sanae to understand that.

“It’s just as Her Highness says, Sanae-sama. Haven’t many happy things happened since then?”

“Yeah, everyone is right! Besides, a landlord and tenant are like parent and child. We have something special. Who cares if there was a reason for it all or not?”

Ruth and Shizuka felt the same way the other girls did. There had been some minor troubles since they’d met Sanae, but overall, every day had been a good one. And they wanted things between them to continue that way.

“Sanae, nobody thinks of you as unnecessary. Even if you were to lose the game and the right to the room, nobody would tell you to leave. We all need you. And don’t you think it’s the same way with your parents?”

Kiriha was the last to speak up, and even she offered words of encouragement for Sanae. There was no need for Sanae to be sad. Everyone loved her, including her parents. They might have missed each other, but her parents still loved her.

“Everyone...”

Sanae looked at the faces of everyone present with her eyes wide. She had never been told that she was needed so directly before.

“Sanae, what do you think?”

“...Every day is so fun. And I wanted it to stay that way forever...”

Warmth began pulsing through Sanae’s frozen heart once more. It spread in an instant and melted away the ice that had sealed it off.

“Then why are you crying?”

“Because... Koutarou, you still haven’t said anything loving yet.”

“You’re already feeling better, aren’t you?”

“No, I’m depressed! You’re the only one that hasn’t said anything tender to me!”

Sanae flashed a slight smile and brought her cheek closer to Koutarou. Her face was still wet with tears, but she was no longer crying.

“Of course I wouldn’t say anything like that in this situation.”

“Cheapskate.”

“I try not to spoil children.”

In the end, Koutarou didn’t say anything Sanae wanted to hear. But he did hug her a little tighter.

“Heehee...”

Since that conveyed his feelings well enough, Sanae didn’t say anything more. To her, that meant more than words.

“So, Kiriha-san, Sanae’s in danger as things stand, right?”

Still holding Sanae, Koutarou turned to Kiriha for what to do next. Sanae looked up at Koutarou’s face before silently looking at Kiriha too. She understood that she was in danger, but she left the talking to Koutarou.

“That’s right. Currently a device to stabilize spiritual energy is being used, but it’s only a temporary fix.”

Kiriha pointed to the device set up next to the bed as she explained. The device in question was about a meter tall, and looked rather unpolished with its circuity and wires exposed. As Kiriha said, it was a patchwork fix, and it certainly

looked the part.

“A device of this size can run for about an hour, but we can’t just set up a larger one and hide it. We need a proper solution.”

Sanae’s unconscious body was growing weaker even as they spoke, and ghost Sanae was only able to maintain her form through the help of the device. Since they were originally one person, the only way to save both of them was to unite them again somehow.

“Is that even possible? You said the technology is still being developed, right?”

“It’s impossible right now, yes, but we’re a step away from a breakthrough.”

Kiriha shook her head.

“We could reduce Sanae’s ghost form to spiritual energy, but we wouldn’t be able to stabilize it with the technology we have now.”

“Then you’re stuck.”

“No. I just said it wasn’t possible with the technology we have now.”

Kiriha shook her head once more and pointed at Yurika.

“Judging from what happened before, Yurika’s magic should be able to make it happen.”

Even with the advanced technology of the People of the Earth, they couldn’t directly heal Sanae. But Yurika could make up for what they lacked with magic. Between the two, they should be able to save her. It was only a possibility because they’d all come to trust in Yurika and her powers. And that was why Kiriha had insisted on bringing the unconscious Yurika with them.

“Me again?!”

Wide-eyed, Yurika pointed at herself in disbelief. She didn’t expect to get another turn.

“Please, Yurika. What we need right now is your precise control of spiritual energy.”

“But, but I’m not very confident I can do it...”

Yurika, exhausted and bewildered, no longer had the same confident aura about her she did earlier.

Doing that again... No, that's impossible!

Yurika had returned to her pessimistic self.

"If you can't do it, Sanae will die. You just have to do it, confident or not."

"Please, Yurika."

"E-Even if you say that, I can't do it! Satomi-san, please help me! It's impossible, right?"

Yurika was starting to tear up and turned to Koutarou for help. She wanted him to tell her she wouldn't be able to do it so that she could take it easy.

"Koutarou, listen to her."

"Satomi-kun, can't you do something?"

Theia and Shizuka turned to Koutarou too, hoping he would know how to encourage her.

"Well..."

It wasn't like he didn't understand how Yurika felt. She'd really given it her all before. It felt cruel to ask her to go through it again in this condition.

But... Yurika is probably...

After thinking for a while with his arms crossed, Koutarou looked at Yurika.

"Yurika."

"It's impossible, right, Satomi-san?!"

Yurika was convinced that Koutarou would take her side.

"...Is it really?" Koutarou said, looking directly into her eyes.

"Ah..."

Yurika was swept away by Koutarou's serious stare. His eyes were shining with a strong sense of trust and expectation, and the moment she saw that, Yurika could feel her timidity and anxiety vanish.

I can't betray this... A precious friend is relying on me...

Confidence and courage began to blossom in their place.

"I'll do it. I'll show you I can."

Yurika nodded without a hint of hesitation. She had regained her strength as a magical girl.

"I'm counting on you."

"Yes!"

Looking at Yurika, who had regained her love and courage, Kiriha made a fist and then raised her middle and index fingers in the shape of a V.

"That's one problem taken care of. Only one more remains."

Kiriha then lowered her middle finger, leaving only her index finger in the air.

"There's still a problem?"

"There is. Granted, that's only if we succeed..."

As Kiriha said, she pointed at her head with her raised finger.

"The problem is her memories."

"Memories? What do you mean?"

Seeing the doleful look on Kiriha's face, Koutarou had a bad feeling about what she was going to say.

"Sanae will almost certainly lose her memory of the time she spent as a ghost."

"What?! W-Wait a minute, what's that supposed to mean?!"

Sanae's life was in danger. Fortunately there was a solution. That made her feel a little better, but now she had another bomb dropped on her altogether. She was so taken by surprise that even though she'd left the talking to Koutarou so far, she instinctively leaned forward and interrupted Kiriha.

"The memories you have now are memories you have acquired in a spiritual form. Even if they're reduced to spiritual energy and returned to your body with you, it's not like they'll overwrite the memories in the brain of your actual

body.”

“I don’t get it! Explain it with words I can understand!”

“Think of it this way. Your time as a ghost is like a past life. Once Sanae wakes up, she most likely won’t remember any of it—including us.”

Once ghost Sanae merged with her body again, she would take the memories written into her soul with her, but they wouldn’t be stored in the network of nerves making up her brain. That way, she’d have to commune with her soul every time she wanted to remember Koutarou and the other girls. But that would be incredibly difficult. Accessing the memories of the soul was practically the same as conjuring memories from a past life. There were extremely few people who had the power to do that, and it was unlikely Sanae was one of them.

“Th-Then I won’t know who Koutarou or all of you are if I stick with the me sleeping over there?!”

“Sadly, I’m afraid that’s the case. I’m sorry, Sanae, but we didn’t have enough time to do anything about your memories.”

Kiriha apologized with a bitter expression. Of course, it wasn’t like Kiriha hadn’t thought about restoring Sanae’s memories. But with things as they were and the development of the technology behind where they would have liked it to be, Sanae’s life took priority over her memories. The length of time she’d been a ghost also posed a problem. The amount of information that would have to be copied over to her brain was simply too much. Because they were more concerned about making sure they could save Sanae’s life, they hadn’t gotten around to coming up with a good way to keep Sanae’s memories.

“N-No...”

Sanae frantically shook her head.

“No, I don’t want that! I definitely don’t want to lose my memories and become a different person!”

Sanae now understood what Kiriha was saying. She meant that, in order for her to survive, she had to throw away her life as she knew it.

“Because... Because I won’t know how warm Koutarou is, or how fun it is to be with everyone!”

Sanae was in tears again. She just couldn’t stand the idea of losing her precious memories.

“I’m stupid, so I’ll just be mean again! Like throwing dictionaries at Koutarou! I finally became friends with everyone, so I don’t want to go back to throwing tantrums like a child again! I finally, finally... waaaaah!”

Losing her memories would mean regressing on all the friendships she’d made along the way, and that would mean the end of the warm, comfortable everyday life she had with those precious people. She hated the idea.

“But Sanae, if you don’t return to your body, you’ll die!”

Even though Sanae didn’t want to sacrifice her memories, Theia wanted her to live, even if it came at a cost.

“I know that... I already know that!”

Sanae had to make a choice. She could either die with her memories, or live without them.

“But I can’t choose! I don’t want to die, but I won’t be me without my memories! That makes it practically the same as dying!”

To Sanae, both options essentially meant the same thing. The Sanae sleeping in bed would be the one to survive. Since her memories as a ghost wouldn’t be passed on, it was like her ghost self would disappear altogether. In a sense, it was the same as dying. So whether she died or she merged with her former self, the Sanae that Koutarou and the others knew would be lost. It was a harsh fate that left Sanae without any real options.

“This is unfair! I won’t see everyone again no matter what I choose!”

Sanae shouted and clung to Koutarou with all her strength.

“No, I want to stay here! I want to be together with everyone!”

Sanae didn’t want to let go of her current life and the friends she’d made in room 106. And most of all, she didn’t want to let go of the warmth of the person who was embracing her with both arms.

“This... This is just unfair!”

The warmth Sanae was holding on to was something she was willing to trade her life for. And that’s why it happened.

“Agh...”

All of a sudden, Koutarou started vomiting blood. Not a moment later, he lost consciousness and collapsed.

“Koutarou?!”

Sanae did her best to hold him up, but he slumped over her like a large, lifeless doll.

“What is this?! At this rate, Koutarou will die!”

As a ghost, Sanae could tell just by touching him. Koutarou was losing spiritual energy at an alarming pace. And if it continued, he would die shortly.

“What?! How?! Koutarou! Koutarou!”

But Sanae didn’t understand why. All she could do was helplessly watch as the person she loved more than anything was dying.

Memories and Life

Wednesday, March 17th

Clan, who had given Koutarou a thorough checkup, adjusted her glasses as she reported her findings to Theia and the others.

“His blood pressure, pulse, and temperature are all dropping. And that’s not all. In fact, all of his vital activities are in decline. Medically speaking... if this continues, Koutarou will without a doubt die.”

Clan had appeared shortly after Koutarou collapsed. The bracelet he was wearing had alerted her that his life was in danger. And after seeing him collapsed like that, she brought him to the Cradle to treat him. Since it was designed to be a research vessel, it was better equipped than Blue Knight to give a detailed diagnose. Theia and Clan had argued about it, but Ruth and Kiriha intervened. In the end, everyone from Corona House was now aboard the Cradle to support Koutarou.

“He’s barely holding on thanks to the medical treatments, but he won’t last for long this way.”

Clan felt a sense of relief as she explained things to Theia and the others.

I made it just in time... Thank you, Alaia-san...

Koutarou had been put in a bed in the lab and had a respiratory device and an IV drip attached to him. There were machines running left and right to help sustain him, but what was actually keeping him alive was Signaltin, which Clan had hidden under the bed. He was deteriorating far faster than even Clan’s technology could keep up with, and if it weren’t for Signaltin, he likely wouldn’t have survived this long.

“What happened to Koutarou?! Kiriha, tell me! You know, right?!”

Everyone was shaken by what had happened to Koutarou, but Sanae was the most affected of all. Of course, that was only natural. Not only was her own life

in danger now, but the person she loved most of all was dying right in front of her.

“Based on everything’s that happened, there’s almost no mistaking it.”

Koutarou’s body had been examined with spiritual technology, magic, and science. All three results pointed to a single cause.

“Koutarou is...”

Kiriha hesitated. She had expected this kind of situation might happen, but she was hesitant to say it out loud. That said, she couldn’t afford to be timid or polite right now, so she steeled herself as she delivered the harsh truth.

“Koutarou is having his spiritual energy stolen by you, Sanae.”

“Me?! You’re lying! I would never do something so horrible!”

“Yeah, Kiriha! I can’t believe you’re saying that! There’s no way that Sanae would try to kill Koutarou!”

Sanae and Theia were the only ones to say anything, but everyone had a hard time believing what Kiriha was saying. Surely she was mistaken.

“This is unrelated to what Sanae does or doesn’t want. Her very existence as a ghost is killing Koutarou.”

Not even Kiriha wanted to believe it herself. But if she let her emotions get the better of her, Koutarou would die. So with a sorrowful expression on her face, she continued her explanation.

“Sanae was originally a ghost bound to room 106. She received spiritual energy from two sources to maintain her body: from her real body and from the ley lines near room 106.”

Sanae lived in room 106 as something between a specter and a bound ghost. In order to maintain her form, she drew spiritual energy from her original body and from the environment around her.

“But over the past year, a change has occurred within Sanae.”

“What change?! I haven’t changed at all!”

“You were once a ghost bound to a location, but you’ve become a ghost

attached to a person. A possessing ghost.”

“A possessing ghost?!”

Theia was wide-eyed and speechless. It seemed as though she knew exactly what Kiriha was talking about.

“As a result, her supply of spiritual energy had gradually began shifting from the ley lines to Koutarou. Up until now, the amount of energy she’s actually been draining has been slight, so his biggest symptom has only been stiff shoulders...”

“Now that you mention, Satomi-sama has been talking about how stiff his shoulders are for quite a while now...”

“He had me massage his shoulders several times.”

When a ghost possessed someone, they often developed symptoms like stiff shoulders and poor circulation. And since they’d all heard Koutarou complaining about that, the residents of room 106 began to connect the dots on their own.

“But just recently, your source of energy switched over to Koutarou completely.”

“Why?!”

“Sanae, that’s because Koutarou has become more important to you than room 106.”

Room 106 was extremely important to Sanae. It was where she had waited all this time for her parents. But once she’d learned they weren’t coming back, the people in room 106 became much more important to her than the room itself. And the most important of them all was Koutarou.

“Well, yeah, I love Koutarou! But since I love him, I wouldn’t try to kill him!”

Sanae was also aware that she loved Koutarou the most, but she couldn’t believe that she was killing him.

“Sanae, like I said, your will is irrelevant here. Ghosts possess the item, space, or person most precious to them. That’s why you’ve latched on to Koutarou, and that’s what’s killing him.”

Sanae of course didn't want him to die, but like Kiriha said, it wasn't about what she did or didn't want. Ghosts latched on to people and objects out of love, hate, or any other strong emotion. It wasn't something they had control over. And just like humans needed air to breathe, ghosts stole spiritual energy to sustain themselves.

For a normal ghost, the consequences weren't all that dramatic. Their victims often complained of fatigue or stiff shoulders, but that was the extent of it. Sanae, however, required a vast amount of spiritual energy. Because of that, she'd started draining it from Koutarou faster than he could produce it. Since her secondary supply of energy—her real body—had grown unstable, she was relying on Koutarou more and more. Koutarou, who only had an average amount of spiritual energy, couldn't possibly hope to sustain her on his own.

That was one of the reasons why Kiriha had kept the truth a secret from everyone. She knew from the outset that if Sanae learned that her parents weren't going to return to room 106, her list of priorities would change and she would most likely end up possessing Koutarou. That's why she'd kept it quiet as long as she could.

"Th-Then Koutarou's going to die, and it's going to be my fault?"

Her eyes overflowing with tears, Sanae pointed towards the unconscious Koutarou.

"I'm afraid so, yes."

Kiriha's response was short, but it was painful to say even that much. It wasn't like she wanted to cause Sanae any undue grief.

"At this rate, both Koutarou and I will die... I don't want that! But if I return to my own body, I won't know who you all are anymore... and I don't want that either!"

It was already clear what she had to do, but she was scared to do it. The future appeared hopeless and dim.

"Tell me, Koutarou! What should I do?!"

She ran over to Koutarou and pleaded for an answer. Feeling helpless, she ended up relying on him just like she always did. And that was what was killing

him. For better or worse, Sanae needed Koutarou.

“S-Sanae...”

Koutarou opened his eyes when he heard Sanae’s voice. He was conscious now, but could still barely speak.

“Koutarou! You’re awake!”

“Yeah... I have been for a while... so I understand the situation...”

Koutarou had regained his consciousness about the time Clan finished with her examination. His body was aching and he couldn’t muster any strength, so he hadn’t even been able to move. But hearing Sanae desperately calling for him, he just couldn’t stay quiet.

“Koutarou, what should I do? I don’t want to kill you, but I don’t want to lose my memories either!”

Koutarou would know the answer. Sanae hoped that he would tell her what it was, much the same way that young children expected their parents to know everything.

Sanae... that’s for you to decide...

But Koutarou himself didn’t know, so he answered her question with a question.

“S-Sanae... what kind of future do you want?”

Between those few words, Koutarou’s expression distorted in pain. Sanae was stealing spiritual energy from him even now. Even with Signaltin’s protection, it was all he could do to stay conscious.

“That’s obvious! I want to have fun with everyone, eat food, and play games! And I want to see my mama and papa! That’s the kind of future I want!”

Sanae knew what her wish was. She wanted her everyday life to continue, and she wanted to see her parents. But the thought that she couldn’t have both drove her to bitter tears.

“Then... r-return to your body, Sanae.”

“If I do that, I’ll lose my memories! I won’t know who you are anymore!”

Sanae shook her head, large tears spilling from her eyes. Her memories of the past year were irreplaceable to her. She was terrified of losing them. She couldn't bear the thought of it.

"It'll be okay."

But Koutarou shook his head in return. And through the incredible pain, he managed a smile for her.

"How?!"

"E-Even if you lose your memories, I... We will definitely become your friends... We'll make sure your everyday life... continues..."

Even if Sanae lost her memories, her everyday life would stay the same as it always had. They would become her friends all over again and they would take her back to room 106 where they would play games and eat dinner together. That way, even if her memories didn't return, Sanae would get the future she wanted.

"Koutarou..."

Koutarou's answer was something that Sanae hadn't imagined. Astonished, she stared at his face with her eyes opened wide in surprise. He continued to smile despite the pain.

"Isn't that right, everyone?"

He then asked for the opinion of everyone else who had been watching over them.

"That's right, Sanae! Don't think you can escape from our games just by losing your memories! Since you've started this fight, you have a duty to see it through until the end!"

Theia quickly agreed with Koutarou. She answered in true Theia fashion with an emphasis on competition, but that was exactly what Sanae wanted to hear from her.

"Sanae-chan, let's keep watching *Love Love Heart* together! I'll ask the cosclub to record the episodes you might forget!"

Yurika answered in her own way too, and she was in tears just like Sanae.

During the past year, the two of them had always been together when they watched their magical girl anime. Yurika didn't want to watch the end to the series on her own. She wanted to watch the ending together with Sanae no matter what.

"If you have requests for dinner, I'm listening, Sanae. I'll prepare whatever you'd like when you return to room 106."

Kiriha knew what Sanae liked. She liked Hamburg steak and curry. She had taste like a child—like Koutarou. But she asked what she would want anyway. She wanted to have a promise between them too.

"Sanae-sama, it's just as everyone says. You'll only be losing your memories. There's no changing the fact that we're friends."

"Yeah, Sanae-chan! Even if everyone else hesitates, I'll talk to you no matter what! So you don't have to worry!"

Ruth and Shizuka felt the same way. Their eyes welled with tears as they agreed to Koutarou's plan to make Sanae's wish come true. They both loved her and wanted to see her happy too.

"Ho! We'll be waiting, ho!"

"We love Sanae-chan too, ho!"

Even the haniwas joined in.

"...You two be quiet."

"Mm, mmmph!"

"Fhm, fhmmm!"

Since it looked like the mood was about to be ruined, Clan clapped her hands over the haniwas' mouths and dragged them out of the room.

Am I feeling envious of that girl because I've matured myself?

After shutting up the haniwas, Clan cast a soft glance back at the group.

"Everyone, thank you..."

Sanae wiped away her tears as she smiled. She was really happy to hear everyone say such kind things to her. And at the same time, she was incredibly

sad that they would soon part ways. That's why no matter how many times she wiped away her tears, they wouldn't stop overflowing from her eyes.

"I love you all too..."

All of their feelings had come together because of the danger Sanae was in. Koutarou and the girls all loved each other in one way or another. And everyone in the room recognized that right now.

"Theia, I will definitely keep playing games."

"I will be waiting."

Even though it no longer mattered who won, the games between them were a way to strengthen the bonds between them.

"Yurika, I'll let you borrow my *Love Love Heart* stuff."

"I'll give it all back to you just as soon as we meet again."

"Yeah, please do."

And after all this time, Sanae shared all kinds of bonds with the residents of room 106. Even something as simple as watching anime had been a way to build a friendship.

"Kiriha, I want to eat whatever you're the best at making."

"Are you sure you're fine with something like that?"

"Yeah. I'm sure eating something I'm used to will taste better."

"All right. I'll be sure to prepare it."

Now that they were saying goodbye to Sanae, everyone realized how precious they'd become to each other. She was irreplaceable to each of them, and they all prayed that things would go well so that their daily lives together could continue.

"Ruth, Shizuka, once I'm gone, I'll leave Koutarou to you. He gets lonely easily."

"You can count on us, Sanae-sama."

"I will accept this responsibility as his landlord."

And they would keep praying as they waited. For Sanae and for the day she would once again return to room 106.

“Karama-chan, Korama-chan, I love you guys too. Let’s play again sometime.”

“Ho! All right, ho!”

“I’m so happy, ho! It’s a promise, ho!”

“I said be quiet.”

“Mmmph!”

“Fhmmm!”

Once she said her other farewells, Sanae finally turned to Koutarou. After hugging him once, she took a step back.

“Koutarou, I’m sorry for keeping you waiting this long while you’re in so much pain...”

“I don’t remember raising you to be a rude girl who said her farewells quickly...”

“I don’t remember that either.”

Sanae gently stroked Koutarou’s cheeks as she whispered to him. As she did, she could feel all of the events that had led up to this day bubble up to the surface of her memory and slowly vanish.

When they’d first met, Sanae had thrown Koutarou’s luggage at him. But then Yurika showed up and their fight was left unsettled. After that, Kiriha and Theia appeared one after another and things got complicated. In the end, they all ended up living together. And that was just the beginning. Sanae was kidnapped, Theia wrote a play, and the underground people even came to invade. Koutarou had even scared them by disappearing for a little while.

Sanae really loved the life she’d been living. Every day since she’d met Koutarou had been grand. And when she imagined losing all of that, she trembled all over.

“I was planning on becoming the perfect incredible woman as your guardian angel, too.”

“And you did.”

Koutarou had been saved by Sanae several times over. Both by her psychic powers and by her bright smile. She really was like a guardian angel to him.

“No, in the end, I’m just an evil spirit. I’m even killing you right now.”

“Evil spirits don’t cry when they smile.”

Beads of sweat ran down Koutarou’s forehead. Sanae tried to wipe them away, but her ghostly hands couldn’t comfort him. She smiled bitterly at herself.

“Ahaha, looks like I couldn’t even become an evil spirit then. In the end, I could only be myself...”

“That’s right. Just make sure you’re the version of yourself you want to be most.”

“Yeah...”

Sanae had been a ghost up until now, but that future was quickly closing before her. Yet with that, she would regain her life as a normal human. She could become whatever she wanted. If she wanted, she could even start a family. Possibilities spread out before.

“That’s right, Koutarou. I’ll give this back to you.”

“Hmm?”

“The charm. It’s important to you, right?”

Sanae removed the charm she normally carried around her neck and put it in Koutarou’s hand. It was the family safety charm that she had been wearing ever since she was kidnapped by the ghost hunters and attacked by evil spirits.

“I gave this to you.”

“You did... but I can’t take this with me.”

Sanae would be reduced to spiritual energy and returned to her body. She wouldn’t be able to take any of her possessions with her, so she was returning the charm to Koutarou for now.

“So give it back to me when we meet again.”

“It’s a promise.”

“Good.”

Koutarou held the charm together with Sanae’s hand. He didn’t want Sanae to go either. He didn’t want to let go of her hand, but he definitely didn’t want her to die. Even if she lost her memories, as long as she was happy, he could endure the loneliness of letting her go. And so he slowly released her hand, but held on tightly to the charm and their memories.

“Koutarou, could you promise me one more thing?”

Sanae wiped away her tears again, and with that, they finally stopped.

“Sure.”

“If... And I mean if... But if I fall in love with you again... after becoming human...”

“Yeah?”

“Would you take me as your wi—”

Sanae wanted one more promise, but she couldn’t finish her sentence.

“What’s wrong?”

“Actually, I won’t say it.”

Instead, she just smiled.

“I feel like making you promise that at a time like this would be really unfair.”

It wasn’t a particularly remarkable one. It was just her normal smile, but it was burned into the hearts of everyone who saw it.


内安全

The merging of Sanae with her body would take place aboard the Cradle, as with Koutarou's examination. The power supply was a problem, and carrying in the equipment wasn't easy, but they wanted Signaltin nearby as insurance. And so Clan and Ruth managed to successfully coax the others into accepting their plan.

"Are you ready, Sanae?"

Kiriha made one final check, and Sanae nodded firmly without hesitation.

"Yeah. I'm actually scared, but I can't waste time while Koutarou is in danger, so do it right away."

Sanae's body was put in the bed next to Koutarou's, while ghost Sanae was held inside of large a glass container next to it. The bed and glass container were connected by various cables running through a strange device. The device was what would merge the two Sanaes together, but since it had been constructed in a hurry, its design was far from refined. And because it would be handling a large amount of energy, it would likely be unstable.

"Nee-san, the trial run worked without a hitch. The spiritual energy generator has secured a regulated output."

"Yurika-chan, do you understand the procedure?"

"I think I've got it."

Keeping the unstable device in check was Yurika's job. When Sanae was reduced to spiritual energy, Yurika would keep it from dispersing and diffusing. Her role in the procedure was incredibly important. The hunters were operating the device while Yurika stood next to them with her staff at the ready. Their preparations were already complete.

"All right. Then let's start."

"Understood. Generator connected. Activating converter."

On Kiriha's signal, the two hunters busily began operating the control panel. The device responded with all kinds of lights flashing and various meter needles moving up and down.

"Stabilizer control strength at 20! Stability is still increasing! Yurika-chan,

we're counting on you when the control strength reaches 65!"

"Right!"

While firmly holding her staff, Yurika stared at one of the meters. Her job would start once it passed the halfway point.

"Goodbye, everyone."

Sanae waved her hand inside the glass container. Her body was being wrapped in a yellow light created by the device.

"Sanae-chan, just leave the rest to me! I will definitely protect you!"

Yurika boldly encouraged Sanae as she gripped her staff tightly, but her eyes stayed glued on the meter. She was aware of just how important her job was.

"Thanks, Yurika. I'm counting on you."

"Right!"

Sanae was a little confused as to how she'd ended up relying on Yurika for something, but it made her happy, too. Seeing the normally useless Yurika work so hard for her sake was oddly touching.

"Sanae-chan, I'm not saying goodbye."

"Let us meet again, Sanae-sama."

After everyone else, Shizuka and Ruth spoke in turn. They were both ready to burst into tears—and a few escaped here and there—but they held back the urge to cry and smiled at Sanae.

"Yeah. You have to come meet me. I will be waiting inside of her."

Since she could see their auras, Sanae knew exactly how they were feeling. She responded with a smile of her own and nodded at them.

The light enveloping Sanae grew stronger, and eventually she herself began emitting light too. It was a sign that she was being reduced to spiritual energy.

"I'm sorry for not being able to make proper preparations, Sanae."

Kiriha looked at Sanae inside the glass container with an apologetic expression. She normally didn't show a lot of emotion, but she wasn't trying to

hide her feelings this time. That was just how serious she was, and just how much she treasured Sanae.

“Don’t be sorry. If it wasn’t for you, I probably would have just up and vanished one day.”

Sanae held nothing against Kiriha. Sanae knew she’d done everything she could, and she was grateful that.

“So don’t worry about it. Instead, you should be thinking about what you’re going to cook for me the next time we meet.”

“I will do just that.”

As the two smiled at each other, Theia stepped forward.

“Sanae.”

Theia’s expression was sorrowful, but her eyes shone with a strong will. Even though she was faced with this adversity, she hadn’t given up hope.

“There was a time when I was worried about being an alien.”

Theia and Koutarou were aliens to one another. The realization that they could never be a normal couple was crushing to her.

“But I decided to overcome it, even if I needed to do so forcibly. I realized resigning myself to a future I was unhappy with and writing it off as ‘fate’ wasn’t very noble.”

“Theia..."

“So you too should overcome the fate you’ve been handed, even if you have to use force. Defy the odds and return to us in room 106. I’ll be waiting for you there.”

Theia was an alien, and Sanae was a ghost. They’d both had very similar concerns about their futures with Koutarou, so Theia felt a sort of special bond with her over that. She also wanted her to grow strong and overcome that fear the same way she had.

“Thank you. I’ll do my best.”

Sanae felt the same way. Theia’s words filled her with courage.

“That’s the spirit.”

“Yeah.”

And just as the two smiled at one another...

“Here we go, Encyclopedia! Energy Stabilizer! Modifier: Effective Time, Four Times!”

With her staff in hand, Yurika started her incantation. The needle on the meter was about to reach the area indicating the machine would become unstable.

By now, Sanae’s luminescence had grown much stronger and her outline began to fade. A large portion of her body had already been converted to spiritual energy. But Sanae wasn’t in any pain. The device and Yurika were protecting her to the utmost of their abilities.

“Koutarou, looks like it’s time.”

“...This year went by so fast.”

Koutarou somehow managed to lift his weakened body up enough to look at Sanae.

“Yeah, but it was fun. I wasn’t sure what was going to happen at first, though.”

Koutarou and Sanae thought back to the day they first met. When Koutarou returned to his apartment, he’d found Sanae there. Assuming that she had snuck in without permission, he simply tossed her out. After that, chaos ensued. It left a strong impression on both of them, and they could both recall it so vividly that it felt like it had happened just yesterday.

“I hope we have another year like that.”

“Of course we will, right?”

Enduring the pain he was in, Koutarou smiled at Sanae. As she was starting to merge with her body, the drain on Koutarou gradually weakening. Though it was something of a welcome relief, he knew it meant that it was time to part ways with Sanae. It was probably because of their strong bond that he wished to be in pain for just a little longer.

“Yeah, I think so. So you have to come meet me...”

“Yeah.”

Sanae had been trying her best not to cry, but when she saw Koutarou nod at her, she couldn’t hold it in any longer. She could feel that she didn’t have much time left. That life as she knew it was about to end.

“Everyone, thank you for everything up until today. And—”

From there, her time came quickly. The light from Sanae grew so strong that it bathed the whole room in a gentle glow.

“I love you, Koutarou...”

The light was warm, but Sanae’s last thought inside of it was that Koutarou’s back was even warmer.

Once she was reduced to spiritual energy, Sanae was transferred through the cables of Kiriha’s device as Yurika protected her. To Sanae, it felt like she was flying through a world of nothing but white. On the other side of that whiteness, her body was waiting for her. Like a meteor crashing to earth, she flew straight towards it.

In the midst of the vast whiteness, images began appearing around Sanae. They were all snippets of memories of Koutarou and the others.

So much has happened...

In an instant, the white world around her was completely replaced with images of her memories. It was like a photo album without any proper order to it.

“Say it with more love!”

“What does that even mean?”

When Sanae focused on the images, she could recall exactly how she’d felt at the time. Every single one of the images she was seeing was an irreplaceable treasure to her.

Huh?

But at some point, she began seeing things she didn’t remember, even though

she was part of them.

Could this be how I lose my memories?!

The images of things Sanae couldn't remember crumbled and fell away like sandcastles in the tide. Sanae felt like she lost a piece of herself for every time one of them disappeared. She knew they were precious memories and didn't want to lose a single one.

No! No, no, no! Give it back! That's something important!

But her memories crumbled one after another. Sanae reached her hands out towards the remaining images around her in a desperate attempt to protect them. She was determined to save at least one.

Why?!

But they all slipped through her fingers.

Don't disappear! I won't be able to tell who everyone is! Stay with me forever!

Sanae reached out to the Koutarou within her memories, but even that crumbled before her. She only had a few memories left now. Her nearly unlimited memories had been decimated. There were so few left that the world around her was becoming white again, and that terrified Sanae. She felt herself losing who she was—a thought more haunting than death.

I don't want this! Save me, Koutarou, Koutarou!

As if trying to carve his vanishing memory into her heart, Sanae screamed out Koutarou's name repeatedly. He was now the only one of the residents of room 106 that she could remember, but she could only faintly picture him in her mind. Then, at last, even that image began to fall away.

Noooooooooooo!

Sanae screamed. Losing her memories meant the end of everything she knew. The thought was unbearable. And then...

"..."

Sanae could hear someone's voice.

Huh? Wh-Who's there...?

It was a voice that somehow felt nostalgic, but she had never heard it before. Even stranger, the sound of it was calming to her. She looked around for the source of the voice.

“...”

Before she could find where it was coming from, the voice reached out to her once more.

I’ll be fine? What do you mean?!

What she heard were words meant to give her courage. And when she heard them, her fear began fading.

Huh?!

Sanae then began turning her head in all directions to try and find the source. She spied a glowing red light way off in the distance in the direction she was headed. It was a gentle light similar to that of the rising sun.

Someone’s there... You’re...

At the center of the light was a lone girl.

When Sanae saw her face, she felt like she knew who it was, but she had no recollection of meeting her. Just like the voice, it was someone she had no memory of. Sanae couldn’t tell if that was because she had lost her memories, or if she had never really known her.

The girl had her hands clasped together in front of her chest as if she was praying. She was wearing something similar to a kimono or a shrine maiden’s outfit, but it wasn’t quite in the Japanese style. It had a foreign, unique design to it. And what stood out even more than her outfit was the girl’s hair. Her hair was pure white, but it shimmered with the colors of the rainbow from time to time.

Several globes were floating around the girl too. They were all about the size of volleyballs, but made of a transparent material like glass. Each one of them was glowing a different color. There weren’t quite as many, but seeing them reminded Sanae of the set of twelve different colored crayons she had in elementary school.

What do you mean I'll be fine?

Sanae spoke to that mysterious girl. She was more interested in her own future rather than the girl right now.

"..."

The girl moved her mouth and answered Sanae's question, though she was certainly too far away for Sanae to hear her. Instead, her voice seemed to be conveyed directly into Sanae's mind.

There are several ways to read the information recorded in a spiritual structure...? I don't understand what you're saying at all! Use simpler words!

"..."

The girl obliged Sanae's request and used a simpler expression.

Love is all? Yeah, I can understand that much, but I knew that from the start!

Sadly, the girl wasn't able to clearly explain herself in a way Sanae could understand. In the end, Sanae was completely at a loss as to why this girl was saying everything would be fine. But even then, their conversation had, strangely enough, calmed her down and eased her fear.

But thank you. Thanks to you, I feel a little better.

When Sanae thanked the girl, she received a happy smile in return. Seeing that, Sanae calmed down even more and finally began wondering who the girl was.

By the way, who are you? Are you a new ghost or something?

Sanae didn't have any particular investment in learning the girl's identity. More or less, she was making small talk.

"..."

But the response she got exceeded her expectations by far.

You're an invader of room 106?! The first and last?! W-Wait a minute, what does that mean?! Hey!

Despite having lost almost all of her memories of Koutarou and the others, Sanae could tell how bizarre what the girl had said was. Wanting more details,

Sanae raised her voice.

But before she got an answer, she had reached the end of the white world. Her few remaining memories disappeared and her consciousness flew towards whatever was drawing her in. And now that Sanae's fears had been alleviated, everything proceeded exceedingly smoothly.

"..."

After seeing Sanae off, the mysterious girl smiled once more before leaving that white world. Any more help would be unnecessary, and she wanted to keep her involvement to a minimum. She knew quite well that excessive interference wouldn't necessarily lead to a good result. The rest was up to Sanae and the others.

And so, though the road there was terrifying at first, Sanae safely merged with her body.

Higashihongan Sanae the New Student

Monday, April 5th

A girl named Higashihongan Sanae was originally registered in class 1-A along with Koutarou and the others. But before she could attend the entrance ceremony, her condition took a turn for the worse and it became clear that she would be unable to attend Kisshouharukaze High School. As a result, her name was removed from the class roster, and only the teachers knew about her.

But lately things had improved and she was up to attending school normally again. She was given a placement test, and it was determined that she had learned enough through self-study to be considered on par with her peers. Thanks to that, she was able to transfer into the same class as Koutarou and the others instead of repeating a year.

“...And so Sanae-san was able to safely return to our class. I expect you all to get along.”

The classroom was a whirlpool of excitement after the teacher in charge finished her explanation.

“All riiiiight! Another cute girl in class! Yeah!”

The excitement was mostly from to the boys. Because the girl known as Higashihongan Sanae had spent a long time in the hospital, she was thin, pale, and gave off a fragile impression. There weren’t any other girls like that in glass, so the boys were particularly excited.

“U-Um, I’m Higashihongan Sanae. It’s nice to meet you all.”

Although bewildered by the boys’ reaction, Sanae politely bowed her head to the class. The Higashihongans were a distinguished family that had been protecting a shrine since the days of old. As such, Sanae had been taught proper etiquette growing up, and that included exceptional manners.

“S-So cute!”

“She’s totally different from the other girls!”

“This is just getting better and better!”

Sanae’s modest and calm personality only further incited the boys. The other girls in class were all shooting daggers their way.

“How rude!”

“Honestly! It’s always like this whenever a new student comes in.”

“They’re happy as long as it’s a girl. This is just like the Maki-chan fever from a little while ago.”

Sanae’s appearance only seemed to deepen the divide between the male and female students in class.

“Okay, okay, everyone calm down!”

After letting Sanae introduce herself, the female teacher in charge clapped her hands together in an attempt to get the class’ attention. Once her students’ eyes were back on her, she continued explaining things.

“Like I said, Sanae-san just got out of the hospital. She’s not used to the school yet, and she may have some physical trouble here and there. That’s why I’d like one boy and one girl as her support team. You’ll be in charge of helping her out.”

Having been hospitalized all this time, Sanae didn’t know a thing about Kisshouharukaze High School. Since she’d basically skipped her freshman year, she’d missed all the orientations and other activities designed to adjust students to high school life. She didn’t even know her way around the school yet.

And having spent so much time bedridden, her stamina was another concern. Since she’d only just been released from the hospital, her strength hadn’t fully recovered yet. She would get winded just from climbing the stairs. Between all that, the teacher thought it would be a good idea to have assigned helpers to support her in her day-to-day school life until she got a handle on things.

“Let’s see... Who to choose?”

The teacher scanned the room and looked at her students. As she did, a few

of the boys began begging for their chance.

“Me, me, me! I’ll be the male supporter!”

“You idiot, I’ll be the one helping Sanae-chan!”

“I will do everything from helping her change to going to the bathroom!”

But the teacher easily ignored their desperate pleas.

“Let’s see... Okay, Satomi-kun, could you do it?”

“Me?”

Koutarou’s eyes went wide with surprise when the teacher called on him. She nodded with a smile in return.

“Yes. I can tell from here that out of the stronger boys, you’re the most settled down. Or would you rather not?”

While the rest of the class was in a fluster, Koutarou appeared to be the same as ever. The teacher thought that was a great asset, so she’d chosen him for the job.

“No way!”

“Well, if it isn’t Koutarou the traitor!”

“Can’t you give us a chance for once?!"

Of course, the boys were rather unhappy with this development.

“Mr. ‘Leave It to Me’ Blue Knight, huh?”

“Hmm, well, I guess it’ll be okay if it’s Satomi-kun.”

“Even if he’s an idiot, he’s a hundred times better than those other boys.”

The girls, however, seemed to respond positively to the teacher’s choice. And Koutarou himself had no real objections to supporting Sanae.

“Okay, I’ll do it.”

He nodded and accepted the teacher’s request.

“Thank you, Satomi-kun.”

Seeing Koutarou agree, the teacher smiled and began looking over the class

once more.

“All right then, as for the girl... Aika-san, can I leave it you?”

The female teacher’s eyes stopped on Aika Maki.

“Aika-san, you were a transfer student yourself, so you probably have a good idea of what Sanae-san is going through. Could you do it?”

Her decision wasn’t just because Maki was a transfer student, but also because she got along well with Koutarou. The teacher believed that the supporters’ teamwork would play a big part in ensuring things went smoothly for Sanae.

“I don’t mind. I probably would have ended up helping anyway.”

Maki smiled and agreed. Like the female teacher suspected, Maki was fairly close with Koutarou. Even if she hadn’t asked, Maki probably would have offered to help him out. But she wasn’t entirely motivated by goodwill.

All right... With this, I might be able to understand what’s going on with Satomi-kun a little bit better...

Maki had noticed that something had changed in room 106. And the ghost that had always been together with Koutarou had now appeared inside of a living body. It was a curious situation that a leader of Darkness Rainbow who sought to steal the power of room 106 couldn’t afford to overlook.

“Thanks. You’re a big help, Aika-san.”

Koutarou took Maki’s help at face value without suspecting a thing. He thought she was just being nice. He also found it reassuring to have Maki, a transfer student herself, helping Sanae out.

“My help will cost you, Satomi-kun.”

“Even though I wasn’t the one who asked?”

“Heehee, I’ll put it on your tab this time.”

Maki answered him with a smile. The truth was that she had already pushed the convenience of Darkness Rainbow into a corner of her mind. Right now, Darkness Rainbow was just an excuse for her. Maki simply didn’t want to accept

that her motive was 100 percent goodwill. The owner of that little twisted personality was the girl known as Aika Maki.

“Okay, could you take your seat, Sanae-san? Your seat will be between those two.”

Now that she’d chosen a support team to help Sanae, the teacher was going to leave the rest of it to the students.

“Of course.”

Sanae nodded and started walking towards Koutarou and Maki.

Sanae...

The way Sanae had nodded was just the way Koutarou remembered, and he felt nostalgic seeing it. But the Sanae approaching him wasn’t the Sanae he used to know.

“Um, it’s nice to meet you. Satomi-san, Aika-san. Thank you for helping me.”

Sanae’s memory hadn’t returned.

Roughly two weeks had passed since the two Sanaes were reunited. During that time, Koutarou and the girls had patiently waited for her to return to room 106, but they didn’t get to see her again until the new school term started.

According to the ghost hunters who had been tasked with investigating, after Sanae woke up, she appeared to be her normal self and had no recollection of being a ghost. The residents of room 106 knew in advance that Sanae would lose her memories, but they had all held on to the hope that maybe, just maybe, she would still remember them. They were hoping to catch a glimpse of the old Sanae in the new one.

Yet in the end, they were all disappointed. The new Sanae appeared before them as a normal girl, and as a total stranger.

Between classes, Maki showed Sanae where the girl’s bathroom was.

“This is the girl’s restroom. It’s in the same location on all floors, so it’s easy to find.”

“Thank you. I’ll remember that.”

In order for Sanae to lead a normal school life, one of the first things she needed to learn was where the bathroom was. She could take her time looking for anything else she might need, but not the bathroom. Maki knew that personally as a transfer student, so she made sure to show Sanae first thing.

But there was another reason she wanted to show her here first. Koutarou wasn’t around right now. At their age, it would have been awkward for all of them if he’d tagged along on this part of the tour, so Maki made sure to take care of it while he wasn’t there.

After that, Maki showed Sanae where the drinking fountains, special facilities, and other classrooms were. Since they didn’t have a very long break, she decided to leave it at that for now.

“Hey, I’ve got them.”

When they were done with their tour for the time being, Koutarou approached the two girls in the hallway while carrying a cardboard box in both hands. He’d spotted them after hitting the top of the stairs, and came running right for them with a smile.

“Thanks for your hard work, Satomi-kun.”

“Thank you, Satomi-san.”

Maki and Sanae both welcomed Koutarou with smiles of their own. They were grateful because Koutarou had gone to get course material for Sanae in her stead. Since Sanae had skipped her first year, she didn’t have all of the reference material and other odds and ends the rest of the students had accumulated during that time, such as a map of the world and musical instruments. Since it was a whole year’s worth of material, Koutarou knew it would be a lot to carry and had offered to go get it for her.

“What were the two of you up to?”

“I was giving her a quick tour.”

“I still don’t know left from right yet, after all.”

“Of course, it’s for free because it’s the first time.”

“Hey, keep things free for Sanae-san.”

“Sure thing. I’ll just charge you instead, Satomi-kun.”

“As if!”

“Like I said, I’ll put it on your tab.”

While discussing with Koutarou whether she would charge him or not, Maki pulled a badminton racket and a dictionary out from the box in his arms. The racket was sticking out and blocking Koutarou’s sight, and the dictionary was so precariously balanced that it looked like it was about to fall out.

“You greedy little...”

“Heehee, bonds by money are never severed. That’s why they’re the best!”

“...Are you two going out, by any chance?”

Both Koutarou and Maki’s eyes shot wide open at Sanae’s unexpected question, and they both quickly denied it.

“Me?! And Aika-san?! No way, that would never happen!”

“Me?! And Satomi-kun?! No way, that would never happen.”

Short of using each other’s names, they spoke in harmony.

“Is that... so?”

Sanae tilted her head in confusion. Watching how they interacted, Sanae found it hard to believe they weren’t dating. Though they were saying snide things to each other, they were being incredibly considerate of each other. And they were in perfect synch. They certainly seemed like they were more than just classmates. But Sanae had another reason for suspecting they were dating, and that was the mysterious power she had recently developed.

That’s strange. Normally people like this are a couple...

About half a month ago, Sanae had suddenly recovered from an unknown disease that had plagued her for many years. After that, she began seeing strange things like a white hazy glow around people.

At first, Sanae had assumed that it was a side effect of her disease. When she consulted a doctor, she was told that kind of thing sometimes happened, and

she was told to watch its progress for a while. Since the doctor didn't seem to think much of it, she didn't either, but after a few days, she realized that she could control whether she saw the haze or not.

After discovering that, Sanae had used her power to observe people. People watching was the perfect hobby for a sickly girl like her who was still weak and couldn't do much else, but the more people she looked at with her power, the more she began to learn about it.

She ended up figuring out that the glow had something to do with a person's life energy and their soul. The haze was thicker around young people and grew weaker as they aged. It also grew thicker the more intense the emotion and vice versa. She also noticed that the haze had a tendency to gather around anything a person was concentrating on. That was particularly noticeable in sports and martial arts. She could see where people were going to strike or kick a ball by paying attention to what they were focusing on through the haze.

Sanae also learned a great deal about human relationships by watching the haze. For instance, when it came to couples or parents with their children, people seemed to project their haze onto the people they loved. And since that's what Maki and Koutarou were doing, Sanae had simply assumed that they were dating.

I still don't know all that much about this hazy glow, so maybe something is different...

Sanae didn't think much more about it. The ability to see this haze was an odd power to begin with, and it was still largely a mystery to her. For example, she would sometimes see the haze gather where no one was standing. She didn't understand it well enough to draw any real conclusions from it. And right now, there was something that worried her more than her power.

"Having Aika-san as my girlfriend would cost me an arm and a leg."

"There's no girl that doesn't cost money, jeez..."

"I'll just take my time to find one."

"Satomi-kun could just say that he'll earn a ton of money in the future... I keep telling him he can put it on his tab... jeez..."

“Hmm? Did you say something?”

“Nope, nothing at all!”

Koutarou and Maki walked side by side as they continued to joke around with each other. While staring at them from behind, Sanae found herself unable to take her eyes off Koutarou’s back.

What is this feeling...?

And as she stared at his back, she was overcome with an urge to embrace him. It was strong enough that she was worried she might unconsciously do it if she didn’t actively tell herself not to.

I’ve never heard of love at first glance at someone’s back...

Koutarou had just said he wasn’t going out with Maki. Maybe she could become his girlfriend instead then. Entertaining that thought, Sanae’s heart began throbbing as she imagined herself hugging Koutarou’s back.

Distant Days

Monday, April 12th

A week had passed since Sanae had joined class 2-A. By now, Sanae had started to blend in with the rest of the class.

“Sanae-chan, what do your parents do?”

“Um, we run an old shrine... so papa is the chief priest.”

“So you’re like the only daughter of some distinguished family?!”

“I wouldn’t say that... It’s not that famous of a shrine...”

When she had first joined the class, Sanae had only really spoken to Koutarou and Maki. But as the days went on, she opened up a little and got to know the rest of her classmates. Because of that, they began flocking to her during breaks. Her youthful appearance and pure personality tickled a lot of people’s protective instincts.

“In the end, Sanae-chan didn’t regain her memories...”

Yurika mumbled to herself as she looked at Sanae, who was surrounded by a large group of their classmates. Not far from them sat Yurika and the other residents of room 106. They had gathered to chat about nothing in particular during their break, but since it was just them and everyone else in class was distracted, they naturally began talking about Sanae.

“I’m sorry. Our power wasn’t enough.”

Kiriha looked at Sanae from afar with a furrowed brow and melancholy expression. She had put in a lot of effort trying to help Sanae, and in the end, she’d been able to save her, but not her memories. Looking at it objectively, there was nothing else she could have done, but Kiriha still felt responsible. That was why she was probably the one who wanted Sanae to regain her memories the most.

“There’s no need for you to blame yourself, Kiriha-san. If it wasn’t for you, Sanae-chan wouldn’t have survived.”

Shizuka tried to comfort Kiriha, who was clearly feeling down. After all, it was Kiriha who’d actually saved Sanae’s life. It was because she’d extracted information from the ghost hunters and developed a way to treat Sanae while keeping everything a secret that they’d been able to help her. If she hadn’t done all that, Sanae probably would have died. Or Sanae might have ended up killing Koutarou. Everyone was happy they’d been able to avoid those terrible outcomes, so no one was upset with Kiriha for what she had or hadn’t done.

“We still don’t know for sure that she won’t get her memories back. It’s still too early to lose hope.”

“I think so too. It’s only been three weeks.”

Compared to the others, Theia and Ruth remained optimistic. They would feel bad too if Sanae didn’t regain her memories, but they firmly believed that she would eventually. It was the kind of optimism they’d learned to foster through hardship.

“Do you really think Sanae-chan’s memories will return?”

“If we don’t believe in it, who will? If we don’t do anything to help her, the Sanae who cried when she said goodbye to us won’t be able to rest in peace.”

“You’re right. I was feeling a little timid, but you’ve opened my eyes, Theia-dono.”

“Very good.”

“That’s right! We have to get Sanae-chan’s memories back at any cost!”

“Yurika-sama, please lend us your power too.”

“I understand! I, humble Nijino Yurika, will do my best!”

Theia’s optimism spread to her friends, and smiles returned to the group. Her leadership skills were really starting to blossom.

“But, but... what do we do specifically?”

Yurika cocked her head to the side. She understood that what they wanted

was to get Sanae's memories from being a ghost to resurface, but she had no idea how to go about doing that.

"Would it work if we hit her with electricity or made her take some kind of special medicine?"

"Yurika-chan, you've been reading too much manga."

Shizuka smiled wryly at Yurika's somewhat extreme ideas.

"Then what *should* we do?"

"Um... well..."

Not even Shizuka knew.

"There's not any particular thing that we have to do."

The one to answer Yurika's question was Koutarou, who had been quiet until now otherwise.

"What do you mean, Koutarou?" Theia asked.

Koutarou responded by smiling at the girls.

"We can just keep doing what we're doing. Talking to Sanae and fooling around. Stuff like that will probably awaken her memories sooner or later."

If they really wanted Sanae to remember things how they were, they would just have to act like they always did. Eventually, Koutarou hoped, that feeling of familiarity would trigger something within her.

"That said, it would be a little difficult right now. We should try and get closer to her when the attention around her dies down a little."

Koutarou pointed towards Sanae as he spoke. She was surrounded by classmates even now. Even if they wanted to talk to her, there didn't appear to be an opening for Koutarou and the others. That would probably change once the initial excitement of having a new student in class wore off.

"Besides, that was how she wanted to live. With us and having fun. Whether or not she remembers isn't really the important part."

Sanae's wish had been to continue to spend her days with Koutarou and the others. In that sense, as long as she got to be with them, her wish would come

true. What was important was that Koutarou and the others kept that promise to her.

“Satomi-kun, could you come over here?”

Just as Koutarou finished his explanation, Maki called him over to where she and Sanae were sitting with their other classmates.

“What is it now?”

Thinking that she must have some business with him, Koutarou got up and walked over to her.

“What a magnificent man...”

Watching him walk away, Theia praised Koutarou. Entering the circle around Sanae, Koutarou began talking with his classmates about something. Shortly thereafter, smiles appeared on his and Maki’s faces, and seeing them smile made Sanae smile too. Hers was a bright, wonderful smile.

“He understands the path he must take, and he walks it without hesitation. His life with us may have trained him to be that way, but—”

Theia understood Sanae’s wish and she understood that Koutarou was determined to fulfill it, yet her expression was dark. She stared at Koutarou’s back as he walked away as if she was witnessing something sad.

“But even then, he doesn’t need Sanae, huh?”

Kiriha finished Theia’s sentence for her. She was watching Koutarou with a somber expression, just like Theia.

“That’s right...”

Kiriha knew exactly how Theia felt.

“He’s gentle to everyone. His love is distributed equally to all, even more so than the Blue Knight of legend.”

“Your Highness...”

Reacting to Theia’s words, Ruth showed a faint smile. “More so than the Blue Knight of legend.”

To Ruth, the feelings put into those words meant more than Theia could

possibly know.

“And he never asks for anything in return. I suppose that’s fine for most people. That is the selfless way of the knight, after all.”

Theia’s words were supposed to be words of praise, but her tone and expression made them quite bittersweet, like a bard singing a sorrowful story.

“But... not even asking anything of the people closest to him—like us—is rather a sad thing...”

Theia stopped speaking there, but there was actually more to it. While fiddling with her golden hair, she continued the thought in her mind.

Especially as women...

She wanted the person she loved to need her. To desire her. That would be true no matter what planet she lived on. And Theia believed that it was how the girls around Koutarou felt too. But that wasn’t important for now, so she put her feelings aside before she started speaking again.

“The girl over there is supposed to be our Sanae, so why isn’t Koutarou concerned about that? It’s like he doesn’t care whether or not it’s her so long as he keeps his promise.”

That was what was important to him. But from Theia’s viewpoint, it was quite strange. Koutarou was upholding his end of the bargain in trying to fulfill Sanae’s wish, but he didn’t seem at all invested if Sanae fulfilled her own promise. In other words, regaining her memory. It made their relationship seem wildly one-sided. Like Koutarou didn’t need Sanae at all. Theia couldn’t accept that because she couldn’t imagine Koutarou being so cold to her.

“Why is he so accepting of losing Sanae? Why doesn’t he need anyone? Why doesn’t he just say ‘come back’? Just what is he so scared of?!”

There had to be some reason, but Theia couldn’t figure it out. Theia struggled to contain her frustration that had nowhere to go. She couldn’t get angry with, forgive him, or sympathize with him. And that indecisiveness only made her more frustrated.

“There is one thing that I can think of.”

Kiriha was the one to eventually offer an answer.

“Really?”

“Yes. It’s a rough guess based on what I know about Koutarou’s past and the way he’d acted until now.”

It wasn’t something that she normally liked to share, but Kiriha believed that the girls of room 106 felt similarly to how she did, so she decided to tell them.

“I understand where you’re coming from, Theia-dono. I was wondering the same thing myself for a long time, including why the only exception seems to be Yurika.”

“Huh? Me?”

Yurika was taken back by surprise to her hear name brought up in such a context. She hadn’t even expected to be involved in such a serious conversation.

“Koutarou doesn’t ask anything from anyone, except for you. Like write manuscripts together, doing homework together, trying out wrestling moves, and so on. Do you see what I mean?”

“Now you mention it... I do always end up having to do all the crappy stuff...”

When Yurika placed a finger on her lip and thought about it, it did ring true. Whenever Koutarou needed someone to help him, he would always single out Yurika. Practicing wrestling moves a few weeks ago was one such example.

“But isn’t that just because, you know, Satomi-san is bullying me? It’s not like I’m special to him. Oh, and he also extorts me using food!”

Yurika could only think of the way Koutarou treated her as a punishment. She could always come up with a few reasons for him to be mad at her at any given moment, after all.

“That’s what I thought at first as well. But... when I think back on Koutarou’s past, I feel like I can understand why only Yurika is special.”

Combining what Kiriha knew of Koutarou’s past and what Kii knew of her Onii-chan’s behavior, the situation appeared a little differently. That’s what it had taken for Kiriha to realize it.

“Satomi-kun’s past? Now that I think about it, Satomi-kun doesn’t really talk much about himself.”

Shizuka loved gossip, but she knew when she shouldn’t be playing around. And when it came to Sanae and Koutarou, she always took things with them seriously. That was true even now. She wanted to help come up with a solution for the problem at hand.

“It’s not that he won’t talk about it. It’s that he doesn’t want to. After all... his mother was involved in a traffic accident and died right in front of him. It ruined his family life for a time.”

“Wh... What...?”

Ruth held her breath. Koutarou’s past was far more horrific than she had imagined.

“His mother died when he was six years old. Koutarou accidentally stepped out into the road, and just as he was about to get hit by a car, his mother pushed him out of the way... Koutarou had to watch his mother die right in front of him because of his own carelessness.”

The detailed information about the accident was a result of Kiriha’s prior investigations. When she first came to room 106, she had gathered as much information on Koutarou as she could in order to draw things out, and that had included information on his family. In the end, she’d decided it would be best not to bring it up. And since they were the same age, she had thought it was merely a coincidence that the same thing had happened to her first love. But now that she knew her first love was really Koutarou, she had a much better idea of what he’d been through and how it had affected him.

“After the loss of his mother, his relationship with his father turned sour. It seems that Koutarou spent most of his childhood alone, and Kenji and baseball are what helped him get back on his feet.”

“So that’s why Satomi-kun loves Mackenzie-kun and baseball so much...”

Hearing about Koutarou’s past, Shizuka suddenly understood the strange relationship between Koutarou and Kenji a little better. Regardless of what cruel tricks they would play on each other, they would always completely

forgive each other by the next day. Deep down, they really trusted each other. Though it was slightly different from with Yurika, Kenji was another exceptional friend to Koutarou, and that was because of his connection to his past.

“That’s probably why he’s good at fighting too...”

These days, children rarely fought one another, so it wasn’t hard to imagine what kind of tough childhood Koutarou must have had in order to be as good with his fists as he was. Yurika felt her chest tighten when she thought about it.

“This is just my assumption, but... Koutarou is probably afraid that the people he loves will be taken from him just like his mother was. That’s why he doesn’t need anyone. Why he won’t take that step.”

Theia’s eyes went wide.

“What... No, if that’s the case, then...”

“It’s also why he’s so careful with the people around him. He doesn’t want to be responsible for making a mistake he can’t undo.”

Kiriha’s assumption sounded convincing to Theia. Losing his mother had had a profound effect on him. Scared that he would lose people who were truly precious to him, he tried to avoid getting too close with anyone. And because he blamed himself for his mother’s death, he was adamant about keeping his promises so he would never regret anything again. He wanted to make everyone around him happy. But Koutarou’s actions weren’t so much out of love as they were loss. When thinking of it like that, everything began making sense.

“That’s why Yurika is special?!”

“That’s right. I’m from the underground, you two are aliens, and Sanae was a ghost. It was clear that we would all eventually part ways, so Koutarou was keeping his distance in his own way.”

Theia and Ruth would eventually return to Forthorthe. Kiriha would also return underground one day. And Sanae would pass into the afterlife. Shizuka wouldn’t be his landlord forever, and Harumi would be graduating at the end of the school year. It seemed like he would eventually part ways with everyone around him.

“But Yurika is different. To him, Yurika is just a normal person. They could spend their high school career together, graduate, and have their relationship continue naturally after that. To Koutarou, Yurika is the only one he thinks might stay with him.”

“Now that I think about it, Satomi-san—”

Hearing what Kiriha was saying, Yurika recalled something Koutarou had once said to her in the past.

“It’s selfish, right? I guess I just wanted you to stay a normal classmate. Y’know, a normal classmate with an odd hobby.”

That was several months ago when Yurika and Maki had fought. It was how he’d reacted to finding out she was a magical girl, but it was only now that Kiriha had explained it that Yurika truly understood what he’d meant. She’d only taken it at face value before, but now she knew there was much more to it than that.

It’s not that Satomi-san doesn’t believe that I’m a magical girl! He just wants to believe that I’m a cosplayer because he can stay friends with me that way!

Of course, Koutarou hadn’t consciously put that much thought into it. But as he started to get along with Yurika more and more, it was true that he was happy she was just a cosplayer.

Koutarou’s mother had been snatched away from him without warning, but he knew in advance the invaders would all go their separate ways one day. Yurika, on the other hand, was just a freeloader with a strange hobby. She might be lazy and sloppy, but Koutarou’s carefree everyday life with her had no foreseeable end, just like his friendship with Kenji. And that’s what he secretly wished for—things to continue just as they were between them.

Thinking about it, Yurika recalled something else Koutarou had said to her.

“Sunshine and rainbows suit you better.”

Yurika had always interpreted those words to mean that Koutarou thought fighting didn’t suit her, but after listening to Kiriha’s explanation, they took on a different meaning.

Th-Then Satomi-san is always bullying me and playing rough with me because he really does treasure me and... he thinks of me as sunshine and rainbows...

To Koutarou, who suffered greatly over losing his mother, a friend like a troublesome little sister was priceless. If what Kiriha was saying was true, then even while Koutarou was taking care of Yurika, he was relying on her in his own way too. He was only rough and blunt with her because he was treating her like real family.

“Then, uh, that’s, erm, could he...?!”

That was when Yurika’s thoughts ground to a halt. Her blood started steaming and her face turned bright red. She blanked out completely and couldn’t think of a single word to say. No one had ever really needed her before. There was an argument that her mentor Nana had, but even Nana had never intended to keep Yurika by her side forever. She was always warning Yurika of the dangers of being together and trying to push her away.

But now Yurika had learned that Koutarou needed her. And it wasn’t just in a superficial way. They truly had a deep connection. Thinking back on it, that must have been the reason he trusted her to take care of Sanae with her magic a few weeks ago when she was in real trouble.

In other words, though Yurika had been none the wiser, Koutarou had come to trust in her as a magical girl and as a friend. He counted on her as both. If Koutarou had known Yurika was a magical girl from the start, things most likely never would have developed that way. Coincidence and inevitability had crossed paths in such a way that Yurika had become truly special to Koutarou. And when she realized that, Yurika could think of nothing else. Realizing how blessed of a situation she was in, she lost control of her emotions.

“So Satomi-sama doesn’t think he will always be with us...”

Putting aside the matter of Yurika, whose brain had overheated and was unable to speak, Ruth mumbled to herself with a depressed expression. Koutarou’s relationship with Yurika was a good thing, certainly, but if what Kiriha was saying was true, that meant that Koutarou was expecting all of the other invaders to leave him someday. It was a horribly lonely realization.

“That’s right. That’s why Koutarou was so ready to accept Sanae losing her

memories. After all, he was always prepared for her to leave.”

“Sanae-chan is important to him, but he was prepared to lose her. That’s why he’s not shaken up even though she doesn’t remember him. And why he doesn’t want to force her to remember. That’s kinda... sad, Satomi-kun...”

Shizuka could understand how Koutarou felt since she’d lost both of her parents. She knew better than anyone what being truly alone was like. To her, Koutarou and the invaders had saved her from that solitude. That’s why she was especially sad to hear that Koutarou had been ready to part ways with them from the beginning.

“But knowing that, there’s a way to handle this.”

The whole group of girls began growing gloomy, but Theia’s eyes kept their gleam. Now that she’d decided the path she wanted to walk for herself, she wasn’t going to let an obstacle like this stop her.

“We only need to make sure that Koutarou understands that we’re not going to leave him.”

“How?”

If possible, Shizuka wanted to do what Theia was suggesting. She wanted Koutarou to be able to enjoy his everyday life without worry, just the same way she did hers. But she didn’t know how to make that happen. Shizuka followed Koutarou with her eyes as she racked her brain, but if Theia had an answer, she wanted to hear it.

“Kiriha, I’ll let you explain the details. I’m sure that you would know.”

But in reality, Theia didn’t know how to manage it either. But she trusted that Kiriha would.

“But of course.”

Kiriha flashed a small smile and nodded.

“There’s not any particular thing that we have to do.”

Kiriha simply repeated Koutarou’s words from earlier. She believed that Koutarou’s solution regarding Sanae would work for him as well.

“We can just keep doing what we’re doing. Talking to Koutarou and fooling around. Stuff like that will eventually lead him to believe that we’ll always be with him.”

They would continue with their everyday life together until Koutarou believed it was real. That it was here to stay, and so were the girls that were part of it. A year might not have been enough to do that, but there was still time. They would show him that they could stay together. And if for some reason someone was ever about to leave, they could simply join hands and prevent it. They would show him that together they could protect their bonds.

“Like Yurika-sama?”

Ruth smiled as she looked at Yurika, who still seemed to be in another world. Ruth found the thought of everyone troubling Koutarou like Yurika did unbearably amusing.

“No... it doesn’t necessarily have to be the same way Yurika does. In fact, we’re all using our own ways to invade Koutarou’s heart.”

There were as many answers as there were people. Yurika’s method wasn’t the only correct one.

“I’m not trying to invade though.”

Shizuka understood what Kiriha was trying to say. She thought it was strange that she was being treated like one of the invaders, but she didn’t particularly mind. She would be happy to help them convey these feelings to Koutarou.

“Sanae-san does it for free, but Aika-san makes you pay...”

“Hey, Satomi-kun, that’s a rude way to put it!”

“That makes it sound like I’m a cheap girl...”

Unaware of the invading girls’ plans, Koutarou continued chatting with Sanae and the others. Looking at Koutarou, the edges of Theia’s lips curled up into a smile.

“Heh heh... You just continue to laugh carefreely like that, Satomi Koutarou.”

Arms crossed, Theia threw her head back with a sinister smile on her face as she looked down and laughed at Koutarou. It was a smile much like how Theia

looked at him when she first came to Earth.

“You’re sadly mistaken if you think our invasion will eventually end. Just you wait. By the time you notice, it will already be too late... heh heh heh...”

But since her feelings were obvious to everyone watching her now, unlike one year ago, nobody tried to stop her.

Koutarou and the girls weren’t the only ones paying attention to Sanae’s condition.

“It looks like her memories really aren’t returning... Ahahaha, this is my chance! The moment I’ve been waiting for has finally come!”

The evil spirit that had been following Sanae, Koutarou, and the others was also quite interested in this turn of events. She’d been waiting for the opportune time to try and get her revenge on them.

“If I had a body that could produce that much spiritual energy, I could surely return to the world of the living! This time I will absorb that girl for sure! Both her body and her spiritual energy will be mine!”

The evil spirit was after Sanae’s vast amounts of spiritual energy and her body that seemed to produce it without end, but there had been no meaning in going after either one while they were separated. Sanae as a ghost was nearly untouchable because of the spiritual protection surrounding room 106. And since she almost never left the apartment alone, there was nothing the evil spirit could do. As for Sanae’s body, because the majority of her spiritual energy had been separated from her, she had grown horribly weak. She was practically useless for producing energy in that state, and if she’d tried to possess her, she would have risked dying with her if things went wrong.

But now that the Sanaes were united, those problems were all resolved. Sanae left room 106 and was no longer under its protection. Moreover, Sanae’s body was once again producing massive amounts of spiritual energy. Now was the perfect time for the evil spirit to attack. If Sanae regained her memory, she might grow more wary and increase her spiritual protection. And although the Sanaes had been united, her spiritual form hadn’t yet stabilized inside her physical form. If she attacked now, it would be easy enough to take over her

body like that. At last, the time had come to strike, and the evil spirit had no intention of letting this opportunity slip by.

“Just you wait, little kitten! This time we will become one!”

The evil spirit’s hatred and envy flared up, burning her little remaining spiritual energy.

She wasn’t thinking about the future at all. But since she was growing weak, she knew she wouldn’t get another chance like this. That’s why she was willing to use up the very last of her power to get what she wanted.

Love Is All

Monday, April 12th

Sanae was casually walking down the road by the riverside. Since she had only just been released from the hospital, walking home down that path from school in order to build her stamina had become a part of her daily routine. With the sun starting to set, there were plenty of other people out on the street also on their way home. Sanae indulged in her thoughts as she observed the hazy glows around them.

What was that about, I wonder...?

She was thinking about the haze she could see with the power of her mind. Because the haze would change depending on a person's emotions and intentions, Sanae had become somewhat able to read a person's feelings. It was on her mind because she'd seen something strange with it today in class.

Class 2-A, the class Sanae had transferred into, had warmly welcomed her for the most part. The students were all nice to Sanae, but there was a handful of people who seemed to regard her quite differently from the rest of the class.

The first one she'd noticed was Koutarou. Since the atmosphere around him was different from the others, Sanae had first suspected that he might have a crush on her. But after observing the class for a little longer, she'd realized that there were others who held similar feelings towards her. The mature Kurano Kiriha, the older-sisterly Kasagi Shizuka, the easygoing Nijino Yurika, and the two international transfer students, Theia and Ruth. Adding in Koutarou, there were six people in total whose auras were different around her.

Why do they have such feelings for me too...?

And upon further observation, she realized that these six people seemed to have similar feelings for each other. It was apparently just the way they regarded those in their circle of friends, but if that was true, she couldn't understand why that would include her. She'd never met any of them before

coming to school, and she couldn't think of a reason why they would consider her part of their group without even really getting to know her.

It was a mystery to her, but so was the exact emotion their hazes were projecting. It wasn't something she'd seen in other people walking around the city. It was similar to the kind of affection shared by lovers, married couples, families, and teammates, but it was also distinctly different from each of those. Perhaps it was something like all of those put together, but whatever it was, Sanae hadn't encountered it before.

But... I don't hate it...

Sanae didn't know what it was and she didn't know why it was happening, but she was happy that such an emotion was directed towards her. And she felt it the strongest when she was staring at Koutarou's back. It was during those moments that she returned the emotion they were feeling, even though Sanae wasn't aware of it herself yet. And so she continued to watch the people around her even now in search of an answer.

"...Huh?"

Looking around, however, Sanae saw something unusual. The road she was travelling passed under a steel bridge, but she could see a haze swirling in the darkness ahead.

"What is that, I wonder?"

All she could see was the haze. There was no one nearby. She'd seen something similar a few times before, but didn't know what was causing it.

"I can see it awfully clearly today, too..."

Something was different about this odd phenomenon today. When she'd seen it before, it was much more vague and dispersed, like a fine mist. But now it seemed to be taking shape in front of her, and she could clearly read its emotions. Hate, envy, resentment, anger, grief, and despair. All kinds of negativity swirled within that haze. And the moment Sanae sensed it, she instinctively stepped back.

What is that dark thing?!

Just as Sanae was screaming on the inside, the dark haze looked at Sanae. It wasn't like it had eyes, but Sanae could feel it watching her.

"I've been waiting for youuuuu!"

A gleeful shout drenched in dark desires echoed throughout the area under the bridge. When it reached Sanae's ears, a strong sense of fear made her cower. Strangely enough, however, no one else nearby was reacting. It was like only Sanae had heard it.

I have to run! That thing has to be something bad!

Sanae quickly made up her mind, but her brain worked much faster than her weakened body. Though her legs felt heavy and sluggish underneath her, she ran away as fast as they would carry her.

After finishing up his club activities, Koutarou was headed home just about the time the sun was setting. He'd seen Harumi off on the bus she took home, and he was now walking down the street alone. Because Kisshouharukaze High School was located partway up the mountain, the walk home was mostly downhill. Casting a long shadow as he moved along, Koutarou descended the hill at a brisk pace. His commute home from school was really the only time he had to himself these days.

In the morning, he left Corona House and walked to school with Shizuka and Kenji. They often ran into Kiriha and Theia along the way. Yurika would often oversleep, but she always showed up to class eventually. After spending the school day together, they would all split up after class for their various club activities and other business. They then met up again in room 106 later for tea before dinner, and after they ate, they usually hung out together until it was time for bed.

So even though it was short, his trek home from school was Koutarou's only real personal time. It wasn't like he did anything special because he wasn't with the invader girls, and it wasn't like he was especially happy to be without them either. Really, it was just a chance for him to unwind and clear his head.

"...My stiff shoulders really did get better..."

Koutarou mumbled to himself as he swung his arms around. Not long ago, his stiff shoulders had really been bothering him. It was ultimately because Sanae was possessing him, but now that she'd been reunited with her body, that wasn't a problem anymore. His shoulders had started to recover, and he could hardly feel any stiffness unless he swung his arms around like he was.

"I wonder what's better... having my stiff shoulders heal like this, or having Sanae massage them every day... But Sanae was able to see her parents again this way, so the answer is only obvious, I guess..."

When his stiff shoulders were at their worst, Sanae had given him daily massages. But now that she wasn't around, his shoulders had to recover without her help. The thought made Koutarou feel a little lonely, but there wasn't anything that could be done about it. He believed he'd made the right choice and that he should be happy for Sanae. She was with her family now.

When he thought about it rationally, Sanae as he'd known her was a ghost, and the only ending for a ghost was passing on. If she had been a normal ghost, she would have passed on the moment she was reunited with her parents. Compared to that, the current outcome was much better. She was now living with them like she should be, and Koutarou knew that she was doing fine.

All that was left was for Koutarou and the others to make good on what they'd promised Sanae while they waited for her memories to return. But being honest with himself, Koutarou felt like that was wishing for too much. They'd managed to give new life to a girl who had once been a ghost. That alone was an unbelievable miracle, and Koutarou didn't think they'd be lucky enough to get a second one.

"Sanae is living her life happily now, and that's good enough..."

Koutarou's true intentions passed through his lips as a mumbling sigh. The only time he could really speak his mind in such a way was when he was alone like this. He would never say that in front of the girls, who were all hopefully awaiting Sanae's return.

But Koutarou was different, and the girls had guessed his feelings exactly. He wasn't hoping for Sanae to return to the way she used to be. He felt like it would be asking for too much. That's what he told himself. But the truth was

that his mother's death had traumatized him, leaving him in a terrible state of resignation when it came to his relationships with other people.

"We'll get used to it eventually. Both me and everyone else..."

Scared of losing the people he relied on, Koutarou actively tried not to rely on anyone. That way, he would never get hurt again. But he couldn't just let the people around him be unhappy. He couldn't repeat the same mistake again.

It was a strange place to be in emotionally. On one hand, Koutarou was strong. He had admirable fortitude in his strict self-reliance. But it was also a major flaw. That was what the invaders meant when they talked about how Koutarou didn't need anyone. It was a serious problem because he was intentionally cutting himself off from people—even the people who cared about him most. That was just how profoundly his mother's death had affected him, and it wasn't a problem that would be easily solved.

"Hmm?"

Once Koutarou reached the bottom of the small mountain his school was situated on, a lone girl passed by him at the intersection.

"Was that... Sanae?"

She was slightly more mature than the Sanae that Koutarou knew, but she still had a youthful energy to her. Since Sanae had just been on his mind, he recognized her in an instant.

"Did something happen?"

Sanae was heading in the opposite direction of where she lived. On top of that, she was running as fast as she could even though she was in the middle of rehabilitation. Even weirder still, she kept looking behind her as she ran. Those three things taken together made Koutarou suspect something might be wrong.

"Here we go!"

Koutarou quickly ran after Sanae. She had disappeared around a corner, but it wouldn't be hard for him to catch up to her at his full speed.

Sanae was running out of breath and her heart was beating faster and faster.

She had only come a short way, but even running just that much was exhausting in her condition. She couldn't catch her breath no matter how many times she inhaled, and her heart was frantically trying to pump enough oxygen to through her body. Beads of sweat ran down her forehead and her mouth hung wide open as she gasped for air. It was quite clear just looking at her that she would collapse any minute now. That could be avoided if she'd just stop running, but that wasn't an option right now.

"I-It's still chasing me?!"

Looking behind her, Sanae's expression twisted up. It wasn't from the pain and exhaustion of running, but rather from the fear of what she saw over her shoulder.

"Wait! I just want to get along with you!"

Chasing Sanae in the shadows of the setting sun was something she didn't understand. It seemed unable to leave the darkness, but Sanae continued to run as fast as she could to try and shake it.

"I have... to get away! Th-The sun... will set soon!"

Whatever it was that was following her wouldn't step into the light, so Sanae had thought she could get away, but the sun was setting quickly now. In mere minutes, she'd be completely surrounded by darkness. That would put Sanae right within that thing's reach. Sanae didn't know what would happen if it caught her, but her instincts were screaming danger. That's why she'd tried to escape while it was still light out.

"You only just got better. You shouldn't push your body like that. You should take better care of yourself. That's my body too now, you know."

"It's getting closer! What should I do?!"

Sanae started to panic. She had only been able to stay away from it because it was keeping to the shadows. But now that the sun was dipping low, the shadows grew longer and bigger. It could move more freely this way, and it was quickly gaining on her. It was only ten meters or so behind her now. Sanae was trying to escape before darkness fell, but the chances of that seemed low now.

"And it looks like... it's getting bigger and bigger!"

Sanae's panic only worsened when she realized the presence that was chasing her was getting larger. She thought at first it only felt that way because it was getting closer, but it was close enough now that she could tell that wasn't the case. If her sense of it was correct, it had already grown several times larger than when she'd first encountered it.

"Heh heh, just a little more... Just a little closer!"

"At this rate... I'll be captured! B-But... what can I do?!"

Sanae was helpless. She knew she would be in trouble if that thing caught her, but there was no way of escaping it. This was her first encounter with a paranormal phenomenon, and she had no idea what to do.

"My... lungs..."

Sanae gasped and coughed as she desperately continued running through the residential area. The sun started to fall below the horizon, and she was finally hitting her limit. She had a hard time breathing, she was feeling dizzy, and her exhausted legs were barely responding. She eventually tripped over herself, and couldn't regain her balance.

"Kyaaaaah!"

She crashed into the asphalt with nothing to break her fall. She felt the pain all over her body. It cleared her mind, but it nearly paralyzed her.

"Done already, little kitten?!"

That was when the black presence closed in on her. Its body had indeed grown larger like Sanae had feared. And with the light of the sun quickly fading, it came charging towards her at full speed.

"I've waited for this day for so long, little kitten! This time, you will become one with me! You will become one with us!"

The presence spread out in front of Sanae, who was unable to even get up, and took the shape of a malformed giant. It was vaguely humanoid, but with no thought put into its design. It looked like pieces and limbs had been randomly assembled around the body. Only the face alone was distinctly still human, but seeing a human face on such a grotesque form was bizarre. Even creepier still

was its expression. The sunken eyes were gleaming with all kinds of negative emotions, and its twisted mouth seemed to be made of pure malice.

Looking at the thing in front of her, only one word came to Sanae's mind, and rightfully so.

"M-Monster!"

There was no word more appropriate to describe the disfigured giant.

"How rude! If I were a monster, what would that make you with that ridiculous amount of spiritual energy?!"

The monster reached out towards Sanae with an arm several meters long. Still unable to get up, Sanae had no way of evading the arm. No, it probably would have been impossible even if she were standing. The arm was simply too large and moving too fast. Faced with the giant arm closing in at an unavoidable speed, Sanae finally resigned herself to her fate and closed her eyes.

"That's obvious!"

But just before it reached Sanae, somebody jumped in and punched the monster's arm with all their might.

"She's an incredible woman!"

The next moment, the punched arm exploded.

"Gyaaaaaaaah!"

The explosion wasn't all that large, but it was a painful shock to the monster, which created an opening.

"Huh?"

Sanae opened her eyes when she heard the explosion and scream, and when she did, she saw a certain someone in front of her.

"Let's go, Sanae!"

"Ah..."

Not a moment later, she was lifted up into his arms.



With his large body, well-trained muscles, and resolute eyes, he radiated strength and warmth. The moment Sanae felt that, she instinctively wrapped her arms around his neck.

“Be a good girl and hold on tight!”

“Satomi... Koutarou-san...?”

Sanae only realized who that certain someone was after she had her arms wrapped around him.

Once he’d rescued Sanae from the giant monster, Koutarou continued running while carrying her on his back. He had indeed rescued her, but they weren’t out of the woods yet. The monster was still chasing after them even now. Koutarou needed to find somewhere where he could finish the fight, but the middle of a neighborhood like this with a ton of bystanders around wasn’t a good option. Once he met up with Yurika, she would be able to cast a ward to keep people away, but he still wanted to go somewhere that would cause the least damage.

“I got it! The construction site in the suburbs, right?!”

“Yes! It seems like Yurika’s spell can just barely cover that site! And because it’s under construction, there’s a metal fence around the area as well! It’s the perfect place to fight!”

Theia’s voice rang out from Koutarou’s bracelet he’d gotten from Clan. He’d used it to contact her, and since Theia was in room 106 with the other invaders, everyone knew what was going on. After Koutarou had explained, Kiriha had came up with an apt plan while Ruth swiftly looked up a suitable vacant lot. Koutarou and Sanae would meet up with the invaders there, have Yurika cast her ward, and then they would defeat the monster with their combined force. That was the plan Kiriha had come up with.

“Theia, tell Kiriha that the enemy is the ghost woman from that one time!”

“Roger that! I’ll tell her! And pleb!”

“What?!”

“I will leave Sanae to you! Protect her no matter what!”

“As you wish, my princess!”

With those words, Koutarou ended the call.

“All right!”

Koutarou then changed the direction he was running in, following the guidance marker projected into his field of vision by the bracelet. Since the bracelet had received the coordinates from Ruth, he could now make a beeline towards the construction site.

“I’m telling you to wait, you filthy brat!”

After changing directions, the monster behind Koutarou caught up a little. Noticing that, Koutarou picked up the pace.

“Hang on, Sanae!”

“Kyah!”

Koutarou was running so fast now that Sanae nearly lost her grip on him. In order to not get shaken off, she desperately held on to Koutarou with all her might.

What is this...

Once she was secure, Sanae realized just how fast Koutarou was actually running. Her eyes opened wide in surprise as she watched him easily overtake people on bicycles. He was even keeping pace with a car that happened to be driving down the road before it stopped at a traffic light. He had to be going at least twenty kilometers per hour.

If Koutarou had been on his own, that might have been possible. It was possible for particularly athletic people to sprint at those speeds for a short distance. But Sanae couldn’t imagine that it was possible to run like that for an extended period, much less while carrying someone. But regardless of whether she believed it or not, it was happening right in front of her. And with every step Koutarou took as he ran down the sidewalk, the distance between them and the monster increased.

Koutarou was actually using psychic powers to enhance his physical abilities.

Though it was growing weaker, Koutarou still had the ability to use psychic powers from Sanae. He reinforced his muscle power and increased the supply of oxygen to his body to keep exhaustion at bay. Even for a strong guy like Koutarou, running that fast on his own power was not possible.

“Satomi-san.”

“What’s wrong? Did you get hurt?”

“No, that’s not it... Just who are you people?”

Sanae couldn’t understand anything. The speed at which Koutarou was running was abnormal, and she also didn’t know why he’d showed up to save her. It seemed like he knew something about that monster, too. Then there were the classmates he had contacted through his bracelet. Sanae knew that Koutarou, Theia, and the others were bound together by a deep sense of trust. Adding it all up, Sanae could only imagine that Koutarou and his friends were people with mysterious backgrounds.

“Us?”

Koutarou stumbled for an answer. He couldn’t find a single apt way to describe himself and the other girls. When they had first met, “invaders and their victim” had sufficed. But now he felt like that explanation wasn’t suitable anymore. Koutarou and the others had become something much more than that a long time ago.

“Well...”

After thinking for a moment, he smiled.

“We are Higashihongan Sanae’s merry band of friends.”

Koutarou couldn’t think of any other way to put it. They were all close friends, so Koutarou felt like that was the most accurate description for the time being.

“Does that... have something to do with why you’re so nice to me?”

Koutarou and the others treated her much the same way the rest of her classmates did, but the feelings behind their actions were fundamentally different. Sanae felt kindness in everything they did for her, and that made her happy.

“Maybe. But let’s leave that for later. We have to hurry on ahead as fast as possible for now.”

“Yeah...”

After that, Koutarou fell silent and focused on running. Sanae held on to his back with both her arms and tried not to get in his way. She stayed quiet to as she bounced up and down on Koutarou’s back as he ran along for some time, but then a strange feeling started squeezing her chest.

I... know this back...?

It was a bizarre sensation. This was all new to her, but a sense of familiarity came over her as she leaned against him. The width of his back, his warmth, his pulse. The sensation of her arms around him. And the sense of security she felt while trusting herself to him. All of it told Sanae one thing.

There’s no doubt about it... I’ve done this before...

Though Sanae wasn’t sure when it had happened or how, she became convinced this wasn’t her first time riding on Koutarou’s back. It seemed impossible, but it felt right. Something deep within her heart was shouting out that this was where she belonged.

Higashihongan Sanae’s merry band of friends...

As she bounced on Koutarou’s back, Sanae began thinking that what he’d said might not have been a joke. The warmth she felt in her arms was a calming, familiar relief to her. It was like she’d known it forever.

When Koutarou and Sanae reached the construction site, there was no sign of anyone around. Since the sun had set, the workers had finished for the day and gone home. Ruth, who had chosen the place, had foreseen that much.

“Are Theia and the others not here yet?”

Jumping into the construction site, Koutarou looked around the area as he headed for the center of it. He was glad not to see any bystanders, but he didn’t see his friends, either. Because he’d been closer to the construction site and because he had been running so quickly, Koutarou and Sanae had reached their

destination much quicker than the others.

“Satomi-san, it’s coming!”

“What’s wrong, brat?! Done running?!”

Even worse, the monster arrived before Theia and the others did. It passed through the entrance gate and invaded the construction site. Its body had grown even larger than before and was now several meters tall. If it were corporeal, it would have destroyed the gate walking into it like that.

“That monster... Just how many evil spirits did she merge with before coming here?”

Koutarou had fought against this monster—or more accurately, this ghost—in the past. Back then she had also merged with other spirits to grow larger. But she was much bigger now than she’d been back then. She’d used the last of her spiritual energy to gather as many evil spirits as she could. That’s why she no longer appeared human. She’d used the last of her spiritual energy and couldn’t maintain her form, especially not as the mass of evil spirits she’d become. She had so much power this way that she couldn’t control it herself. She was so desperate for Sanae that she’d sacrificed her body to try to get what she wanted.

“Heh heh heh, you brat... This won’t go down like it did last time!”

The only thing that reminded Koutarou of her original form was the way she talked. Her appearance and voice had already greatly changed, and were inhuman in every sense of the word.

“Sanae, please get off.”

“Okay.”

Listening to Koutarou’s request, Sanae climbed off his back. She was a little reluctant, but it seemed like her best bet was listening to him.

“But... what are you going to do?”

“I’m going to fight her to buy some time until help arrives.”

Koutarou had told Theia and the others that the enemy was an evil ghost. Kiriha should have ways of dealing with ghosts. And since she had access to her

armory, unlike the time at the beach, she could make use of the specialized weapons inside. The only problem was how Koutarou was going to hold the ghost off until Kiriha could get there.

“That’s impossible! That thing is incredibly dangerous!”

Sanae shook her head frantically, making her somewhat long hair swing left and right. She didn’t think he had any chance of standing up against that monster. In fact, she wasn’t even certain that that this “help” of his that was coming would be able to do anything. The monster held such great power within it that it terrified Sanae that much.

“Doing things, even if they’re impossible, is what a man does. Besides, there’s no escaping now.”

The monster was standing in front of the exit. The sun had fully set. There was no longer anywhere to run. Koutarou had to take on the monster, even if it was impossible.

“B-But... But you...!”

Sanae still tried to stop Koutarou, but she couldn’t come up with a good way to put it. In truth, she too understood that it was simply something he had to do.

“Thanks for worrying about me.”

Koutarou smiled at Sanae.

“Ah...”

Koutarou may have been smiling, but his eyes were filled with determination. Sensing that, Sanae realized that she wouldn’t be able to stop him.

“Oh, right, I almost forgot.”

Seeing Sanae so uneasy, Koutarou was reminded of a certain something in his possession. He reached into the pocket of his uniform to get it.

“Here, take this.”

He then put it in Sanae’s hands, hoping it would alleviate her anxiety.

“This...”

The moment she wrapped her fingers around it, her heart skipped a beat. It felt like some kind of memory was bubbling up in the back of her head.

“A... charm...?”

“It’s for protection, you know.”

Koutarou had handed Sanae a small charm. It was a purple fabric embroidered with the words “family safety” in golden thread. Looking at it, they glimmered in the last few rays of sunlight.

What was that... I was about to...

It appeared to just be a typical charm. It had probably been purchased at some shrine for a few hundred yen. But the moment she laid eyes on it, Sanae was overcome with the powerful feeling that she was on the verge of remembering something. But nothing ever came to her, and that left her feeling frustrated.

“Cradle, give me my sword.”

“As you wish, my lord.”

“Ah.”

While Sanae was distracted by the charm, Koutarou stepped forward and stood in the way of the approaching monster. Seeing his defiant attitude, the monster’s mouth distorted as it sneered at Koutarou.

“Do you think you can do something, brat?! You may have gotten the better of me last time, but I am several times stronger now!”

Koutarou had defeated this ghost in the past, but she was different now. She’d sacrificed her own body to gather as much power as possible. She was confident that she could easily defeat Koutarou this time, even with his powers.

“Yes, there is a limit to what I can do alone. I’m just a high schooler that knows a thing or two about fighting.”

Koutarou freely admitted to what the monster was saying. But he didn’t take a single step back, and he spoke with determination in his voice.

“But we won’t lose. My friends are all exceptionally competent!”

“So what?! Who cares about your friends?!”

“You should know after gathering power from all those other evil spirits!”

As Koutarou shouted that out, he held his right hand out in front of him.

“Y-You impudent brat!”

With Koutarou’s hand pointed at her, the monster instinctively flinched. Sensing she was afraid of him, Koutarou made his move.

“Come, Signaltin!”

“Call sign confirmed. Coordinate axis fixed. Commencing transfer of Signaltin.”

The moment the AI answered through Koutarou’s bracelet, a black hole appeared in front of his outstretched hand.

“What is that?! Brat, what are you trying to do?!”

Koutarou’s confidence, his dignified figure, and the mysterious black hole all intimidated the monster. Though she was supposed to have the upper hand, she began feeling anxious. In the moment she recoiled, Koutarou grabbed hold of the sword that had appeared from the hole in time and space. When his fingers wrapped around the handle, the sword began emitting a dazzling light. It was so bright that it flooded the construction sight and temporarily made it look like it was midday.

“This is that light from last time! So it was that sword’s power?!”

The monster, with the female ghost as its core, had seen this light before. In the past, it had burned her ghostly allies and forced them to pass on. It had cost her a great deal of her spiritual energy, too. She’d already seen the light in action when Koutarou punched her arm earlier with the charm in his hand. But even though this was the same light, it was on a totally different level now. It shone several times more intensely than what she had seen before.

“Your Excellency, Lord Blue Knight, this ship, the Cradle, will pray for your fortune and glory in place of the nation of Forthorthe.”

“...Thank you.”

The enemy was powerful and he was unarmed. But he had to protect Sanae no matter what.

In that situation, Koutarou couldn't be picky about his methods. He figured that Signaltin was the only weapon capable of harming this ghostly monster. Even if he borrowed a weapon from Clan or Theia, it likely wouldn't have any effect against an incorporeal creature.

Truth be told, he also wanted to call for the Blue Knight's armor, but he didn't think that the monster would wait long enough to let him put it on. He had to hold his ground with Signaltin alone.

Seeing Koutarou take hold of his sword, Maki grabbed hold of her staff. She had been tailing Koutarou in order to learn more about what was going on in room 106, and so she'd been watching over him and Sanae all this time. As a result, she'd arrived at the construction site long before the invaders.

There's that ridiculous amount of mana again... But this time it might be a little tough...

Since Maki had experienced the powers of Signaltin firsthand, she understood the situation at hand better than anyone else.

Since Signaltin was a magical sword, it could deal a lot of damage against opponents that were affected by normal physical attacks. And against opponents who protected themselves with magic, it held matchless strength. But against a ghost, it was just a normal sword. The surplus mana would have to be used to coat the blade directly in order to do any real damage, but Koutarou wasn't that good at controlling it. He only had a rough understanding of the sword's magic. Because of that, there was a lot of wasted mana, which meant that the magic covering the blade was weaker than it should be.

Meanwhile, his opponent was a monster that had absorbed an abnormal amount of evil spirits and obtained great power. Though she was no match for Signaltin, she was still a considerable opponent. Normally once a ghost amassed that kind of power, things would spiral out of control and the evil spirit at the core would collapse on itself. But with this ghost, her grudge was still keeping her together.

Koutarou had a strong power, but couldn't use it to its full extent. The monster had less power, but could freely use it. Not even Maki was sure who would come out on top in this battle.

In the worst case scenario, I'll have to step in... But for now I'll just cast a ward to keep people away until Nijino Yurika gets here...

Maki began incanting her spell.

"Sanctuary! Modifier: Effective Area, Colossal!"

At the same time, Maki began griping to herself internally.

Really... Why am I here helping Satomi-kun and the others? I don't get it at all, jeez...

It was a strange twist of fate. This was actually the same construction site where Maki had once fought Koutarou. Though work on the site had advanced since then, there was no mistaking it.

Things were different now. Maki and Koutarou were no longer fighting. In fact, she was even giving him a helping hand. It was a reversal that anyone would have found strange, not just Maki.

By the time Maki had finished her internal griping, her incantation was finished and the spell went into effect. Mana enveloped the entire construction site and concealed what was happening within from the surrounding residents.

"You can do it, Satomi-kun... I will always stay with you..."

Maki was the only outsider still watching Koutarou after her spell went off. It was truly strange. It was all she wanted to do—even felt like she had to do—from the bottom of her heart.

The fight between Koutarou and the monster went as Maki had predicted. Signaltin was a poor match against an opponent without physical form. And Koutarou's control of the sword's magic power wasn't enough to overcome that hurdle.

It would probably have been more than enough to defeat the ghosts that had captured Sanae last summer, but unbeknownst to Koutarou, he was being aided

by Yurika's magic back then. And she wasn't here right now. Worse yet, the monster before him was far more powerful than the ones he'd faced then.

"I was surprised when you pulled out that sword, but looks like it's just a sword after all! As long as I keep my distance, it's nothing!"

The monster floated into the air and kept her distance from Koutarou while using her powers to attack him at range. She psychically lifted up objects around the construction site and hurled them at him. It was a paranormal phenomenon identical to Sanae's Poltergeist powers.

"Haaah!"

Koutarou swung his sword to swat away the flying objects. Iron bars, sandbags, nails, screws, and similar projectiles were all sent flying right for him. And though they were dangerous, they were all normal objects, meaning Koutarou could block them. He swung his sword to block the larger projectiles, while using Signaltin's magic to block the hails of smaller projectiles with a defensive spell. His physical abilities enhanced by psychic powers just barely allowed him to keep up with the monster. But throwing things wasn't her only attack.

"Come on now! Are you sure you should be focusing on just that?!"

"Guah!"

With his hands full blocking the Poltergeist attacks, something suddenly crashed into Koutarou. An acute pain ran through him, robbing him of his strength and body heat. His vision then went dark, and he looked like he was on the verge of losing consciousness.

This was the monster's second attack. While hurling things at Koutarou with her Poltergeist powers, she launched something else at him from his blind spot. It was a ball made out of hardened spiritual energy—a fitting attack for a ghost that stole the life energy of whatever it hit.

"D-Damn it!"

Koutarou shook his head to clear his mind, but that was when another wave of Poltergeist attacks assaulted him. Unable to properly move from the pain, Koutarou had no way to block them this time and ended up taking direct hits

from several objects. He now had several more cuts and bruises, but it wasn't like he'd survived the earlier onslaught of attacks unscathed. He'd been on the defensive for a while now.

I can't keep up like this! I have to come up with something quickly!

After recovering, Koutarou started blocking the Poltergeist attacks once more. But even he knew he couldn't keep this up for but so much longer.

Koutarou's sword couldn't reach the monster, yet she could attack him freely. Even if he focused on dodging the balls of spiritual energy, he would have trouble picking them out of everything that was already coming flying at him. His simple defensive spell couldn't protect him from spiritual energy, meaning he had no way of blocking those attacks.

As a result, Koutarou was taking hits here and there and was gradually being cornered with this combo attack. He was trying to buy as much time as he could in order for Theia and the others to get here, but he had started to realize that doing so would be very difficult.

"Satomi-san, that's enough! Please! Just forget about me and run away!"

Even Sanae could see that Koutarou was in trouble. He was bleeding from multiple gouges now, and all of them looked deep. If he continued protecting her, it was clear that he would be killed. And she didn't want that. She didn't want this boy who'd been working so hard to save her to die for her sake. She'd just learned of the warmth of his back, and she couldn't bear the thought of losing it.

If she had had enough stamina left, she would have run out in front of Koutarou to protect him. But after all the energy she'd used, she barely able to move now. She hated it, but all she could do was watch as he fought.

"Heh, I-I can't do that."

Koutarou answered Sanae without looking at her. He was at his limit just blocking the incoming attacks.

"Why not?!"

"Because I'm stubborn!"

Betraying Sanae's hopes, Koutarou refused to run. Even if she didn't have her memories, Sanae was still Sanae to Koutarou, and he wasn't about to abandon such a good friend.

Even if I die, I have to keep that monster away from Sanae until Theia and the others get here... And to do that, I have to buy as much time as I can!

As rough as things were, he was glad the monster was fixated on him. Every attack it sent his way was one less chance it had to hurt Sanae.

I'll leave the rest to the others!

Koutarou foresaw his own defeat, but he still didn't back down. He had absolute faith in his allies. They would be able to save Sanae. With that hope in his heart, Koutarou resolved himself to buy as much time as possible.

And since Koutarou had been prepared to part with the invaders from the start, he didn't grieve the life-threatening situation he was in.

"Haaaaaaaah!"

Koutarou shouted out to pump himself up as he readied his sword and charged in. Based on how the monster had been behaving so far, he was convinced it wouldn't attack Sanae, so Koutarou decided to close the distance. If he stayed on the move, it would be harder for the monster to hit him, and he would likely keep the monster's attention away from Sanae. It would be his final attack, and he wanted to put it to the best use possible.

"You can't, Satomi-san! Don't do it!"

Since she'd developed the ability to read people's feelings, Sanae immediately understood what Koutarou was doing.

"Wait! Please wait!"

Sanae firmly grasped the charm in her hand as she desperately called for Koutarou. But he didn't answer. He didn't turn back. He simply charged ahead.

He will die! At this rate, Satomi-san really will die!

All Sanae could do was stare at Koutarou's back as he ran. The thought that she would never be able to feel its warmth again overtook her, and she couldn't take it. She had to do something. Anything. That's why she started crawling

after him.

“Don’t leave me behind! I don’t want you to go!”

Koutarou was putting his life on the line for her. It should have been the first time anyone had ever done that for her, yet strangely enough, it didn’t feel like it. But Sanae didn’t have time to dwell on that. She was putting all her strength into crawling after Koutarou, but the distance between them just kept growing. The number of wounds he suffered just kept increasing.

“You promised me! That everything would stay the same! That we would always have fun!”

Driven by her intense emotions, Sanae shouted loudly after him. She didn’t even know what she was saying, but she was desperate to get through to him. She wanted him to come back. To stay by her side forever. She was listening to the desires of her soul.

“So dying on your own is unfair! You have to keep your promise!”

However...

A large iron bar came flying at Koutarou. Unable to block it completely, he took the hit straight on. The massive bar struck him and sent him flying backward. He hit the ground with a thud and rolled. When he finally came to a stop, he laid there motionless.

Right in front of Sanae, the unthinkable was happening. It felt like watching the end of the world—it just shouldn’t be real. She could scarcely believe her eyes.

“Kooouuutaaarooooouuuuu!”

In that moment, Sanae’s channeled all of her emotion into her voice. She screamed for Koutarou, and his name echoed through the construction site. But Sanae was overflowing with more than just emotion now.

“What?! What is this abnormal amount of spiritual energy?! Is this the little kitten’s true power?!”

An enormous amount of spiritual energy was radiating from the screaming Sanae. It was concentrated in her right hand—the one holding the “family

safety” charm.

The spiritual energy from the charm turned into a dazzling light that even a normal person would have been able to see, and it spread from Sanae’s hand over her entire body. She was completely aglow now, but the light only continued to expand. Eventually, Sanae stood in a pillar of light with a look of blank surprise on her face.

“H-Huh...? I...”

But once she returned to her senses, the light rapidly shrunk like it was being absorbed into her body. As it did, the amount of spiritual energy she was emitting returned to normal levels.

“That’s right, Koutarou! What about Koutarou?!”

Sanae had been surprised by the light that had surrounded her and then disappeared, but she soon remembered something more important.

“Koutarou!”

Sanae put what had just happened to her out of her mind and rushed towards Koutarou. Just moments ago, she had been so weak that she could hardly crawl. Yet she felt fine now. It was another strange phenomenon, but Sanae paid it no mind.

The monster stared at her with wide eyes. Its eyes were already big, but the surprise enlarged them even more.

“Impossible... This is on a completely different level from what I saw over the summer... Not even a lesser god should have this much power... It exceeds even that... I can’t believe it... Just who is this girl...?”

Though it hadn’t lasted, Sanae’s burst of spiritual energy was off the charts. It far exceeded the limits of man, and was stepping into the boundaries of the divine.

“Ahahahahaha! I want it! I will definitely make that body mine!”

Despite witnessing her power firsthand, the monster didn’t fear Sanae. Instead, it grew more excited at the prospect of consuming her. The desire for her power far outstripped any fear the monster felt at having to fight her for it.

Perhaps that's simply how evil spirits were programmed to think.

"As long as I have that body, I could even become a goddess!"

The excited monster followed Sanae with its eyes. Now that Koutarou had been defeated, all that was left was this little girl. Sensing her victory drawing near, the female ghost at the monster's core could hardly contain herself.

When she reached Koutarou, Sanae held up his large body.

"Koutarou, Koutarou! Please wake up!"

She'd run over to him, terrified that he was dead on the spot. That's why she shook him fiercely and her voice was breaking up as she called for him.

"S-Sanae...?"

Koutarou half opened one of his eyes and looked up at Sanae, who was holding him. Fortunately, he was still alive. He was badly injured, but he had somehow survived the attack.

"Koutarou!"

Sanae firmly embraced him. The only thing that had kept him alive was Maki's magical interference, but Sanae couldn't care less about how he had managed to survive. To her, all that mattered was that he was still breathing.

"Thank god, you're alive..."

The warmth she could feel as she embraced Koutarou was the same warmth that she had longed for, both past and present. Tears soon began welling in Sanae's eyes. She was so happy at getting to feel Koutarou's warmth again that she couldn't keep them from overflowing. The tears streamed down her cheeks to her chin, and then dripped down onto Koutarou's face.

"I was really, really worried..."

"...Sorry."

Koutarou reached out with his hand and wiped Sanae's cheek. Koutarou felt that tears didn't suit her, no matter the kind.

"I won't forgive you if you leave me again. And if you do, I'll put you in my

scorpion deathlock!”

“Sanae, your scorpion deathlock still doesn’t hurt that much... Wait, Sanae, do you remember that?!”

Realizing what Sanae was nonchalantly talking about, Koutarou sat up in stark surprise. He was so taken aback that he momentarily forgot the pain of his injuries.

“Of course I remember that. Did you get senile?”

After being told her wrestling moves weren’t any good, Sanae grew a little snippy. She hadn’t realized what had Koutarou so surprised.

“If you want, I can use it on you right now.”

“That’s not what I meant. Did you get your memories back?!”

Koutarou had practiced the scorpion deathlock with Sanae as a ghost. Sanae as she was now shouldn’t know anything about it. So if she was talking about it, that had to mean she’d gotten her memories back somehow.

“Huh...? My memories?”

Sanae blinked repeatedly. She had been so focused on Koutarou that she hadn’t stopped to pay any mind to herself. It wasn’t until Koutarou pointed it out that she realized a change had come over her.

“Y-Yeah... it looks like it...”

Now surprised herself, Sanae nodded a couple of times. Her memories of Koutarou and the other invaders girls had indeed returned. Right now, Sanae had her memories of being in the hospital and being in room 106 at the same time. Having two sets of memories was a strange sensation, but it paled in comparison to the joy of what she was remembering.

“I remember... Koutarou! It’s you, Koutarou! We... We met again...”

More tears formed in Sanae’s eyes. Even though Koutarou had just wiped them away, they streamed down her cheeks once more.

“Sanae...”

Koutarou was so surprised that he couldn’t say anything else. This was even

more of a shock than learning Kiriha and Kii were the same person. He'd convinced himself he'd never get to see his Sanae again. But that was as far as they'd get for now.

"Sorry for interrupting your touching reunion, but it's about time to end this."

They were currently in the middle of a battle, and their enemy wasn't going to wait for them to finish talking. Now was the time for action, not words.

"I'll be taking that body of yours, little kitten!"

"Sanae, get back!"

Koutarou placed himself in front of Sanae and readied his sword.

"No way!"

However, Sanae was no longer someone who needed to be protected. She had all the love and courage she'd developed over the last year she'd spent with Koutarou and the others, and the perseverance that she had developed during her long stay in the hospital. Sanae as she was now was not either Sanae had existed before—it was almost as if she was born anew. And this Sanae wanted to cling to Koutarou's back when things were peaceful, and fight by his side when things got rough. She wanted to protect the boy she loved.

"After all, I'm the incredible woman who's going to keep you safe!"

Embracing everything she felt, Sanae stood next to Koutarou without hesitation. Her appearance was no longer meek and timid like before. Her weakened body had been healed by the spiritual energy from before. And as she stood there with her hands on her hips, she radiated confidence. This Sanae was sure she could win.

"Sanae?! Don't be reckless, you're still—"

"Like I said! If you leave me again, you'll get the scorpion deathlock!"

Sanae was never planning on letting Koutarou leave her behind again. She was meant to be holding on to his back, not watching it from afar. And if he didn't understand that, Sanae was going to forcibly make him understand by using the new joint lock she'd learned.

"Little kitten, even with your powerful spiritual energy, what can you even

do? Just give up on your useless struggle and become a part of me.”

The monster sneered at Sanae. It was true she had vast spiritual energy, but Sanae couldn’t freely use all of it. And she had only just returned to her own body; her psychic powers were still unstable. So even though the monster had been wary of Sanae six months ago, it wasn’t scared of her now.

“I can do anything! I can make miracles happen!”

However, completely unlike before, Sanae didn’t flinch at all. She puffed up her chest, glared at the monster, and proudly declared herself.

“I’ve learned the most important lesson of all! Love is all!”

Sanae couldn’t remember where she’d heard those words, but she believed them to be the truth. The passion burning inside of her told her that she couldn’t possibly lose to this monster. She had no basis for that belief, but she was still convinced of it.

“Sanae, you’re being crazy.”

By now, Koutarou had given up trying to convince Sanae to back down. Since the monster wanted to absorb Sanae, it probably wouldn’t hurt her. And since Sanae could use spiritual energy far better than Koutarou could, she wouldn’t get in the way.

“What? Are you saying you don’t trust me, your Sanae-chan?”

Despite the powerful foe in front of her, Sanae was talking the same way they would while joking around and playing games in room 106. She then leaned over and bumped into Koutarou with her shoulder as a sign of her dissatisfaction.

“No, I was just thinking that we’re really rocking now.”

“Naturally!”

In that moment, Sanae’s right hand began glowing white again. Her spiritual energy was starting to concentrate into the charm. At first her spiritual energy grew stronger and weaker as it fluctuated with her pulse, but as she got excited, it began beating at its own rhythm.

“A maiden’s heart always plays at eight beats.”

The name of the song was “Love Is All.” The rhythm played at eight beats. It was a small band with just her and Koutarou, but Sanae was sure the world would be theirs. That world was a mere six tatami mats big, but it had everything Sanae could ever want in it.

Once the fight restarted, Sanae issued an unexpected command to Koutarou.

“Koutarou, that sword won’t do! Change it to your normal one!”

“What?!”

The sword in Koutarou’s hands was Signaltin, the strongest weapon he had access to. It was thanks to that sword that he hadn’t been killed by the monster right away, so Koutarou was confounded when Sanae wanted him to use something else.

“The power in that sword is too strong, so my power can’t properly pass through it! But your normal sword has your spiritual energy permeated through it, so I can infuse it with my power!”

“I see!”

Now understanding what Sanae was getting at, Koutarou let go of Signaltin and stretched his right hand out in front of him.

“Blue Knight, give me my sword!”

“As you wish, my lord.”

The bracelet Koutarou wore originally belonged to Clan, but thanks to Clan and Ruth’s recent under the table dealings, Koutarou could now use it to communicate with Blue Knight as well. And his order was to transfer over Saguratin, his other sword.

“Come, Saguratin!”

“Call sign confirmed. Coordinate axis fixed. Commencing transfer of Saguratin.”

The transfer worked the same way as when he got Signaltin from the Cradle. A black hole opened up in front of him, and the handle of the sword extended from it.

“Master, this ship, Blue Knight, will pray for your fortune and glory in place of the nation of Forthorthe. Princess Theiamillis and Guardian Knight Ruthkania both await your safe return with all their hearts.”

The only difference in the transfer process was the notification message. The Cradle’s AI used a synthesized voice, but Blue Knight used Ruth’s. It was a personal touch of hers.

“Like Ruth said, let’s return safely!”

“Yeah!”

Koutarou nodded to Sanae and grabbed hold of Saguratin. Unlike Signaltin, which he had only started using recently, he’d had plenty of practice with Saguratin. It felt just right in his hands.

“Let’s go, Koutarou!”

The next moment, spiritual energy started flowing out of Sanae’s right hand. It became a torrent of white light that poured into Saguratin.

“I knew it! This sword will work!”

Saguratin, which had been permeated with Koutarou’s spiritual energy, readily accepted Sanae’s. Since Saguratin wasn’t a magical sword, Sanae could freely infuse it with her powers since her spiritual energy was compatible with Koutarou’s.

“We’re good to go, Koutarou!”

So with Sanae’s help, Saguratin became much more powerful in Koutarou’s hands. It accepted much more of her spiritual energy than Signaltin would have.

“All right!”

Koutarou now had Signaltin in his left hand, and Saguratin in his right. Since Saguratin was infused with Sanae’s spiritual energy, he was now easily able to fend off the monster’s Poltergeist attacks with it. He didn’t even need to directly hit things away from himself anymore; anything that came near the sword was automatically repelled by its energy. It was like it had a meter wide barrier around it. Not even Signaltin covered in its special shockwave magic had that wide of a radius. It was incredibly useful in this situation.

“Sanae, I think I can do it with this!”

Sensing that he was making progress, Koutarou instinctively smiled at Sanae.

“Heehee, and on top of that... I can do this!”

Getting into the swing of things after being praised by Koutarou, Sanae turned her hands towards him. When she did, Koutarou’s right arm moved on its own and swung Saguratin from right to left. Completing the swing, a blade of spiritual energy went flying from the sword. It spun forward through the air, knocking down anything in its path as it sailed towards the monster.

“Gyaaaaaaah!”

Since the monster hadn’t been expecting such an attack, the blade of spiritual energy scored a direct hit. The blade buried itself in the monster’s waist, forcing the spirits it came into contact with to pass on.

“Hurgh... Gaaaaah! Wh-What is that?! That’s cheating!”

The monster summoned forth more evil spirits to heal the wound in its waist, and then glared at Sanae. Sanae’s powers were far greater than what the monster had expected. The monster had assumed that for all her spiritual energy, Sanae wouldn’t be able to do much with it. And it had just paid dearly for underestimating her. The monster had had the advantage of being able to attack Koutarou from a distance, but with Sanae’s help, they were on equal footing now.

“Koutarou, that’s how you use the Love Love Sanae-chan Sword.”

“...Sanae, you really do the most incredible things so casually.”

Koutarou was amazed in more ways than one.

“Just make sure you don’t use the Sparkling Sanae-chan Cutter too much. Creating the cutter puts a little strain on you.”

“I’m not so sure about your naming sense, though...”

Sanae’s psychic powers had been impressive when she was a ghost, but what she was doing now far surpassed even that. It was most likely because she merged with her body, but her sudden progress was quite a surprise for Koutarou.

“Like this, I’m probably better off focusing on Saguratin. Cradle, recover Signaltin.”

“As you wish, my lord.”

After sending Signaltin back to the Cradle, Koutarou held Saguratin in both hands.

“Huh? You only need one?”

“Yeah. You should avoid doing things you’re not used to in a fight.”

Koutarou wasn’t trained to use two swords, and since spiritual energy was more directly connected to the mind and soul than magic was, Koutarou decided it would better if he wasn’t dividing his attention between two types of attacks.

“What a waste. It looked so cool.”

“I’ll practice it for next time then. But for now...”

Koutarou pointed the tip of his sword the monster.

“Let’s do this.”

Koutarou and Sanae had gained supreme confidence in themselves, and the monster was starting to fear Sanae’s powers. The tables were slowly turning.

“As if I would let you!”

The female ghost that made up the monster’s core had bet everything on this fight. Using up the last of her remaining spiritual energy, she had summoned all of the evil spirits in the area and challenged Koutarou and Sanae to a fight. That’s why she couldn’t afford to lose. Even if she ran, she would still be forced to pass on because she’d used all of her energy. Because of that, she couldn’t retreat.

“You guys, give me more power!”

The ghost forcibly squeezed spiritual energy out of the other evil spirits making up the monster’s body, and attacked Koutarou and Sanae. She was using the same tactics as before, but she upped the ante on her attack dramatically. She used her Poltergeist powers to lift everything she could, and

created several balls of hardened spiritual energy at once.

“She’s going on her final offensive?! Here she comes, Sanae! Stay on your guard!”

“Koutarou, I’ll protect your back! So you just look straight ahead and beat that thing!”

“I’m counting on you!”

The relationship between Koutarou and Sanae was the opposite of the evil spirits exploiting each other. They felt for, protected, and supported each other. Anyone watching the battle at this point wouldn’t have doubted that Koutarou and Sanae would come out on top. Even in the face of grave danger, their trust in each other was their greatest asset.

“Sanae-chan Special Attack: Wonderful Arrow!”

Sanae began focusing spiritual energy into the family safety charm in her left hand. As she did, the energy took the form of a glowing bow with the charm as its core. And when she drew the bow with her right hand, a glowing arrow appeared nocked and at the ready. Sanae was going to support Koutarou using a spiritual bow and arrow as cover.

Sanae had been part of the archery club during her middle school years, just like her mother before her. She hadn’t been able to participate much as she grew weaker, but it was the only weapon she knew how to use.

“Dieeeeeee!”

Before Sanae could take aim, the monster attacked. It threw a barrage of heavy objects at Koutarou while attacking him with balls of spiritual energy from behind.

“I’m the only one who gets to mess with Koutarou’s back!”

With a shout, Sanae let her arrow fly without even taking aim. Had it been a real bow and arrow, she never would have hit a thing. But since she was using a bow and arrow made out of her own spiritual energy, it didn’t quite work like a real one. She’d only given her energy that form to make it easier to use. The spiritual arrow sailed through the air, then split into eighteen different arrows,

each going after a different target.

“Take them oooouuuuut!”

Sanae was shooting for the eighteen attacks aimed at Koutarou’s back. With her psychic powers, she had a perfect sense of her surroundings. And since the monster had attacked with physic powers too, all its attacks were targets for Sanae.

Her arrows flew like guided missiles and cut beautiful arcs through the air. The eighteen arrows each successfully took down their intended targets, successfully defending Koutarou’s flank and leaving him free to attack.



“All right!”

Satisfied with this result, Sanae called out to Koutarou from behind him.

“Gooo! Right there! It’s a home run!”

“Gooooot iiiiiit!”

Responding to Sanae’s words, Koutarou gripped the sword tightly with both hands.

“I’ll knock you out of the park!”

Koutarou swung Saguratin like a bat with all his might. Had he been hitting a ball, he most definitely would have sent it flying far beyond the field.

The wide, sweeping swing created a gigantic blade made out of spiritual energy. Its size, thickness, and speed all surpassed what Sanae had created by controlling him before. This blade blew away everything in its path and then some, leaving a clear opening for Koutarou.

“Feh, don’t get full of yourself, brat!”

Of course, the path the blade carved led straight to the monster.

“Ha!”

But since the monster had predicted the attack this time, it was ready for it. It controlled the balls of spiritual energy it had created to attack Koutarou, and shot them into the incoming blade. The two attacks collided midair and unleashed their energies, creating a large explosion.

“As if I’d let you hit me with that again!”

“Aw, so close! But I guess I don’t need a year’s worth for that one.”

“No, it’s not over yet!”

The next moment, Koutarou passed through the flames of the explosion and appeared right in front of the monster. He had thrown himself through the explosion, prepared to take some damage from it.

“Really?! Koutarou, you like old ladies?!”

“O-Oh no!”

The monster hadn’t expected Koutarou to close in like that, so it was slow to react.

“How about thiiiiis?!”

With Saguratin raised above his head, he swung it down on the monster. Without any time to react, the monster had no way of avoiding the attack. Koutarou’s strike cut off the monster’s right arm at the elbow, and the limb disappeared before it even hit the ground. The evil spirits that made up the arm passed on.

“I missed?!”

However, Koutarou clicked his tongue at that result. He’d been aiming for the monster’s head. Since the head belonged to the female ghost that served as the monster’s core, Koutarou figured that the whole beast would go down in a single blow if he could hit it.

But Koutarou’s aim had been thrown off because he jumped through the explosion. The blast had slowed him down and the flames had obscured his sight. The end result was his attack being slightly off course.

“Kyaaaaaaaah! My arm, my arm!”

Reeling from its severed arm, the monster quickly retreated. It wasn’t foolish enough to stay a sitting duck for a follow-up attack from Koutarou.

“A-At this rate, I’ll be defeated! In that case...!”

The monster started retreating even further by going up into the air.

“What? Does she want to make this a long distance fight again? Or is she running away?”

Even if the battle turned into long-range shootout, Koutarou and Sanae wouldn’t lose. Even if the monster ran away, the female ghost at the core was almost at her limit. The monster’s actions seemed illogical, and Koutarou couldn’t figure out why it was behaving this way. While keeping his sword on it, he watched it in confusion.

“Aaah, no!”

The monster continued to fly up and away, but Sanae let out a bewildered

shriek. Her face went pale when she realized what the monster was doing.

“What’s wrong?!”

“Koutarou! She’s going to eat the people outside to increase her power!”

Even from this distance, Sanae could use her sharp spirit senses to tell that the monster was targeting humans outside the construction site. That could only mean one thing. It was going to eat people in order to replenish its power before coming after Koutarou and Sanae again. The whole neighborhood was in danger.

“She knows she can’t win at this rate, but she can’t retreat! She’s going to keep eating people until she gets her power back!”

“What?! That would be a disaster!”

Koutarou hurriedly chased after the monster, but it had an incredible lead on him. His attacks would never reach it at this distance. It was about to escape the construction site, and from there it would go on a rampage in town until it got what it wanted.

Damn it, to think she would do something like that...

Koutarou kicked himself for not being able to predict this ahead of time. How many victims would there be? Ten? Twenty? More than that? Koutarou’s thoughts turned dark as he gave chase.

“There’s no need to worry.”

Suddenly, a familiar, powerful voice resounded throughout the construction site.

“Well done on enduring for this long on your own, my knight!”

The voice belonged to a girl Koutarou and Sanae knew very well—it was Theia. She was standing a ways off from them, her posture dignified and her chest puffed out proudly and she glared at the monster.

“Theia?!”

Having spotted her first, Sanae let out a joyous shout. There were several other familiar faces lined up next to Theia as well. Ruth, Yurika, and Shizuka,

plus Kiriha and her two haniwas. The reinforcements from room 106 had finally arrived.

“Theia, what are you going to do?!”

Upon spotting Theia himself, Koutarou asked her what the plan was.

“Koutarou, Sanae, you two continue giving chase.”

But Theia didn’t answer his question. Instead, she gave him an order.

“I got it! Let’s go, Sanae!”

“Yeah!”

Theia was no longer the kind of shallow girl that would ignore others. And because he knew that, Koutarou understood that Theia was pressed for time. That’s why he didn’t hesitate to chase after the monster on her instructions.

“Yurika, contain the monster!”

“Okay! Quick Cast Bind Undead! Modifier: Superior Penetration!”

Yurika incanted a spell that prevented ghosts, zombies, and the like from being able to move. Magic tended to not be very effective against powerful undead creatures, and knowing that, Yurika poured extra mana into her spell.

“Gah, my body!”

The powered-up spell proved effective, and the monster stopped in its tracks midair. Yurika’s mana became like a lasso that had ensnared it.

“Could this be th-the same as that time?! Which means—”

The female ghost at the monster’s core remembered the sensation of not being able to move her body. It was the same thing she’d felt when Koutarou and the others had defeated her before.

“Here we go, Ruth, Kiriha, Shizuka! Prepare to attack!”

“I-It’s them!”

Turning her eye that she could just barely move, the monster confirmed what was behind her. She spotted a girl with golden hair along and a clear sense of hostility. There were also four other girls moving about busily, and the monster

couldn’t imagine they’d come here for fun.

“Spiritual energy sensor activated, ho! Ruth-chan, are you getting the data? Ho!”

“I’m getting it, Karama-chan! Data has been converted and input into Blue Knight’s firing control system! Your Highness, we are ready!”

“Kiriha, how’s it going on your end?!”

“The photon to spiritual energy converter is up and operational! Korama, how are the adjustments?”

“Shizuka-chan, we’re counting on you, ho!”

“Um... something like this? Hyah!”

“Nee-san, the output wavelength has been synchronized to Shizuka-chan’s fighting spirit, ho!”

“Theia-dono, we’re set!”

“Good! Here we go, men! I don’t want to see any blunders!”

The monster could see Theia’s fearless smile.

“Eeek!”

It made the monster shudder. In spite of her smile, Theia’s face had hostility written all over it. It was the fierce expression of a royal who had decided to show no mercy to their enemy. And with that look on her face, Theia gave an order to the bracelet on her right wrist.

“Blue Knight! Anti-Material Laser Cannon!”

“As you wish, my princess.”

The next moment, a black hole appeared next to Theia. It was the same kind Koutarou had used to call out his swords. But what appeared from the hole Theia summoned was no sword. It was a large laser cannon with a barrel several meters long. It was the largest size of personal laser cannon, but because of its size and bulk, it couldn’t be aimed manually. It was a half-automatic weapon that aimed and fired on its own.

Once the cannon had fully emerged from the black hole, the two haniwas

installed gold rings around the muzzle. After waiting for them to complete their task, Theia issued her next order.

“Output to maximum power! Firing mode to single-shot, and set the irradiation range to high convergence! Give it your best shot!”

“Altering firing mode. Adjusting range and focus. Retargeting in accordance to adjustments. Energy charging complete. Firing preparations are complete.”

“Then fire!”

The moment after the bracelet announced that the cannon was ready to fire, Theia gave the word without hesitation.

“As you wish, my princess.”

Immediately afterward, the laser cannon converted all of the energy it had stored into photons and ejected them from the muzzle in a flash. In Forthorthe, standard issue lasers were purposefully designed to emit light to show that they were firing. The laser from this cannon was originally red, but what actually fired from the barrel was white light.



The reason for the light's change in color, in short, was the girls' teamwork. Karama's sensor detected the monster, and Ruth then sent that location data to Blue Knight. Blue Knight used that information to fire when Theia gave the order. The photons of the shot were changed into spiritual energy thanks to the devices Kiriha had brought to install on the muzzle. The converted spiritual energy was then synchronized to match the same wavelength Shizuka used when she attacked, so as long as the attack connected, it would do serious damage even to an incorporeal enemy. The girls had worked together to come up and execute the perfect plan.

"Gyaaaaaaaah!"

The monster roared in pain. After being converted into a different type of energy, it wasn't strictly a laser anymore, but the shot from Theia's cannon was still blindingly fast. By the time the monster even saw the light leave the barrel, it had already been hit. The shot was infused with the girls' will to defeat their enemy, and the sheer power of it completely blew away the lower half of the monster's body. The damage was serious enough that the monster could no longer stay in the air, and it plummeted down towards the construction site.

"Koutarou!"

"Yeah!"

The monster landed right in front of Koutarou and Sanae. They had gotten in position in case Theia's attack hadn't completely defeated the monster. It was a splendid plan, and they rushed in to finish the abomination off.

"Uuughh, why... why am I the only one this miserable? Why couldn't I... h-have been at least a little happy after dying...?"

The monster was still alive. Without its lower body, it was simply crawling along the ground.

"Koutarou, she's already..."

"Yeah. I know."

The monster was still moving, but the female ghost controlling it had suffered a great deal of damage in the attack. It was obvious that she would pass on

shortly, even if left alone. Even if she was evil, Koutarou and Sanae couldn't bring themselves to attack her like this.

"Nobody... Nobody cares about me... I am alone... and I will face my end alone... ha... hahaha!"

Before long, the monster stopped moving. The female ghost no longer had enough energy to order around the other evil spirits.

"You're wrong. Death isn't the end."

Sanae approached the monster. She squatted down next to her and reached out to wipe her tears away.

"Little kitten...?"

"And you won't be alone. Someone somewhere out there is watching over you. I promise."

"Sanae..."

Koutarou felt a strange sensation well up inside of him as he watched Sanae talking with the female ghost that was about to pass on. Koutarou mostly still thought of Sanae as a child, but right now she was opening up her heart to someone in their time of need. Someone who had just been her enemy, no less. She was radiating gentleness and maturity no child would be capable of.

"I don't understand... but that's... probably why I lost..."

The ghost's body began emitting a faint light. Her figure began to fade and her body gradually lost its shape. Her time had finally come.

"Take better care next time, okay?"

Sanae smiled as she said that. She tried to wipe away the ghost's tears once more, but she was so far gone now that Sanae could no longer touch her. That made Sanae feel bad. What this woman had done to Sanae no longer mattered to her. She just wanted to comfort her in her final moments.

"Next time, huh...? Will there be a next time for me...?"

"Of course. There's no way there wouldn't be."

The ghost's body grew fainter and fainter to the point that it was no longer

visible to Koutarou. Only Sanae, who was sensitive to spiritual energy, could still see and hear the ghost now.

“You think so?”

“I’m sure of it. I don’t think the god of this world is that unforgiving.”

Sanae was convinced of that. Otherwise, she never would have been reunited with Koutarou. Not only had she gotten to see him again, but she now remembered him and everything about their life together. That was a miracle—no, it was several. And after witnessing those miracles come together, Sanae was quite sure the god of this world was indeed a gentle, caring one.

“Heh... I hope so...”

The ghost disappeared, leaving only the echoing sound of her soft laughter behind. Not even Sanae could tell if she had been saved or not, but that last laugh wasn’t a hollow and bitter one. Sanae chose to believe it was a good sign, and she prayed for her soul.

“Bye-bye, ghost lady... Let’s meet again...”

And so the ghost finally left this world, seen off by the very girl she’d been stalking for months.

Love is all, huh?

Koutarou couldn’t help being a little impressed when he took it all in himself and realized that Sanae was much more mature than he’d previously thought.

After seeing the ghost off, Sanae wiped away her own tears and turned back to Koutarou. When their eyes met, she smiled. Feeling that the battle was now over, she was finally able to relax.

What is this...?

However, Koutarou’s was still feeling tense. Even though the ghost had passed on, the evil presence wasn’t going away. In fact, it was growing even larger.

“What’s wrong, Koutarou?”

“Sanae, something’s strange. Don’t you feel it? This strange presence?”

“Now that you mention it...”

Once Koutarou pointed it out, Sanae picked up on it too. When she focused on the evil presences in the area, she realized that it was by her feet.

“Koutarou, this is weird! The ghost lady is gone, but the monster’s body isn’t going away!”

The identity of the evil presence was the monster created by the female ghost. Its lower half had been destroyed by Theia’s attack, and now the ghost controlling it had passed on. Yet despite that, the upper half of its body was still intact and its evil aura was suddenly growing.

“Sanae, just get back! It’s dangerous!”

“Okay!”

Sanae ran towards Koutarou. Not a moment later, the monster’s fist slammed into the ground where Sanae had just been standing. She would have been crushed on the spot if Koutarou hadn’t called for her.

“What’s going on?!”

There was no one left to control it, yet the monster was still moving. It was a bizarre and mysterious sight. As Koutarou tilted his head in confusion, Sanae came running back to him. After positioning her behind him, Koutarou pointed his sword at what was left of the monster. But rather than coming after them, the monster simply continued to crawl around and roll in circles. It seemed to be flailing, and it was apparently just a coincidence that it had almost crushed Sanae.

What’s up with that?

Sanae poked her head out from behind Koutarou and strained her eyes to focus on the monster’s upper body. By doing that, she would be able to see the flow of spiritual energy inside of it. And when she saw what was happening, she instinctively let out a scream.

“What is that?!”

The spiritual energy in the monster was far too disordered to have a proper

flow. Normally there was a natural flow to spiritual energy, similar to the way blood circulated in vessels through the body. But the mass of energy in the monster was pure chaos, flowing in any and all directions at random. The upper half of its body seemed to be crawling around according to the pull of the energy.

“What’s wrong?!”

“Koutarou, there are too many evil spirits in that body! It’s out of control!”

“Out of control?!”

It was a nightmare the female ghost had unwittingly created.

In order to fight Koutarou and Sanae, she had sacrificed the last of her energy to gather as many evil spirits as she could. Her hatred sustained her, and she was able to control the evil spirits she gathered with sheer will. The end result under her influence was an abnormal number of evil spirits coalescing in one place. But she ended up passing on before releasing them from her control. What was left behind now was a clump of evil spirits forcibly merged to one another. They were all rampaged around inside in an attempt to escape from their constraints.

“The evil spirits in that body want to be released! But since they’ve been forced into this form, they can’t get out! They’re all just struggling, and their energies are running amok!”

“So what’s going to happen?!”

“I don’t know! But I don’t think it will be pretty!”

Not even Sanae was sure what would happen next. But if several hundred evil spirits forcibly joined together continued to rampage on like they were, it was clear nothing good would come of it. They’d seen what kind of damage one spirit could cause before, but this was something else altogether.

Kiriha’s two haniwas had floated over to Koutarou and Sanae before they’d realized it, and they were the ones to deliver the very answer they were afraid of.

“It will explode, ho!”

“The pressure will continue to build until it blows up, ho!”

The haniwas knew what was going to happen thanks to the data they were receiving from their observational sensors.

“Explode?! Seriously?!”

“Explain!”

Hearing that the monster would explode, Koutarou and Sanae knew they had to do something. They started by approaching the haniwas and demanding more details on the situation.

“Assuming that the body has the standard strength of a powerful spiritual entity, I have calculated how big the explosion will be. I’ve also calculated how long we have until it explodes based on the rate it’s taking in spiritual energy, ho!”

“There won’t be much physical damage, ho! It’ll only scorch the ground a little when it explodes, ho!”

“That’s it? Then who cares? Let’s just leave it be.”

“Jeez...”

Hearing that all they’d be dealing with was a small explosion, Koutarou and Sanae both slumped their shoulders in relief.

“We can’t do that, ho! The effect of the spiritual body exploding will kill any life forms with souls within a 300 meter radius, ho! They’ll be hit with a shockwave capable of fracturing minds, ho!”

The fatality rate for any living thing within 300 meters of the site would be 100 percent, guaranteed. It would gradually drop off after that, but everyone within a kilometer radius of the explosion would be affected.

“You should have said that first!”

“Wait, wait! Karama-chan, how long until it explodes?!”

“Another two minutes and 23 seconds, ho!”

“Kyaaah! Noooooooo!”

Night had now fallen, and most of the residents in the neighborhood were

home by now. Evacuating them all in a timeframe like that was impossible. This would become the worst tragedy Kisshouharukaze City had every known.

“Koutarou!”

At last, Theia and the others arrived. They’d received the same information and were equally freaked out.

“Just how far away do we have to get to be safe?! Even if we all run now, we won’t make it in time!”

“It’s definitely impossible for me! I’ll definitely die!”

“I’m not sure I can run that far either...”

“Kiriha, isn’t there some way?! At this rate, we’re *all* going to die!”

“It’s not like there’s not a way, but... it’ll be difficult.”

The only one not panicking was Kiriha, but even she wore a rather grave expression. The odds of making it out of this weren’t in their favor.

“Tell us!”

“We need to force all the evil spirits composing this body to pass on before it explodes. By doing that, the spiritual energy that’s building and primed to explode will diffuse naturally in the process.”

“Is that even possible?!”

“It’s not possible for me. But if anyone can do it, Sanae can.”

“Nooooo, I just became a human again! I don’t want to die— Wait, me?”

Realizing she had become the subject of the discussion, Sanae froze.

“That’s right. Karama and Korama’s spiritual energy weapons don’t have enough power to force that many evil spirits to pass on now, but with your powers, you should be able to handle it.”

“Sanae-chan, could you triple the amount of spiritual energy you put into Koutarou’s sword? Ho!”

“If you can, we have a chance, ho! We can amplify your powers, ho!”

“You want me to triple it? Hmm... I won’t know unless I try.”

Sanae furrowed her brow. The amount of spiritual energy required to do what the haniwas were asking was enough that Sanae wasn't sure she could pull it off.

"But I have to do it, right?"

"That's right."

Kiriha nodded firmly. And Sanae nodded back in response.

"Okay, I'll give it a try! Because I'm the incredible woman that makes miracles happen! Yours truly, Sanae-chan!"

Sanae wasn't planning on letting go of her ticket to the future here. And to see that future through, she would become as strong as she needed to be.

As Koutarou stood holding Saguratin in both hands, Sanae moved around to his back.

"I'm sorry, Koutarou."

"What for?"

"I'm going to be a little reckless, so I wanted to apologize beforehand."

"But you're always a little reckless, aren't you?"

"Heehee, I guess so!"

Sanae giggled a little as she lightly pressed her hands onto Koutarou's back. She then closed her eyes and focused.

"Here I go, Koutarou."

Koutarou heard Sanae's voice, but not in his ears. He heard it in his soul, just like Sanae used to talk to him.

"Sanae?"

"Long time no see, Koutarou."

But it wasn't just her voice. A familiar figure appeared in front of Koutarou. It was Sanae, but the version of Sanae Koutarou had known as a ghost.

"Long time no see? What did you do?! You're supposed to be behind me!

Wait, you're both places?!"

Koutarou was astonished. There was one Sanae in front of and one behind him. The only difference between them was their age and hairstyle. Other than that, they were the exact same girl, and Koutarou had a hard time telling them apart.

"Heehee, this is what you call astral projection."

The Sanae in front of him smiled. She was a projection of Sanae's soul, which is why she looked the way she did. This was how Sanae still thought of herself on the inside.

"Astral projection?!"

"Yeah. The truth is that the best method to increase your spiritual energy is the method that ghost lady used."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm going to become one with you, Koutarou. By doing that, I can use a lot more power than I could have on my own."

The Sanae in front of Koutarou put her hands on his chest. As she did, her body slowly sunk into his. In seconds, she was completely inside of his.

"So that's what you meant by being reckless."

"Yeah. I might not be able to separate from you. If that happens, I'm sorry."

As a ghost, Sanae had slept inside of Koutarou many times before, but what she was about do now was taking that to a new level. Instead of just entering him, she was merging with him. But since it was her first time doing it, she wasn't sure how it would work out.

"We've done similar stuff before."

"Ahaha, you're right."

Since the day they met, Sanae had always been with Koutarou. There had been times where they were apart briefly, but they spent the most of their time together. Koutarou figured that even if they couldn't separate after this, life wouldn't be much different than how it had been.

“Okay, then here I go, Koutarou.”

“Yeah.”

That’s why Koutarou didn’t hesitate. He wasn’t even the slightest bit scared of merging with Sanae.

“Hup!”

With that, Koutarou could feel someone entering his mind. Koutarou called out to the visitor, but with his mind rather than his voice.

“Is that you, Sanae?”

“Yeah. Can you tell?”

“Yeah. It feels strange hearing a voice inside my head though.”

“I’m going to hurry, okay? If I relax, I feel like I just might melt inside of you.”

“That would be bad.”

“Because you don’t like me?”

“You already know the answer to that, don’t you?”

“Heehee, I thought I’d ask anyway.”

After entering Koutarou’s mind, Sanae overwrote his internal energy flow and connected their spiritual bodies. When she did, their spiritual energy merged, increasing in size as it flowed through both of them.

“Oh, is this it?!”

Their combined spiritual energy then began flowing into Saguratin in Koutarou’s hands. To Koutarou, it did feel like it was three times what he’d used before.

“Koutarou, I’ll leave the attacking to you. I don’t know much about stuff like that, so I think it’s best if you handle it.”

“All right, I’ll give it a shot.”

Koutarou readjusted his grip on the sword and pointed it at what was left of the monster’s body still writhing on the ground.

“Karama, Korama, let’s start.”

“Okay, ho!”

“The amplification system has been activated, ho! Whenever you’re ready, ho!”

Thanks to his merging with Sanae, all of Koutarou’s psychic abilities were enhanced. Right now, he could even see the spiritual energy flowing through Karama and Korama. With this power, he was convinced they’d be able to send the rest of the spirits to the afterlife. Koutarou raised his sword high with confidence.

“Say, Koutarou...”

Just before Koutarou swung his sword down, Sanae whispered to him. It was enough to make him pause before attacking, and he stood there with his sword held over his head.

“What is it?”

“There’s something I want to tell you while I can.”

“Can’t it wait for later?”

“I just feel like I can tell you without any misunderstandings right now. And I don’t have to worry about anyone else overhearing.”

“Then tell me. But we don’t have a lot of time, so make it quick, okay?”

They had less than thirty seconds before the monster would burst. It wasn’t exactly the time for chitchat.

“Okay, then I’ll just say it. Here goes...”

Sanae paused for a moment as she steeled herself. But once she put what she wanted to say into words, she didn’t hold back.

“I love you, I love you, I love you, I love you, I love you, I love you, I love you, I love you, I love you—”

It was a simple phrase, really. But could Koutarou could see—feel, even—the meaning behind it with the sudden increase in spiritual energy that came over him. It flowed right into Saguratin, which was easily five times more powerful now than it had been when he was fighting the monster with Sanae’s help

earlier.

“Love is all, huh? You really are a handful...”

“Huh?”

Reacting to Koutarou mumbling, Sanae stopped speaking. But even though she fell silent, her spiritual energy continued to increase. Sanae, however, was completely unaware of it.

“It’s nothing. Let’s wrap this up.”

“Why are you laughing? Hey, Koutarou!”

Koutarou continued laughing and didn’t give Sanae an answer. He then swung down Saguratin at full force. The results need not be said.

A Small Step

Monday, April 12th

After watching the fight reach its conclusion, Maki lowered her staff and released all the spells she'd prepared. She was more than prepared to step in and help Koutarou, but if it was revealed that she was allying with him, she would find herself in a difficult position. Fortunately, however, with how things had gone, none of that was necessary. It turned out Sanae had far more power hidden inside of her than Maki could have imagined.

"And here I was thinking that she was just a poor evil spirit controlled by a necromancer. Boy was I wrong. Considering how many evil spirits they forced to pass on with a single strike, that power she displayed at the end—even if it was just for a moment—was quite clearly on the level of a lesser god... Just what kind of being is that girl serving?"

In the past, there had been a time Maki thought that Sanae was merely a ghost being manipulated by Koutarou's necromancy. Looking back on it now, she realized how wrong she'd been. Sanae was from a long line of priests, and she'd inherited great power from her lineage. She was a psychic, and her abilities were on the extreme side at that. She couldn't fully control them, but she was continually pushing the envelope with her power.

"She was always a psychic, but because her spiritual energy had been separated from her, the two sides of her appeared as an ordinary girl in the hospital and a ghost."

Maki analyzed Sanae's circumstances while observing Koutarou and the others. That was the real reason she'd come in the first place.

"It looks like they've somehow managed to merge her again, but in this modernized age, it seems even her family has lost their ability to use spiritual energy. She was born a normal girl with generous amounts of it, but once her memories from being a ghost returned, she remembered the techniques

needed to control it...”

If Sanae hadn’t recovered her memories, she likely would have just stayed a normal girl that could see ghosts and auras. The talent she had with her psychic powers now was a result of spending years as a ghost and learning how to manipulate her spiritual energy. Sanae as a normal girl knew nothing about that, but once her selves truly merged, she recalled everything about her life as a ghost—including how to use those powers.

“The reason her memories returned may have been because a part of herself was left inside Satomi-kun, or it might have been the result of coming into contact with the residual thoughts inside that charm. Or perhaps a little bit of both. In other words, she was poised to regain her memories from the start. It just took being in a pinch like this to bring them out.”

In the event that Sanae came into contact with Koutarou while his spiritual circuits were active, she would have been able to indirectly access her own spiritual body. And the charm she’d worn for so long contained her residual thoughts. That also would allow a way for her to regain her memories. In other words, Sanae only needed to come into contact with Koutarou’s psychic powers or the memories stored inside the charm. It meant that two backups had unintentionally been left behind.

“...I think I’ll put something like that in my report.”

With her thoughts gathered, Maki turned away from Koutarou and the others. She couldn’t let them find out she’d been present.

“But what a dull report. It was such a trivial matter.”

Her business as Darkness Navy of Rainbow Darkness was concluded, but Maki personally found it to be a rather boring ending to such an eventful story. She had her own theory on the matter.

“Sanae regained her memories because her bond with Satomi-kun was just that strong. It was thanks to their unbreakable bond that they were able to band together and overcome such hardship... It was truly wonderful.”

If she said something like that to her allies in Darkness Rainbow, she would have been made a laughingstock. Even Maki herself would have laughed at it

half a year ago. But things were different now. Neither she nor the man she loved would ever laugh at something like that.



“It’s your win, little evil spirit...”

Maki smiled gently and slipped away into the darkness of the night.

“Though it pains me, I’ll let you have Satomi-kun for tonight. Heehee...”

Nobody was around to hear Maki’s laughter, but she sounded satisfied.

“Ahh... The moon is so very beautiful tonight...”

Maki was a magician of darkness that lived her life in the shadows. But right now, her face was illuminated in the glow of the moon—or perhaps it was the light of her hopeful smile.

With the battle over, Koutarou returned Saguratin to its sheath. He then pushed it back into the black hole that had appeared. It wasn’t until his sword was properly stowed that he was finally able to relax.

“Hahh, it’s over at last...”

Not all that much time had passed, but enough had happened that Koutarou was mentally exhausted.

“This is great! Sanae-chan’s got her memory back!”

“I’m sorry for making you worry.”

“I wasn’t sure what would happen for a minute there, but now we’re all back together.”

“This is truly marvelous.”

“Ho-oh!”

Out of everything that had happened, nothing was more important than Sanae regaining her memories. That wasn’t part of what had exhausted Koutarou, but it was certainly the most surprising event of the night. In truth, Koutarou still couldn’t believe it. He was there talking to Sanae like normal again, but it hardly felt real.

“Satomi Koutarou, why do you look so surprised?”

“You wouldn’t dare say you’re unhappy about this turn of events, would

you?”

Seeing the bemused look on Koutarou’s face, Theia and Kiriha called out to him.

“No, there’s no way that I’m unhappy.”

Koutarou shook his head. He was ecstatic that Sanae was back.

“I’m just... in awe. To think—”

“To think that Sanae would really come back to us. Is that it?”

Kiriha managed to say what Koutarou was thinking before he could put it into words. He was quite taken aback all over again.

“Something like that, yeah.”

Koutarou nodded while trying to hide his surprise.

“You’re amazed that something you thought was impossible has come to pass. It’s as simple as that. You sure are quick to give up...”

Theia smiled as she said that.

“Say, Koutarou, could you tell me something?”

Her gentle smile right now was as sweet as a crimson tulip in full bloom.

“Sure.”

“If I were to leave your side... would you feel the same way about me as you did Sanae? Would you just take it for granted that we would never meet again? That a reunion would be out of reach... that it would be impossible?”

“Wha...”

Theia’s words shook Koutarou up even more. In her own way, she was calling him out. He did believe he would have to part ways with Theia one day, and that they would never meet again after that.

“Bullseye, huh?”

“...”

Just staying quiet was all Koutarou could do. But seeing the look on Theia’s face, he imagined she already knew how much her words had affected him.

“Listen up, pleb. I promise you that no matter how far apart we might find ourselves, we will definitely meet again. That’s a promise, and I’ll make sure you come to trust in it sooner or later.”

Theia’s eyes were filled with confidence as she proudly declared her intentions.

“Theia...”

“Well then, I will see you later. It’s time to rejoice in our reunion with Sanae.”

Theia left without waiting for Koutarou’s answer. She didn’t much care whether or not he believed her right now, because she fully intended to make him believe her in the future.

“Sanae, well done on returning to us.”

“Theia! That’s right, Theia, look, look! My breasts are a little bigger now! Look at them!”

“Wh-Whaaat?!”

Once Theia joined Sanae and the others, things got a lot noisier. As he watched them from a distance, Koutarou began wondering something.

Do they believe that these days will last forever...?

Watching the girls now, he couldn’t imagine that they had even considered the day might come that they would have to go their separate ways. They were laughing together right now like these days would never end.

“Hey, Kiriha-san...”

Koutarou wanted to confirm it. And he felt like Kiriha would be able to give him an answer.

“Do you... No, do all of you really believe that we can spend the rest of our lives together like this?”

That might have been a question too vague for anyone but Kiriha to answer, but she knew what Koutarou was really asking. And so she answered honestly, just the way he was hoping.

“At the very least, I do.”

Those words came to her easily.

“I’d like you to remember a little girl named Kii. Three days was enough to make her believe that she could be happy with the people she loved, and she held on for ten years to see things through.”

“But... how can you believe so blindly? Didn’t it ever occur to you that nothing might happen even if you did believe?”

“Koutarou...”

Kiriha slowly smiled. It was a gentle smile, but one of profound sadness. It was the result of Kiriha knowing everything about Koutarou, including his dark past and the fears in his heart right now.

“I would like to ask you the opposite. Why don’t you believe? Why are you so certain that you won’t be rewarded for having hope? Why is it that you shy away from a future with the people you love?”

“That’s...”

Koutarou couldn’t answer. If he did, it would be the same as accepting all of his weaknesses. But Koutarou had forgotten.

“Koutarou, I want you to think this as a message from Kii.”

He had forgotten that Kiriha had already forgiven all of his weaknesses in the past.

“Onii-chan, please... don’t cut yourself off and be sad all alone because you think everyone will meet the same fate as your mother...”

And now, once again, Kiriha was forgiving Koutarou for all of his flaws and weaknesses.

“...”

Koutarou was still unable to say anything. He knew what Kiriha was saying was the truth.

“But that’s all I’ll say.”

And with that, Kiriha ended the discussion and her expression returned to normal. Sanae and the others who had been happily chatting with each other

now approached them.

“Let’s go home, Koutarou, Kiriha!”

“I am so very hungry.”

“Kiriha, make me food!”

“I almost forgot. We did make a promise like that, didn’t we?”

“Yeah!”

After exchanging a few words with Kiriha, Sanae ran up to Koutarou. She then extended her arms straight out and jumped towards him with all her might.

“Koutarou!”

Using the momentum from her flying leap, Sanae clung to Koutarou’s neck. But she soon stepped back a little and looked into his eyes.

“Let’s go home together.”

Sanae spoke those words as if they were perfectly normal.

“Sanae...”

Hearing them, Koutarou froze up. Sanae was indeed smiling as though she seemed to think these happy days would last forever.

“What are you waiting for? She said let’s go home.”

Koutarou was frozen, but Theia gave him a push. When she did, he recalled what she’d said just minutes ago.

“Listen up, pleb. I promise you that no matter how far apart we might find ourselves, we will definitely meet again. That’s a promise, and I’ll make sure you come to trust in it sooner or later.”

Theia too believed there would be no end to these days. As did Kiriha.

“The longer we stay here, the longer it’ll be before we can have dinner.”

Kiriha had composed smile, but Kii was always just on the other side of it.

“Onii-chan, please... don’t cut yourself off and be sad all alone because you think everyone will meet the same fate as your mother...”

Three days was all it had taken to convince her that happiness was attainable. That she would get to be with the people she loved one day. And that belief—that hope—had guided her to where she was standing now... And it was true. She was happy and smiling, together with the people she loved.

"What's wrong Koutarou? Not feeling so hot? Is it because we merged?!"

Worried about Koutarou who hadn't said a word, Sanae peered into his face again.

"You're wrong. Death isn't the end."

"And you won't be alone. Someone somewhere out there is watching over you. I promise."

"I'm sure of it. I don't think the god of this world is that unforgiving."

Koutarou recalled how Sanae had comforted the fading ghost after their fight. He didn't even need to ask her. It was obvious she believed that there would be no end to these days. And it was exactly because she believed that that she'd been able to return to Koutarou and the others.

"That's right, Sanae-chan! I recorded episodes of *Love Love Heart* for you."

"Once we get back, I'll give you those clothes you wanted. You should finally be able to wear them now."

"They'll need a bit of hemming, so I'll prepare the sewing set."

Yurika, Shizuka, and Ruth too. Surely they believed it as well.

"Really?! Koutarou, let's hurry back! There's so much to do!"

And in that case, if they all did, shouldn't Koutarou too? It was something that had never crossed his mind. Of course, it might not be possible for him to believe right away. Changing your ways wasn't easy. Changing the way you thought about things was even harder. It would take work and time. But Koutarou felt like he should take at least the first step towards that. For the sake of the people who already believed in him, and for the sake of his own future.

"...Let's do that."

“Yeah! Let’s go home!”

And as for Koutarou’s first step...

“Sanae.”

“Hmm? What is it?”

He would start with something simple. Something he knew how to do.

“Welcome back, Sanae.”

“Koutarou...”

Koutarou decided that changing his mind all of a sudden would be too hard, so he would start with changing his heart. Even if he couldn’t think differently yet, he would feel differently.

“Heehee, that’s the first time you’ve ever said it so lovingly...”

“Is it?”

“Yeah...”

He would do the same things he always had, but with new feeling and meaning.

“It’s good to be back, Koutarou...”

That small step was hugging the girl who had fought her way back to him.



The invaders passed through the gate to the Higashihongan family property. They'd come to make adjustments on the clothes Sanae had gotten from Shizuka, and to take the measures of Yurika's costume. Since Sanae was smaller than Shizuka, the clothes needed to be hemmed and taken in a little. And since Sanae had always been envious of Yurika's costume, they'd decided they would make one for her while they were at it. To that end, Koutarou wasn't with them this time.

"Sanae-chan."

"Yes?"

"Since you have such an amazing house, you don't really need to fight for room 106, do you?"

"Yeah right. That's that and this is this."

"That's just unfair..."

It was only natural for Yurika to be disheartened. The Higashihongan family property was as large as a baseball stadium if you included the hills behind their house. Sanae was actually the daughter of a rather wealthy family.

Even after passing through the gate to the property, it was a bit of a walk to the actual house. The mansion was down the avenue and beyond a stone bridge. Though land like this was cheaper outside of big cities, it was quite clear that the Higashihongan family was well to do.

"The Kurano family home is only about 70 percent the size of this."

"Having 70 percent of this underground is amazing, Kiriha!"

"It's like the head maid's resort villa in northern Mastir."

"Now that you mention it... that brings back memories."

"All of you, this is just unfair..."

Yurika was growing more and more dispirited. Theia, Ruth, Kiriha, and Sanae all came from families that could be considered rich. There was a wide gap between them and the self-proclaimed princess of love and courage, Yurika.

"Now now, Yurika-chan, there's no need to get depressed."

“Even you have Corona House, Shizuka-san. I only have a wardrobe. Waaah...”

Yurika held her staff to her chest and wept bitterly. But despite her discontent, the truth was that any of the other girls would have happily traded places with her to live in room 106. Yurika remained unaware of just how blessed she really was.

Chatting as they walked along, the girls eventually reached the entrance to the mansion. There, a woman in her late thirties wearing a kimono was waiting for them.

“Welcome, everyone. I’d like to thank you girls for always taking care of my Sanae.”

The woman lowered her head in a polite bow. This courteous woman was Sanae’s mother.

“And you even have such a wonderful mom. My mom is just...”

Without even properly greeting Sanae’s mother, Yurika went off on another envious tangent. Everything she’d seen since setting foot on the property had only made her feel even more inferior.

“Oh?”

Sanae’s mother looked at Yurika curiously.

“That staff...”

The next moment, her eyes narrowed.

Oh no! I must have done something again!

Yurika noticed the change in her expression before anyone else and began to worry she’d already done something wrong. She was sure that she’d broken some kind of rule only rich people would know about.

“I’m sorry, I’m so sorry! I’m sorry for being poor and coming over to play! I didn’t mean any harm!”

Distraught, Yurika apologized over and over on the verge of tears. Sanae’s mother was scary, but Yurika was even more scared of being scolded by Koutarou later.

“Could you be...”

However, Sanae’s mother then smiled at her fondly. The tension left her face and she looked at Yurika nostalgically, like she might an old friend.

“Could you be a friend of Nana-chan’s?”

“Whaaat? D-Do you know Nana-san?!”

It was a fateful encounter. Yurika and Sanae’s mother had a common acquaintance.

“No way! Mama, were you a cosplayer too?!”

“...What?”

“Is the real reason you were in the archery club because you just wanted to wear that outfit?!”

“C-Cosplay...?”

However, that fateful encounter created a misunderstanding between Sanae and her mother.



Article 15
As a general rule, the existences under the protection of Satomi Koutarou (resident of room 106) are to be treated as his relatives.

Article 15 Postscript
Please don't throw them out, okay?



Corona Convention

New! April 20th, 2010

Afterword

Long time no see, everybody. It's the author, Takehaya.

I have now safely delivered volume 11. This time around, the story centers on how Sanae became a ghost and the state of Koutarou's heart. As a ghost, however, there is a fate that Sanae can't escape. How will she face it? And how are Koutarou and the other invaders going to handle it? Those are the big questions for this volume.

Also, regarding the "exceptions" mentioned in this volume... Only two were mentioned, but that was just from the speaker's perspective. In reality, there are about one and a half more. Since I suspect that might have confused some readers, I thought I should mention it here. Well, I suppose it's obvious enough who they might be (ha!).

This is the first Sanae-centric volume since volume 3. It's been a whole ten books since then, so I believe I may have irritated all of the Sanae fans out there. But I promise it was necessary to take the time to develop Sanae's story. Bonds are important here, and without those, it wouldn't have worked in the story and I don't think it would have worked for the readers. If I had told this story around volume 4 or 5, I don't think people would have been able to sympathize the way they can now. I think this story was only possible because Sanae has spent so much time with Koutarou and with us. I hope that comes through well.

Since I don't have much room for this afterword, I'll wrap things up here. From the bottom of my heart, I would like to thank the editorial department for their hard work in publishing this volume; Poco-san who always draws great illustrations; my friends who take me out drinking during my slumps; and all the readers who kindly watch over me.

Let us meet again in the afterword for volume 12.

September, 2012

Takehaya

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Invaders of the Rokujouma!? Volume 11

by Takehaya

Translated by Warnis Edited by Morgan Dreher

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