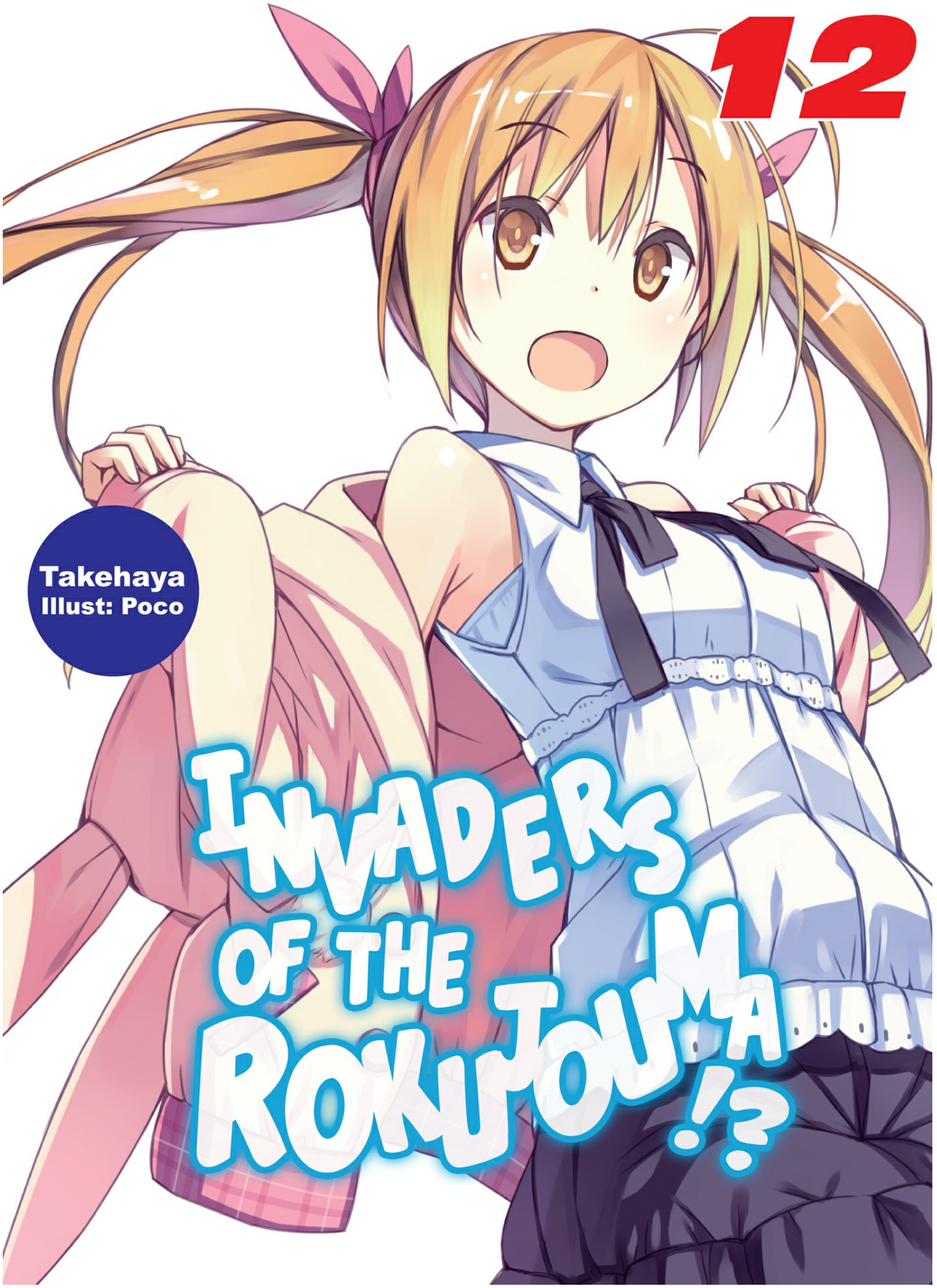
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Takehaya
Illust: Poco



Invaders of the Rokujouma!?



INVADERS OF THE ROKUJOUMA!? 12


AS THE MASSIVE FIREBALL APPROACHED, HARUMI JUST STOOD THERE IN A DAZE.
RUN AWAY, SAKURABA-SENPAI!
GOODBYE, YOUNG LADY!


"TO THINK I HAD SUCH GIRLISH FEELINGS INSIDE ME TOO..."

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MATSUDAIRA KENJI
Koutarou's childhood and best friend.

RESIDENTS OF CORONA HOUSE



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



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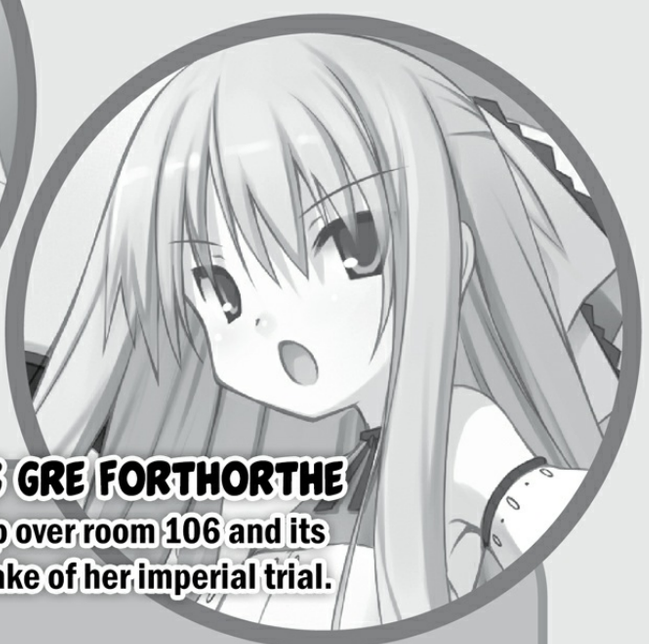
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A member of the evil magical girl group, Darkness Rainbow. Yurika's enemy.



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

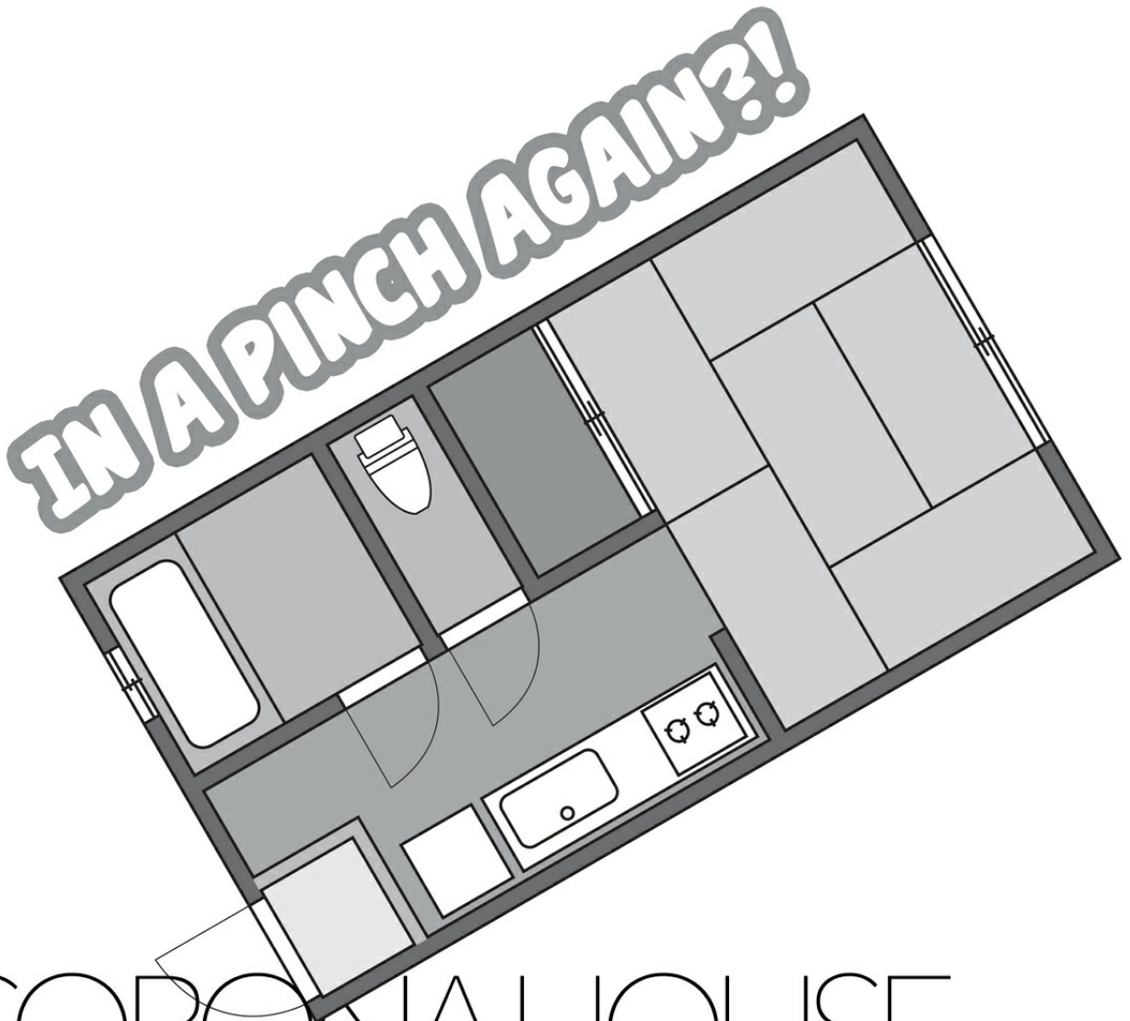
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CORONA HOUSE
ROOM 106

Everyone's Weekend

Friday, April 23rd

The Higashihongan family had been protecting the Higashihongan shrine and serving as its head priests for many, many generations. Even as a branch shrine, the Higashihongan shrine had existed for over five hundred years. And the main shrine, the Hongan shrine, had been around for so long that it predated any records of its existence.

Because of their long history, the Higashihongan family enjoyed a considerable amount of prestige and wealth. They were one of few prominent families in Kisshouharukaze City. Thanks to that, their family property was the size of a baseball stadium and included a large, luxurious Japanese-style mansion with a rich garden that was designed to be enjoyed in all four seasons.

"I-I've come to a helluva place..."

After being escorted to the sitting room, Yurika looked around the place with restless eyes. She lived in the wardrobe of a small, six-tatami apartment, so to her, this was like visiting a different world. And sitting alone in such a big room, she could hardly contain herself. She only got more and more anxious.

Ahhhhh! Save me, Satomi-san!

Yurika instinctively called out for her roommate's help in her mind. The room she was sitting in now had the same stately, opulent feel to it as the rest of the house. It wasn't like it had been plated with gold explicitly for show, but Yurika couldn't help feeling like she was being looked down on by the rich as she sat all alone surrounded by finely crafted pillars, lacquered furniture, and magnificent artwork. It was like the room itself was telling her that this was no place for a poor girl like her. That she should hurry up and leave. That she should find somewhere more fitting for her kind. Of course, this was all in Yurika's head. In fact, far from looking down on her, the residents of the mansion had welcomed her with the utmost care.

“I’m sorry for asking you to come all the way here, Yurika-chan.”

Serving as proof of the kindness and hospitality offered to Yurika here, a resident of the mansion entered the sitting room with a smile. Her name was Higashihongan Kanae. She was the wife of the current head of the family, Higashihongan Soutarou, and the mother of Yurika’s friend Sanae.

“I wanted to talk to you in peace and quiet. About Nana-chan, for example.”

Yurika and Kanae had a common acquaintance.

On a certain Friday after school, Yurika was visiting the Higashihongan household on her own. That was because, when she had visited the mansion with Theia and the girls the other day, Kanae had asked if she could come by sometime so that the two of them could talk. So Yurika had taken the time out of her not-so-busy schedule to come visit the Higashihongan household today.

“Yurika-chan, could you stand up and spin around to show me that outfit?”

“Oh, sure... Like this?”

Yurika accepted Kanae’s request and stood up before slowly spinning around with her arms somewhat spread out. As she stared at Yurika, Kanae had a nostalgic look in her eyes.

“Thank you, Yurika-chan. Though some minor details are different, it really is the same outfit Nana-chan wore.”

“Yes. These are Nana-san’s clothes. I just adjusted them for myself. Um... I’m just a little bit taller than Nana-san... so I couldn’t wear them as they were...”

“That’s true. Nana-chan was pretty small, wasn’t she? Thank you, Yurika-chan.”

Kanae gently smiled at Yurika, who seemed to be quite embarrassed. She was feeling self-conscious about the alterations she’d had to make. Because Nana had a very petite frame, Yurika couldn’t wear her outfit without letting out the waist, seat, and bust. Needless to say, the latter was the only part she was proud of.

“So... is Nana-chan okay?”

Kanae waited for Yurika to sit back down before continuing their conversation. She had invited Yurika over because she'd wanted to ask her that question. And when she did, anxiety became visible in her expression.

"Yes. But around spring of last year, she was seriously injured and can no longer use magic... That's why I, her disciple, took on her role."

"So that's what happened..."

Hearing that Nana was safe was enough to ease the tension in Kanae's expression. Seeing that, Yurika could get a sense what kind of relationship Kanae and Nana had.

"Kanae-san, you were Nana-san's cooperator, right?"

A cooperator was a citizen that helped a magician from Folsaria while they were operating in Japan. Since magicians from Folsaria, a different world, were technically illegal aliens, they had to be careful while on Earth. So in order for them to do their work, they needed the support of a local, known as a cooperator.

"Yes... Until a little after we defeated Maya, Dark Navy."

Maya was Maki's master and the previous Dark Navy. Nana and Kanae had cooperated to defeat her. Maya then retired and allowed Maki to succeed her as Dark Navy, but that was all several years ago.

"After that, Nana-chan left without saying a word... so I was a little worried. I'm happy to hear that she's okay, Yurika-chan."

"Kanae-san, Nana-san was, um..."

"I know. Nana-chan was being considerate and left in order to keep our lives from being in danger, right?"

"Yes."

"There was also the problem with Sanae's body, so I'm sure she wanted to relieve me of my role as a cooperator as fast as possible."

"I think so too. Nana-san always told me to stop coming to see her because it was dangerous, too..."

Eleven years ago, Nana had been unable to fully save Sanae. The best she could do at the time was perform an imperfect merging of Sanae's soul and body using her magic. With that, it was inevitable that Sanae's life would eventually run out. Yurika and Kanae both believed that that was the reason Nana had left quietly—to let Kanae spend as much time with her family as possible.

"About Sanae... Could it be because of you that she's gotten better?"

Aside from Nana's safety, there was one more thing Kanae wanted to know. And that was about her daughter's sudden recovery.

Nana had told Kanae that Sanae wouldn't live for long. And as expected, as the years passed on, Sanae grew weaker and weaker. But just as Kanae was beginning to prepare herself for her daughter's death, Sanae made a miraculous recovery. And shortly thereafter, Sanae brought home Yurika and introduced her as her friend. Seeing a certain something Yurika had with her at the time, Kanae realized Yurika's identity and realized what must have happened. She suspected that Yurika had healed Sanae with magic.

"I did help, but magic alone couldn't have saved her... Um, about one quarter of it was my doing."

Since Yurika's skills with magic were inferior to Nana's, there was no way she could have saved Sanae where her master had failed. In fact, Kiriha had really been the one to treat Sanae while Yurika supported her. Yurika believed the biggest factor in Sanae's recovery was the bonds she shared with the people around her. So Yurika thought of her contribution as half of half the work, or one fourth.

"The ratio doesn't matter. Thank you for saving Sanae, Yurika-chan."

"U-Um..."

Yurika blushed and felt flustered to hear Kanae thanking her personally.

Th-Things have been kind of strange lately...

Recently, the cases of Yurika being thanked, trusted, and needed were on the rise. Since it was a position she'd never expected to be in, Yurika was a bit embarrassed by it all. That was all because she hadn't noticed her own growth;

she was mistakenly under the impression that her surroundings had changed, and not her.

But... it makes me feel warm and fuzzy...

Though Yurika thought this turn of events was strange, it also made her happy. The thought that she could be of help to others made her more positive. Although she wasn't as good as Nana, if she did everything she could, she might still be able to help people. Like she had with Sanae. That's what she wanted to do, never mind the fact that it was her duty. In other words, it could be said that the incident regarding Sanae had turned Yurika into a full-fledged magical girl. Moreover, with her newfound maturity, her abilities were improving as well. While she might not compare to Nana right now, she might in the future. Because now, Yurika had escaped from her pessimistic outlook and was starting to believe in her future for herself.

"Besides, when Sanae's with you, it's like she's returned to her old self... As her mother, I'm overjoyed, and it sounds like I have you to thank for that. I'm so grateful, Yurika-chan."

Thanks to the hard work of Yurika and the others, the two Sanaes that had grown up apart from one another had finally managed to merge, although it was a stretch to say that they were now one and the same.

Normally, the modest, mature personality that Sanae had developed as a girl in the hospital was the dominant one. Her struggle with her condition had humbled her in many ways. However, when she was with Yurika, Koutarou, and the others, the childish personality of her soul surfaced. It was the personality she'd developed during her time as a ghost, uninhibited by the forces that had caused her physical body to mature and grow up.

Though the two had safely merged, their personalities remained distinct, and Sanae would switch between the two. When she was with Yurika and the others, she was bright and cheerful, and when she wasn't, she was a lot more withdrawn. As a result, it looked like she was putting up a brave front, or even suffering from multiple personality disorder. But despite that, her two selves shared memories and still liked and hated the same things, so it was indisputable that they were still both very much so Sanae.

But what Sanae's family noticed was that she acted and looked like she did before the entire ordeal when she was with Yurika and the others. Sanae's quiet, introverted personality had been a concern of her parents' ever since she was admitted to the hospital, so this was a welcome change.

According to Kiriha's explanation, it seemed that Sanae's two selves would eventually blend into one. Once fully merged, Sanae's personality would probably settle somewhere between the mature and childish versions of herself. Kiriha's estimations put it close to how Sanae would've ended up if her soul and body hadn't ever split to begin with.

And that transformation had already begun. Even when Sanae wasn't with Yurika, Koutarou, and the others, she was starting to act a little more cheerful.

"But... it really wasn't just thanks to me. Everything worked out because Sanae-chan loves everyone and because everyone loves Sanae-chan."

Yurika lightly shook her head and put her hands on her chest before tilting her head and smiling.

"So, Kanae-san, it's those feelings Sanae-chan shares with everyone you should be grateful for, not me. That's what really saved Sanae-chan..."

"Yurika-chan..."

Kanae's eyes opened wide when she heard Yurika say that, but the look on her face quickly faded into a smile. She looked nostalgic, but truly happy.

"...You really are Nana-chan's disciple."

"Huh?"

This time, Yurika's eyes went wide.

"That earnest heart trying to do good, that strong will that won't back down, and that deep love that wraps around everything... You're just like Nana-chan."

Kanae's words were even more of a surprise to Yurika.

"Kanae-san..."

To Yurika, who had been striving to become like Nana all this time, those words were the highest praise she could receive.

“Thank you so much!”

“Heehee... I just hope my little girl turns out like you...”

“I can’t recommend that. I don’t have very good grades...”

“Oh my, is that so?”

“Sadly, yes...”

And so the two ladies began chatting about themselves and their common friend with smiles on their faces. It was as if two old friends had met for the first time in ten years, and their lively chatter could be heard from the sitting room until the sun set.

During their talk, Yurika gave Kanae a simple introduction to everyone’s situation and what had happened with Sanae. She was sure Kanae could keep everyone’s secrets, so Yurika didn’t hold back in sharing things with her. Kanae reciprocated and happily listened to everything Yurika told her. But when Yurika got to the part about how the underground dweller, Kiriha, had machines that used spiritual energy, Kanae furrowed her brow. She then took Yurika out on a little trip into the city at night.

“This is the place, Yurika-chan.”

“It’s pretty dark...”

“Wait a moment, I’ll get a light.”

“Continual Light.”

“Of course. I forgot you were a magician, Yurika-chan.”

“That’s right!”

Kanae had brought Yurika to the basement of an abandoned building. It hadn’t seen use in years, so when Yurika lit it up with her magic, she could see piles of junk and illegally dumped trash, as well as a bunch of cracks in the walls and ceiling.

“Is there something special about this place?”

Nothing looked all that out of place to Yurika. It seemed like any other

abandoned building.

“Just a moment... I think it was around here...”

Relying on Yurika’s magic for light, Kanae searched around the room. After a few minutes had passed and Yurika started to grow afraid of how dark and scary the place was, Kanae finally found what she was looking for.

“Found it!”

“Kyah!”

“What’s wrong, Yurika-chan?”

“N-No, it’s nothing...”

Yurika blushed. Being a magical girl, she couldn’t admit that she was afraid of the dark. Unaware of how she felt, Kanae called her over.

“Yurika, could you come over here?”

“Okay...”

Yurika approached Kanae with a pensive look. In stark contrast to her usually gentle, friendly appearance, Kanae looked quite serious right now.

“It’s about this...”

“This is...”

Yurika could see the remains of a wrecked machine of some kind. It looked like it had been destroyed violently, and fragments of all sizes were scattered about. Looking at the rust on broken parts and the dust on the main machine, it was clear that many years had passed since it was destroyed.

“Huh?! Isn’t this...?!”

Yurika, who didn’t know the first thing about machinery, just assumed it was any old broken piece of junk at first. But after staring at it for a while, she noticed its familiar markings and design.

“Isn’t this Kiriha-san’s machine?!”

The remains of the machine looked just like what Kiriha used. It was reminiscent of Karama and Korama, and bore a striking resemblance to the

device she'd used to treat Sanae. They had enough common features that even Yurika could distinguish the similarity.

"Spiritual energy devices are the technology of the underground dwellers... so what is this doing here?"

"This is what Dark Navy... well, more accurately, the previous Dark Navy... was using. Yurika-chan, look down."

"What?!"

Yurika could see some kind of pattern carved into the ground at her feet. It had completely lost its power, but it was a magic circle used for rituals. This one had been drawn to incorporate the machine. As a magician, Yurika immediately understood what that meant.

"Kanae-san, did the previous Dark Navy use magic and machines from the underground dwellers together?!"

"If this is a machine from the underground dwellers, then there's no doubt about it. Nana-chan said that Maya was using this device to store her sacrifice's spiritual energy in order to use it for her ritual."

After hearing what Yurika said about spiritual energy, Kanae was reminded of this place. She wanted to tell her about it, but decided that it would be better for her to see it for herself. That's why Kanae had brought Yurika here.

"...Which means that Darkness Rainbow came into contact with the underground dwellers at the very least ten years ago, and that they were working together..."

Yurika's expression stiffened as she felt a chill run down her spine.

I-I have to tell Kiriha-san about this!

They'd just used a combination of magic and spiritual energy technology to save Sanae, so she had at least a faint idea of how much power they had when used together. And considering that Darkness Rainbow had already come into contact with the underground people, most likely with the faction that opposed Kiriha, it wasn't hard to imagine that Darkness Rainbow now had the ability to use spiritual energy against Rainbow Heart, and that the radical faction had the

ability to use magic.

At this rate, Rainbow Heart will lose! Kiriha-san will, too!

Of course, their enemies wouldn't reveal their aces in the petty skirmishes they'd had so far. They would save that for a major battle. Thinking about that, Yurika couldn't imagine that either Rainbow Heart's or Kiriha's future would be very bright.

Today, there were no club activities after school for the knitting society. The president, Harumi, had a medical exam scheduled at the hospital tomorrow, and it was common practice for the society to take the day before off to rest.

And with his free time this afternoon, Koutarou had decided to pay Clan a visit. He hadn't talked a lot with her lately, but she was always around to lend a helping hand when things got serious. He figured she might be happy to see him if he showed up and it wasn't an emergency.

"Clan, are you shutting yourself up in here again?"

"If I don't, I can't get any research done."

When Koutarou entered the Cradle, he found Clan glued to a computer in her laboratory. She had a ton of topics she wanted to research, including Signaltin and the details of space-time. Seeing Clan like this, however, Koutarou got a little worried. Clan kept herself in her ship all the time and hardly ever saw the sun, so she was looking rather pale. Concerned for her health, Koutarou wanted to get her outside for a bit.

"That might be true, but you are a princess. If you keep shutting yourself in and ruin your complexion, your citizens will worry."

"My, Veltlion, you sound like a proper vassal... Did you finally decide to serve me?"

"I have no intention of serving an unhealthy master. I'm also worried about your future."

"M-My future?!"

Hearing that word, Clan's face turned red and she began to panic. At least for

the moment, she wasn't pale anymore.

"I don't need to hear that from you! By the time I get married, I'll take good care of myself!"

"Huh? Marriage? What are you talking about?"

Koutarou had only meant that Clan wouldn't be able to do the things she wanted if she worked herself ill, but Clan had taken it a different way.

"Are you getting married soon?"

"Kyah! Ack! N-No, I am not! There's no way I'm getting married!"

Clan blushed so hard that even her ears turned red, and she shook her head so fiercely that her glasses looked like they might fly off her face.

"Oh, so you don't wanna get married? What a shame."

"...I-I'll kill him... I'll kill this man one day..."

Clan looked down at the ground, face still red and her shoulders trembling. She wanted to tell Koutarou that if he was so concerned about her that he should marry her himself. In the past, Clan had pushed people away in order to focus on her research, so she came across as conceited and selfish. She'd never let anyone get as close to her as she had Koutarou. That's why when she thought about her future—of her eventual marriage—Koutarou's face was the first thing that came to mind. But she didn't have the courage to say that out loud. Clan was far more innocent and shy than her attitude let on.

"Well, that aside, Ruth-san is here too, you know. And she's a proper citizen of Forthorthe, so make sure you keep up appearances at least a little. Try not to look too miserable."

"'Th-That aside'? This man just brushed off my feelings... I'll kill him... I really will kill him..."

Clan's face was still red and her shoulders continued shaking in frustration and anger. Ruth, who was standing nearby, then leaned in towards Clan.

"I understand how you feel, Clan-sama," she whispered with a wry smile.

When she heard that Koutarou was going to see Clan, Ruth had offered to

come with him. Since she and Clan shared Koutarou's secret, their relationship had improved recently.

"I'm surprised you can stay sane dealing with this all the time."

"I have already conveyed my feelings to Master, you see..."

Clan and Ruth continued whispering to each other. Koutarou was busy staring around the laboratory in awe, so he was hardly paying attention to their conversation.

"So what happened?"

"Nothing remarkable. But every day is full of happiness."

"That doesn't sound like something I could do. I have my pride, after all."

"Pride?"

"I fully intend to make Veltlion cry and beg, 'Please keep me at your side!'" Clan said with a forlorn expression.

"Clan-sama..." Ruth said, trailing off into a laugh.

"What's the matter, Pardomshiha?"

"N-No, It's nothing... Heeheehee..."

Ruth was laughing because it seemed Clan felt practically the same way Theia did. But since Theia and Clan's relationship left a lot to be desired, she couldn't exactly share this bit of humor with either of them.

Koutarou left the Cradle with both Clan and Ruth in tow. It was partially because Koutarou wanted Clan to get some sunlight, but there was also something he wanted to ask of her. That was part of the reason why he'd come to see her in the first place.

"Here I go, Ruth-san."

"All right. Should I do it like I did before?"

"Please do."

Koutarou and Ruth faced each other, weapons in hand.

Koutarou was wearing the blue armor used to control the spaceship Blue Knight. He also held a knight's sword in each hand, but both of them were blunt training weapons. Moreover, Ruth was using a protective barrier, so there was no fear of injuries.

Ruth herself was also wearing armor designed for combat. Like Koutarou's, it was powered and increased her strength significantly. She was holding a thin sword in her right hand. It was like what she usually used, but a little larger and heavier to balance out her increase in strength from the armor. Of course, it was a blunt practice weapon as well.

Koutarou and Ruth had been sparring like this for some time. Koutarou wanted to show Clan how he and Ruth fought.

"All right."

Koutarou kicked off the ground and dashed forward. His power was increased by the armor, and he moved at a speed that indicated the armor wasn't weighing him down any. With his right sword ready to swing and his left sword thrust out in front of him, he came at Ruth.

"Here he comes."

Ruth stood her ground, ready to face Koutarou who was rapidly approaching. She had taken a defensive stance. She wasn't a particularly aggressive person, so her personality lent itself to going on the defensive in combat. Her style was to defend and go for counterattacks, but she was even more on her guard than usual now. Koutarou had asked her to put her full defensive power on display.

"Hahh..."

Koutarou exhaled briefly before using the sword in his left hand to swipe at Ruth's sword. A shrill clang rang out, and before that sound had even cleared the air, the sword in Koutarou's right hand was coming down at Ruth. Ruth was able to dodge the attack by twisting her body.

"Ha!"

However, that wasn't all she did. Using the mobility of her thin sword to her advantage, Ruth launched an attack at Koutarou. The tip of her sword created a sharp whooshing noise as it cut through the air towards him.

“Wah!”

Koutarou kicked off the ground and managed to evade Ruth’s attack.

“There!”

However, his movement was largely instinctual and lacked finesse, leaving him wide open. Ruth took that opportunity to thrust several attacks at him. As serious and diligent as she was, Ruth had practiced at length because she wanted to show off the best of her ability to Koutarou. Her flurry of attacks were elegant and efficient. It was all Koutarou could do to hold up his swords and use them as makeshift shields.

“Y-You’ve gotten better, Ruth-san!”

“I have my teacher to thank for that!”

Koutarou and Ruth continued exchanging blows for a while. Ruth had the upper hand the entire match, using her swift attacks to force Koutarou on the defensive. Based on the fact that the normally defensive girl had taken the offensive, it was fair to say she’d overwhelmed Koutarou.

“Hyah!”

In beautiful form, Ruth easily deflected Koutarou’s right sword with a smile on her face. She then closed in and thrust out her left fist, wrapped in red light. Her armor had read her intention to attack and charged her fist with energy.

“Tch...”

I won’t make it at this rate!

Koutarou decided to abandon his left sword and thrust out his own left fist. Ruth was closing in fast enough that he wouldn’t have made it with the sword. As he thrust out his fist, it started to crackle and spark. That electricity was thanks to Kiriha’s gauntlet, which had been incorporated into his armor.

Their fists collided and cancelled out each other’s attack. Thanks to that, the attack didn’t end their battle, but they both stopped moving.

“You really have improved, Ruth-san.”

“Heehee, that’s because I haven’t missed a single thing you’ve said, Master.”

“Then I better take care not to say anything strange.”

“You don’t have to worry. I’d gladly forget something you asked me to, Master.”

They smiled at each other and lowered their weapons. Though their battle hadn’t reached a definitive conclusion, they’d accomplished what they set out to do.

“So there you have it. It goes something like that. What do you think, Clan?”

Koutarou returned his right sword to its sheath and picked up the one he’d dropped. While putting that back in its sheath too, he approached Clan.

“Frankly, I can’t recommend using two swords at the same time in this state.”

Clan shook her head as she tapped away on her bracelet. The next moment, it projected several holograms in the air around her. They were displaying footage from Koutarou and Ruth’s match, along with data gathered from it.

“I’ve recorded you fighting with a single sword, holding two swords and only using one, and using two swords at the same time... but only the first two seem practical. Even then, in close combat, just holding two swords is dangerous.”

“I thought so.”

Koutarou agreed with Clan’s assessment and nodded his head.

He’d wanted to consult with her about how to use his swords. Signaltin was enchanted with magic and Saguratin was infused with Sanae’s spiritual energy. Both had their own unique traits, and he wanted to know how to utilize them best.

In total, Koutarou could think of three different options.

The first was to keep fighting with a single sword as he had been up until now, and just switch swords based on the situation. Though it would take time to switch weapons in battle, the fact that he wouldn’t need to adjust his fighting style made it an attractive option.

The second option was to hold one sword in each hand, but only use one at a time like in the fight against the monster with Sanae a few weeks ago. It was a sort of last resort then, but not having to waste time switching back and forth

between weapons made it practical.

The third option was to dual wield and use both swords at the same time. Though this would be the most difficult method by far, it maximized his use of both swords. It would give him maximum flexibility in combat.

Dual wielding was Koutarou's first choice, but knowing how difficult it would be, he'd come to consult with Clan.

"When I'm wearing the armor, I don't really feel the weight of the swords, but I end up being thrown around by them."

Without the armor, using two swords at once just wasn't realistic. A knight's sword was a little too big to be used with one hand, and the momentum from swinging one was a force to be reckoned with—even on the user. Koutarou figured that he would be fine while wearing the armor, but the results were unsatisfactory. He also wanted to know the reason for that.

"The problem isn't with the weight you feel, but with the mass. The armor might take the load off your body, but that doesn't change the mass of the sword. The centrifugal force—the pull of the swing—is the same. If anything, you're worse off wearing the armor because the faster you can swing the sword, the more it's going to pull you with it."

"Clan-sama, are you saying the quality of the swordsmanship is affected by using two swords at once?"

"Based on the results from the data, yes. Properly wielding two knight's swords at once would mean having to invent a new style of sword fighting. It's not a very realistic proposition."

Using two longswords at the same time meant that the user had to account for them getting in the way of each other. On top of that, the sheer mass of the swords would affect Koutarou's balance. He would have to use techniques developed specifically for such a style.

"If it's just about offensive power, then doing what you two did at the end and using the built-in weapon in your left hand would be far better."

Using two swords at once was unrealistic, so dropping one of them and relying on the other built-in weapons he had was a better option. That was the

conclusion Clan reached based on her data.

“I see. If you can’t do anything about it, then it is what it is.”

Clan’s answer confirmed what Koutarou had suspected. That made the results easier to accept.

“I’ll just try coming up with something else.”

“...I’m not happy with how you phrased that.”

Koutarou was satisfied, but Clan was not. The eyes behind her beloved antique glasses filled with irritation as she frowned. She looked like a young girl throwing a tantrum.

“What are you getting so angry for?” Koutarou asked.

“There’s nothing I can’t do! You take that back!”

Clan couldn’t forgive Koutarou for suggesting she wouldn’t be any help.

“If you can’t do anything about it...”

To Clan, those words were the same as being told that she wasn’t being trusted.

“But you just said that it wasn’t realistic...”

“That doesn’t mean it’s impossible!”

Clan reached out and began to irritatedly poke at Koutarou’s chest with the tip of her finger.

“I will become your master! As if I would allow something so meager to get the better of me!”

Clan acknowledged Koutarou as the legendary Blue Knight. So in order to become his master, she was prepared to prove herself legendary too with her skills in science. Right now, she was aiming to become Koutarou’s master and be truly worthy of that title.

“So can you do it?”

“A foolish question! All you have to do is beg me! Say, ‘Oh, Princess Clariossa, please lend me your power!’ Now!”

“Clan...”

Arms crossed, Koutarou looked at Clan, who had manically thrown her head back, and realized his mistake.

I guess that to people that get along well, this probably means to expect good things in the future...

The solution to this problem was far more difficult than the practice devices that Koutarou had asked Clan to make. That’s why he didn’t want to ask for the impossible.

Thanks to the invader girls, Koutarou had realized that he tended not to expect things from others. In other words, he only ever asked people to do things in the narrow range of what they could or would want to do anyway.

But it seemed that was his problem here. Even in the face of a seemingly impossible task, Clan was eager to help him. Perhaps he should have just expected that from the start.

“I’m sorry. You’re right.”

“You may reflect on your actions to your heart’s content.”

“But, Clan...”

“What?”

“I want to ask you, not Princess Clariossa. Could you do it, Clan?”

“That...”

In that moment, Clan’s expression froze up.

Princess Clariossa and Clan both referred to the same person. But Koutarou had specifically asked Clan. The Blue Knight wasn’t asking Princess Clariossa. No, this was a request from a partner that she had been through thick and thin with —the man she hoped would continue to be her partner in the future as well.

And Clan properly understood the meaning behind those words. That’s why her expression soon unfroze and she smiled at Koutarou.

“That much is obvious. Who do you think I am?”

“A little sly, stubborn girl that I can always count on.”

“As long as you understand that, leave it to me, Koutarou.”

“Yeah, thanks, Clan.”

“Then I should get to work immediately... Heh heh heh...”

Koutarou had called her sly, but it had been a while since he’d seen her trademark cunning smirk. In fact, she wore such a bright smile right now that she looked like she might break into dance at any moment.

Clan’s idea was to use the armor’s gravity controls to manipulate the swords’ masses as needed. If she succeeded, Koutarou should be able to use two swords with the same style he had been cultivating so far.

But that would be no easy feat. Not only did the data necessary to control their masses need to be extrapolated from Koutarou’s movement data, but the problem with the two swords interfering with one another also needed to be taken into consideration. Anybody might have been able to solve either problem on its own, but only Clan could tackle the incredibly difficult task of solving both problems at once.

Clan led Koutarou and Ruth back to her laboratory and took several measurements on Koutarou and the armor. She also took the operational data from Ruth’s armor. After that, she threw it all into her computer and started calculating the required parameters.

“I can do this, but it won’t be finished anytime today or tomorrow.”

“I know. I’m not asking for that much.”

“I’ll also need to perform some adjustments, so come back again after a while.”

“Sure.”

“Thank you very much.”

It would take Clan a long time to calculate what she needed, so Koutarou and Ruth decided to leave her to her work and head home.

“Well, see you later, Clan.”

“I’ll be taking my leave too, Clan-sama.”

Koutarou lightly waved his hand while Ruth deeply bowed. That was when Clan shot a questioning glance at Ruth.

“Say, Pardomshiha... You went as far as giving me access to Blue Knight. Aren’t you worried I might try something?”

Koutarou’s armor was originally a part of the controls for Theia’s ship, Blue Knight. As such, Clan couldn’t touch up the armor without one of its registered users, namely Koutarou or Ruth, present. Clan had only been able to perform repairs to the armor in past Forthorthe because Koutarou had been with her and given his permission.

But now Koutarou and Ruth had their own lives to take care of, so they weren’t with Clan all the time. In light of that, Ruth decided to register Clan as a crew member of Blue Knight so that she could modify the armor as she pleased. Clan was confused that Ruth seemed to be so unwary of her, especially after giving her access to the ship.

“Could it be that you plan on servicing all of Blue Knight, Clan-sama?!”

Ruth’s eyes sparkled. There wasn’t a single fiber of her being that believed that Clan would do anything wrong.

“No! I’m talking about things like setting up a back door into the system or setting up traps on board the ship!”

Clan was flabbergasted at Ruth’s carefree attitude. Not long ago, she had been Theia and Ruth’s enemy.

“Huh...? But why would you do that? Would it be for a surprise party or something?”

Clan’s true meaning seemed to go completely over Ruth’s head. She blinked repeatedly and looked at Clan with a confused expression.

“Of course not! Jeez! I’m asking if you’re worried that I might eliminate Theiamillis-san to bump myself up in line for the throne!”

Eventually Clan got annoyed by Ruth’s lack of worry, and she spelled out her implication directly. With that, Ruth was finally able to understand what Clan

was trying to say.

“No, not really.”

Ruth shook her head, and her neat, short hair flapped around.

“Why not?” Clan asked, stupefied.

“That’s because, right now, you don’t wish to become empress through such methods, Clan-sama.”

Ruth then put her hands on her chest and smiled at Clan.

“Pardomshiha...”

After meeting Alaia, Clan now understood what it truly meant to be a princess and empress. She knew that if she wasn’t a princess that the Blue Knight, Koutarou, would accept, she wasn’t fit to be empress. That’s why Clan was planning on winning against Theia fair and square now. She wouldn’t get in Theia’s way, and if she had to challenge her still, she would do it outright rather than trying to blindside her. Otherwise, she would never be able to surpass Alaia.

And Ruth had realized that. She could see it in her behavior and her relationship with Koutarou. Ruth may have misunderstood what Clan was suggesting, but it was only because she knew Clan wouldn’t do anything to sabotage what she’d worked so hard to build. Ruth was confident in that.

“Clan, you’re just thinking too hard about it. I’m always telling you that, aren’t I?” Koutarou said with a smile.

“Koutarou...”

Clan’s face turned a little red. She still wasn’t used to having a man be so friendly with her. However, Koutarou’s next words instantly sent her feelings into overdrive in the other direction.

“You’re so sly that you wouldn’t do anything evil that would leave evidence behind, right? You do evil elegantly, in a way that no one would ever find out about. You’re not the type that would do something as a registered user of the ship. It’s too obvious. Give yourself a little more credit.”

Clan’s eyebrow twitched, and her face turned even redder than it was before

as she laid into Koutarou.

“Quit messing around! As if a future empress of Forthorthe would do something so low! Something like that would—”

“Yeah, that’s exactly what I’m saying.”

However, Koutarou put his hand on Clan’s head before she could finish shouting. And as if praising a child, he began patting her head.

“Ah...”

“It’s all right. Don’t worry. Both me and Ruth-san believe in you. The others might not yet, but they will eventually. Theia included.”

Koutarou and Ruth smiled and stared at Clan’s face.

“A-Auuugh...”

That caused Clan’s face to turn yet again a new shade of red, and she cast her eyes down as if to escape their eyes.

Clan had asked Ruth what she did because she was worried about whether or not Ruth really trusted her. They’d been enemies, after all. But in the end, it seemed she was worried for nothing. Koutarou had called her sly on purpose to get her angry and draw out her true intentions. Having realized that, Clan was both too overcome and embarrassed to raise her head.

“Like I said, Clan, give yourself a little more credit.”

“...I’ll hold off on killing you for now, Koutarou...”

Clan mumbled as she put her hands on her chest. When she did, she could feel her own heat and elevated heartbeat.

I could bet my life on this feeling... But to think feelings like this were asleep inside of me...

In the past, Clan had only thought of others as expendable—something to dispose of after their use had expired. But now that she’d stepped out of her laboratory, she’d had something of a change of heart. Clan herself thought it was strange, but now she loved others and the world. And she was happy about it.

“Hmm? What was that?”

“It was nothing.”

Clan spun around, turning her back to Koutarou and Ruth, and then headed towards one of the shelves in her lab.

“Pardomshiha, let me give you something nice.”

“Clan-sama?”

“Here they are. Take these.”

Clan then pulled out something from the shelf and brought it over to Ruth. She was holding a metallic rod in either hand, both about the size of relay batons.

“These are... beam swords, correct?”

The blades of the swords were beams emitted from the rods, hence the nickname of beam swords. Ruth knew that, but she wasn’t sure why Clan was presenting her with them. She gave her a confused look as if to ask why.

“Yes. I’m giving them to you as a sign of our friendship.”

As Clan nodded and smiled, Koutarou patted her on the head again.

“So you do have a nice side to you, Clan. Who knew?”

Koutarou knew very well the significance behind this gift.

“Auuugh...”

Clan blushed once more and turned her face away from Koutarou. She really wasn’t used to receiving compliments from people close to her.

“What do you mean, Master?”

Clan had fallen silent, so Ruth turned to Koutarou for answers. She still didn’t understand the meaning behind the present.

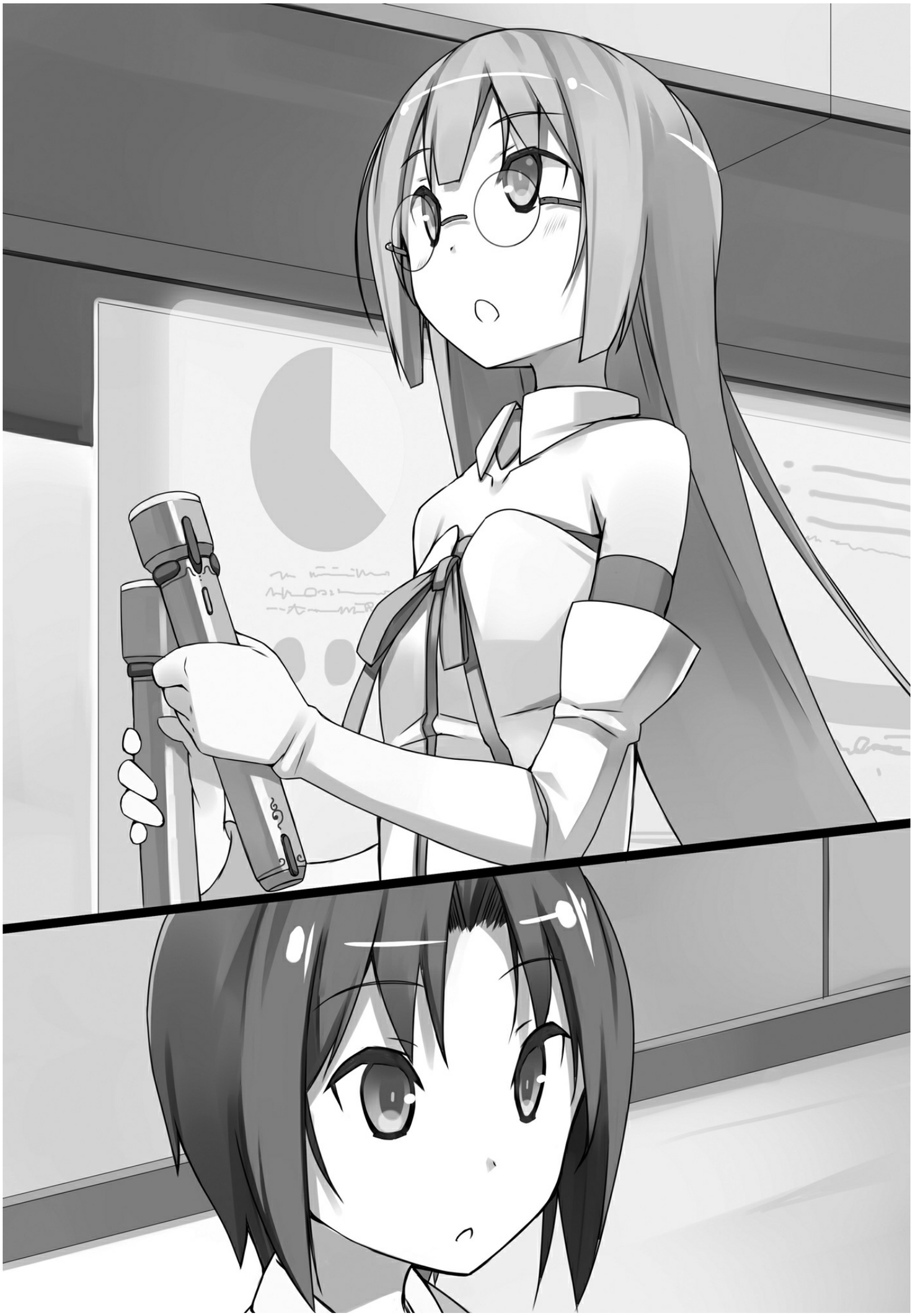
“Actually, those are the swords Lady Flairhan used. You know, the swords of light that appeared in legend.”

“These are?! Is that true?!”

The moment Ruth heard Koutarou’s explanation, her eyes shot wide open

and she stared at the rods in her hands in astonishment. If what Koutarou said was true, what she was holding was of a very special significance to the Pardomshiha family. They were the famed weapons that Flairhan Pardomshiha, one of the characters that appeared in the legend of the Blue Knight, had used in the final battle against the coup d'etat army.

"You have my word."



“To think they actually exist...”

Ruth firmly gripped the swords as her eyes moistened. The two swords of light that could cut through anything. Since they were described as magic swords, historians had debated whether or not they were actually real. And now not only did they exist, Ruth had them in her own hands. Holding the weapons of her greatest ancestor, Ruth was moved to tears.

“W-Well, it’s not something that can be made public, but there’s no point in me holding on to them. So you take them.”

“Thank you very much, Clan-sama! I will cherish them forever!”

“Wh-What an exaggerated reaction... They’re just beam swords...”

Attempting to escape from Ruth, who was repeatedly bowing her head deeply, Clan returned to her desk.

“Hey, Clan... let me teach you something.”

Seeing Clan like that, Koutarou gave her a small smile.

“...Wh-What?”

Clan looked up just enough with her eyes to see Koutarou. She was far too embarrassed to actually face him.

“You’re not suited to play the villain anymore. How about you just realize you’re a good guy now?”

“Wh-Who are you to talk?! You’re the one always calling me sly!”

“If I didn’t, I’d have to treat you like a real princess.”

“Then do it already!”

“Is that what you really want?”

“Uh... That’s not really what I...”

Clan became flustered, adjusted her glasses, and grabbed the hems of her skirt.

“Well, I am your partner... and accomplice... then there’s also... um...”

“Clan.”

“Wh-What?”

“Thank you for everything. You’re a huge help.”

“Wha?!”

Koutarou’s words of thanks made Clan’s eyes nearly bulge out of her head.

“I hope you continue to take care of me in the future as well.”

“...Uh... Auugh...”

Clan tried to retort, but she wasn’t able to form the words. It took a few moments, but Clan shot a dirty look at Koutarou through her glasses and finally managed to squeeze out a proper sentence.

“Jeez... I changed my mind. I really will kill you...”

Looking at Clan’s eyes, Koutarou had a certain thought...

“Yeah. Come kill me whenever you want. How about a day when Ruth’s prepared some snacks?”

“Idiot...”

He was really happy he’d reconciled with Clan.

At first, the room the girl known as Aika Maki lived in was extremely bare.

She would only be staying in this city until she completed her mission. That’s why she kept nothing that wasn’t absolutely necessary in her dwelling. She was almost like someone on a business trip. And without any decorations or personal touches, her room certainly didn’t look like a teenage girl lived there.

However, ever since the start of the new year, Maki’s room had started getting brighter.

There were several colorful outfits hanging on the clothes rack, and by the bed was a dressing table that wasn’t there last year. The drawer in that table held some makeup, though not much. More noticeably, the low table in the center of the room now had a checkered tablecloth draped over it. There were even two cushions sitting on the floor on either side. Wallpaper now covered the previously bare concrete walls, and there were countless other small

changes to the room.

It was no longer the desolate living space it had once been. In just a few months, it had undergone a transformation. Though it was still minimal in decoration, it was now fitting for a teenage girl.

“Which one should I try next? Showing too much skin would be embarrassing, so maybe this white one... But won’t it be seen as childish, being so frilly and all?”

Maki was currently standing in the middle of her colorful room all alone, holding her own private fashion show. Standing in front of the dressing table, she was going back and forth between her newly-bought clothes and her favorite outfits, trying to decide what to wear for the coming weekend.

“If I match it with this white ribbon, it will probably look cute, so even if it’s a little childish... But I’m going to be getting on rides, so I shouldn’t wear any accessories that might be annoying...”

Her outfit, accessories, and makeup. Maki didn’t have a lot of options to choose from for each piece, but there were so many possible combinations that she’d been hard at work trying to find the best one since she got home.

“But... all the girls around Satomi-kun leave such a strong impression, maybe I should pick something flashy too... No, no, I shouldn’t force it...”

Maki actually had a date to go out tomorrow. She would be visiting the amusement park by the beach with some of her classmates, including the boy she loved. That was the reason she was having this fashion show—she wanted to be able to show off her cute side to him. She wasn’t trying to woo him, but she did want him to compliment her.

“As for my underwear... I should just wear something normal. It’s not like anyone’s going to see it... No, it’s possible, depending on the attraction... In that case... I should pick this flashy pair... Ah, no, it’s too early for that!”

After imagining something embarrassing, Maki grabbed a nearby cushion, hugged it, and buried her face into it. It was obvious what she wanted from the object of her affection, but being a beginner in love, she didn’t know how best to go about getting it. Deeply troubled over this, she continued hugging the

cushion.

“What am I doing...?”

After sitting like that for a while, Maki sighed. Still hugging her cushion, she looked up at the ceiling.

“To think I had such girlish feelings inside me too...”

Maki couldn’t help being confused.

Ever since she was a child, she had lived a harsh, violent life. She’d grown up only thinking about how to use and outsmart others. She was utterly detached from feelings like love, so much so that she thought she would never be able to experience them.

But meeting a certain boy had changed everything.

If it’s with him, I’m sure we can ease each other’s loneliness. We can save each other...

Her exchanges with this boy had woken up such feelings in her. And by the time she realized that, everything around her had changed. Things were sparkling and colorful. Everything she did was enjoyable. Having someone to support her and supporting someone in turn made Maki’s life brighter. This was the first time she’d experienced that magical little thing called hope.

“I... would die for Satomi-kun’s sake... and I used to think that only fools died for others...”

Maki had finally found value in her own life. This was the first time in her life she wished that these days would last forever. Of course, because of the harsh life she’d lived up until now, it had taken her some time to admit those feelings. She had tried to play them off with various excuses, including that getting close to this boy was part of her mission. But now her feelings had grown to the point that she could no longer hide from them.

However, that deviated from her goals as a member of Darkness Rainbow. Darkness Rainbow’s creed was to use magic to achieve what its members desired, whatever that might be. But right now, Maki didn’t want to use her magic to force things. She was happy to live out her days as they were. She was

starting to lose herself as Dark Navy, but she wasn't fully aware of that yet.

"Okay, let's do this. I have to make sure Satomi-kun likes it somehow!"

Maki stood up, put the cushion down, and turned back to her wardrobe.

This was how Maki had lived her days like a normal girl, not knowing what her actions really meant.

"...It looks like you're blending in well, Maki."

However, those days were about to draw to a close. It would be as sudden as the way they'd begun. And the person that came to let Maki know the end had come was someone she knew very well.

"You also seem to have gotten a lot more feminine since I saw you last."

When Maki hurriedly turned around in the direction of the voice in her room, she saw a woman in a dark indigo robe very similar to her own magical girl outfit.

"Maya-sama?!"

It was Maki's master and the previous Dark Navy.

Maya was injured in a battle against Nana several years ago. As her disciple, Maki had inherited her title as Dark Navy.

Though the wounds Maya had suffered weren't fatal, she was severely maimed. She was in a bad enough state that she couldn't walk, let alone fight. She lost several parts of her body, along with a great deal of mana. That's why Maya's life as a soldier should have ended back then.

"Maya-sama, is your body all right?!"

"Yes. I found a superb doctor."

But the same Maya was now standing in front of Maki on her own two legs. She'd even cloaked her presence well enough that she could sneak up right next to Maki. In other words, she'd recovered her potential as a soldier. That's why Maki was left speechless from surprise.

"That said, I haven't fully healed. So as part of my rehabilitation, I came to

cheer you on.”

While she spoke, Maya clenched her right hand and formed fist in front of Maki.

Amazing... Just where did she get such an elaborate artificial arm...?

Maki held her breath as she stared at Maya’s right arm.

Maya’s original right arm had been blown off during her battle with Nana, so her right arm now had to be artificial. However, it was so expertly crafted that it was hard to tell just by looking at it. Its color and texture almost perfectly matched the rest of her skin, and there were only a few lines and markings on it that hinted that it was artificial. Even then, she could probably just play them off as tattoos. Its movements were also very natural; they were neither too stiff nor too smooth. In short, it looked and worked just like a real human arm.

A prosthetic that elaborate couldn’t have come from Folsaria, and certainly not from Earth. Seeing it, Maki realized that Maya must have a very special ally.

“I also came to brag about my rejuvenated form.”

“Maya-sama...”

Maya had lost much more than just her right arm in the battle with Nana, and it seemed she’d supplemented all of those losses with mechanical body parts. Even her badly burned skin had been grafted with some kind of synthetic material. As a result, Maya looked easily ten years younger than when she saw her last. Maya was more than ten years older than Maki, but now they looked like they could be sisters.

“But you don’t have to worry. I don’t have any intentions on retaking the title of Dark Navy from you. Sadly, I still can’t use magic very well.”

The only downside to her artificial body parts was that they couldn’t produce mana. Magicians focused the mana in their bodies into a single point to cast spells, making artificial body parts worthless in that regard. Her body had been artificially restored to its full physical potential, but that wouldn’t help her with magic. Because of that, the once powerful Maya was about on par with a standard magician. She no longer had the strength to be a leader of Darkness Rainbow.

“No, I wasn’t worried about that... I am glad to see you are fine, Maya-sama.”

Maya was Maki’s master, and seeing her master so healthy made her happy. A smile naturally crossed her lips.

“You’ve changed, Maki. The you in the past would have been more cautious... Could this be confidence from getting stronger?”

Seeing Maki like this, Maya smiled with enjoyment. But when Maki saw her master’s expression, she froze up.

Oh no, I was acting like I would with Satomi-kun...!

Ever since she’d realized her special feelings for Koutarou, Maki spent her days in happiness. She no longer distrusted people or wished harm on them. Her hostility had been replaced with warmth.

But that wasn’t how Maya knew Dark Navy. Not only was she hostile towards the magical girls from Rainbow Heart, there were even power struggles within Darkness Rainbow. Her everyday life was a constant struggle. That was what had closed off her heart and put an edge on her personality. That was who Maki, Magical Girl Darkness Navy, had been in the past.

I have to make sure no one suspects anything, or Satomi-kun will be in danger!

Realizing the position she was in, Maki summoned all of the negativity she could. She didn’t have much malice left within her, but for better or for worse, she at least still had her worries and anxieties. Imagining the person she loved in danger caused those feelings to swell up and fill her heart.

“...It’s been quite some time since I took the title of Dark Navy. I won’t be known as your poor disciple forever.”

The darkness Maki summoned inside was just barely enough to recreate her mask as Dark Navy.

“That’s true. I’m sorry, Dark Navy.”

Fortunately, Maya didn’t find Maki suspicious.

Darkness Rainbow was an extremely self-concerned group of people. Even if a change came over one of the other members, they would suspect it was related to a mission or a plot. Maya had noticed the difference in Maki’s behavior, but

she figured it was because of her work here in this city. Or perhaps she was even trying to manipulate Maya. Either way, Maya didn't seem to think anything of it.

Darkness Rainbow believed that bonds between people either meant using someone or getting used. The relationship between master and disciple was nothing more than that.

"No, it's nothing to apologize about..."

Maki smiled without letting anything on, but in reality she was greatly shaken.

This is who I used to be...

Maki could see her past self in Maya. She saw someone who only looked at people as tools. Someone who was only concerned about making sure she wasn't the one getting used. And confronted with someone like that, Maki couldn't help but feel afraid. The thought that Maya might attack the boy she loved—just as Maki once had herself—struck fear in her heart.

I have to protect him... I have to protect Satomi-kun from my darkness...

This city had changed Maki a lot, but the darkness of her past self changed form and reappeared before her as Maya. Maki knew it was a threat, and that Koutarou might end up getting involved. Maki also knew that if that happened, it would be her fault. That hurt her heart more than anything.

Maya wasn't the only one from Folsaria to pay a visit to Maki. Once Maki and Maya had their little reunion, two other girls appeared in Maki's room. They were also wearing magical girl outfits similar to Maki's, but the colors were different—one was red and the other green. These were Maki's allies from Darkness Rainbow, the magical girls Dark Crimson and Dark Green.

"Maki, you've gotten awfully girly since I saw you last."

The girl in the red outfit, Dark Crimson, looked around at Maki's clothes spread throughout the room and smiled.

Dark Crimson had a boisterous and unyielding personality. Getting stronger and fighting powerful foes meant everything to her. Her frame of mind was

similar to that of a devout martial artist. She strived to become the strongest magical girl and trained hard day and night. She was also obsessed with collecting magical items that would make her stronger. She specialized in energy type offensive magic.

And because of her tomboyish disposition, she didn't care much for being girly. Dark Crimson didn't wear makeup and her hair was unkempt, flowing down her back like flames. She'd even modified her outfit to get rid of anything that restricted her movement, so its design was different from the others'. She was clean, but not very feminine. That was the kind of girl Dark Crimson was.

Dark Crimson felt a sense of closeness with Maki, who lacked almost as much femininity as she did. Maki hated feigning who she really was, so she never wore makeup or fancy clothes. But that Maki had started to come around, Dark Crimson took that as ammunition to tease her with.

"I am only doing this out of necessity."

Maki frowned as she spoke. Since she despised lies, she told the truth. To the current Maki, being feminine was necessary.

"Well, I guess. There's no way Maki would ever *want* to do something like this... but seeing it sure does make me laugh."

However, Dark Crimson interpreted Maki's words differently. She assumed that Maki meant she was doing all of this for the sake of her mission.

"If you want to laugh, just go ahead and do so."

"Heh, I'll take you up on your offer... Ahahahaha!"

Of course, Maki didn't correct that misunderstanding. There was no reason to reveal the truth and jeopardize her position. And since this was all working out in her favor, she wasn't particularly mortified about being laughed at.

I agree, Crimson... I find it funny myself...

Maki was glad Dark Crimson had misunderstood her, but she forced an unhappy expression and turned to Dark Green to change the subject as Dark Crimson kept laughing.

"By the way, Green, what even brought the two of you here?"

The girl in the dark green outfit was the shortest of the seven leaders of Darkness Rainbow. Standing next to Dark Crimson, the tallest of the seven, there was more than a head's difference in their height.

"Our last job wrapping up happened to coincide with Maya-san's return, so we came to take a look and see how things were going over here."

Dark Green responded in a very proper manner as she adjusted her glasses. It wasn't just her height; even her personality was the opposite of Dark Crimson's. Her specialty was also quite contrary, as she focused on divination and illusions. She was a magician skilled in information gathering and interference.

"I said that I was fine alone."

Dark Green's words made Maya slump her shoulders. Even though she had just recovered, Maya had a lot of pride and confidence. She wasn't very happy being told that she needed protection.

"I believe in your abilities, Maya-san, but not so much that new body."

"Same."

Trusting Maya was one thing, but trusting the technology that was now part of her body was something else altogether. Since Maya felt the same way, she raised no further protest.

"...So the three of us have come out ahead of the others. Our goal now is to scout the surroundings of that mana source before our all-out attack, and if possible, seize it for ourselves."

Darkness Rainbow was after the mana gathered in room 106. They considered claiming it their top priority, but even that was just a means to an end. Their real goal was to destroy Rainbow Heart.

Crimson and Green had been on their own missions in preparation for all this. It was sheer coincidence that Maya had returned in her new body just as they had finished their last jobs, so the three of them had come to Kisshouharukaze City together.

Their true battle, the decisive battle against Rainbow Heart, lay beyond this. If they were able to obtain the pool of mana, they would be in a much more

advantageous position for that fight. That was why Maki had been sent here in the first place.

“What about the other four?”

“Purple-san is busy tying up Rainbow Heart. Yellow-san is making weapons in preparation for the battle. Blue-san is still busy training her disciple, and Orange-san is helping her.”

“So it’s almost time...”

One year ago, five of the seven leaders of Darkness Rainbow had sustained severe injuries in a fight with Rainbow Nana. As a result, Crimson, Orange, and Yellow needed long-term treatment and Navy and Green had to retire and pass their titles to their disciples. That’s why the Dark Green standing in front of Maki now was a different person from the Dark Green she’d known a year ago.

However, Darkness Rainbow’s situation had improved over the past year and they had since started taking action again. Like Maki said, the decisive battle against Rainbow Heart was at hand. The opening round would be when they moved to seize the mana in room 106.

“It’s obvious that whichever side controls that pool of mana during the decisive battle will have an advantage. So this is where it starts...”

Maki mumbled to herself with a serious expression as she realized the gravity of the situation.

I have to keep Satomi-kun out of this fight...

There was a massive quantity of mana in room 106. It was in a league of its own, even when compared to the artifacts—powerful magical items—that Maki and the others had gathered. Maki suspected it was related to Signaltin and Encyclopedia, but there was something that kept her from being certain. Moreover, in the middle of all this was the boy she loved. If she did nothing, he would be dragged into the conflict. Maki began racking her brain to try and come up with a way to avoid that.

“The ideal would be if we could seize it now, but it should be fine as long as we seal it before the decisive battle.”

Maya continued on from where Maki left off. Darkness Rainbow's absolute priority was to make sure that Rainbow Heart didn't use the mana themselves. Seizing the mana came second.

"Then let's blow away the building around the mana. If we clear the area, they won't try and make use of it for fear of being seen."

Listening to Maya's words, Crimson proposed a rough plan—destroying Corona House so that neither side would be able to use the mana. It was something of an unwritten law that magicians were required to conceal the existence of magic from normal society while on Earth. By leveling the building that contained the mana pool, it would become impossible to do anything with it in secret. Crimson's idea was simple and savage, but quite effective.

"We can't do that."

However, Maki immediately rejected it.

"Why not?"

Crimson was unhappy with this. She thought her plan was a good idea. Maki continued on in an attempt to convince her otherwise.

"If we do that, then we can't use the mana either. It's also likely they'd begin reconstruction immediately. Besides, we can always destroy it later if we need to."

There wouldn't be any point in destroying the building if it was rebuilt before their decisive battle. There was a similar problem with sealing the mana pool. If they were going to do that, they would need to do so just before the battle. Their focus right now should be solely on seizing the mana.

"How slow are you going to take this...?"

Crimson grimaced at Maki's explanation. She hated trouble. But since she understood what Maki was saying, she didn't raise a fuss.

"Green, what do you think?"

Instead, Crimson asked for Green's opinion. Green was the calmest and most intelligent of the four in the room, so Crimson was willing to defer to her opinion.

“Hmm... In order not to waste all of Navy-san’s efforts, let’s not blow up any buildings this time.”

Green slightly tilted her head and indicated the clothes lying scattered around the room.

“Well, okay.”

Crimson easily gave up on the idea when Green backed up Maki. Strategy wasn’t her forte in the first place, and she would be happy as long as she got to fight against strong opponents.

You’re a lifesaver, Green...

If Corona House was blown up, its residents wouldn’t go unscathed. Since Maki wanted to protect one of those residents, she was grateful that Green had come in on her side.

“So, Maki, how about the boy?”

Hasty as she was, Crimson pushed the discussion forward. Secretly relieved, Maki answered her question.

“Our relationship is going well. I’m sure he would think of me as a good friend.”

“Hmm, for someone who hates dealing with people, you’ve sure worked hard on this.”

“...Well, thanks.”

“Maki, couldn’t you just lead that boy somewhere else?”

That was when Maya spoke up. She’d heard reports of the dangerous boy who wielded a powerful artifact. The best outcome would be if he joined their cause, but if that wasn’t possible, they needed to separate him from the pool of mana somehow. It was a common tactic to pull the most difficult opponent away from a fight.

And looking at everything that had happened, it seemed as if the artifact he had made use of the mana in room 106. They would inevitably need to keep him away until they could seize control of the mana for themselves.

“I wasn’t the one that set it up, but I happen to have plans to go out with him tomorrow.”

“Then try to stall him for as long as you can. I’m interested, so I actually would have loved to meet him, but I have more important business to attend to.”

Maya flashed a smile as she said that, her words laced with sinister meaning.

Maya-sama is after Yurika...

Maya was planning on eliminating Rainbow Heart’s archwizard, Yurika, while Maki kept Koutarou away. Seeing Maya grin, Maki understood all of that implicitly. She gave her master a nod in return.

“I understand.”

Maki had no objections. Things were actually developing in an ideal direction for her.

If it happens tomorrow, I can protect Satomi-kun...

The person Maki wanted to protect was the same person Maya considered a threat. Maki didn’t just want to protect Koutarou from physical harm; she wanted to keep him from getting involved in anything bad.

He shouldn’t have to fight. I can’t let him...

The boy she loved had skill in battle and a powerful weapon, but that didn’t mean that fighting suited him. Maki believed he was the kind of person that died a little on the inside when he had to hurt others. If he had to go through too much of that, it would eventually consume him.

That’s why Maki wanted to keep him away from the battle in order to protect him. She loved Koutarou just the way he was now. He was neither a soldier nor a hero, just a normal boy that was a little strange. But Maki loved that boy who knew the same loneliness she did more than anything.

“Won’t that be dangerous with just Navy-san? The artifact in question is supposedly very powerful...”

Green furrowed her brow. Maki hadn’t gone on the offensive so far because Satomi Koutarou was too strong. It seemed to the others, then, that Maki facing him tomorrow should be a big risk.

“I’ll be fine, Green. I’ve been working up to this.”

Maki had no intention of fighting him. She also didn’t think that he would attack her. She couldn’t imagine being in danger, even going alone. However, just saying that she would be fine wasn’t enough to satisfy Green.

“Perhaps, but if it does develop into a fight, then Navy-san alone won’t be able to— Oh?”

But as she spoke, Green realized something and flashed an astonished expression. After staring at Maki for a moment, she smiled.

“I see... So that’s how it is.”

“What?”

Maki wasn’t following Green’s meaning. She just stood there, looking confused.

“Navy-san, you’ve made a contract with a devil or something, haven’t you? That’s why you said that you’ll be fine on your own... I finally understand.”

In contrast to the confused Maki, Green seemed satisfied and nodded.

All magicians were able see the mana surrounding people, but Green was exceptionally good at it thanks to her specialization in divination and information gathering. Thanks to that, she was able to see even concealed magic or weak traces of magic that normal magicians would overlook.

And Green had spotted something special within Maki. It was a kind of magic that compelled two intelligent creatures to help one another.

To magicians, it was a type of magic called a contract or engagement, and there were primarily two reasons to use such a thing. One was to form a contract to bind a demon in service to a magician, a so-called familiar. The other was when making a deal with a creature of a higher existence, primarily forming a contract to receive aid when specific conditions were met.

When forming such contracts, the more powerful the being, the more complex the conditions tended to be. And Green had noticed a very complex contract connected to Maki. That’s why she assumed that Maki had made a contract with a devil, an extremely high level demon.

“Wha...”

Maki was at a loss for words.

A contract? That’s not... With who, even? And when?

Maki had no recollection of forming a contract with someone, so what Green was suggesting took her by surprise. It was enough that she suspected Green must be jesting.

“So, Green, what kind of contract is that?”

While Maki was stumped, Crimson muscled her way into the conversation. If Maki had made a contract with someone, it would mean she’d gotten a serious power-up. To Crimson who valued strength more than anything, this was extremely interesting.

“It’s an equal and persistent contract involving a mental connection between the parties... and there’s no limit to the mutual assistance. It’s almost like they’re one and the same. It’s quite a bold contract...”

“Maki... are you planning on marrying that devil or something?”

Hearing the details, Crimson began laughing with an amazed expression. The contract was far stronger and complex than what she had imagined. Simply put, it was contract that bound their hearts and bared their souls to one another. Until death did they part, they were bound to protect each other. It was such an odd, complex contract that it wasn’t strange that Crimson would laugh and compare it to marriage. But the complexity of the contract also indicated that Maki had contracted with an extraordinarily powerful being. Crimson could imagine just how strong that bond made her. It was exciting.

Marriage...?

When Green mentioned that word, a certain boy appeared in Maki’s mind.

“Ah...”

That was when Maki realized that there was indeed someone who fit what Green was describing. But that too stumped her quite badly.

But... that’s... impossible...

If that really was the truth, everything that Maki believed might have been a lie.

“What’s he like? Tell us, Maki.”

Interested because Maki had clammed up, Crimson prodded her for information. She thought Maki was just being secretive about the source of her power, and didn’t think there was any deeper meaning to it than that.

“Th-That’s...”

“Just leave it at that, Crimson. Even if we’re allies, it’s against the rules to pry into each other’s affairs.”

Pale and in shock, Maki was unable to give an answer. Fortunately, Maya gave her a helping hand. Darkness Rainbow had a rule about not interfering in the business of others, and pushing Maki to reveal who she’d made a contract with could be seen as a violation of that rule.

“Hahh... And we finally got to an interesting topic...”

Crimson sighed regrettably, but she easily relented and quickly backed off. Crimson was curious about the creature Maki had contracted, but it was also true that revealing such information would put Maki at a disadvantage. So Crimson thought that Maya’s words were justifiable.

“Green, you too.”

“Yes, Maya-san. And I’m sorry, Navy-san...”

Green politely bowed her head as she apologized for revealing that Maki had formed a contract without permission.

“No, that’s okay...”

Maki offered forgiveness, but her mind was elsewhere.

S-Satomi-kun, I... I...

Her body trembled as unease welled up from the bottom of her heart. Just a few moments ago, Maki had been leaping for joy as she was cheerfully trying to pick out what clothes to wear for tomorrow.

I... Just what... are these feelings...?

But there was not a trace of joy left in her now. The solitude and despair she thought were long gone had seized hold of her once more.

An Evening in Room 106

Friday, April 23rd

Ruth's arm was wrapped around Koutarou's. There was practically no space between them as they walked along, making their way through the residential area cloaked in twilight. They were on their way back home to Corona House after paying a visit to Clan at her spaceship.

"Master, it's gotten a lot warmer, hasn't it?"

Ruth smiled with her cheek resting on Koutarou's shoulder. She was gazing up at the first hints of the early summer night sky. The calendar had hit the end of spring, making it comfortable outside even after the sun set.

"If it's so warm, then why not let go?"

"Jeez... you always try to pull away like that Master..."

"...I'm sorry. I'm not used to it..."

When it was just the two of them, Ruth would call Koutarou "master." And as of late, she would start to link her arm with his. It was also the result of Ruth's wish to be closer with him.

"I think I have the right to stick to you from time to time, if I may say so."

"Ruth-san, you're always so diligent and serious, so... it's a bit embarrassing..."

"Heehee. Please get used to it. My master has the right to freely make use of my mind and body..."

Since some time ago, Ruth had begun feeling that she was the only one missing out on physical contact with Koutarou.

Sanae had been clinging to Koutarou ever since she was a ghost, and she continued doing so even after regaining her body. Theia's relation with Koutarou was fierce, both in the past and present. Since Yurika lived so sloppily,

Koutarou was always taking care of her one way or another. And Kiriha lived to play her little pranks on Koutarou.

Looking at it like that, Ruth was the only one missing out because of her serious and reserved personality. That bothered her, so she at least wanted to be close while it was just the two of them. And if Koutarou refused her, he would feel like he was only rejecting her, so he had no choice but to accept her wishes.

“But... if you really don’t like it, please say so... That’s not what I want...”

The smile on Ruth’s face disappeared just for the moment she spoke those words. She didn’t seriously want to trouble Koutarou.

“If I really didn’t like it, it wouldn’t bother me.”

Koutarou, on the other hand, started smiling as he spoke.

Any normal person would probably be able to do this without any resistance...

Thanks to the girls around him, Koutarou had realized the flaw he carried with him.

He didn’t expect much from people. That’s why he reflexively tried to get out of linking arms with Ruth. In other words, he subconsciously felt it was meaningless. That it wouldn’t lead to a deep bond.

But now, Koutarou realized that was wrong. He didn’t want to keep living like that. And while it might be hard to change right away, he believed he could little by little.

“Then... I will wait.”

“Huh?”

“Her Highness and I will always wait for you. Until the day you can accept us...”

Still leaning on Koutarou, Ruth tightened her embrace around Koutarou’s arm. While he couldn’t see her expression, the warmth he felt from her conveyed the depth of her feelings.

“Why would you go so far...?”

“That’s because... we wish to save you and realize happiness.”

If Koutarou had only been the Blue Knight, Ruth probably wouldn’t have loved him as much as she did. She loved him—the boy named Koutarou—because he was imperfect. She wasn’t just depending on him for protection. She could protect him too.

“I think that’s what love is.”

Ruth looked up at Koutarou. As she did, the gentle light in her eyes shot straight into Koutarou’s heart. And that light broke down another piece of the wall around his heart.

“Ruth-san...”

His heart a little lighter, Koutarou spoke to Ruth honestly.

“I don’t want you repeating this, but...”

“Yes, Master?”

Ruth quietly nodded without changing her expression.

“There are times when... I think of you and the others as angels or something similar.”

Those were Koutarou’s true feelings. It was the most gratitude he could offer in words for the girls that treated him so well despite his many flaws.

“You’re wrong, Master.”

However, Ruth simply shook her head.

“We are just human. Because... if we really were angels, we wouldn’t think to want to be loved by anyone, would we?”

“Ru...”

Hearing that, Koutarou was at a loss for words.

“We are just normal humans that love you and want to be loved in return.”

“...”

In the end, Koutarou wasn’t able to say anything else at all.

It’s things like that that make you look like angels to me...

As he stared at Ruth’s gentle eyes filled with conviction, it was all he could do to admit that in his head.

When Koutarou and Ruth returned to Corona House, they were greeted with a bizarre sight. It stopped them both in their tracks.

“Kyaaah!”

“Sanae?!”



Sanae was collapsed in front of room 106. She was lying down on the ground with her head pressed up against the door. It looked like she'd tried to break through it with her face.

"It's okay, Ruth-san. It's just the usual thing."

Koutarou lightly stroked Ruth's hair as she screamed and held tightly on to his arm. In response, she timidly looked up at him. There were tears forming in her eyes.

"I... I just can't get used to this no matter how many times I see it..."

"That Sanae... I keep telling her..."

Realizing what was going on, Ruth calmed down and let go of Koutarou's arm. Grumbling to himself, Koutarou approached the collapsed girl.

"Upsy-daisy."

Koutarou stuck his arms under the unconscious Sanae and lifted her up. Her body was completely limp, so it took quite a bit of effort.

"Master, here."

Ruth opened the door for Koutarou.

"Thank you."

Koutarou took Sanae inside. Stepping into the apartment, he could hear the TV on in the inner room. Someone was already here.

"She really is..."

Feeling a bit exasperated, Koutarou marched into the inner room. Coming around the corner, he could see a magnificent magical girl transformation sequence and the back of a ghost sitting in front of the TV watching it.

"The magical girl of love and courage! Love Love Heart!"

"It's finally here!"

"It's not finally here!"

Koutarou struck the back of the head of the ghost glued to the TV, Sanae.

"Ow... Oh, welcome home, Koutarou."

Ghost Sanae pressed the power switch on the remote and turned to Koutarou. When she did, the magical girl on the TV disappeared. Sanae had been watching the episodes of the magical girl show that Yurika had recorded for her during the time she'd lost her memories.

"Sanae, how many times do I have to tell you? Don't just leave your body lying around."

"Ah, yeah. You're right."

Realizing she'd gone into astral projection mode, she slightly blushed as she apologized to Koutarou.

"I'm sorry, Koutarou. Old habits die hard, I guess..."

Sanae had recovered her body, but when she tried to pass through the doors like she had as a ghost, it left her physical body on the wrong side.

"If the neighbors see your body lying around like that, it'll cause an uproar."

"I understand. I'll be more careful."

Sanae hadn't done it on purpose, so she remorsefully reflected on her actions. Sanae was the one who would be the most upset if nobody could stay in room 106 anymore because she'd caused trouble.

"Good... Here's your body."

Koutarou presented Sanae's ghost form with her physical body. However, she shook her head and pointed towards the wall with the window.

"I don't need it right now. Leave it over there and I'll get in later."

"Get in now. You're in the way when you take up space as two people."

"Jeez! How could you say that this bundle of adorability, Love Love Sanae-chan, is in the way?! Isn't having two of me even better?!"

"One is fine. The room is small enough already."

"But if I get in now, my head's gonna hurt..."

Sanae pointed to her body's forehead. It was swollen and red.

"Oh, come on..."

It looked painful even to Koutarou, so he complied and carried her body over to the wall while grumbling.

“That’s right!” Sanae clapped her hands as she came up with a good idea. “As thanks, you can touch my boobs! I’ll forgive you.”

“As if I would!”

Sanae thought it was a brilliant idea, but Koutarou instantly rejected her.

“You joker. You know you want to touch them, Koutarou-chaaan! You don’t have to hold back.”

“What’s the fun of touching someone without anything inside?”

“...Is that how it is?”

“I don’t know about anyone else, but it sure is for me. If neither you or Sanae-san are there, it’s not much different from touching a doll.”

Sanae’s personality still wasn’t fully merged. Ghost Sanae’s personality appeared when she was with Koutarou and the others, and when she wasn’t, her more mature self—Sanae-san—came to the surface. But when Sanae collectively wasn’t inhabiting her body, it wasn’t much different from a doll.

“Hmm... I feel like I’ve learned something new.”

“Then get in.”

“No way. My head will hurt too much.”

“Right, right...”

Koutarou set down Sanae’s body by the wall while smiling wryly. He took a moment to straighten out her disheveled clothes.

“Thanks, Koutarou.”

“You better get in before long.”

“Okay.”

Sanae energetically nodded and turned back to the TV to continue watching her anime.

“Jeez...”

Koutarou looked back and forth between Sanae's body by the wall and Sanae sitting in front of the TV before shrugging and heading to the tea table in the middle of the room. That was when his eyes met with the girl sitting there.

"What's wrong, Theia? You're making a strange face."

"Ah, no, it's... you see..."

Theia had both her hands pressed against her chest and was staring at Koutarou. But when her eyes met Koutarou's, her face turned red and she turned away. Theia kept her mouth shut and didn't say anything. Koutarou wondered what she was doing and sat down next to her.

"Your Highness, no one will understand if you just think it to yourself."

"R-Right..."

After a word of encouragement from Ruth, who was also sitting at the table, Theia glanced at Koutarou. She then looked down at her chest before opening her mouth.

"Pleb..."

"What?"

"Well, I recalled something as you and Sanae were talking."

Theia fell silent for a moment and looked up at Koutarou's face. Waiting for a moment to make sure he wouldn't laugh, she continued.

"When we first met, you said something. Do you remember? You said, 'I have the right to choose which breasts I fondle.'"

"Yeah..."

Hearing what Theia said, Koutarou thought back to when they first met. Back then, he'd accidentally touched Theia's breasts. Theia chewed him out for it, and that was how he'd responded.

"...Something like that did happen, didn't it?"

Koutarou started feeling nostalgic and looked at the wall furthest into the room that led to Blue Knight. On that day, it was the wall Theia had appeared from.

Back then, Koutarou never would have imagined the day would come when he and Theia would be speaking so calmly to one another. He couldn't help smiling thinking about how immature they'd both been back them.

"So... I want you to listen without laughing, but..."

Hearing those words, Koutarou turned back to look at Theia. He could see she'd grown a little in the last year, both mentally and physically. With her eyes still turned away, she continued squeezing out words.

"I-I was wondering... if you still think... the same way..."

After listening to Koutarou and Sanae's talk, that's what Theia had started feeling anxious about—what Koutarou thought of her breasts.

"M-My breasts have grown, you know! They haven't grown much in the past year, but they've still grown a little!"

In the past, Koutarou had called Theia flat. It wasn't like she was unaware of her size, but as time passed and Theia fell in love with Koutarou, it was something she started to worry about. Did he still not want to touch them, just like when they first met? Or has he changed his mind since then? It might sound silly to anyone else, but it was a serious concern for Theia.

"They shouldn't be as unshapely as you think anymore! Surely!"

Theia was desperate. She believed that Koutarou would stay by her side as long as she stayed true to her fate. But she also wanted him to love her as a woman. And if he still didn't want to touch her breasts, that must mean that he didn't love that part of her. That was a serious problem for Theia when it came to her pride as a young woman.

"Theia..."

Theia's words inadvertently told Koutarou how she felt for him. He could feel something tugging at his heartstrings. If he let down his guard, he felt like he would just break down and give Theia a big hug.

Wait, calm down! That would be bad!

However, Koutarou managed to stop himself as he started to reach out for her. That was because he recalled the problems surrounding room 106. And

after taking several deep breaths, he smiled at her instead.

“Honestly... size doesn’t really affect whether or not I want to touch them.”

Though he’d kept his composure, talking about breasts was uncomfortable for Koutarou. He couldn’t keep himself from blushing.

“But... that’s not what you said back then...”

Koutarou gave Theia his honest opinion, but she had trouble accepting it. She doubted it because it seemed to contradict what he’d said before, and she gave Koutarou a scrutinizing look. Seeing that, Koutarou decided to explain himself.

“You understand tit for a tat, right?”

“...Yes...”

“Back then, I didn’t like you, so I brought the size of your breasts up to make fun of you, even though I didn’t really care.”

Koutarou had been so desperate to prove his innocence that he tried to make the argument that he’d never want to touch her small breasts in the first place.

“Then... you don’t care if my breasts are small?”

Theia intently leaned forward a little and her expression started to brighten.

“Let me put it this way. I care more about your heart than your chest, got it?”

As Koutarou said that, he turned to look towards the TV. He saw Sanae, who was swinging from joy to sorrow and back again.

“...I see. I understand.”

Theia looked at Sanae too and nodded.

Of course... Just wanting to touch someone’s breasts because they’re big certainly would be sad.

If someone’s body was all that mattered, Sanae probably wouldn’t have made it back. But that wasn’t the case. And that likely meant the same held true for someone’s figure, face, height, or anything else. If those things were really what mattered, it wouldn’t be a proper relationship in the first place.

What’s important isn’t the sword, but the oath sworn on it... How immature of

me to be so concerned of the size of my breasts...

In fact, if appearance or position had mattered to him, Theia probably wouldn't have chosen Koutarou to be her knight. And the same was true the other way around—she hadn't fallen in love with him for his looks or his status. Yet even though she loved him for the kind man he was, Theia had been so concerned about her breasts that she'd nearly forgotten that. Having come to her senses, Theia now spoke to Koutarou with her usual smile on her face.

"Then... the question is whether you love me or not, no?"

Theia knew that Koutarou loved everyone, but she wasn't asking about that. She was asking if he loved her as a woman. If he didn't just want to talk and laugh together, but also embrace her and feel her warmth. That should be the deciding factor if Koutarou wanted to touch her breasts or not.

"What do you think?"

"I don't know. But I do know that you won't run away if I touch you like this."

"Oh?"

Theia had reached over and put her hand on top of Koutarou's without him noticing. When he looked down at it now, however, he didn't pull his hand away or try and shake her off. It wasn't an unpleasant feeling.

"You love me enough to allow this. And in that case, my breasts are only a matter of time..." Theia narrowed her eyes and held on to Koutarou's hand. "Heh, such futile resistance, Satomi Koutarou."

"How selfish..."

Koutarou criticized what Theia was saying, but on the inside he was thinking the opposite.

Futile resistance, huh...? Maybe that really is the case...

Just moments ago, Koutarou had been about to embrace Theia. He had barely managed to hold himself back, but that was exactly what Theia was talking about. He was aware of that, and it made no sense to deny it. That's why, despite what he was saying, Koutarou lightly squeezed Theia's hand back. As if responding to that, Theia intertwined her fingers with Koutarou's.

“Yes, I am selfish. I’m an invader, after all,” she said with a confident smile.

After all, Theia’s invasion was proceeding smoothly.

While waiting for Ruth to finish making the tea, a bored Koutarou was watching what Theia was doing. She had ardently been scribbling something on a large piece of paper for a while now.

“So... what is that?”

“I was thinking of ways to power up your armor.”

Theia flashed a big smile and showed the paper to Koutarou.

“Let’s see... ‘Theia’s New Super Koutarou’?”

That was what was written at the very top of the paper, and underneath it was a long list of ideas to strengthen Koutarou’s armor. Koutarou, however, couldn’t get past the title.

“Hey, don’t play around with me, Theia.”

“How rude! I’m quite serious about this. There have been a lot of troublesome incidents lately, right? So I figured there would be no harm in preparing for any future trouble.”

“That’s true...”

Goofy title aside, Koutarou thought Theia’s heart was in the right place. The continued peace of room 106 was something all residents wished for.

“So what’s up with this drawing, Theia? It’s a big mess and I can’t understand it at all.”

Below the title and list was a tangle of lines and complex diagrams, making it impossible to tell what Theia’s plans were just at a glance. That’s why Koutarou needed an explanation.

“I came up with ideas for additional equipment. But if they get in the way of your movement, there wouldn’t be any point in adding them, so I was thinking of positioning small unmanned fighters of various types around you instead. They could support you in battles using various formations.”

“Hmm... so where am I in this drawing? There are too many lines for me to tell.”

“Um, around here.”

Theia used the pen in her hand to draw a circle around something in the middle of the paper.

“...You’re an idiot, aren’t you?” Koutarou asked, simply amazed.

“Why are you calling me an idiot?!”

Unhappy with Koutarou’s reaction, Theia puffed out her cheeks and frowned.

“I’m completely buried in your additional equipment! Talk about getting in the way!”

The circle that Theia drew was miniscule. It made sense now why Koutarou couldn’t find himself in the drawing; 99 percent of what was on the page was additional equipment Theia wanted to add.

“With this, you will never lose! You’d survive, no matter what enemy you face!”

“What’s the point of me being in the middle of all of this?!”

“Victory!”

“Then just use Blue Knight!”

A swarm of unmanned fighters surrounded Koutarou for several dozen meters. With that, there was absolutely no point of Koutarou himself fighting. It would be more efficient to just use her spaceship, Blue Knight, to attack. This idea for a power-up was outright useless.

“I don’t want that! I want you to be strong! I want Super Koutarou!”

“Satomi-sama, you don’t understand anything... These plans are filled with both my own and Her Highness’s dreams and love.”

Theia was raising a fuss while Ruth, who was pouring up tea, began talking about love. It seemed the two of them had absolute confidence in this power-up idea.

“With this, you can save me and Ruth from any danger! And you’ll stand in

the spotlight and defeat the enemy!”

“With this, the unmanned fighters will be the ones in the spotlight!”

“No, it will be you, Satomi-sama.”

“Give me a break!”

Koutarou wanted to defend the peace of room 106 as efficiently as possible, while Ruth and Theia wanted Koutarou to shine. Their discussion had reached a deadlock there.

“What’s all the commotion about?”

That was when Kiriha peeked into the inner room. She had gone out with Shizuka to buy groceries for tonight’s supper, and she had just now gotten back to the apartment.

“Theia’s just being an idiot.”

“How dare you call me an idiot?! Is that a word you should use to describe your beloved master?!”

“Master or not, you’re an idiot!”

“Your Highness, maybe we should ask for Kiriha-sama’s opinion on this.”

“Indeed! Take a look at this, Kiriha! Koutarou saw this and called us idiots!”

Theia snatched the drawing from Koutarou’s hands and held it out to Kiriha. She took it in her hands and looked it over carefully.

“...Hmm, ‘Theia’s New Super Koutarou,’ huh?”

Having deciphered the complex drawing, Kiriha knitted her brow slightly.

“Tell her, Kiriha-san! Teach this idiot a thing or two!”

Koutarou had high hopes that the reasonable Kiriha would be able to talk some sense into Theia.

“Theia-dono, this plan has several large holes in it.”

“Yeah, like that!”

Hearing exactly what he wanted to from Kiriha, Koutarou nodded emphatically with a satisfied smile on his face.

“What?!”

Theia, on the other hand, got worked up and pressed Kiriha for details.

“To fill those holes, I see a need to add in mass-produced haniwas.”

“Of course! As expected from Kiriha! You *do* get it!”

But in the end, the conversation didn’t play out as Koutarou had hoped. Kiriha only added more fuel to Theia’s fire.

“You’re on their side too, Kiriha-san?!”

Feeling betrayed, Koutarou could feel his strength leave his body.

“Absolute safety and complete victory! That is the way to go!”

“What a splendid plan, Your Highness.”

Koutarou complained to Kiriha, but Theia’s eyes were sparkling and Ruth was applauding.

“...Is that your real opinion, Kiriha-san?”

“Indeed. This might be quite silly from a strategic point of view.”

“Then—”

“But, with this, you wouldn’t have to fight.”

“Huh?”

“You’re strong, certainly, but we don’t want you to dirty your hands for our sake. So in that sense, this is a great plan.”

Kiriha saw things a bit differently from Theia. She would prefer it if Koutarou didn’t have to fight at all. If he was going to hold something sharp, she’d rather see him with a knife in the kitchen than a sword on the battlefield.

“I can understand that too... but isn’t there a better way?”

Koutarou didn’t want to see Kiriha and the others fight either. He knew they would all have to resolve their various problems someday, but Koutarou much preferred seeing them in their peaceful everyday lives. That’s why he could understand how Kiriha felt, but he couldn’t understand what the point in just powering up him was.

“Heh... You don’t have to worry. This plan will never be realized.”

“Really?”

“Yes. Even though Theia-dono has highly advanced technology, it still has its limits. Even if she tries for this, it will naturally take a more realistic turn in implementation.”

Kiriha was sensitive to the feelings of others, so she understood Koutarou’s confusion.

The girls wanting to make Koutarou stronger was inevitably the result of their romantic notions. Rather than trying to come up with defense for everyone, they would rather have Koutarou eliminate all the enemies without taking so much as a step. That in of itself would end up protecting everyone. In other words, they were trying to create an invincible Prince Charming.

But even if she tried to tell Koutarou that, he wouldn’t understand. And with that thought, she instead tried to comfort him by telling him that Theia’s plan was unrealistic.

“That’s good,” Koutarou said with a sigh.

“Yes, you only need to smile.”

“What’s so good?” Sanae asked as she wandered over.

“I’ll explain it. Just go get in your body,” Koutarou insisted.

“Okay.”

“Realistically speaking, nothing is more effective than us teaming up,” offered Kiriha.

“That’s not true. I will eventually make Koutarou the strongest man in the universe. He’ll be able to defeat any foe *and* be absolutely safe doing it.”

“...So some grand fantasy will commence at some point, huh?”

“Satomi-sama, please call it a production, not a fantasy.”

“You are my knight! The knight of a soon-to-be legendary princess! If you can’t at least split a planet or two in half, you won’t be much to talk about.”

“As if I’d allow that!”

Koutarou and the girls continued their debate, though it was less like a discussion and more like just playing around. It was of no real consequence.

Outside the room, however, was a single pair of eyes watching over Koutarou and the others. They belonged to Yurika, who had been unable to enter the inner room ever since she came home.

Satomi-san...

Yurika was pressed up against the wall and hiding in the hallway leading into the inner room and looking in. The apartment was overflowing with casual fun, but Yurika wasn't feeling any of it.

Wh-What should I do...

Yurika's heart started beating faster, and she was feeling dizzy from the blood rushing to her head. She could hardly stand still even though she wasn't doing anything, but she hardly knew what to do in the first place. Her mouth was drying up and her breathing was strangely labored.

As of late, Yurika was unable to keep her cool whenever she was around Koutarou. Whenever he entered her sight, she would get worked up and be unable to think of anything. She didn't want to leave his side, nor did she want to take her eyes off him. She just wanted to feel his presence nearby and look at him, but whenever she was with him, she didn't know what to do. It was the first time in Yurika's life she'd ever felt this way.

"Wh-Why am I this..."

"Are you seeing something strange, Yurika-chan?"

"Kyaaah!"

That was when Shizuka, who had been putting away groceries in the fridge, came over to where Yurika was standing. She stood next to her and joined her in peering into the inner room. Yurika had been so focused on what was going on inside the room, she felt like her heart was going to stop when Shizuka suddenly appeared.

"Sh-Shizuka-san?!"

"Hmm, it looks the same as usual to me..."

Shizuka ignore the surprised Yurika and stared into the room for herself, but didn't spy anything out of the ordinary. She then realized whatever was going on must be on Yurika's end.

Now that I think about it, Yurika-chan has been acting strange lately...

Having gotten used to living in room 106, Yurika had, for better or worse, gotten bolder. But after the incident with Sanae, she had started behaving suspiciously. Yurika a month ago would have casually waltzed into the inner room like she had every right to do so. But now she was acting as timidly as she had when she first came to room 106.

"Did you get into a fight with someone?"

That was all Shizuka could think of. But Yurika replied by quickly shaking her head.

"No, no fights."

Yurika's pigtails bounced around as she shook her head. Seeing that, Shizuka realized that the ribbons at the bases of her pigtails were slightly skewed.

"Is it something between you and Satomi-kun then?"

Koutarou had been the one tying Yurika's ribbons for a while now. He took Yurika's appearance fairly seriously, so her ribbons being messy suggested she'd tied them herself today.

"N-Not at all! That kind of thing would never...!"

Being called out on the truth, Yurika panicked and shook her head even more violently than before. Her face had turned as red as an apple.

"Aha!"

Seeing Yurika's reaction, Shizuka realized what was going on and clapped her hands together.

"So that's what it was..."

Shizuka flashed a mischievous smile.

"Huh?!"

And just as Yurika had a bad feeling about Shizuka's smile...

“Prepare yourself!”

“Kyaaaaah!”

Shizuka swept one of Yurika’s legs out from under her and lightly pushed her upper body. With that, Yurika lost her balance and was sent stumbling into the inner room. With no training and poor reflexes, Yurika was unable to regain her balance and took a pratfall right next to Koutarou.

“Ow, ow, ow...”

“Are you okay, Yurika?”

Since she’d come stumbling into the room and fallen square on her butt, Koutarou gave her a worried look.

“Auuugh, ah, uwaaah...”

Yurika fumbled about, trembling from the shame. She’d done something humiliating. Normally she wouldn’t think anything of it, but right now, Yurika was unbelievably embarrassed that Koutarou had seen it.

“I-I-I’m okay! I’m okay!”

Yurika crawled across the floor to escape from Koutarou. But since the room was so small, she didn’t get far. The farthest she could go was the other side of the tea table.

“That was weird.”

While Koutarou was a little confused, this wasn’t the first time he had seen Yurika’s eccentric behavior. He didn’t think much of it and soon continued his conversation with the girls.

“Hahh...”

Once Koutarou took his eyes off of her, Yurika was finally able to take a deep breath. Shizuka then came and sat down next to her.

“That’s no good, Yurika-chan. You have to try harder.”

“Shizuka-san! Th-There are better ways to do it!”

“Sure, but you have a habit of running away. If I hadn’t do something like that, you wouldn’t have even tried.”

“Th-That’s true, but...”

“You want to get along with Satomi-kun, right?” Shizuka whispered into Yurika’s ear.

Yurika’s face turned red and she was rendered speechless. That silence, however, told Shizuka everything she needed to know. She then continued to whisper to Yurika.

“Satomi-kun will get lonely if you can’t at least behave like normal, you know?”

“How do I behave like normal?”

“Just do what you want to do.”

“But that’s...”

Yurika’s face was turning redder and redder, and her voice getting quieter and quieter. She had been whispering to begin with, but now even Shizuka had a hard time hearing her.

“Having Koutarou see my stupid sleeping face, gently brushing my ruffled hair, and scolding me for not going to bed earlier when it looks like I’ll be late for school... I don’t want any of that! I’d be so embarrassed I could die!”

Everything that had been perfectly natural before was now unbearably embarrassing. She didn’t want the boy she cared for to see how pathetic she really was. She just wanted him to see her charming and cute sides. Really, it wasn’t until now that Yurika started to mature as a girl.

“Yurika-chan, could this be...your first love?”

Yurika remained silent and kept her head down.

“I see... That’s great.” Shizuka gently smiled at Yurika. “My first love wasn’t a wonderful one like yours, Yurika-chan... I wish it had been...”

Shizuka’s first love was a long time ago, back when she was in elementary school. It was a typical, childish crush, and it ended without anything happening. Compared to that, Yurika’s first love looked like something brilliant and beautiful to Shizuka.

“I would prefer yours...”

Yurika, on the other hand, had the opposite opinion.

During the past year she’d spent with Koutarou, she’d embarrassed herself countless times. And now that she had developed romantic feelings for him, all of that made for one hopeless and unfavorable legacy. And since Koutarou had only seen that side of her, she worried that he wouldn’t be able to see her as a love interest even if she confessed to him. She was sure he would only ever think of her as a freeloader or, at best, a little sister.

After dinner and games for the night had ended, Koutarou and the others continued to hang out in the inner room. It was him, Shizuka, and the five invaders for a total of seven people. The small room was very stuffy with all of them in it, but nobody complained. They were all happily chatting away about nothing especially important. The seven of them loved the calm, fun atmosphere that their silly talks created.

“Koutarou, it’s starting to get warmer now, isn’t it?”

Though Sanae had recovered her body, she still liked clinging to Koutarou. Even now, she was still clinging to him.

“Well, it is almost summer, so you won’t be able to hold on to me like that for much longer.”

Sanae was light, so the weight wasn’t much of a problem. The real issue was her body heat. Once summer came around, the heat that would build up between Koutarou and Sanae would become unbearable.

“If that happens, I’ll just strip out of my body.”

“Don’t strip.”

Astral projection was easy for Sanae. Even now, she was cheerfully spending her days switching between her body and her ghost form.

“Koutarou, these rice crackers are quite delicious.”

Next to Koutarou and Sanae was Theia, enjoying a rice cracker. After finishing one, she picked up another and put it in her mouth.

“Give me one too.”

Koutarou didn’t lift a finger himself, and instead asked Theia to pass him one. Unlike before when she was a ghost, it was harder to move with Sanae actually on his back.

“Okay.”

But instead of reaching for the bag, Theia turned towards Koutarou and presented him with the rice cracker that had been in her mouth.

“I don’t want one you’ve already started on.”

However, Koutarou had no intentions of taking it from her. In response, Theia relented and let out a small sigh.

“You really are a wuss... Ruth.”

“Yes.”

Ruth, who was sitting next to Theia, pulled out a rice cracker from the bag and presented it to Koutarou. Sanae then took it and split it in half. She put one half in her mouth and pushed the other half into Koutarou’s.

“Oh, these are really good.”

“You’re right! What do you think, Koutarou?”

After tasting the rice cracker herself, Sanae used her psychic powers to share Koutarou’s sense of taste.

“Hmm... I think it’d be better if you ate them.”

Sanae gave up on eating for herself and instead focused on Koutarou’s sense of taste. Since there was a difference in how individuals perceived taste, there were certain things that Koutarou enjoyed more than Sanae. When that happened, Sanae would do what she’d done as ghost and let Koutarou do the eating while she shared his senses.

“I shall leave the rest to you. Now make me proud.”

Using her psychic powers, Sanae pulled the bag of rice crackers a little closer.

“That’s a convenient power...”

Koutarou smiled wryly as he put his hand into the bag and pulled out a rice cracker. That was when Kiriha, who was folding the laundry in front of the wardrobe, called out to him.

“Koutarou, the bath should be ready by now. Why don’t you go on?”

“Hmm, yeah, thanks. I think I’ll do just that.”

Koutarou pushed his rice cracker into his mouth and removed Sanae’s arms around his neck.

“You’re already done?”

“Yeah. Sorry, but you’ll have to eat the rest yourself.”

“Boo.”

Koutarou left the pouting Sanae at the table and approached Kiriha. She handed him a new set of clothes and a towel, both of which had just been washed a neatly folded.

“You could have just given me those unfolded ones.”

“No, that won’t do.”

Kiriha smiled and picked up the next piece of laundry.

“But I’m just going to put them on in a few minutes.”

“I know, but take the folded ones anyway.”

Kiriha then continued carefully folding laundry. It was a casual act, but she did it with an extraordinary amount of love and care. Seeing her like that, Koutarou got a little embarrassed.

I wonder if she’d be like this if we got married...

Koutarou started doing something he had almost never done before—imagining a future together with someone. Thinking about it as he watched Kiriha sit there folding the laundry, he felt both happy and embarrassed. It was the first time he’d felt that way.

I wonder if my old man felt like this before he married mom...

Koutarou thought of his father, who had transferred far away for work. He

suddenly wanted to ask him why he'd decided to marry his mother.

"Koutarou?"

Confused as to why Koutarou was just standing there, Kiriha stopped folding the laundry and looked up at him.

"Hmm? Ah, sorry. I'll go take a bath now."

"Take your time."

"Yeah."

After Koutarou returned to his senses, he disappeared into the bathroom as Kiriha saw him off with a smile. When he was finally gone, a certain person let out a large sigh of relief.

"Phew..."

It was Yurika. As she exhaled, she slumped down onto the tea table. Finally free of the tension she'd been feeling in Koutarou's presence, her body completely relaxed.

"What's wrong, Yurika? You've been acting strange lately... Well, you were strange to begin with, but I mean even more strange than normal."

Sanae, who was watching TV by Yurika, looked over at her with a confused expression. Since she could see auras, she knew that Yurika's emotions were a mess. But she'd been like that for a while now, which was what puzzled Sanae.

"Strange...? You guys are the strange ones. How can you all be fine in this kind of situation?"

Yurika replied to Sanae, still leaning over the tea table. She was at a complete loss.

"What kind of situation?"

"Living together with Satomi-san!"

That was the root of Yurika's problem. She was having trouble accepting that.

"What? Yurika, did Koutarou do something to you?"

"Could it be the ointment for stiff shoulders that he put up your nose during

the last penalty game?”

“Ah, that certainly looked painful...”

“Well... at least he didn’t try out some more wrestling techniques on her.”

“Or could it be that he did something lewd to you?”

“You’re wrong! You’re all wrong! That would have been a lot easier!”

To Yurika, penalty games or being an object of desire would have far easier to deal with than her current predicament.

“Then what’s the problem?”

The dumfounded girls all looked at Yurika. She was definitely the one acting strange here.

“Th-The person that really treasures me and is always with me every day, the person who needs me... He’s not a girl!”

Yurika had friends. There was obviously the invader girls, and then there was Harumi and her master, Nana. But to Yurika, who had become vaguely aware of her own sloppiness, there was someone in particular that she felt like she needed and who needed her in return. And that someone being a boy was a problem. Up until now, Yurika had never been close to anyone but other girls. This was the first time Yurika wanted to be more than just friends with a boy, but she was troubled because they were already such close friends.

“You... Are you an idiot?” Theia retorted bluntly.

“That’s too harsh, Your Highness. There wasn’t any groundwork in place for her like there was for us.”

“Even so...”

Theia always had Ruth. She always had someone who had her best interests in mind, and someone she could bare her heart to at her side. That’s why, when she realized her feelings on Valentine’s Day, she’d had someone to share that with. She was never this much of a mess about it.

It’s not like I don’t know how she feels...

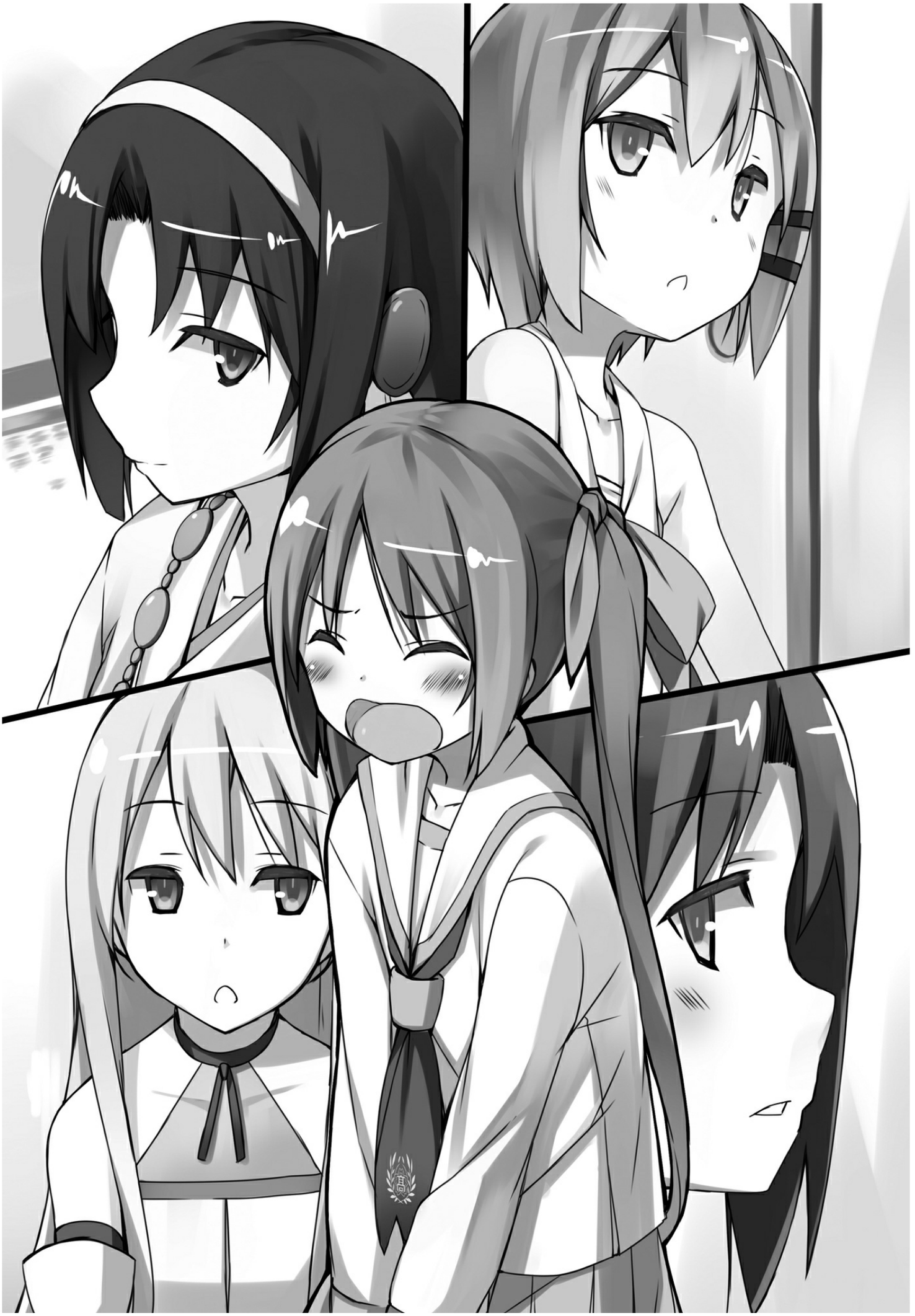
Theia figured that the confusion that Yurika was feeling was similar to what

she herself had felt when Koutarou had suddenly vanished and just as suddenly returned. That was when Theia first became aware of her feelings, and she had been greatly shaken by his disappearance. She thought she had an inkling of what she was going through. But oddly enough, Yurika was behaving more like Theia had after her confession, which confused her a bit. She couldn't really relate there.

"If you don't like being with Koutarou, then you can just run away. That's what you're good at, right?"

Sanae tilted her head. Love was love and hate was hate. To Sanae who had an utterly straightforward outlook on things, Yurika's confused feelings were beyond her comprehension.

"If I didn't like it, I would have run away a long time ago! I'm troubled because I do!"



Yurika wanted to be with Koutarou. Calmly looking back at the time she'd spent here in room 106, she realized the past year had been a blissful one. The first few months were chaotic, but after that her life had been full of sunshine. And there was no way that Yurika could hate Koutarou, who was the center of all that sunlight. If hate had anything to do with it, she was worried because she didn't want him to hate her. She didn't want to disappoint Koutarou by continuing to be so messy and ungraceful, but she didn't know what to do to show him a better or cuter side. As a result, Yurika was in a torturous situation where she desperately wanted to escape, but couldn't bring herself to run away.

"You know, Yurika-chan, your way of thinking is a lot like Satomi-kun's. You're worried that there's no way that someone would love you. But that's not true at all."

Shizuka, who was smiling, had learned of Yurika's circumstances after talking it over with her earlier. Shizuka loved that kind of news. She was always happy to listen to such heartfelt confessions. Perhaps because she was an orphan, she took a special delight in such secrets because she didn't have many people to share them with.

"Satomi Koutarou needs the normal you. You don't have to do anything out of the ordinary. Just be yourself."

Yurika's appearance was adorable to Kiriha, who understood Koutarou's personality better than anyone else. Yurika was alternating between joy and sorrow while striving to create a better relationship through trial and error. Since Kiriha thought that was a wonderful way to create a bond between two people, she simply watched over Yurika and avoided any actual intervention.

"Really?! Would that really be all right?! Won't he just think I'm some strange girl?!"

Yurika didn't have any confidence. She could tell herself that Koutarou needed her just as she was, certainly, but she couldn't escape the feeling that would only lower his opinion of her as a woman. She wanted the person who needed her to think highly of her. That was the biggest reason for Yurika's worries.

“Have some confidence, ho! It’s fun taking care of Yurika-chan, ho!”

“You’ll be all right, ho! Helpless girls are always cute, ho!”

“I don’t want that! Waaaaaaaah...”

Yurika slumped down over the tea table again after what the haniwas said. Not a single problem had been resolved. At this rate, Koutarou would be done with his bath before Yurika had a single countermeasure in place. She once more racked her brain.

“Well, have fun with that... Let’s go, Ruth.”

Theia threw a sidelong glance at Yurika, then stood up and walked towards the far wall of the room.

“Are you already done, Your Highness?”

Ruth quickly followed after Theia, but since it was a little too early for bed, Ruth was curious about what Theia was doing. Theia answered Ruth in a whisper so that only she could hear it.

“The more warmth one feels, the better. Especially in her case...”

Theia was planning on giving Yurika time. Time to think on her own, and time to spend together with just Koutarou.

“I see. What a wonderful idea.”

“Of course. I’m not some merciless dictator.”

“Of course not, Your Highness. Well then, goodnight, everyone!”

“Huh?! Wait, Theia-chan, Ruth-san!”

Ignoring Yurika’s pleas, the two aliens made their exit.

“Well then, maybe I should head out as well.”

“I came over here thinking there was some big fuss, but that’s all it is...? Jeez, and I have to carry this body all the way home...”

“Karama, Korama, you don’t have to watch over the room for tonight. Leave the two of them alone. Instead, increase the watch outside.”

“Understood, ho!”

“You’re the best, Nee-san! Ho!”

Realizing Theia’s intentions, the other girls stood up one after another.

“Ah, everyone, please don’t go!”

At this rate, Yurika would be left alone with Koutarou. And she had nowhere to run. She thought of jumping into the wardrobe and hiding under her futon, but that would be behaving in the disgraceful way she was trying to avoid. She could already see Koutarou opening the door to the wardrobe and telling her to take a bath already.

“I’m begging you! Don’t leave me alone!”

Yurika clung to Shizuka in an attempt to keep her in the apartment. Being alone with Koutarou was like torture to Yurika, so she was desperate.

“Yurika-chan, let me know what happened tomorrow, okay?”

“Noooooooooo!”

However, Shizuka casually grabbed Yurika’s wrist and gently threw her to the floor before leaving like nothing had happened. By that time Yurika was left all alone in the inner room.

“Auuuuuuuuugh...”

Yurika was at a loss, her trembling hand reaching out towards the front door.

I-If I’d known this was going to happen, I would have worked harder to become a more proper girl!

Yurika had always thought that nobody would like her. She thought Harumi and Nana only got close to her because they were especially kind and took pity on her. But reality was different. The girls in room 106 all liked Yurika, and Koutarou needed her.

Yurika didn’t know how that had happened, but that was exactly why she began worrying that they would grow to hate her if she didn’t do something right. And that stress was what led Yurika to continuously repeat the same mistakes without end. She wasn’t doing herself any favors. That was why the other girls had all gone home. They knew that no matter what happened, it couldn’t make the situation worse.

I have to run! But where?! This is supposed to be my home, the place where I can feel at ease the most! Th-Then I should at least make myself look a little better... but I can't use the bathroom because Satomi-san is in there! Th-Th-Then l-l-let's put on some tea... but how do you do that?! Teach me, Kiriha-saaan! Then what about pretending to study?! Th-That won't work either! I can't let Satomi-san see all the mistakes I would make!

Yurika rolled around on the floor, the seconds and minutes passing as she failed and failed again to come up with anything to do to help herself.

"S-Save me, Satomi-san! Wait, Satomi-san is the problem! Nooooo! What should I do?!"

"...I'm what now?"

That was when Koutarou stepped out of the bathroom, wiping his head with a towel. Yurika was still rolling around on the floor, but Koutarou didn't think much of it. He then approached the fridge, pulled out a bottle of barley tea and poured some into a cup.

"I-I-It's nothing! Nothing at all!"

Yurika shook her head in a fluster as Koutarou entered the inner room with his bottle and cup in hand.

"Oh? Did everyone already go home?"

Koutarou came in to ask who else wanted some tea, but Yurika was now the only one in the room.

"Y-Yes, just a moment ago!"

"I see."

If it was just Yurika, he didn't need to ask. Koutarou poured a second cup for Yurika. Since she was such a glutton, he couldn't imagine her saying no.

"Yurika, do you want something sweet or not?"

Next, Koutarou opened up the cupboard and went to choose a snack.

"Huh?! Sweet or not?!"

Lying on the floor, Yurika couldn't see out of the inner room. That's why she

had no idea he was asking about what kind of snack she'd like to go with her tea.

Sweet or not? Wh-Wh-What does he mean?! When a boy just out of the shower says that, that means he's talking about a k-k-ki...

Koutarou's sudden appearance had confused Yurika even further, leading to a wild misunderstanding on her part.

"I... I would, um, like a sweet one over an intense one... i-it's my first time..."

Yurika felt like steam was coming out of her head. Her heart was pounding unbelievably fast and her mind went blank. She couldn't process anything else. Her imagination was spiraling out of control.

"Got it, a sweet one."

"..."

Yurika didn't respond. She was too busy picturing what would happen next. She imagined Koutarou forcibly pushing her down onto the floor. She imagined pushing him down to the floor. She imagined him whispering into her ear as she closed her eyes.

Thanks to her shoujo manga obsession, Yurika really knew her stuff. By the time Koutarou came back into the room, she had run through more than thirty different scenarios in her head. Thanks to that, one clear image had formed in Yurika's mind. And that was her lips pressing against Koutarou.

I-I-I'm going to kiss Satomi-san! Uwah... Uwaaaaaaaah!

Despite it being just a delusion, it felt like an imminent reality to Yurika. And if today was a kiss, what would tomorrow be? And the day after that? Yurika's mind was racing with intense scenes from her shoujo mangas.

"Wha ahe yho dhoin?"

Oblivious to what Yurika was thinking, Koutarou approached her with a cup in each hand a bag of jam donuts in his mouth.

"Ah..."

Yurika gaze naturally drifted up towards Koutarou's lips... and there she

spotted the bag of jam donuts. That was when she realized she'd had utterly the wrong idea.

"Th-That's right! Snacks! Sweet snacks! Of course it would be snacks!"

Her face still red, Yurika began making excuses to no one in particular. She was unbearably embarrassed over getting the wrong idea about things, to the point where she just wanted to jump into a hole and hide. Unfortunately, however, there were no holes in room 106.

"What are you talking about?"

Koutarou looked at Yurika after setting the cups and donuts down on the tea table.

"Aha, aha, ahahahahaha..."

Yurika's face was beet red for some reason, and she was forcing a dry, fake laugh. Koutarou was concerned.

"...Are you really okay?"

"Huh?"

Seeing Yurika in such a strange state, Koutarou started to worry she had a fever or something. That might explain the rest of her weird behavior too.

"Yurika, bring your face a little closer."

Koutarou had a serious expression as he approached Yurika.

Bring my face a little closer? Could he... really?!

Yurika's shattered delusion was instantly revived. She knew it couldn't possibly be that, but she also couldn't think of any other reason he'd ask her to lean in.

"U-u-ummm... please be gentle..."

Yurika turned her face towards Koutarou and closed her eyes.

"Don't worry. It's not like I'm going to hit you."

"Okay..."

Yurika had believed that her first kiss was still a long time away.

I’m really... going to... kiss...

She’d dreamily waited a long time for this moment.

“Hmm, it doesn’t look like you have a fever.”

“Wuh?!”

However, when Koutarou put his hand on her forehead, she instantly realized she’d been wildly under the wrong impression again.

“Noooooooo! I don’t want this! I can’t take this anymore!”

Yurika felt like she couldn’t be more embarrassed even if she were stripped naked. Unable to stand it, she got up and dashed out of the inner room. Koutarou simply stood there, dumfounded by Yurika’s actions.

“Yurika, really, what’s wrong with you?!”

Yurika was so fast that all Koutarou could do was hurl his question at her as she charged away.

“The bath! That’s right! I’m getting into the bath before going to sleep!”

And with that, Yurika ran into the bathroom, her only remaining sanctuary. That was when she finally realized...

What do I do? What do I do?! I-I-I’m living in an apartment with a boy!

A year after it should have, that obvious fact finally dawned on her.

When she came to, Yurika was looking up at the ceiling of room 106’s inner room.

“Huh...?”

Unable to remember what had happened just before, Yurika blankly stared up at the ceiling. As time passed, she gradually began absorbing the situation around her.

“Next up is baseball. A fierce battle of skill between both teams...”

The first thing she heard was the female newscaster talking on the TV. With that, she understood that there must be someone else in the room with her.

Yurika never watched the news.

The next thing she felt was a breeze. It was a gentle breeze that cooled her hot body. After indulging in it for a few moments, Yurika looked in the direction it was coming from.

“...It’sh Shatomi-shan...”

In front of her she could see a lone boy holding a fan in his hand. He was responsible for the breeze that Yurika was feeling.

“...Mmm, meheheh...”

Yurika loved that boy, so just seeing him made her happy. While still in a daze, she looked at the boy and smiled.

“You awake now, Yurika?”

Hearing Yurika’s soft laughter, the boy looked at her face.

“Are you okay?”

He wore a worried but gentle expression.

Satomi-san is concerned about me...

Realizing that, Yurika felt equal parts guilty and happy. She wanted to put the boy at ease, so she tried to get her head around what was going on.

Um, did I fight with Maki-chan? Or someone else from Darkness Rainbow? Did Theia-chan’s enemy show up? Or was it something about Sanae-chan’s body?

Usually when this boy was worried about her, it involved some kind of crisis. She often ended up hurt in situations like that, but as far as Yurika could tell right now, she was fine.

“I’m fine, I’m fine... There’s nothing wrong...”

Confirming that she was alright, Yurika smiled at the boy.

I’m okay, so don’t worry... I’ll always be with you...

It seemed as if Yurika’s feelings had reached the boy. The worry disappeared from his eyes, leaving behind only his gentle expression. Satisfied by that, Yurika just continued fondly looking at the boy while wishing that she could stay like

this forever.

“Mm... Good. You really scared me, you know? I thought you were just taking a long bath, and then I heard a loud noise from the bathroom.”

“Bath? H-Huh...?”

Hearing that word, Yurika’s brain began working rapidly. The fog parted and her mind cleared up.

“And when I rushed over to see what had happened, I found you collapsed in the bathroom...”

“Ah, n-now that I think about it...”

That was when Yurika remembered what had happened to her.

She had run into the bathroom to escape from Koutarou. She was hiding from him, so she wanted to stay in there as long as possible. When she finally couldn’t stand it anymore and had to get out of the bath, she lost her balance after suddenly standing up.

That was as far as Yurika could remember. She must have knocked herself unconscious when she fell.

“...Did you carry me out, Satomi-san?”

“Yeah. You’ve been out for a while.”

“I see... I’m sorry for making you worry...”

“Just stay lying down. You have a big bump on your forehead.”

“Okay...”

Yurika moved her hand and touched her forehead. There was a damp towel over her forehead, but it hurt where she touched it. She did indeed have quite a lump from hitting something in her fall.

“If you start to feel bad, don’t just hold it in. Let me know, okay?”

“Ahaha, I don’t hold in anything at all...”

“No, you’re the type to hold it in when it really matters.”

As Koutarou said that, he changed the towel on Yurika’s head. The new one

felt nice and cool, but Koutarou's words stunned Yurika so much that she hardly noticed. Eventually, that shock turned into joy.

If I'm with this person, if it's for this person... then I could probably do anything...

Koutarou said what he did knowing Yurika's bad sides. She never thought she'd meet anyone like that. Or maybe she was convinced that people like that didn't really exist. But she was wrong. There was a boy sitting next to her right now that accepted her for who she was—good and bad. That's why Yurika felt like crying, but she held it in and smiled at Koutarou.

"...Do I look that patient?"

"Less patient and more foolish, I guess."

"Foolish..."

Before now, Yurika wouldn't have stood for being called foolish and would have started complaining. But as things stood now, she could honestly accept it. Yurika was confused by that, but she didn't find it strange.

"I must be. Fools have... confidence, after all..."

"What's wrong? Does it hurt?"

Yurika was struggling to hold back her feelings anymore, and a portion of her intense emotions broke free in the form of tears. Seeing that, Koutarou remembered that Yurika had hit her head and leaned over to look at her.

"No..."

Yurika shook her head.

"It's just... I was thinking about how much you understand me... and that made me happy, so..."

And so Yurika ended up revealing her feelings quite naturally.

Before she had stormed into the bathroom, Yurika had been so embarrassed she couldn't even speak to Koutarou, let alone look at his face. But now was different. Something in Yurika was changing, though what exactly that was remained unclear. Her heart started to beat faster, but in a different way than

the out of control throbbing from before. It spread her and Koutarou's feelings throughout her whole body.

"I-I see..."

In fact, the one embarrassed at that time was Koutarou.

What is this...? For some reason... Yurika really looks like a girl today, or rather, she looks... cute?

Seeing Yurika smile, Koutarou felt his heart starting to beat faster too. It was a new feeling for him. It was quite clearly different from how he felt when he put his trust in her. This was the moment when something inside Koutarou's heart changed.

"..."

"..."

Both parties unexpectedly fell silent. But unlike before, neither was troubled. They were a little embarrassed, but they both felt at ease as time passed with that silence between them. Just as the towel on Yurika's head was starting to become lukewarm, she sat up.

"Um... can I ask you something?"

Yurika looked herself over as she spoke. She was wearing the soft pajamas she always wore to bed.

"Hmm? Yeah sure."

Koutarou took the towel from Yurika and rinsed it in a bowl of water.

"Then..."

Yurika started blushing a little. What she was about to ask was something that she honestly wanted to know, but took courage to say. She felt like now, while their feelings were overlapping, would be her only chance. So she mustered her courage and asked anyway.

"Satomi-san, you... carried me... here from the bathroom, right?"

"That's right."

Koutarou's hands stopped moving.

“And then... you put clothes on me, right?”

“...Yeah.”

Koutarou’s answer was slightly delayed. He realized where Yurika was going with this. Seeing that he was onto her, Yurika’s face turned even redder.

“Th-Then, you... saw me, right? I mean, um... me... naked...”

Yurika had summoned all the courage she could manage, but even then, her voice had all but disappeared by the end of her sentence. Her face turned down towards the floor, she glanced up with her eyes to see how Koutarou reacted.

“I’m sorry. But I had to... I’ll try to forget it as quickly as possible.”

Even dense Koutarou knew that a girl would be embarrassed about someone seeing her naked. That’s why he honestly apologized.

“No... That’s not what I meant...”

Yurika lightly shook her head.

“Huh?”

Koutarou hadn’t expected Yurika to react like that. Surprised, his eyes opened wide.

“Did you have any other impressions...? Other than being sorry... I mean...”

“Th-That’s...”



Yurika's next question surprised him even more. Koutarou was left at a complete loss for words.

Yurika was well aware that Koutarou had only seen her body because he was acting out of goodwill to help her. In the past, that might have been good enough for her, but now her feelings were a bit more complex. She was obviously embarrassed and would hide in a hole if she could, but she wanted to know if Koutarou had any interest at all in her as a girl.

"How... was it? Did... you feel anything?"

"I—"

Didn't feel anything.

Just before Koutarou was about to reflexively say that, he shut his mouth.

Wait, is that actually the correct answer?

Not feeling anything for a woman he had seen naked. That was probably the proper answer, but was it really the correct one for Koutarou and Yurika? That was what Koutarou was wondering.

Koutarou knew the way he approached relationships was wrong after the invaders had pointed it out to him. It was why he'd hurt Ruth over her arranged marriage, and why he hadn't hoped for Sanae to recover her memories. Would he end up rejecting Yurika the same way, even now that he knew better? Would the "proper" answer be too cold for someone he was close with?

Thinking it over, Koutarou gave a different answer from what he normally would have.

"Well, um... I think you looked... beautiful..."

Thinking that delving into details would be going too far and that claiming he hadn't seen anything would be strange, that was the most honest impression Koutarou was able to comfortably give.

"I-I see..."

Yurika lifted her head, a bit of both joy and embarrassment written on her face. Seeing that, Koutarou felt he'd made the right choice.

I can be a little open with Yurika and the others, can't I...?

Yurika had helped remind him of something so natural. They were friends, after all.

"As for the rest, um, no comment..."

"I know I was the one who asked, but... I think that's for the best..."

The pair fell silent once more. They were even more embarrassed than before and their hearts were racing, but they didn't feel uncomfortable at all. And neither of them fought the mood. They simply sat there together for a while longer.

Bang!

"Kyah!"

"Wah!"

The silence was interrupted by a loud noise from the apartment above. It was just the sound of Shizuka knocking something over, but to Koutarou and Yurika, it felt like Shizuka had suddenly jumped in between them.

"Ah, um, so where were we?"

"Th-That's right. I have something I wanted to talk to you about too."

The noise seemed to restore the mood to normal. Now that they were both indirectly thinking about Shizuka, they couldn't return to that special atmosphere with just the two of them.

"Yurika, could you take a look at these?"

"What's this...?"

Koutarou spoke at a rapid pace and put down several pamphlets in front of Yurika. The covers of them all depicted large, square buildings.

"They're brochures for universities. I got them from the teacher today."

"Universities?"

The pamphlets Koutarou had put down were all introductory guides to nearby universities. Koutarou wanted to show them to Yurika, so he had gone to the

guidance counselor to pick them up.

“Actually, recently in the knitting society, we started talking about Sakuraba-senpai’s graduation. You know she’s already in her third year, right?”

“Oh yeah...”

Yurika and the others had just become second-years, but Harumi was a year ahead of them. That meant she’d be applying to university at the end of this year.

“And while we were talking about schools, I started getting more and more worried about what you’re going to do. That’s why I brought you these.”

“What I’m going to do...?”

Yurika touched the pamphlets with a look of blank surprise.

I’ve never even thought about it...

She didn’t have plans for any of this. As someone who fought as a magical girl, the idea of moving on to study at a university had never even crossed her mind. Once the problems with room 106 were resolved, the chances of her next mission being in this city weren’t all that high.

“Yurika, according to the teacher, you should be able to get into the universities around here even with your grades as long as you work hard the next two years. Where do you want to go?”

Yurika’s grades always rode that fine line between passing and failing. But the pamphlets Koutarou had brought were all for universities she could reasonably get in to. Of course, that would still mean putting in some serious effort and really studying.

“Th-This is just so sudden, I...”

Yurika couldn’t decide. That was the first time she’d even thought about going to university. Seeing her look so lost, Koutarou decided to throw her a bone.

“By the way, this is where Sakuraba-senpai will be going. Kisshou University. With her grades, she could probably get in to any school she wanted, but she’s concerned about her health, so she wanted to stay close and picked this one. It would be hard for you to get in though. So if you want to go to the same

university as Sakuraba-senpai, you would have to start studying now or it will be too late."

Kisshou University was a local university from before the merge of Kisshou City and Harukaze City. Compared to the other schools in the area, it was one of the more prestigious options. An honors student like Harumi would have no problem getting in, but she'd picked it as her first choice because of its proximity to the hospital. And since Harumi and Yurika were best friends, Koutarou figured that Yurika would want to go wherever she did.

"Sakuraba-senpai will be going to Kisshou University..."

Yurika mumbled to herself as she picked up their pamphlet.

Will I... study at a university too...?

After becoming a magical girl in Nana's place, Yurika had always assumed she'd never go back to a normal life. She had only entered Harukaze High because she wanted to harass Koutarou and get him to leave room 106. But now a chance to continue this normal life was presenting itself to her. It didn't feel real.

"What university will you go to, Satomi-san?"

Yurika still needed more help deciding, so she asked Koutarou about his plans "I want to go to one of the local universities, either Kisshou U or Harukaze Technical. But like you, I'm not sure if I can get in."

Koutarou was interested in either Kisshou University or Harukaze Technical University, but those were both above the bar he'd originally set for himself. He'd always thought he'd just go to whatever school he could get in to with his grades, regardless of how far away it was.

But as of late, Koutarou felt like making an effort to stay in the same city his friends lived in. That was a feeling that had awoken inside him after the incident with Sanae.

"I'll try to get in to Kisshou University, and if that doesn't work, I'll compromise a little and aim for Harukaze Technical University, I guess. Haru U has a famous baseball club, so that would really be a win-win."

Harukaze Technical University was a technical school with about average admissions standards. Since it was a university with plenty of sports clubs, it was attractive to Koutarou, but it was further away than Kisshou University. In the end, both schools were good options for him. Koutarou has set his sights on the more prestigious Kisshou University, thinking that he would have an easier time getting into Harukaze University if he failed. So like Harumi, it was his first choice right now.

“Satomi-san is going to Kisshou U too...”

“What will you do?”

“I, um... I never really thought about it...”

Yurika honestly revealed her hesitation. She still wasn’t sure how she felt.

“Then take some time to think it over.”

“Yes...”

Yurika looked at the pamphlet once more. She imagined herself walking towards the white building in the picture. She saw herself, Koutarou, and Harumi all walking through the gates together. To her, that would be like a dream come true. After thinking for a while, she eventually turned towards Koutarou.

“Um, Satomi-san, can I ask you something?”

“Yeah.”

“What... do you think I should do? Not just what university, but if I should be trying for university in the first place...”

Yurika still couldn’t make up her mind. She was a coward, and it took courage to head towards a new future. Moreover, this was a future she had given up on once already. Yurika just couldn’t make this decision on her own.

“I think that’s something you decide for yourself.”

Koutarou’s answer was the same he had given Ruth over her arranged marriage. In the end, it was Yurika’s decision. But this time, Koutarou didn’t stop there.

“But I think you would be better off studying at a university than just winging it the rest of your life. And instead of going somewhere far away, I would like you to stay close. That way would be more fun.”

Even if the commotion around room 106 came to an end, Koutarou wanted these happy days to continue. He had never wished for that before. He always felt he shouldn’t get his hopes up. But he now knew other people wished for it, and Yurika very well may be one of them. In that case, shouldn’t he wish for the same thing and let people know he supported them? Koutarou held back his negative thoughts and held up his hopes for Yurika’s future.

“Satomi-san...”

Yurika knew about Koutarou’s past. And she had heard Kiriha’s interpretation of how it had affected him. As a result, Yurika knew what was going on inside his heart.

I want to protect him...

This poor soul that had given up on the future after losing his mother was now desperately reaching for a bright future again. That’s why Yurika wanted to protect that small, fragile hope he had.

And if Satomi-san protects me too...

Yurika could use magic, but she wasn’t all-powerful. No matter how much power she might have, she was still a normal girl at the end of the day. Fighting alone was hard and lonely. But she felt like she could continue trying if she had someone by her side. And above all else, she believed that two people supporting one another was a wonderful thing.

“I... want to go to Kisshou University. Together with Satomi-san and Sakuraba-senpai...”

That’s why Yurika wanted to go to university. She wanted to support and be supported by Koutarou and Harumi. She wanted to laugh and have fun with them as they lived their daily lives together. With the invader girls as well. To Yurika right now, that felt like it would be a wonderful future.

“Because I love Satomi-san, Sakuraba-senpai, and everyone else...”

It was the first time Yurika had ever said anything like that. She wanted to live happily. She loved not just Koutarou, but all of the other girls too. That's why she wanted to be with them forever. It was a declaration of love for all of Yurika's friends—something she had decidedly been lacking a year ago. But after all this time, she had finally found what she really needed to be a magical girl.

"I see... That's good..."

Koutarou smiled and nodded at Yurika. He was happy that was her choice, and a little relieved as well. That meant Yurika wouldn't disappear after they graduated.

"Heehee..."

Yurika's eyes moistened and she gave an embarrassed smile. The person she loved most of all had said that he wanted to be with her. And he was happy when she said she wanted to be with him too. There could be no sweeter feeling. From the bottom of her heart, Yurika was truly happy that she had come here.

"Then come over here, Yurika."

Koutarou put away the pamphlets and beckoned over Yurika.

"O-Okay..."

Yurika blushed, and with her eyes still moist, crawled over towards Koutarou.

I misunderstood before... but this time... it's different, right...?

Koutarou was looking at her with gentle eyes. They both knew they treasured each other. And the time to confirm those feelings directly had come at last. In other words, seal them with a kiss.

If it's Satomi-san... No, I want it to be with Satomi-san... I don't want it to be with anyone else... so it should be all right to kiss here... right?

Yurika's mind was full of thoughts of what was about to happen. But unlike before, she wasn't losing her composure. Since she knew her feelings had reached him, she didn't try to run away.

I... love this person...

Yurika felt like her heart was being squeezed. She was sure of that feeling. She followed her heart, and it led her to Koutarou. She was now right in front of him. All that was left to do was give herself over to these feelings.

“All right, let’s start right away.”

However...

“Huh?”

Koutarou put a pen in Yurika’s hand and set a book down in front of her. And with fire in his eyes, he loudly declared his intentions.

“You only faintly remember your multiplication tables, right? We’ll start from here!”

Koutarou tapped the cover of the book: “Fun Mathematics for Second Graders.” It was a grade school level math workbook. Contrary to Yurika’s expectations, Koutarou was planning on having her study right away now that she had decided to aim for university.

“S-Satomi-san, c-can’t you treasure the moment a little more? Can’t you follow your heart?!”

Yurika had been on cloud nine, but was rudely cast right back down to reality. It was just too much. Tears welled in her eyes as she complained to Koutarou.

“It’s because you keep slacking off like this that you’re in such a pitiful condition to begin with.”

However, Koutarou shook his head with a stern expression.

I’ll set her straight on multiplication by tomorrow, and then during the rest of the week, it’s on to division and fractions. But... it might still be too late. I have so much more I need to drive into her!

Koutarou’s fighting spirit flamed up. He was ready to use any means possible to get Yurika into Kisshou University.

“You’re wrong! You might ordinarily be right, but right now, *I’m* the one who’s right!”

Yurika knew that she had to study. And that she had to start as soon as

possible. But that hardly mattered in the moment. Yurika was dead sure that even if she asked a hundred people, they would all agree with her.

“Quit whining and get to work! I’ll do them with you.”

But Koutarou refused to listen to her. He had already decided that he would get Yurika into Kisshou University. That they would go together. And he was going straight for the shortest route there.

“This is wrong! There is definitely something wrong here!”

“It’s good for you to notice your own mistakes. So let’s get on with it!”

“Eep!”

Yurika finally started moving her pen after Koutarou scolded her.

I might have fallen in love with a completely helpless person... W-Wait, huuuuuh?! Satomi-san is *totally helpless on his own!*

Yurika realized the error of her ways, but it was far too late. The damage was already done.

The Magical Girls' Morning

Saturday, April 24th

The next morning when the invader girls came to room 106 like usual, they discovered Yurika crying and prostrating herself.

"P-Please forgive me already, Satomi-san! I know my multiplication tables, so please don't ask me any more questions! No more!"

"Shut it, Yurika. What's seven times nine?"

"It's sixty three! Please forgive me now! I feel like I'm going to go insane!"

"What's eight times five?"

"I-It's forty... urrrgh..."

Koutarou was sitting up straight and proper across the table from Yurika with a stern expression on his face as he asked her questions from the workbook. Yurika, completely exhausted, was begging him to stop. Coldly ignoring her pleas, he would only ask her more questions. They had been at it since last night.

The atmosphere in the room was bizarre. It was strange, sure, but that wasn't what surprised the other invaders the most.

"Two times seven."

"Fourteen... hnnngh..."

"Yurika has mastered multiplication?! How?!"

"Just what happened after we left?!"

Both Theia and Sanae were well aware of Yurika's grades. She was so bad off that they had genuinely doubted she could even do extremely simple math. But now she was demonstrating fluent mastery of her basic multiplication tables. Sanae and Theia were floored and watched over this phenomenon in

astonishment.

“How did he teach Yurika multiplication in a single night? No, more importantly, just how did it come to this after we left...?”

“It seems like some big misunderstanding happened...”

Shizuka and Ruth were also impressed with her progress, but they were predominantly curious why Koutarou and Yurika were studying in the first place. They had expected Koutarou and Yurika’s relationship to take a step forward so that things could return to normal between them.

“Please help me. Please... Satomi-san won’t... Satomi-san won’t stop with his math drills!”

Yurika clung to Kiriha and begged for help.

“Impossible. Satomi Koutarou is the kind of man that will see something through to the end once he’s set his mind to it.”

However, Kiriha merely shook her head with a thin smile. She could vaguely imagine what had transpired. She believed that because their relationship had progressed, there was now a need for Yurika to study. Going to a university or getting a job, whatever it was, this clearly had something to do with their future and carried a lot of weight with it. And in that case, Kiriha knew Koutarou wouldn’t listen no matter what she said.

“No waaay...”

Yurika cried and slumped her shoulders.

Yurika, you should just realize that this is how Onii-chan expresses his love. What a waste...

The Kii inside of Kiriha began expressing her dissatisfaction. She was frustrated that Yurika was oblivious to Koutarou’s obvious expression of love. She felt Yurika should consider herself lucky and relish the attention she was getting right now.

And so the girls’ impressions of this odd scenario ran the gamut, but neither Koutarou nor Yurika seemed to notice. They were too busy.

“Five times four.”

“Um—”

After an entire night of this, Yurika was exhausted and slightly distracted now that the other invader girls had arrived. Her answers were getting slower and slower.

“It’s twenty! You have to be able to answer one like that off the top of your head.”

Sanae, who had taken up her typical position on Koutarou’s back, answered before Yurika. She’d had plenty of sleep, so coming up with the right answer was a cinch for her.

“You lost to Sanae, Yurika.”

“But I didn’t get it wrong! I didn’t get it wrong!”

“Yurika, another twenty as penalty.”

“Kyaaaaaaaah, nooooooooo!”

She had hoped this nightmare would be over soon, but the end was nowhere in sight. Koutarou was dangling a carrot in front of her that he would never let her have.

“Don’t cry. It’ll be over soon. It’s just twenty more.”

“That’s what you’ve been saying since last night! But no matter how hard I try, it never ends! I don’t wanna do this anymooore!”

Yurika had been shown hope several times, and been given despair just as many times. As a result, her multiplication tables had been ingrained in her like trauma she would never forget.

“S-Sorry, Yurika.”

“So that’s how he’s been teaching her...”

“A living hell method...”

“I told you Satomi Koutarou would stop at nothing once he’s set his mind to something.”

“At this rate, Yurika-sama might be able to multiply two digit numbers in her head by tomorrow...”

While the girls pitied Yurika, they were a little envious that Koutarou was this invested in it.

“Come on, Yurika. Quit spacing out. Here’s the next problem.”

“Please! Make it stop!”

“‘Tarou-kun has six boxes of tennis balls. In each of these boxes are four balls. How many balls are there in total?’”

“Th-There are twenty four... I can’t do this anymore! My head is about to explode!”

“Don’t worry, Yurika. You’re someone who can pull through when you need to.”

“That kind of faith in me feels like an attack right now!”

That was when the alarm clock next to Yurika went off. It was now 9 AM.

“Satomi-san! That’s it! It’s over!”

Yurika picked up the alarm and showed it to Koutarou.

“Time’s up, huh?”

After confirming the time, Koutarou turned off the alarm. Both he and Yurika actually had plans for the day. Koutarou had promised to go with some of his classmates to the amusement park, and Yurika had promised to meet up with Harumi. And they’d both be late if they didn’t leave soon.

“I guess it can’t be helped. Yurika, the study session ends here for now. We’ll continue later.”

“I-I’m saved...”

Hearing those words, the exhausted Yurika collapsed onto the tea table. She had to hurry and get ready, but she remained motionless.

“Oh, and I think you already know this, but make sure you come back before curfew. If you break it...”

There was a dangerous gleam in Koutarou’s eyes.

“Eep!”

With a squeal, Yurika dashed out of the room in the blink of an eye. For being so unathletic, she moved at an incredible speed.

“Say, Koutarou...”

“Hmm?”

“Yurika is a lot like you, you know?”

“What part?”

“The part where she doesn’t do anything for herself. I mean, it’s a bit different in presentation, but...”

“Hmm... That might be true...”

Watching Yurika as she escaped room 106, Koutarou started to think that the both of them might need drastic treatment.

Koutarou reached the station just after 9:45 AM. He was supposed to meet everyone at ten o’clock, so he was plenty early and decided to stroll through a nearby bookstore.

“Oh, there it is.”

Koutarou was looking for some more study materials for Yurika.

Yurika’s scholastic abilities were iffy from the start, seeing as how they’d had to go all the way back to elementary school material. She was especially bad at math, and having such a poor grasp of it had a bad influence on her performance in other subject areas. For example, she couldn’t make salt water at the requested density in science class. In social studies, she couldn’t properly convert yen to dollars. When told to calculate the average time on a 100 meter run in gym class, she was hopeless. And while she was concerned about her weight, she couldn’t even properly calculate how many calories she was eating.

The root of all those problems was her poor math skills. Once he’d determined that much, Koutarou decided to start Yurika’s remedial studying with math lessons. To that end, he was looking for some supplemental material in the bookstore.

“I guess it’s still too early for third grade math, but there’s her pride to think

about... No, results are more important than her pride...”

“What are you doing, Satomi-kun?”

With an assortment of workbooks in his hands, Koutarou looked up and saw Maki coming around the corner. Instead of her school uniform, she was wearing casual clothes that gave off a soft impression. Maki was part of the group of classmates Koutarou was supposed to go to the amusement park with.

“Good morning, Aika-san. I was thinking of making Yurika study a little.”

Koutarou showed Maki the workbooks he’d picked out. Seeing their covers and titles, she put a hand in front of her mouth and giggled a little.

“Yurika-san *is* terrible with her schooling.”

“That’s why we’re starting from the basics.”

“Yurika-san’s reading ability is a little spotty too, you know.”

“Really? What am I going to do with her...?”

Koutarou and Maki flipped through the books together to investigate their contents. They were looking for something that was within Yurika’s reach. And after finding some interesting books, Koutarou made a note of them so he could pick them up on his way home from the amusement park.

Satomi-kun is taking good care of Yurika...

That was what Maki felt as she watched Koutarou. No one would go that far for just a classmate. It was proof that they were best friends, or maybe even something more. And since he was clearly thinking about Yurika rather than Maki, who was right next to him, that made Maki feel a little lonely.

Were these new clothes... for nothing...?

Maki looked down on the outfit she was wearing and let out a small sigh. She was in a brightly colored dress with a lot frills. She also had a large matching ribbon in her hair. Maki had done her best to make herself look as cute as possible. She wanted to show a different side of herself to Koutarou. She at least wanted him to say something. She didn’t mind if that wasn’t a compliment, she just wanted him to acknowledge that she looked different from normal. However, Koutarou was so preoccupied that he wasn’t looking at

her. Maki was unhappy, but it wasn't envy directed at Yurika. It was a special loneliness at feeling like she had no place in Koutarou's heart.

"By the way, Aika-san."

"...Yes?"

Maki had slumped her shoulders and was looking down on the floor, but she looked back up when he said her name. She saw that he had his back to her and his face stuck in yet another workbook. It made her feel even more lonely.

"You've got an awfully cute air about you today. Have you forsaken your underhanded ways with money?"

"Ah..."

Just those words from Koutarou were enough to blow Maki's loneliness away. In its place, yearning for Koutarou filled her heart.

"...Why can't you just say that I look cute, Satomi-kun?"

"Sorry. It seems that's one of my flaws. I've been hearing a lot about it recently. They tell me to quit trying to distance myself from others."



Keeping himself—his heart—removed from other people was the flaw in his personality that the invaders had pointed out to him. And even here on a weekend outing with his classmates, it reared its ugly head. But since he wanted to mend that flaw, Koutarou acknowledge it and honestly apologized.

“Um, so let me try again... You look cute today, Aika-san. That works, right?”

“Satomi-kun...”

An unexpected image appeared in Maki’s mind. She saw a young boy embracing a half-knit sweater. Maki hugged that boy in her mind and smiled at Koutarou.

“You would have gotten full marks if not for the question at the end.”

“You’re so strict, Aika-san.”

Koutarou turned towards Maki and smiled. As he did, a certain image floated into his mind for just a moment, but he was so distracted by Maki’s bright smile that the image vanished before it became clear.

“There has never been a time or place in history that women haven’t been strict.”

“Yeah. You women are always strict, except during the most important times...”

Koutarou and Maki had a good laugh together. Maki was happy just being with Koutarou like this, and Koutarou was smiling at her. There could be nothing better.

However...

“Navy-san, you’ve made a contract with a devil or something, haven’t you?”

Maki recalled what Dark Green had said to her the day before. And in that moment, anxiety began spreading through her.

That’s right. I have to confirm that...

Koutarou turned back around and started looking through books again. Maki pointed her palm towards that back and quietly mumbled something.

“Analyze Magic.”

It was a spell that analyzed the effects of magic. Maki wasn't wearing her magical girl outfit or holding her staff, but she could still use simple spells even in this state. Maki was going to use magic to examine herself and Koutarou.

Green wasn't wrong... There really is a magical contract between us.

Maki wasn't specialized in informational and analysis spells like Green was, so she couldn't detect the magic until she got closer to Koutarou. She'd never noticed it before, but there was indeed a contract between her and Koutarou.

This... really is from that time...

Maki had no recollection of forming a contract with anyone, which meant that the other party, Koutarou, must have done it. And Maki could only think of one time that could have happened.

It was a few months ago during the ski trip. Maki had been seriously injured in the mountains, and Koutarou had magically healed her. But since Koutarou wasn't exactly a magician, he'd relied on the powerful magic of his sword to do it. With a pure white light, it had closed Maki's wound. And as she was bathed in that brilliant light, Maki had had a vision of a young boy. A boy trembling in solitude. She felt a desire to comfort and protect that boy, and she'd told him that she would always be with him.

If that was a contract... everything would make sense...

Something similar happened to Koutarou, and as a result, a contract was formed between them. It was hard to imagine Koutarou forming a contract on purpose since he wasn't very knowledgeable about magic. It was more likely that the sword had created the contract in order to save Maki.

"It's an equal and persistent contract involving a mental connection between the parties... and there's no limit to the mutual assistance. It's almost like they're one and the same. It's quite a bold contract..."

But the contract that Green had mentioned worried Maki.

Do I really love Satomi-kun...?

Maki loved Koutarou. But right now, she couldn't trust in her own feelings. She started doubting herself and wondering if her feelings were only because to

the contract.

Up until now, Maki had always felt like Koutarou could read her mind. In everyday life and in battle. She'd thought it was because they had good compatibility. That was why she had begun developing feelings for Koutarou, thinking that they shared the same sensibilities and could save each other from their loneliness.

But if a contract existed between them, then that might not be the case. Their compatibility and her feelings for Koutarou might just be an illusion created by the contract.

Back on that snowy night, Maki had completely given up on her life and lost her will to live. Even if her wounds were healed, it wasn't certain she would survive in that state. And with the scars Koutarou carried from his tragic past, he probably wouldn't have been able to endure seeing someone die in front of him.

So in order to make sure both of them would live, the sword formed a contract and pushed them to treasure one another. Maki was given hope, the treatment was successful, and Koutarou's heart was spared.

In other words, Maki might have been brainwashed in order to save herself and protect Koutarou.

I would get my answer if I annulled this contract, but...

There was a strong compulsion caused by the contract binding the two. They were tied together forever and urged to help one another. It was possible to annul it by going through the correct procedures. However, the safety and consent of both parties were the conditions for it.

If the contract was annulled, Maki would recover her sensibilities even if she was brainwashed. And by doing that, she would know if her current feelings were her own or if they'd been caused by the influence of the contract.

But if I am being brainwashed... should I really annul the contract? I might end up killing Satomi-kun...

However, Maki hesitated to annul the contract. She was scared that she might become someone else. Worried that she might become Koutarou's enemy

again. That's why she didn't move to annul the contract right away.

If I'm not being brainwashed, then I can annul the contract anytime... Then I'll know how I really feel...

While Maki feared that she was being brainwashed, she wanted to trust in her feelings. She wanted to believe her love was real, rather than a figment of the contract. But with the contract in place, that question would remain. Her feelings would be a constant source of doubt, and that would leave her uneasy. The only solution to that was to annul the contract and confirm it for herself. She knew that's what she needed to do to get her answer.

But...

Maki continued worrying. If she didn't annul the contract, she would never know if her feelings were genuine or not. However, if she did that, she might become Koutarou's enemy again. And once annulled, the contract couldn't be renewed. It wasn't an easy decision.

"Is something the matter, Aika-san?"

Koutarou called out to Maki as she fretted over the situation. He thought it was odd she'd suddenly fallen silent.

"No, it's nothing."

Maki hurriedly smiled and shook her head. As she did, the ribbon on the back of her head swayed back and forth.

"Satomi-kun, it's almost 10 AM. Let's go."

"Hmm? Yeah."

Maki grabbed the sleeve of Koutarou's shirt and led the way, but she kept her head low to keep Koutarou from seeing her face.

I have to return to my usual self before we get out of this store... I have to protect Satomi-kun today...

In the end, though she continued worrying, Maki decided to keep things as they were.

Even if her feelings were a product of a contract, the thought of reverting to

her old self was frightening. If she really was being brainwashed, the risk was too high. To Maki, keeping Koutarou out of harm's way took priority above all else. That's why, as long as the possibility of her being brainwashed remained, she couldn't annul the contract.

I will definitely protect him. From any enemy... even myself...

It was because Maki had lived most of her life in darkness that she didn't want to let go of the warmth she finally had within her reach, even if that was just an illusion.

Sakuraba Harumi had to go to the hospital in the morning for a checkup. Yurika was tagging along with her, and once Harumi was done, they were going to go eat and shop.

"And then Satomi-san hit me."

"Heehee. If Satomi-kun hit you, then you must have really skipped studying for a long time."

"Wuh?! Th-Th-That's..."

"Not true?"

"...No comment."

The two girls were currently talking in the waiting room at the hospital. Harumi's checkup was over, and all that was left was to settle the bill. Because the hospital was busy and because there was a great deal to take into consideration on the bill itself, Harumi had to wait over ten minutes before the bill was ready for her to pay every time she had an appointment. The two girls were using that time to talk, but the topic naturally shifted to Koutarou, their mutual friend.

"Anyways, Satomi-san is the one who's in the wrong. He's fundamentally lacking in love towards me," Yurika said with her cheeks puffed out.

"Nijino-san, the truth is that you don't actually think that at all, right?"

However, with just a single look at Yurika, Harumi had decided that she wasn't telling the truth. She gently smiled as she looked at Yurika's pouting

face.

“That’s not true. Satomi-san is always violent and mean,” she shook her head and insisted.

“That’s a lie. I won’t believe it.”

But even then, Harumi didn’t believe Yurika’s words. She was confident in her belief.

“Th-That’s not true! Why would you think that?”

“Heehee... Because lately you seem so happy whenever you talk about Satomi-san.”

“Whaaat?!”

The moment Harumi pointed that out, Yurika started blushing. Seeing her change in expression, Harumi felt like her suspicions were confirmed “You haven’t noticed yourself? Even now, you sounded really happy when you said that Satomi-kun hit you... Even back when you mentioned your snacks being stolen, you sounded really excited.”

Harumi had noticed that Yurika sounded really happy as of late whenever she spoke about Koutarou. Whenever he came up, Yurika’s eyes lit up even if she seemed unhappy about something.

And during the past few weeks, the change was even more profound. When Yurika spoke of Koutarou now, she had a different air about her. She still seemed happy, but that happiness was tempered by something.

“I feel like I’m watching myself... That’s how I can tell.”

“Auuugh...”

“Do you love Satomi-kun too, Nijino-san?”

Yurika was in love. It didn’t take a lot of time for Harumi to reach that conclusion, particularly because she felt the same way. Yurika had the same look on her face that Harumi did whenever she would fix her hair in front of a mirror before going to her club activities.

“...”

The answer was only obvious, but Yurika couldn't bring herself to say it right away. She was of course embarrassed, but that wasn't the big reason holding her back.

I've... fallen in love with the boy Sakuraba-senpai loves...

When Yurika had learned about Harumi's feelings for Koutarou, she had at first worked to try and get them together. She had consulted with Harumi and given her relationship advice. But as time passed and she learned more about Koutarou, Yurika fell in love with him too. Yurika felt like that was a mistake on her part, and she felt guilty about it now. That's why she couldn't bring herself to admit her feelings to Harumi.

"You don't have to hide it, Nijino-san. I understand how you feel... And while they might not show it, I believe there are many other girls that love Satomi-kun too..."

Harumi had no intention of criticizing Yurika. She thought the idea of giving up on love because someone else cared for the same person was just too sad. She believed that everyone should have a fair chance, regardless of any perceived order. And because she was in love with Satomi Koutarou herself, she completely understood why other people, Yurika included, would fall in love with him.

"Yes..."

Yurika felt so guilty that she couldn't look at Harumi's face, but she finally answered in a quiet voice and nodded her head ever so slightly.

"I see... That's great..."

"Huh? Great...?"

Harumi sounded genuinely happy. Yurika was confused by that and looked up to see what was going on. When she did, she was met with Harumi's gentle smile.

"Nijino-san... Don't you think we're plain compared to many of the girls around Satomi-kun?"

However, what Harumi said wasn't an answer to Yurika's question directly.

Instead, Harumi presented Yurika with a different question. Yurika was somewhat confused, but she answered honestly.

“Um... Yeah, I think so...”

Yurika felt the same way Harumi did.

Theia was a dazzling, strong, and beautiful princess.

Kiriha was far more wise and mature, and left the others in the dust when it came to femininity.

Sanae was honest and carefree. And when it came to cuteness, she wouldn’t lose to anyone.

Ruth was serious and single-minded. Though she didn’t stand out like the other girls, it was her reserved character that made her so trustworthy and dependable.

Then there was Shizuka. Not only was she an expert at martial arts, but she was a hardworking girl who managed Corona House all on her own. Her bright character and talkative personality made her a real ray of sunshine.

Just thinking on it for a moment, Yurika had a clear, vivid image of each of the five girls in her mind. Compared to them, Yurika only stood out for her bad sides. When it came to her good points, she was average at best.

Harumi had a similar problem. She was originally shy and weak to pressure. She had been working on that as of late, but she was still rather introverted. As a result, the deep love and kindness within her rarely ever showed.

As a result, Yurika and Harumi were extremely ordinary girls when it came to their appeal.

“And so... would you like to work together with me to make Satomi-kun turn our way?”

“Huh...?”

This all led up to an unexpected request. Harumi wanted to work together with Yurika to get Koutarou’s attention. It was a surprising proposition, but their teamwork might give them an advantage.

I see. That's why she said it was great...

That was when Yurika finally understood what Harumi had meant. Harumi knew that she was someone who didn't stand out on her own and that she needed to do something about that. But then she'd learned of Yurika's feelings. That was why she felt relieved, and subsequently had asked for Yurika's cooperation.

"And if the two of us work together, I think we can... How do I say this? Support the part of Satomi-kun that's lonely inside."

That might have been what was really important to Harumi. There was something she had always wondered about, and that was why a boy like Koutarou had joined the knitting society. Harumi had been thinking about it all year. And recently, she had reached a certain conclusion on the matter.

During their club activities, Koutarou was eager to pick up techniques for knitting sweaters. In fact, sweaters was the first thing he asked about when he joined the club. She didn't know why, but it seemed like knitting a sweater was important to him.

Moreover, as they would sit and knit together after school, Harumi would sometimes see a far off, lonely expression on Koutarou's face. He did his best to hide it, so Harumi hadn't noticed until about half a year after he joined the society. But since then, whenever Harumi saw that face, she felt deep down like she needed to do something for him.

Harumi began thinking that Koutarou's obsession with knitting sweaters had something to do with that loneliness. If they were related, then Harumi would need help. She believed she couldn't heal his heart on her own.

"I think Satomi-kun has some sad memories involving a sweater somehow. That's why he's so earnestly learning knitting even though he's a boy. I can teach him how to knit, but my body is frail and I'll be graduating at the end of the school year. So I can't heal his loneliness by myself. That's why I want you to help me, Nijino-san."

"Sakuraba-senpai... you..."

Yurika truly believed that Harumi was amazing. Yurika knew of Koutarou's

past thanks to Kiriha, including that the half-knit sweater he had was a memento of his late mother. But even knowing all that, she hadn't realized what she could do to help Koutarou. But here was Harumi who had no clue about Koutarou's past, but had found a way to help him. Kiriha and the others had said that Yurika was closest to Koutarou, but in fact, the closest one of all was Harumi.

Satomi-san joined the knitting society because he wanted to finish his mother's half-knit sweater. He probably wants to do that to get his own feelings in order... That's why Satomi-san won't be able to fully trust in others before it's complete... In that case, even if we continue to get closer to Satomi-san, we'll eventually hit another wall! This must be the piece of the puzzle we were missing!

In that moment, Yurika was the first of the girls around Koutarou to fully realize a way to mend Koutarou's wounded heart. They would each need to give Koutarou their warmth in their own way as he endeavored to complete his mother's unfinished sweater with his own hands. As Harumi suggested, it would take both to save him. He would only fully heal once he had both.

I can save him... No, if we all combine our powers, we can save Satomi-san!

Up until now, Yurika had felt like Koutarou was the one who'd saved her. This was her chance to return the favor. And that conviction filled Yurika with a powerful sense of joy. Yurika was grateful. She might not have ever reached this conclusion if it weren't for all the other girls around Koutarou.

"I understand, Sakuraba-senpai! Let's start with the two of us!"

Yurika decided to start out with her and Harumi. She would eventually need to explain the situation to all the girls of room 106, but Yurika felt like Harumi, who had been the one to uncover the key to it all, deserved to get a head start. Harumi also had the handicap of not being involved with room 106.

"Thank you, Nijino-san!"

Nothing was as reassuring as having her best friend support her. On top of that, she would be helping the boy she loved. She was so happy that she was beaming like a small child.

“For the time being, I will join the knitting society too! With that, we can maintain the minimum amount of members and preserve the society for next year!”

According to school regulations, clubs required a minimum of four people, and societies a minimum of two. Since the knitting society hadn’t had any luck recruiting, it would be shut down if no one else joined before April of next year. And if Koutarou’s sweater wasn’t completed before then, things might get dicey. So in order to avoid that, Yurika decided to join the knitting society.

“Heehee... That’s quite crafty of you, Nijino-san, but it would be a big help.”

“But, but... won’t I get in the way?”

Yurika had been keeping her distance from the knitting society in order to not get in between Koutarou and Harumi. And from that viewpoint, she was worried joining the club would be a bad thing.

“Not at all. I think helping Satomi-kun is more important than my feelings. Besides, Nijino-san, we decided that we would work together, right?”

While Harumi was hesitant about other people joining the knitting society and interfering in her alone time with Koutarou, Yurika was different. If it was just Yurika, things would continue relatively unchanged. If anything, with Yurika there, Harumi might even be able to summon her courage and get a little bolder.

“All right!”

Relieved, Yurika’s eyes started sparkling. She was happy that she could be of help without getting in Harumi’s way. In fact, she welcomed the situation. Harumi was helping to make up for Yurika’s overwhelming faults.

“With you around, I think we can have club activities even when I’m at the hospital. I’m counting on you, Nijino-san.”

“Yours truly, Nijino Yurika, will do her best!”

Harumi and Yurika smiled and continued chatting away about friendship and love. In that moment, they were enjoying their lives together to the fullest.

“Oh, you two sound like you’re having fun.”

That was when someone called out to the two girls. Looking in the direction of the voice, they saw a woman wearing an elegant suit.

“Kanae-san!”

“It’s nice to see you, Higashihongan-san.”

“What a coincidence. May I join you?”

The woman who approached was Higashihongan Kanae, someone close to both Yurika and Harumi.

Darkness Rainbow

Saturday, April 24th

Harumi and Kanae first met each other a few years ago when Harumi was admitted to the hospital. Back then, Sanae's condition wasn't as severe, so Harumi and Sanae were put in a room together. So Harumi knew Sanae too, although it was Sanae-san and not the Sanae-chan that the others knew. After being released, Harumi would still come by every so often to visit Sanae. During those visits, she also ran into Kanae from time to time.

Kanae was currently at the hospital to pick up a few personal belongings Sanae had left behind. On her way out, she'd just happened to spot Harumi and Yurika in the waiting room.

Having finished their business, the three ladies left the hospital and decided to have lunch at a family restaurant. They were done eating and now just casually chatting after their meal.

"Hmm, so the two of you will be gunning for the same boy together... Girls nowadays sure are bold."

Kanae swirled her glass of iced coffee around while smiling elegantly.

"Gunning for...?"

Kanae's choice of words made Harumi blush. Still in her teens, Harumi didn't have the same level of confidence or frankness an older woman like Kanae did in these matters.

"Am I wrong?"

Kanae gave Harumi a teasing glance. She was enjoying seeing Harumi's innocently blushing face.

"I don't think you're wrong, but... I feel like the nuance has changed..."

“Heh, no, it hasn’t changed... But I’m a little jealous. Friendship and love, huh? It’s been a while since I got to talk about this stuff...”

Kanae took a nostalgic dive into her memories and smiled warmly. She imagined herself in her teens and dreamed of going back to that time.

“How long? Like thirty years?”

But Kanae only got to indulge in that fantasy for a few short, sweet seconds before Yurika’s oblivious and ruthless comment dragged her back to reality.

“Yurika-chan, are you trying to pick a fight with me?”

Kanae was still smiling, but her eyes were twitching.

“N-Not at all!”

Yurika frantically shook her head.

I’ve done it! I’ve done it again!

Yurika knew that having a rich enemy was bad. And she was also scared of the punishment she’d get from Koutarou. She continued shaking her head as fast as she could and apologizing.

“She may not have, but I sure did, Kanae.”

Suddenly a new voice joined their conversation. It belonged to a woman in her late twenties or so wearing an indigo suit. The moment they saw this woman, both Kanae and Yurika’s expressions froze up.

“Long time no see, Kanae.”

“Maya?! Why are you...?!”

“This person is using magic... which means, Darkness Rainbow?!”

“Nice to meet you, Rainbow Yurika. I hear you’re always taking care of Maki. I’m her master, Maya.”

The woman that had appeared in front of Yurika and the others was none other than Darkness Rainbow’s Maya.

Nana and Kanae had defeated Maya years ago. The injuries she’d sustained in

their fight were severe and she was put out of commission. That was when her disciple, Maki, had taken up the name of Dark Navy.

“Maya... what is that body...?”

“You’ll find out soon. Very soon.”

However, Maya didn’t seem to be any worse for wear now. She looked like she was in perfect health to Kanae. In fact, she even looked younger than the last time Kanae saw her. It was almost as if she’d aged in reversed. Maya’s physical condition surprised Kanae more than her sudden appearance.

“Nijino-san, what’s going on? Who is that person? Why are we here?”

Harumi was even more confused than Kanae was. After Maya had appeared in the restaurant, the group had moved to an abandoned building nearby. Harsh words and dirty looks were being exchanged on both sides. And all Harumi knew was that she’d been dragged into something dangerous.

“Sakuraba-senpai, it’s dangerous, so please stay back.”

“Dangerous...?”

“This is going to turn into a fight. That woman is my and Kanae-san’s enemy.”

“Enemy?!”

Harumi wanted to believe that Yurika was joking. That she was only pretending that this was a scene out of her favorite anime. But something was clearly wrong. The atmosphere was far too tense for this to be a joke. Moreover, Yurika’s tone and expression were extremely serious. Harumi had never seen her look like that, not even during the plays.

Enemy...? This woman is Nijino-san and Kanae-san’s enemy...?

Harumi looked at Maya. Even she could feel the ominous presence coming from her, but all of this still didn’t feel real. What Harumi’s gut was telling her and what her common sense was telling her couldn’t have been more at odds. It only confused her further.

“I’ll explain the details later. Please just do as I say for now, Sakuraba-senpai.”

“O-Okay, I understand...”

Harumi did as Yurika asked and backed off from the group. She didn't understand a thing, but she had no reason to doubt Yurika. And after confirming that Harumi was a safe distance away, Yurika approached Kanae. Meanwhile, Kanae and Maya's discussion continued.

"Maya, let Sakuraba-san go. She has nothing to do with this."

"Heh, I can't do that. I have my reasons, you know."

Maya refused Kanae's request with a confident smirk.

On the surface, she's just a weak girl. But there's that second personality insider her that holds vast amounts of power. There's no way I would just let her go knowing that, is there?

Maya had gotten a report about it from Maki, so she knew of the power hidden within Harumi. And based on Maya's objective, there was no way that she would let Harumi go free now.

"Won't you reconsider? Sakuraba-senpai is just a normal person."

Yurika took her place next to Kanae and made her case for Harumi's release as well. Yurika didn't know anything about Harumi's power. She'd been unconscious when she revealed it for the first time. So, thinking that she was just a normal girl, Yurika wanted to keep her out of harm's way.

"Not a chance. I don't care who she is."

But even then, Maya wouldn't let Harumi go. Maya flashed a fearless grin as she tore off the clothes she was wearing to reveal a magical girl outfit underneath that was familiar to Kanae. But that familiarity ended there.

"Mode Change: Combat Mode! Aura amplification rate to 1.5!"

"Ready. Combat Mode with aura amplification rate at 1.5 activated."

On Maya's command, her wrists being emitting an indigo glow as if she were wearing bracelets of light. The lines resembling tattoos on her arms also began glowing with the same light and opened up a little. Complex looking machinery could be seen through the gaps. Most of Maya's body now consisted of such machinery.

"Maya?! What is that body?!"

Seeing that parts of her body were now artificial, Kanae understood how she'd made such a dramatic recovery. But she couldn't imagine that something like that could be done with modern science. It was a very shocking sight to Kanae.

"Are you jealous? I found a wonderful aesthetician. Aren't I beautiful now?"

"A cyborg?! Kanae-san, get away! That's dangerous!"

Yurika shouted out a warning to Kanae, who was standing stock still. Kanae followed Yurika's advice and put some distance between herself and Maya. Thanks to her repertoire of manga and anime, Yurika had a much easier time processing the potential dangers of something so farfetched.

"Good guess! As expected from Nana's disciple, I suppose!"

Maya grinned as she continued to transform. Various mechanisms popped out from the gaps that had formed in her body. Things such as exhaust tubes, armor, and weapons. Maya had traded in her beautiful human form to become a brutal combat machine.

"Come, Angel Halo! Encyclopedia!"

In response, Yurika called for her staffs. Her intuition told her that she would have no chance of winning if she didn't reveal her identity to Harumi and go all out with her magic.

After transforming, the first thing Yurika did was give Kanae a weapon and then create a ward.

"Armed! Encyclopedia!"

One of the two staffs in Yurika's hands transformed into a bow, which she then threw to Kanae.

"Please use that, Kanae-san!"

"Thank you!"

Kanae easily caught the bow midair and swiftly readied herself. As she did, the bow readjusted itself to perfectly suit Kanae.

It works the same way as with Nana-chan... I can fight with this!

Kanae then drew the string and an arrow appeared out of nowhere. Kanae held her breath as she recalled her technique from her previous battles and pointed the bow at Maya.

“Sanctuary! Modifier: Effective Area, Colossal!”

Yurika then finished casting her ward spell. With that, there was no need to worry about their fight being witnessed by anyone outside the building.

“Are the two of you ready yet?”

She’d already finished her own preparations for battle, so Maya waited for Yurika and Kanae to do the same. Part of that was because she wanted to wait for the ward to be put up, but the biggest reason for it was because she had absolute confidence in her own power. She was convinced that there was no way she would lose to Kanae, who was growing weary from age, and Nana’s still immature disciple.

“That confidence of yours will be fatal.”

“That’s might be true... if your partner had been Nana.”

She had been defeated by Nana because she was overconfident in her power previously. Maya was reasonable enough that she could honestly accept that now.

“But you two are not as strong as the past Kanae and Nana. And besides...”

Maya took a stance. As she did, a sound similar to a switch being pressed could be heard from several places on her body. It would serve as the starting pistol for this fight. It was the sound of the safety devices on Maya’s weapons being released.

“I’m far stronger than I was before!”

Maya kicked off the ground and instantaneously disappeared from Yurika’s sight.

“She’s fast!”

“Above you, Yurika-chan!”

Yurika had lost track of Maya, but Kanae had excellent kinetic vision. She released an arrow as she called out a warning Yurika.

“You’re looking a little rough around the edges, Kanae!”

Maya kicked off the ceiling of the building and changed direction in the air. As a result, Kanae’s arrow missed her and flew off in the distance.

“Would you like me to introduce you to a good salon?!”

Maya used the momentum from kicking off the ceiling to charge towards Kanae at a fierce speed. Maya wound her arm back, her hand transforming to bring out a blade.

“I think I’ll pass!”

But Kanae wasn’t just going to stand there and let herself be done in so easily. She held the bow with both hands and swung it like a golf club.

“I still have my youth, after all!”

“My, that’s too bad!”

Maya’s right hand and Kanae’s bow collided. If Kanae’s weapon had been a normal bow, it probably would have snapped in half on impact. But since it had the strength of Encyclopedia, it withstood the blow.

“Maybe you just need to lose a little weight!”

Still in bow form, Encyclopedia unleashed a spell. It read Kanae’s wish to blow Maya back and activated a shockwave spell.

“I’ll pass that along to the people who made my new body!”

But even the close range shockwave didn’t rattle Maya. She made no attempt to dodge, and instead pointed her left arm towards Kanae. The next moment, the shockwave crashed into the parts of Maya’s body covered in armor and dispersed. She responded by firing the gun protruding from her left arm.

What Maya fired wasn’t normal bullets, however, but bullets of indigo light. It was a type of energy weapon where the energy was discharged directly from Maya’s body.

“Oh no!”

Kanae hurriedly took evasive actions, but she was too close to dodge all of the discharged bullets. At this rate, she would definitely be hit.

“Quick Cast Force Field!”

But just before the bullets collided with Kanae, a yellow barrier of light appeared in their way. Yurika’s shield deflected the majority of the bullets, but it was unable to withstand the entire barrage. The last of the bullet hail broke through the barrier and continued flying towards Kanae.

However, thanks to Yurika buying her a few seconds, Kanae barely managed to jump out of the way of the remaining bullets. One grazed her cheek and one sheered a few strands of hair, but she was otherwise unharmed.

“Oh... You’re working harder than I expected.”

Getting some distance, Maya seemed a little impressed with Kanae and Yurika, but her confidence remained the same.

“Please be careful, Kanae-san.”

“...Thank you, Yurika-chan.”

Yurika stepped forward to keep Maya in check. Meanwhile, Kanae got up and readied her bow again. As she did, the weapon changed shape according to Kanae’s will.

Even if it’s a little hard to draw, if I don’t have enough power, I won’t be able to hit her at that speed...

Maya was moving far faster than Kanae remembered. Maya was good at magically enhancing her physical abilities in combat, but this far outclassed what she’d been able to do with magic.

“I wonder what this is... I don’t know what’s going on with her body and her weapons...”

Yurika held her staff at the ready and took a good look at Maya.

Despite it not being her real body, she can move so fluidly... And she can move at that speed without using any magic. Her defense is very impressive, too. And that weapon just now is strange... Not even a machine gun can break through a force field that easily. It probably isn’t magic, but it has some other properties...

Overwhelming speed, powerful attacks, and solid defenses. Yurika could only think of one person with that kind of strength.

“If I don’t treat this like I’m fighting against Satomi-san, I’ll be killed!”

Maya reminded Yurika of Koutarou. He had Sanae’s psychic powers, Kiriha’s gauntlet, and the haniwas— Once Yurika reached that point in her thought process, she had an epiphany.

“I see! The underground dwellers made your body, didn’t they, Maya-san?!”

Yurika remembered the remains of the altar that Kanae had shown her the other day. It was a broken spiritual energy device. If Maya had connections to the underground dwellers back then, chances were high she still did now. Their technology would explain Maya’s smooth movements and extraordinary speed.

“Hmm... I guess you’re not as stupid as you look, just like Maki said...”

Maya’s smile disappeared as several new weapons took from on her body.

“Pity, though. Now you all have to die.”

Maya wanted to keep her connection to the underground dwellers a secret. But now that Yurika knew the truth, Maya had to eliminate her in order to protect her relationship with them. Maya’s goal before now had only been to buy time, but this made things serious. Playtime was over.

“Kanae-san, I’ll enhance your strength with magic! I’ll leave the attacking to you!”

“Okay! I’ll count on you to back me up!”

“All right!”

Kanae dashed forward with her bow at the ready. Yurika wouldn’t be able to lock on to Maya, so she left the attacking to Kanae.

“Quick Double Cast: Lightning Reflexes, Mighty Power!”

Yurika cast two spells: one to make it easier for Kanae to keep up with Maya, and one to make it easier for her to wield her bow. She wanted to do more, but since Maya was already making her move, two spells was the most Yurika could manage right now even when cast quickly.

“How about this?!”

Kanae sent one arrow after another flying at Maya. She could clearly see Maya now and had a much easier time drawing her bowstring thanks to Yurika’s magic. The arrows she let loose charged straight through the air towards Maya.

“Good, Kanae! It’s like you’re getting back to your old self!”

“Automatic interception system activated. Beginning interception.”

However, Maya wasn’t without her own plans. Two antennas thrust up from her body and started firing powerful lightning bolts. Though they didn’t directly hit the arrows, the electromagnetism they generated was enough to affect the metallic tips of Kanae’s arrows and pull them off course. Not a single one hit Maya.

“But you’re still not there yet! You really have gotten old, Kanae!”

“It’s not over yet!”

In that moment, the bow in Kanae’s hand greatly changed shape. As it returned to its original staff form, Kanae swung it. Kanae was skilled with both bows and naginatas, and she was going to fight Maya using the staff as a makeshift naginata.

“I see! So you have more weapons than before too!”

In response, Maya fired the gun on her left arm while charging in.

“Protection from Soul Energy!”

But this time, the bullets were completely blocked by Yurika’s defensive spell. Knowing that she was going up against the technology of the underground dwellers, she realized that protection from spiritual energy would be more effective than protection from physical attacks.

“Haaaaaaaa!”

“Raaaaaaaa!”

Maya and Kanae clashed, the blade in Maya’s right hand meeting Kanae’s staff. Kanae’s staff was made out of wood, but thanks to the mana inside, it was harder than steel. As a result, it successfully held off Maya’s blade. But the blow

was heavy, and so was Maya's body thanks to all the machinery in her. Moreover, her speed was superhuman. Because of that, Kanae couldn't hold her own despite being strengthened by Yurika's magic.

"I've got you now, Kanae!"

The momentum from the blow sent Kanae up into the air, and Maya unleashed a kick with her long legs. A blade had appeared on her foot, just like the one on her hand. Maya was planning on finishing off Kanae with this attack.

"Quick Cast Push!"

"Kyah!"

But before Maya's leg could reach, Kanae was blown away by Yurika's spell. Thanks to that, Maya's kick only caught air.

"Staff, please!"

Kanae then used the Encyclopedia's magic to make a soft landing. But despite having survived the immediate crisis, Kanae's expression was severe.

She's strong... and her attack pattern is completely different from the past... If I let my guard down for even a moment, I'll be killed!

The staff transformed into a bow once more. Kanae wanted to wipe the sweat off her forehead, but she didn't have time for even that.

The battle continued in Maya's favor. She could attack in any way she pleased thanks to her many weapons, which kept Yurika and Kanae on the defensive despite having Maya outnumbered. Harumi knew next to nothing about fighting, but even she could tell that Yurika and Kanae were being driven into a corner.

"What is going on...? Just who are Nijino-san and Higashihongan-san...?"

Harumi was overwhelmed by the spectacle taking place right before her eyes. A battle had suddenly broken out, and she had no idea why. She was confused by the woman with the mechanical body, and by Kanae who fought against her like it was natural. But what confused her the most was Yurika's appearance.

"It's like she's a real magical girl... Wasn't that supposed to be cosplay...?"

As Yurika fought, she looked just like the magical girls Harumi had seen in anime. She was summoning light and fire that stopped bullets and scorched the air. It was clear it wasn't any kind of special effects, either. This was very real. Real, but nearly unbelievable. Harumi had to wonder if she was dreaming. It was just that fantastical.

"Huh...?"

A strange feeling surfaced in Harumi's mind. It was a sense of deja vu.

Haven't I seen something like this before...?

A faint memory flashed through her head. She saw Yurika fighting against a girl in an indigo outfit. It was hazy and that was all she could remember, but she felt like she'd seen it somewhere before.

What is this...? I feel like I'm forgetting something important...

Harumi began focusing, trying to scan back through her memories and find what she had forgotten.

It wasn't this year. It was probably after the first play... I talked to Nijino-san and Satomi-kun, and then all of us went out to play with Matsudaira-san... No... Was it a little before that?

Based on the feelings she was getting, what she could remember of what she was wearing and what she'd seen of her surroundings, Harumi had a vague idea of when it had taken place. Going off of that, she dug deeper and slowly began to uncover the answer.

That's right... Back then, this woman... No, it wasn't her, but a different girl in a similar outfit... She kidnapped me and I couldn't move...

Something was glowing on Harumi's forehead, and it grew brighter the harder she thought about her past. That bright white glow turned into a torrent of mana that was trying to break the spell that had sealed Harumi's memories.

And then...

Harumi could remember a large fireball. As she recalled the image in her mind, one appeared before her in reality too.

"I don't know what you're planning, but let's put a quick end to it!"

Maya summoned a fireball just like Maki had in Harumi's memories. Maya sensed the mana that Harumi was releasing and made the first move to keep Harumi from interrupting her fight with Yurika and Kanae.

"Run away, Sakuraba-senpai!"

Yurika shouted to her friend. The situation was frighteningly similar to last time, but this time around, Yurika had just cast a spell and couldn't do anything to protect Harumi in that downtime. And since the attack coming at her wasn't magic this time, Maya was far faster with her fire than Maki had been conjuring her spell. Worse yet, Kanae was too far away to try and stop Maya's attack. It looked like Harumi's life was in danger.

"Goodbye, young lady!"

In the end, Yurika's warning hadn't reached her in time. Harumi wasn't a magician, and she had no combat training. And as a normal girl, all she could do was stand there and stare blankly as imminent doom came for her.

"Sakuraba-senpaaaaaiiiii!"

And then I was swallowed by crimson flames...

Darkness Rainbow wasn't just after Yurika. Dark Green and Dark Crimson were planning on attacking room 106 of Corona House. Darkness Rainbow's main goal was to seize the mana concentrated there. Maya's attack on Yurika was just a diversion to stall for time. The apartment was what they were really after.

"Are you ready, Green?"

"Yes. My forecasts are all prepared. And do watch out for a girl with blonde hair that uses the keyword 'Blue Knight.' I can see a multitude of different attacks stemming from that. And one more warning..."

"What?"

"Don't enjoy your battle with the girl wearing an apron too much. I can see several futures where you get the rug pulled out from under you if you get too into it."

“Okay, okay. You know, despite your calm looks, you’re pretty offhandedly harsh...”

After invading the Corona House grounds, Crimson and Green dismissed the spells they were using to conceal themselves. They had already put up a ward to keep people away, so there was no need to worry about being spotted now.

“Crimson, quickly take a step to your right.”

“Okay, okay. You’re so demanding...”

Both girls took a single step to the right, and then it all began.



Two beams of light appeared just where they had been standing. The lights carved large holes into the ground, and the shockwave created from the superheated air blasted the two girls.

“Kyaaaaah! What’s going on?!”

“It’s the enemy attacking. They noticed our approach when we put up the ward.”

Having predicted all this, Green was only a little shaken by the overhead laser attack. Crimson, however, was caught completely unaware and lost her balance. She hurriedly regained her equilibrium and voiced a complaint to Green.

“Let me know important things like that sooner!”

“It’s okay. We’ll be using a mental link from now on.”

As Green activated a new spell, the people that had attacked revealed themselves. There were five girls around the same age as Green and Crimson.

“Oh? To think you would dodge that... How interesting.”

“Your Highness, this is strange. According to the observed data, these two took evasive action just before the weapon was fired.”

“But it doesn’t seem like they read our auras or anything.”

“Then did they wiretap us? How rude. I’ll have to call the operator...”

“If they wiretapped us, they probably would have moved sooner. It seems like this is something different.”

Theia, Ruth, Sanae, Shizuka, and Kiriha, the five present girls from Corona House, stood in Crimson and Green’s way. They were ready for a fight.

“But should we really have attacked with no warning?”

“That’s not a problem. These two couldn’t be anything but enemies in this situation.”

Sanae was worried about just opening fire, but Theia had thought this through. There had been signs of an enemy invasion beforehand.

First, all communication between Koutarou's bracelet and Blue Knight except gravitational signals had been suddenly cut off. Finding that strange, Ruth investigated the situation and found that communications methods with Koutarou had been cut off too. They couldn't reach Yurika, either. Upon investigating further, it seemed communication to and from Corona House had been jammed. And shortly thereafter, two girls had snuck onto the property. It was all circumstantial evidence, but Theia made the call that they weren't friendly and used Blue Knight to attack without hesitation.

"I like that you take swift action."

Crimson smiled. A fire had started burning in her eyes. She was excited to fight against powerful opponents.

"But of course. That's part of the basics of battle. Making a preemptive strike with overwhelming force. Getting noticed was your fault for carelessly approaching after such an imperfect diversion... How ungraceful."

Theia smiled elegantly and covered her mouth with an even more elegant folding fan. Enraged by Theia's behavior, Crimson readied her staff and roared.

"I'll turn you into cinders right now! I'll make you regret talking down to me!"

Crimson knew good and well they'd made a mistake. She was also embarrassed over looking like a fool during the bombardment. So Theia taunting her now only made her blood boil.

"Calm down, Crimson."

"But..."

"I understand how you feel, but don't fall for their provocation. That girl is very calculating."

"Ugh... F-Fine..."

But with Dark Green's calm words, Crimson barely managed to hold herself back. Seeing that, Theia closed her fan and forsook her taunting smile.

"I see... so that's the kind of dynamic you two have..."

Like Green said, everything Theia said was to try and incite them. She was no longer the type of person who would aggravate others for no reason. Skilled in

battle, Theia was trying to extract info from Crimson by provoking her.

They're unknowns, but I'm starting to figure things out... They're definitely the one responsible for the diversion. The green one is in charge of information, and the red one can use high-energy attacks. The calm girl in green is keeping the reckless girl in red under control. Based on their relationship, the green one is the leader. And then there's that staff that the red one was going to attack with... Surely that can't be a magical staff, can it?

The brief exchange had been enough for Theia to discern quite a bit. And upon analyzing what she knew, Theia reached a certain conclusion. To confirm it, she turned to Kiriha standing next to her.

"Kiriha, what do you think?"

"I believe we've come to the same conclusion, Theia-dono. Sadly, I can't think of anything else."

"I see... So they really are..."

Theia gritted her teeth. If Theia and Kiriha were right, the two girls in front of them wouldn't be easy to defeat.

"What do you mean, Theia-chan?" Shizuka asked, unsure of what they were talking about.

"Those two are magicians."

"Whaaat?!"

"You're kidding!"

Shizuka and Sanae's eyes opened wide in surprise. Even Ruth looked startled.

"Your Highness, are you sure?!"

"You might think that I'm being cute, but I am almost completely certain. They're like Yurika... in a good way."

Like Yurika in a good way. She meant that they had the same kind of power Yurika used when she saved Sanae from her crisis. It meant that they could use magic. In other words...

"Our enemies are magical girls. If you take them lightly and treat them like

cosplayers, you're in for a world of hurt."

It meant that they were troublesome enemies that could be incredibly flexible in a fight.

Theia had surmised they were magical girls when she saw their staffs and how they behaved. Their staffs looked different, but the interference in Corona House currently very closely resembled the ward spell that Yurika could put up using Encyclopedia. On top of that, the invisibility they had used to approach was incredibly advanced and had allowed them to slip past all of the optical sensors that Theia and Ruth had set up. It was hard to believe all that possible with Earth's technology.

Koutarou had brought Yurika's magical staff in from another world, but it worked here without any problems. That meant that the laws of physics allowed for the existence of magic. In that case, it wasn't all that farfetched to think there were other magicians here.

So in short, these two girls either had be magicians or have science advanced enough to deceive Forthorthian technology. Either way, it was clear that they were dangerous. Between the two options, Theia had to play it safe and assume the worst—that they were magicians. Based on what they'd seen from Yurika, magic was flexible and had a multitude of uses, whereas technology—however advanced it might be—had a more limited range of application in battle.

"That's right. And you will all be defeated by our magic."

With a confident smile, Crimson readied her staff in both hands. As she did, the crimson outfit she was wearing began to emit a faint red glow, making it look like she was on fire.

"But it's nothing personal... Green, are you ready?"

"Yes. The first attack will come in 33 seconds."

Green silently nodded, but her voice still reached Crimson. That was thanks to her telepathy spell.

"What kind of attack?"

“The girl in the apron will lead the charge.”

When Green readied her staff, several lights appeared in the air around her. They displayed characters and images, and looked very similar to the holograms Clan could produce with her bracelet.

“An enemy that can do what Yurika-chan did back then, huh? Let me handle this up front. You guys watch my back, okay?”

“Shizuka, I’ll help too!”

“We’re counting on you, Shizuka, Sanae. Blue Knight, activate automatic weapon selection. Begin with the anti-personnel laser.”

“As you wish, my princess.”

“Karama, Korama. Change the settings on the spiritual energy field. Raise the resistance towards elemental attacks as much as you can. I will permit the use of spiritual energy weapons. Release your limiters. Go as far as you need to, even if it means breaking.”

“Understood, ho!”

“Leave it to us, ho!”

“We’re going up against enemies we know nothing about! Everyone, please don’t push yourselves too much until I can gather the necessary data!”

Shizuka was the vanguard with Sanae backing her up with her psychic powers. Theia would be shooting from a distance to make the best use of her firepower. Kiriha took charge of defenses, using her high-mobility haniwas to cover everyone. And Ruth stayed in the back to gather and analyze data.

I just hope this is good enough...

It was the best possible formation in their current situation, but even then Kiriha felt like it was lacking. Based on her own experiences with Encyclopedia, Kiriha knew just how flexible magic was.

“Are you just about ready yet?”

“Don’t play around too much, Crimson...”

And as if to confirm Kiriha’s fears, Crimson and Green were still confident

even in the face of five opponents. They had no doubt that they would win.

The invader girls made the first move.

“Here I go!”

With her exceptional physical strength and speed, Shizuka’s ponytail, apron, and skirt whipped around wildly as she charged the enemy’s front line: Crimson.

“Shizuka, I can’t strengthen your body as much as Koutarou’s, so don’t get overconfident!”

“Got it! Thanks, Sanae-chan!”

After Sanae’s words of caution, Shizuka kicked off the ground and jumped up. With her body strengthened by Sanae’s spiritual energy, she shot through the air like a bullet. Shizuka then lightly rotated midair and thrust out her right leg. She flew towards Crimson, trying to hit her with a jump kick.

“Child’s play!”

“That kick is just a diversion. The real attack is a ranged attack afterwards. Counterattack after you dodge.”

“Got it!”

As Shizuka’s kick approached, Crimson moved strangely. She stepped aside and then forward, as if to move around Shizuka. Not a moment later, a laser passed through the area where she had just been standing. It was fired from a weapon that Theia had summoned.

“It’s not over yet! Sanae-chan God Arrow— Wait, what?!”

Sanae was about to attack after Theia’s laser missed, but suddenly there were several Crimsons in front of her. Surprised by that, Sanae hesitated in her attack.

“Crimson, there are no incoming attacks in your current position.”

“Well then let’s start the counterattack!”

A dozen or so Crimsons then readied their staffs all at the same time.

“Oh no!”

Shizuka's flying kick had missed and she was still in the air trying to come down for a landing. Seeing the incoming attack, however, she crossed her arms in front of her face and chest and curled up as best she could to brace herself. She knew that she was the target thanks to Sanae's spiritual power that allowed her to see people's intentions to attack.

"Sanae, they're just holograms! Attack them!"

"Okay!"

Sanae fired an arrow from her bow made out of spiritual energy. That arrow too was made out of spiritual energy, and it split into more than ten smaller arrows as it sailed to assault the crowd of Crimsons.

"They're all fakes?!"

Each Crimson Sanae's arrows hit disappeared into thin air. As Theia had said, they were all illusions created by Green. And there were so many of them that Sanae hadn't been able to hit them all. The real Crimson was still hiding among them.

"Infernal Fire! Modifier: High Concentration!"

There were three Crimsons left. And all three of them made the exact same movements, each producing a large burning ball of red flame. The massive fireballs then contracted and shrank down to the size of tennis balls. That increased the intensity of the heat, and all three of them shone like miniature suns.

"Take this!"

All three came at Shizuka at once.

"K-Kyah!"

Shizuka didn't know which one was real. Moreover, she had just landed and couldn't move away in time. All she could do was let out a scream.

"Karama, Korama!"

"Leave it to us, ho!"

"Don't worry, Shizuka-chan! Ho!"

Just before the fireballs were about to strike Shizuka, Karama and Korama appeared in front of her. They then pointed their arms forwards and emitted a yellow light between them. That light turned into a large membrane that enveloped Shizuka and the haniwas.

The moment the fireballs crashed into the haniwas' light shield, there was a large explosion. The shockwave from it was so severe that it shook all of Corona house. It looked like Shizuka and the haniwas were completely consumed in flames.

"Hack, ack, urgh..."

"Shizuka-chan, fall back right away, ho!"

"I know, but... ack..."

"This way, ho!"

Fortunately, Shizuka and the haniwas emerged from the flames when they died down. Shizuka was having a coughing fit, so the two haniwas tugged on her hands to lead her back to Theia. Both Shizuka and the haniwas were a bit sooty from the explosion, but they were unharmed.

"Heh, I think we're a strange bunch, but you guys are pretty strange too. That should have killed at least one of you."

Crimson offered a few scant words of praise for Shizuka, who had safely managed to escape her attack. Infernal Fire was one of Crimson's strongest spells, so not many people could walk away from a direct hit, even with protection. But even though Crimson complimented Shizuka, her head was still in the battle. She was secretly communicating with Green without saying a word out loud.

"Green, what's next?"

"The next attack is in 18 seconds. Those cute machines will try something."

"Let me know when your forecast gets more detailed."

"Right."

Crimson and Green were confident that they would win, but that was if they could work together perfectly without making any mistakes. They couldn't

afford to let their guard down.

“Your Highness, this really is strange. The enemy is moving to where our attacks won’t hit just before they’re fired. It’s as if they know where all the attacks are going to land.”

“But I’m sure they’re not reading our auras. I can’t tell that they’re not using spiritual energy.”

“Could it be profiling?”

“No... I can’t imagine our opponents have enough information on us to do that. It would make more sense to suspect magic is playing a hand in this. I don’t know if they’re reading our minds or what though...”

The invader girls were also working on improving their cooperation against these two unknown enemies. From their brief exchanges so far, they’d realized that they would have no chance of winning if they all fought on their own.

“Karama, Korama, don’t let them get close.”

“Roger, ho!”

“Leave it to us, ho!”

“Blue Knight, keep them restrained. Put interception on auto.”

“As you wish, my princess.”

The invaders got back into formation and tried to keep the two magical girls at bay while planning their strategy. If their attacks were being read, they couldn’t afford to be careless. But the magical girls weren’t taking the offensive either. They were blocking the haniwas’ and Blue Knight’s attacks while waiting for the invaders to reveal an opening.

“Um... can I ask something stupid?” Shizuka asked as she dusted off her clothes.

“Go ahead. I’m willing to consider any plan,” Theia answered with a serious nod.

“Those girls are magicians, right?”

“That’s right. There’s no doubting that,” said Kiriha.

The fireball that Crimson had fired from her staff confirmed that they could use magic. As it was being generated, data collected from the haniwas and Blue Knight revealed that it wasn't being created by science or spiritual energy.

"Then... can't they just see the future in a crystal ball like the witches from fairy tales or something?"

"Of course! Predicting the future!"

Shizuka has sheepishly spoken up prepared to made fun of, but Kiriha and Theia did no such thing. Instead, their eyes opened wide as they looked at each other. What Shizuka had suggested clearly struck a chord with them.

"Kiriha, what are the chances?!"

"We can't overlook the possibility."

Kiriha figured that since Koutarou had travelled through time, it wasn't impossible to gain things from the future, including information. Was that their trick?

"We'll have to confirm how they're reading our moves, considering the possibility of some kind of divination."

"Then what do we do?"

"For starters..."

Kiriha swiftly gathered her thoughts and conveyed them to her allies. The girls all moved out, following Kiriha's directions. When she sensed they were making a move, a grin appeared on Crimson's face.

"Looks like they're getting motivated. Finally. I was getting bored of playing with these toys."

"The girl with the blonde hair will make the first move by summoning another machine. Don't let it startle you. A large amount of small missiles will come flying at you. They follow heat sources, so after they lock on to you, use Flare to avoid them."

"Really, how many surprises do those girls have...? Multiple Energy Bolts!"

While listening to Green's predictions, Crimson attacked the haniwas flying in

the air with magical energy darts. But since the haniwas had already started to fall back, the darts missed and continued flying off into the distance until they could no longer be seen. Just a moment later, Theia made her move.

“Let’s go, men! Blue Knight! Anti-personnel multi-missile!”

“As you wish, my princess.”

Space-time holes opened up on either side of Theia, and a big box emerged from each. The boxes were about a meter and a half tall and had a very Forthorthian design.

“Target locked. Beginning attack.”

With a signal from Blue Knight’s AI, the boxes opened, revealing sixteen missiles each about half a meter long. They all belched flame and roared out of the box at the same time. They flew straight for a few seconds before taking a turn towards the magical girls.

“Here I go!”

When the missiles changed course, Shizuka started running. While their enemies were busy intercepting the missiles, she was going to close in on them.

“Flare!”

Crimson held her staff above her head and chanted a short incantation. As she did, a bright ball of light appeared between her and the missiles. The missiles misidentified the light as their target and started following it. Crimson manipulated the ball of light to send the missiles off in a random direction.

“Now it’s my turn!”

Shizuka, who had approached Crimson while she was dealing with the missiles, launched an attack with all of the momentum from her charge behind it.

“I’ve been waiting for you!”

Crimson held her staff in both hands and moved up to intercept Shizuka. Crimson thoroughly enjoyed combat, so she welcomed a close-quarters fight.

“There’s no need for that.”

“Kyaaaaah!”

Just moments before Shizuka and Crimson clashed, the soil below Shizuka’s feet sank down. She was just about to take a step, so the shift in the ground underneath her sent her off balance.

“Hey, Green, let me have some fun too!”

“Only once we’ve thinned their numbers a little.”

“You better mean it!”

As Crimson was complaining to Green, Shizuka rolled to the side at a terrific speed. She’d properly broken her fall, so she didn’t take any serious damage, but it still knocked the wind out of her lungs and momentarily stunned her.

“Seriously... I hate these kind of throwaway matches the most...”

Crimson jumped towards Shizuka and stuck both of her legs out as she came down for a landing. She was going to finish off Shizuka while she was unable to move by slamming her feet into Shizuka’s stomach.

“Bend your legs, Crimson.”

“All right.”

“Look out, Shizuka!”

But the spiritual energy arrow that Sanae fired barely managed to save Shizuka. Since Crimson had to bend her legs to avoid Sanae’s attack, that gave Shizuka enough time to roll out of the way.

“Fall back to three meters behind me.”

“Okay, okay. Sure busy this time, huh?”

“Blue Knight, pull the enemy away from Shizuka! I’ll leave the method of attacking to you!”

“As you wish, my princess.”

The weapon that Theia had summoned from the Blue Knight spewed a large amount of bullets between Shizuka and Crimson. However, since Crimson had already moved to evade, the bullets never hit their mark. And like that, Crimson fell back even further alongside Green.

“So she did avoid it!”

Kiriha looked astonished at this result. As it turned out, Theia’s attack had revealed something important.

“Ruth, how does it look?!”

“They’re just barely outside of the Blue Knight’s set attack radius. It’s like they’ve analyzed Blue Knight’s combat algorithms!”

All the attacks the invaders had tried were tests. For example, the missiles were to find out if the girls were really using magic to read their moves. Since missiles had many different methods of tracking, the girls chose one at random to see if their enemies could take appropriate countermeasures. And indeed, Crimson and Green had correctly used heat to distract them. If they hadn’t known for sure what kind of missiles were being used, it would have made more sense just to use magic to shield themselves. But the fact that they’d responded situationally told the girls that their enemy did indeed have a read on them somehow.

The last important piece of information came from Theia’s last attack. She’d left everything about the attack up to Blue Knight, and the magical girls still managed to avoid it. In other words, if the magical girls had been using magic to read their minds or their auras, they shouldn’t have been able to predict an attack from a machine. Yet nevertheless, Crimson and Green had accurately fallen back to outside of Blue Knight’s attack radius. It was hard to think that they’d analyzed the ships attack systems in such a short amount of time, which left very few other possibilities.

“Green, looks like they’ve found us out.”

“So it seems. The future of this battle just narrowed significantly.”

Despite their opponents having discovered the secret to their strength, Crimson and Green were still confident. They stood smiling and unfazed before the five astonished girls.

“I didn’t think it was possible, but... you really are reading the future...”

“That’s right. So just give up and die.”

And it seemed they had every right to be confident. Their advantage wouldn’t disappear just because their secret had been revealed.

Contract and Advent

Saturday, April 24th

Koutarou and Maki's names were displayed on a screen showing the day's top ten high scores by the exit of an attraction. It was a game where groups of two got on a ride and competed over who could kill the most monsters with toy laser guns. Koutarou and Maki had ridden together and managed to get the top score by a large margin.

"Hey, Kou. Don't you feel anything after seeing this result?"

Looking up on the screen that was flashing "Koutarou & Maki" at the top of the leaderboard, Kenji slumped his shoulders.

"Feel anything? What do you mean?"

"This is what I'm talking about... You're always like this..."

Kenji put his hand on the confused Koutarou's shoulder and lost all will to speak. To Kenji, the fact that a feminine girl like Maki was going all out on an attraction like this with him was a way of sending certain signals. Either dense Koutarou had missed that altogether, or he was willfully ignoring it. Either way, Kenji was worried.

"Satomi-kun and Aika-san should just stop beating around the bush and date already. There aren't that many couples who go together that well."

"I think so too. It feels like it was meant to be."

Kenji and a group of girls all shared the same opinion. Since Koutarou and Maki were so compatible, they should just start dating. The group of girls had gossiped about the special atmosphere between the two of them several times in the past as well. And now that they were going on rides together at the park, it seemed only obvious. Now was the time to try and get the two of them together.

"What do you think about that, Maki-chan?"

“Oh, me? Well... you know... I’m just a greedy woman who’s always after money, so...”

Maki’s face turned red as she blushed. Her feelings were already clear to herself.

“Oh? That didn’t sound like a no to me!”

“...”

Maki instinctively looked over at Koutarou as her classmate nudged her with their elbow. When she did, their eyes met.

“Um... I...”

“Y-Yeah...”

Koutarou had a perplexed expression at first, but when he saw Maki’s eyes, it was quickly replaced with a smile.

She’s certainly got a different feel to her compared to the other girls...

Whenever Koutarou looked at Maki, he got a mysterious feeling. He felt a sense of duty. Like he wanted to protect her. He also felt like they had a lot in common. Koutarou didn’t know what made him feel that way, but the feeling was far from unpleasant. It might have been the same thing that Koutarou felt for the invader girls, but it puzzled him to feel that way about one of his classmates.

She’s just a normal classmate... Could it be because we share a secret?

The only thing Koutarou could think of was the time he saved her life on the mountain. He vaguely felt like that might be the reason.

“I won’t accept this! Aika-san can’t go out with Satomi!”

“Yeah! We can’t let the guy who betrayed the unpopular boys alliance be the first one to find happiness!”

Koutarou and Maki couldn’t stare into each other’s eyes much longer. The hostility from the other boys in the group exploded and blew away the sweet atmosphere between them.

“I’m the one meant to be Maki-chan’s boyfriend! Stop spewing your selfish

crap, women!”

“Are you stupid?! Just face facts! Look, it’s written right there on the scoreboard!”

“No, this a mistake! As if something digital like that could measure the bonds and fate between people!”

“You’re talking sense, but you only sound like an idiot right now!”

The quarrel between the boys and girls grew more intense, leaving out the two in question entirely. Koutarou was sorely amused at this development. He found that funnier and funnier, and eventually he couldn’t keep himself from laughing.

“Haha.”

“Heehee...”

When he started laughing, Koutarou heard quiet laughter coming from beside him too. When he looked in that direction, Maki was giggling too. When their eyes met, she smiled happily. He realized she must be feeling the same thing he was.

What is this, really...?

It was a mysterious feeling, but he didn’t mind it. Not with Maki. And so he slowly started to accept the fact that she was important to him too.

A muffled buzzing sound rang out. Maki had just gotten a message on her phone.

The message Maki received was very short. The subject line read “commencing action,” and there was no text in the body. This was all part of the plan, so Maki knew what it meant without any more information than that.

So it’s starting...

The message indicated that Maki’s allies were on the move. That meant Maki’s job was to keep Koutarou here until her allies were done with their work. She was to keep Koutarou, who was considered their strongest foe, away from the action. And Maki took that duty very seriously. She didn’t want

Koutarou to fight in the first place. It wasn't just that she was worried he might get hurt. She also didn't want to expose him to the malice her allies were capable of.

But... is this really all right...?

Even though Maki wanted to keep Koutarou safe, something was bothering her. She couldn't help but feel like she was betraying him in a way. If he knew what was going on, he would surely try to stop it. And despite knowing that, Maki couldn't tell him the truth. That was all to protect him, but it wasn't what he would want. That was why Maki had a hard time accepting what she was doing.

I don't know what's right and what's wrong anymore... Is this because of the contract too?

What disturbed Maki the most was the contract between her and Koutarou. Since they had a mental connection because of it, Maki tended to value Koutarou and his wishes above all else. She herself wanted nothing more than to keep Koutarou where he would be safe, but that meant her own desires were in direct conflict with what the contract would have her do.

She was torn. She stood there blankly staring at the screen of her phone, unsure of what to do. The sound of a phone vibrating again caught her attention, but it wasn't hers. It was Koutarou's.

What was actually vibrating wasn't Koutarou's cellphone, but the bracelet on his right wrist. Koutarou pulled his phone out and held it up to his ear and ordered his bracelet to answer the call. This way, he could use his bracelet's communications without the people around him suspecting anything.

"What's up, Clan?"

Since Koutarou had gotten the bracelet from Clan, she was the only one who would be contacting him with it. Anyone else would just call his cellphone. That's why Koutarou didn't even need to check who was calling him.

"Are you safe, Veltlion?!"

As Koutarou expected, the voice on the other end was Clan's. But it was much

louder than normal. She sounded panicked. Startled by it, Koutarou almost dropped his phone.

“Wh-What now, all of a sudden?!”

“Just answer me! Are you safe?!”

“Y-Yeah... I’m fine. I’m just at the amusement park. Things are fine here.”

Koutarou discretely scanned the area before answering Clan. The park itself was picturesque—the very image of peaceful. If there was any kind of noteworthy incident, it would be his classmates who were still quarreling.

“Which means that the problem is somewhere else?!”

“What do you mean? What’s happened?”

“I just received an SOS from Pardomshiha using gravitational waves! I just assumed she was with you, which is why I called!”

“I see...”

Now that he understood there was an emergency, Koutarou turned his back to his classmates and whispered instructions to Clan.

“Clan, please confirm everyone’s whereabouts and the situation at once. Ruth-san wouldn’t send you a rescue signal unless it was serious.”

Ruth had forgiven Clan and believed in her, but Theia and Clan still hadn’t reconciled. Because of that, Ruth didn’t frequently contact Clan. So if she was asking for help out of the blue, something bad must have happened.

“I thought the same thing, so I’ve already sent an unmanned fighter. I’ll let you know what’s going on once I find out.”

“Thank you, Clan.”

“There’s no need for thanks. Masters and their servants help each other out, right?”

“Maybe so...”

Koutarou nodded at Clan’s words and realized that he’d had something of a change of heart.

Now I'm thinking that being Clan's vassal might not be so bad...

Masters and their servants helped each other out. For some reason, he felt no resistance to hearing Clan say that. He was no longer objected to the idea of being her vassal. Right now, she was starting to properly display her nature as a princess.

"W-Well, enough of that! Veltlion, please move to these coordinates. I'm sending your armor there."

As Clan gave Koutarou instructions, a hologram appeared in front of him displaying a map of the area. In an alley by a warehouse a few blocks away from the amusement park was a blinking red marker.

Right now, Clan had been granted permission to access Blue Knight's systems. She was going to use that to send Koutarou his armor. And the closest place that wouldn't attract any attention was that alley she'd marked.

"Got it. I'll head there now."

Koutarou drilled the location of the marker into his brain before ending the call. He immediately started moving. He could only imagine what kind of crisis had befallen the girls, making this an abrupt and unfortunate end to his weekend fun.

Koutarou explained to his friends that an urgent situation had come up and that he had to go, and after offering a few humble apologies, he dashed out of the amusement park towards the alley that Clan had shown him. Since it was in the opposite direction of the station where he had come from, it looked like he was taking a roundabout way to get home at first glance, but this was actually the fastest way back to Kisshouharukaze City.

Including the time it would take to get to the station, riding the train back would take at least half an hour. Knowing this was an emergency, Koutarou couldn't afford to take his time. That's why he was planning on picking up his armor and flying back. Using the full power of the armor, he should be able to get there within a few minutes.

"Veltlion, there are two places in Harukaze City where I can't observe any

electromagnetic radiation!”

“Where?!”

“Your residence and a redevelopment zone in the suburbs!”

“Examine those areas some more!”

While running through the unpopulated warehouse district, Koutarou continued his call with Clan. She was sending him information the moment she got it. Thanks to that, Koutarou was able to get a glimpse of the situation the girls were in.

Only me and Yurika went out today, so is Yurika in the redevelopment zone? It’s close to the hospital too... The other five are probably at home. Did someone attack Corona House after me and Yurika left? Do they know about us? But who would care about Yurika? She’s just a cosplayer. No... Could it be that they know that Yurika can use magic now?

As information started coming in, question after question ran through Koutarou’s head and his anxiety grew with each one. Even though he knew that the girls wouldn’t go down without a fight, he still felt rushed to get to them. That was just how important they’d become to him.

“I’m seeding the armor now! Once it’s been transferred, forcibly activate it! Bypass the startup system check! Activate using individual settings: Layous Fatra Veltlion, version 38 revised!”

When Koutarou ducked into the alley by the warehouse, he spotted a two meter tall space-time hole. An upright suit of blue armor slowly emerged from it with a puff of air that kicked up dust and debris on the ground. The blue of the armor nearly seemed to be glowing as it emerged into the dark alley.

Once the transfer was complete, the armor sensed Koutarou’s approach and opened up for him. In contrast to its classical look, it was a cutting-edge piece of technology. It was a masterpiece of advanced science that had saved Koutarou’s life many times in the past.

“All right!”

Seeing the armor waiting for him, Koutarou started running faster. With this,

he'd finally be able to make it to the girls. That was all he wanted right now, and with the armor right in front of him, he would be there soon.

At least, that's what he thought.

"Activate Engage. Activate Safeguard, using the exception article to preserve life. Make Satomi-kun unable to walk."

"Wh-What?!"

The voice of a girl Koutarou knew well echoed through the alley. But when he heard it, his lower body became strangely unresponsive. As a result, he stopped just in front of the armor.

"I can't move my legs?! What is going on?!"

Koutarou did his best to try and move, but his legs wouldn't budge. It was as if they'd taken root in the ground where he stood. It was different from being forcibly stopped or held in place by someone else. It was just like his own body wouldn't listen to him.

"I activated the contract between us, Satomi-kun. If it's to protect you, it will even do things like restrain you."

A lone girl appeared in front of Koutarou. It was one of his classmates dressed in an indigo outfit. It was Aika Maki, the same girl he'd just been playing with at the amusement park.

"Aika-san?! Are you the one doing this?!"

Koutarou didn't know what was going on. He didn't know why his legs couldn't move or why Maki had shown up. Based on her tone, he could guess that she was responsible, but he couldn't imagine one of his classmates being able to do something like this. Confused, Koutarou pressed Maki for an answer.

"No. You're the one who did it."

"What?!"

But Maki's answer only confused Koutarou even more.

"To be precise, your sword did."

"My sword...? Signaltin?!"

When Maki said that, Koutarou started focusing on himself. He was trying to find the source of what was restraining him.

This really is Signaltin's mana... Her Majesty's power is at work!

When he concentrated, Koutarou could feel Signaltin's mana inside him. It was the white mana that had Alaia's presence in it. Even Koutarou, who had no talent for magic, could tell that much.

"But why?! Why is Signaltin restraining me?!"

Koutarou could hardly believe it. The power that Alaia had given to him was depriving him of his freedom. He was shocked since he had always believed that Alaia would always be on his side no matter what.

"It's because you tried to save me..."

Maki spoke quietly to the confused Koutarou. Her eyes were even more serene than her voice and had a very calming feeling to them.

"That's why the sword fulfilled your wish and created a magical bond between you and me."

"A magical bond...?"

"Yes, don't you remember? Back on that snowy mountain when you were trying to heal my wounds... You should have seen something in that white light."

"On the snowy mountain? Ah..."

Koutarou could clearly remember it even now. Desperate to save Maki inside of that snow-covered lodge, he'd used Signaltin's powers. In the bright white light the sword gave off, he had seen a vision of a young girl covered in wounds, trembling in the cold out of fear and loneliness.

"I saw... a hurt and trembling girl..."

"I see... I saw a boy. A crying boy embracing a half-knit sweater..."

Maki clearly remembered what she'd seen as well. In that white light, she saw a young boy covered in someone else's blood, embracing a sweater, and sitting down on the street in a daze.

“Back then, I had given up on everything. I had lost the will to live. Just healing my wounds probably wouldn’t have been enough to save me. That’s why the sword tried to give me hope. Hope that I wasn’t alone.”

“So that girl... was you...?”

Maki, weak and bleeding out, had lost the will to live that night. It wasn’t just her body that was dying, but her spirit too. She needed something to keep her attached to this life. A bond. That’s why Signaltin had shown a vision of Maki to Koutarou—to tell him he needed to save her.

“And you... saw me...”

“You needed it too, right? Hope that you weren’t alone...”

“I... guess so... Somewhere deep inside, I was rejecting others...”

After losing his mother, Koutarou stopped trying to develop relationships with other people. That’s why he needed a bond as well. A powerful bond that would never be torn apart. That’s why the sword had showed Maki a vision of Koutarou’s true self too—to tell her she needed to save him.

“Just wait! I’ll save you right now!”

“It’s okay. I’ll always be with you...”

The two of them had shared the same thoughts. They wanted to embrace the other. They wanted to warm each other’s chilled minds and bodies. They each wanted to hold the other and tell them that they weren’t alone. They wanted to protect that weak, wounded person in front of them. They wanted to protect each other.

“That’s why your sword created a magical bond between us. In order to save both of us.”

Their mutual desire called forth a new spell from Signaltin. A contract to connect their hearts. A bond that would never be cut. At that time, it was what both of them desperately needed.

“A magical bond... But can that really be...”

“You should have felt it before. Haven’t you ever known what I was going to do? What about when I know what you’re going to do? When I do something

unusual, why don't you doubt it?"

"That's..."

Koutarou had indeed felt it before. He'd often wondered if Maki could read his mind, both in their everyday lives and in combat. He also felt like he could read Maki.

So... why don't I doubt Aika-san? What was Aika-san even doing on that snowy mountain? Why was she able to freely use the magical staff? Even now... why am I believing her wild story?

Koutarou had plenty of questions, but he'd never once doubted Maki. He deeply trusted her from the bottom of his heart, and he believed what she was saying even now.

"And this magical bond... this contract... you're using that to stop my legs, right?"

"That's right. That's why you'll never be able to break free. Please just stay with me here for a while."

Signaltin was the source of the contract's power. And if it was Signaltin's doing, then calling for it wouldn't resolve the situation. In other words, Koutarou had absolutely no means to free himself.

"Veltlion! I've got footage! Theiamillis-san and the others are currently fighting against someone!"

That was when two holograms appeared alongside Clan's concerned voice from the bracelet. One of the holograms showed Theia's group and the other showed Yurika's group. Both were in the middle of a fight.

"Everyone?! It really is the enemy— Wait, that's the woman from ten years ago!"

Koutarou started to panic when he saw the girls fighting. Both groups were at a disadvantage and looked like they were in serious trouble. But what concerned him the most was spying Maya, the woman he'd fought against almost eleven years ago now. He was well aware of how strong and dangerous she was. If he didn't rush over there right now, Yurika and the others would

meet with a terrible fate.

“Aika-san, please let me go right now! I have to go to help everyone!”

Knowing the danger the girls were in, Koutarou desperately pleaded with Maki to let him go, but she simply shook her head.

“I can’t. Keeping you here is my job.”

“What?! What does that mean?!”

“It means just what I said. Because I...”

Maki paused for a moment before steeling her expression and continuing.

“I am your enemy! I am a member of Darkness Rainbow, the ones who are after room 106!”

“You’re lying! I don’t believe you! There’s no way you would be my enemy!”

Koutarou instantly denied what Maki had said. To him, Maki was a classmate he trusted and got along well with. She couldn’t be an enemy. He didn’t want to believe it.

“I don’t want to believe it either! I don’t want to fight against you! That’s why I can’t let you go! Because if I do, we’d have to fight each other!”

“You don’t have to fight me just because you let me go, right?! You should never have to! You’re not the kind of girl who should be fighting!”

There was no need for that poor girl who’d been so afraid and alone to pick up a weapon. She wouldn’t get what she needed that way. What she needed was to be by someone’s side.

“I can’t do that! We would definitely become enemies! Letting you go would mean I have to annul the contract! And if I do that, you won’t think of me as important! I won’t think of you as important either! We’ll only be able to see each other as enemies!”

The existence of that contract was driving Maki into a corner.

Clan, who could break through the magical girls’ barrier, had been able to inform Koutarou of what was going on sooner than predicted. Because of that, Maki had to forcibly stop him from leaving. But Maki’s magic couldn’t break

through Signaltin's powers that were protecting him. That's why the only method she could use to hold him back was activating the contract.

And after activating the contract, Koutarou would be held this way for a while for his own safety. In order to free Koutarou from his current predicament, the contract would have to be annulled with both parties' consent. However, Maki wasn't willing to annul the contract. Doing that would mean their magical bond would disappear... along with their feelings for each other. In other words, they would return to when they were enemies.

"I don't want that! I love you, Satomi-kun! I want to have these feelings forever! I don't want to return to the me that tried to kill you!"

Maki was in tears. She didn't want to lose who she was right now. It was thanks to Koutarou saving her that she'd come to learn the joys of living for the first time in her life. Even if that was an illusion created by magic, after spending her whole life alone, it was an illusion she was willing to cling to. And she also couldn't stand the idea that she might try to kill Koutarou if she returned to her old self.

"But if everyone dies because of this, I will hate you!"

"I'm okay with that! Because, because... I can keep you from fighting this way! I can keep loving you!"

To Maki, annulling the contract might as well be the same thing as dying. It would mean that she would return to the lonely version of herself that lived shrouded in darkness. It would mean she would be letting go of the light she had slowly been gathering ever since Koutarou had saved her. That's why even if Koutarou hated her, even if she was just living inside of an illusion, Maki couldn't annul the contract.

"If everyone dies, I will hate you! And after that, how am I supposed to continue living?! I just finally learned the meaning of living with them!"

At this rate, Koutarou would lose everything. After his mother passed, Koutarou rejected the company and affection of others. And at this rate, he was going to lose the girls who had taught him that he couldn't live like that forever. Surely he would blame Maki for not letting him go save them. That hate would drive them apart, and Koutarou would end up losing everyone close to him. He

would lose the bright future he had finally found.

“I don’t mind if you hate me! You can curse me if you want! But even then, I will stay by your side! I will forever protect you so that you will never be alone!”

Maki was prepared to endure Koutarou’s abhorrence to stay by his side. Maki would rather bathe in the flames of hatred than return to the dark coldness of solitude.

“So please, Satomi-kun! Let me stay your Maki!”

Maki had spent too long trembling in the bitter cold of isolation, searching for love but never finding it. She would rather keep Koutarou and have him hate her than lose him altogether. In the past, Koutarou might not have known what to say to Maki. He knew just how scary it was to lose that warmth. That’s why he’d been rejecting others all this time.

“Is that really what you want?! Do you really want that kind of future?!”

But Koutarou was different now. He couldn’t stay quiet. He knew that she couldn’t stay like that either.

“What else can I do?! We were enemies before we even met! But I love you! I don’t want to lose this warmth!”

“Believe!”

He shouted that word for Maki’s sake, but when he did, he realized the path he himself needed to follow.

That’s right... I have to believe... I have to believe in the same things Aika-san has to...

Koutarou had to believe in order to save Maki, to save himself, and to save the kind people he wanted to rescue. He had to believe...

“Our future is not as dark as we think!”

That their future would surely be bright. It was that simple.

“There’s no way that our relationship right now is all just a product of magic! We’re the ones who write our futures!”

“Do you really believe that?! That you won’t go back to crying all alone in the

future?! That I won’t go back to freezing in that dungeon?!”

Truth be told, Maki wanted to believe that as well. She didn’t want to lose anything. She had been betrayed too many times already. That’s why she was so ready to give up that snowy night in the mountains.

“Of course! If you believe, you’ll never be alone again! So believe! Don’t try to isolate yourself!”

Koutarou saw something of himself in Maki. That’s how he knew what she needed. He would teach her what the invaders had taught him. If she didn’t reject people, she would naturally come to feel warmth at her side. That’s what he wanted her to know. That was the future he wanted her to realize for herself.

“Even if the spell disappears, it’s not like what we’ve been through will too! Our relationship isn’t something made just out of magic!”

“Satomi-kun...”

Perhaps it was true that the contract was the start. But after that, Koutarou and Maki had spent a lot of time together. Koutarou couldn’t believe that all of that would just vanish. And there was a reason he believed that.

“Don’t you know that?! Think! What about all the people we went out with today?! Do you not feel anything at all for then?! Or are they your enemies?! They’re not, are they?!”

“Ah...”

Those words left Maki astonished. There shouldn’t have been a change in how Maki felt about her classmates after being saved by Koutarou. The contract only existed between the two of them, after all. She’d always thought of her classmates as clueless sheep who had no inkling of the way the world really worked.

“I... I... think... of everyone... as... as my friends...”

Maki was intensely shaken, but her true feelings escaped her lips. She now thought of her classmates as friends. In the months since Maki had started attending Harukaze High, her feelings had changed without her even realizing it.

“Even if the magic disappears, we won’t become enemies again! As if something like that would ever happen! And even if it’s like you said, you have friends now! You won’t be alone anymore!”

Koutarou was sure of that. Even if they had been hostile in the past, they were both different people now. They was no way they’d go back to being enemies. And even if they drifted apart after this, Maki now had other friends. Even if she became estranged from Koutarou, she wouldn’t be alone.

That’s right... I’m hopeful... I want everyone in our class to have a bright future too...

What Koutarou said to Maki equally applied to him. They needed to believe in the same things. In a way, by trying to save Maki, he could feel that he was changing himself little by little.

“Even if our relationship gets a little worse, we can always rebuild it! We have all the time we need to do that! You won’t be alone!”

“Do you really, honestly think that?”

Maki unconsciously approached Koutarou, one step at a time. She already knew that she wasn’t alone. That even if she annulled the contract she wouldn’t return to her old self. But she was still anxious about one thing. And she wanted courage to be able to overcome it.

“Believe! Open your eyes and look around! Don’t give up and close off your heart!”

“Will you stay my friend too, Satomi-kun?! Even if I change, would you be able to hold on for me?!”

Maki was worried that her feelings towards Koutarou would start to waver if she annulled the contract. That’s why she wanted the courage to be able to believe that wouldn’t happen.

“I’ll probably do something terrible! I might be cold to you or even hurt you! Wouldn’t you hate me even then?!”

Maki believed that Koutarou would give her the courage she needed. Standing right in front of him, she stared right into his eyes and asked him for

the words she needed to hear.

“Don’t worry! You’re Aika Maki, our classmate!”

“...”

Maki saw the strong will in Koutarou’s eyes. It was like that will reached out to her and summoned something deep from the bottom of her heart. Willing to concede, she cast her face downward. Several drops of liquid fell to the ground in a spotted pattern. Maki then slowly walked forward step by step until her forehead was pressed up against Koutarou’s chest.

“Satomi-kun... please... even if it’s just for now... could you please hold me?”

“Aika-san...”

Koutarou still couldn’t move his lower body, but he had free reign of arms. He listened to her request and embraced the girl crying in front of him.



I have to protect her... I did swear to, after all...

With a strong urge to protect her, Koutarou held Maki close. As he did, Maki clung to him like she was trying to eliminate all possible distance between them.

“Satomi-kun, I... I...”

“It’s okay, Aika-san. There’s no way that anxiety and sadness is a product of magic. Those tears are without a doubt your own.”

“Satomi-kun...”

Her tears still flowing, Maki only held Koutarou closer. And Koutarou embraced her right back.

It will definitely be okay... There’s no way that all of these feelings are just from a spell... Magic couldn’t create this much sadness... Satomi-kun is right...

While embracing Koutarou’s warmth, Maki finally made up her mind.

“Satomi-kun... I understand... I’ll believe... in these feelings that have grown in me...”

Maki believed in the feelings that she had for Koutarou. That her feelings wouldn’t all vanish just because she annulled the contract.

“In return... can I ask you for one thing...?”

“Yeah.”

“I want to stay like this until the contract is annulled...”

“I understand... I’ll stay like this...”

“Thank you, Satomi-kun...”

Maki pressed herself against Koutarou. But despite her tears, there was no trace of fear or sadness on her face. She believed in her own feelings now. And it was because she believed that she was able to take a step forward towards her future.

It gave her the strength to say without hesitation, “Disengage: Koutarou and Maki...”

Those words were the incantation that marked the end of a bond between two people. But in this case, they also signaled the formation of a new, eternal bond between them.

As Maki annulled the contract, a pure white light enveloped them as it had once before. They were pulled apart from each other, leaving them both alone in the light.

But in the next moment, a young girl appeared in front of Koutarou, and a young boy in front of Maki. That boy and girl rapidly grew into Koutarou and Maki as they were now. They found themselves facing each other in the bright white light.

“Why...?”

Maki pressed her hands against her chest as she looked at Koutarou with a surprised expression.

“What do you mean?”

Koutarou smiled at Maki. In contrast to what she was feeling, he was quite calm. Perhaps it was because he felt Alaia’s presence in the white light that surrounded them.

“This is strange, Satomi-kun... I annulled the contract, but nothing changed...”

“Nothing?”

“No...” Maki tilted her head and explained. “I still love you as much as I did a moment ago... and I don’t have even an inkling of an urge to kill you. I thought my feelings would change because of the annulment...”

The contract was already annulled. As proof, Koutarou could now move freely. Maki was waiting for a change to come over her, but it never did. That confused her.

Maki hadn’t expected all of her love for Koutarou to vanish once she annulled the contract, but she’d certainly expected to feel differently afterward. But now with the contract voided, it turned out that all her worry had been for nothing. Maki’s feelings remained the same.

“Pfft, heh... Ahahahaha!”

Koutarou started laughing. He had an idea of what had happened.

“I see, so that’s it! It’s obvious once you really think about it! Ahahahaha!”

He realized that he and Maki had overthought the whole thing. He could hardly stop laughing at himself for it.

“Satomi-kun?”

Seeing Koutarou laughing like that, Maki looked at him suspiciously. Koutarou desperately tried to hold his laughter as he explained.

“...Heh, I was just thinking that I had forgotten who gave me this power.”

Koutarou looked at the light enveloping them.

“She was wise, virtuous, and overflowing with benevolence... There’s no way that this sword that contains her feelings would selfishly rewrite your emotions, Aika-san. I think things just returned to normal after the contract was no longer needed.”

Alaia’s feelings and her oath were embodied in Signaltin. The sword’s magic brainwashing Maki would be equivalent to Alaia brainwashing her, and Koutarou couldn’t imagine her doing something like that with her powers. Even if she’d had to for some extreme reason, its effects should have gradually waned after Maki was able to live on her own. But really, the sword had only borrowed from the future bond that Koutarou and Maki would one day share. The bond they shared now.

“Then... there was never any need to worry about brainwashing?”

“I think not. That’s why you don’t feel any differently, right?”

“Maybe, maybe not...”

Now that she understood the truth, Maki revealed a delighted smile. Her feelings had been her own all along. She loved Koutarou out of her own volition. That sensation brought out an immense joy in her.

“I just might not feel any change because my feelings of love towards you are hundreds of times more profound than my feelings of hostility towards you.”

Maki didn’t know for sure, but that’s what she wanted to believe. She wanted to believe that love had won out. That was the more romantic option.

“H-Hey...”

Koutarou instinctively blushed at Maki’s sudden declaration of love. Even though the contract was supposed to have been annulled, her feelings were seemingly transmitted directly to Koutarou. Apparently, annulling the contract had almost no effect on their compatibility.

“Heehee, I’m sorry.”

Having been freed from a great deal of suffering, Maki flashed a refreshing smile. Her expression was filled with childlike innocence and affection.

“To be honest, I wanted to tease you a little more, but... please go. There’s no one else you need to save here.”

Maki felt like she shouldn’t keep Koutarou any longer. There was something he had to do, so they would part ways here.

“You idiot.”

A dull thud rang out in the alley.

“Ow! What are you doing?! I was being serious here!”

Maki clapped her hands over her reddened forehead and puffed out her cheeks in a pout. He’d smacked her about 70 percent as hard as he would Yurika, which was probably too much for a normal girl. Maki had every right to complain.

“You just don’t get it, Aika-san.”

“Huh...?”

But Koutarou wasn’t apologizing. Instead, he scolded her.

“Don’t give me that! Here!”

Koutarou presented his right hand to Maki.

“Satomi-kun...?”

Maki didn’t understand what Koutarou was doing, so she blankly looked back

and forth between his hand and his face.

“I told you, didn’t I?! Don’t try to isolate yourself!”

In that moment, Maki realized that Koutarou had no intention of leaving her alone.

“Aika-san, you don’t have to fight anymore! But come with me and support me from the sidelines! Pray for me!”

As those words reached Maki’s ears, Koutarou grabbed on to her left hand.

“Ah...”

Maki’s heart started pounding at an explosive pace, and it sent warm blood coursing all throughout her body.

I was... born for this person... to love him, and to be loved... I’m sure of it...

Maki was on an emotional high she might never come back down from. She felt like she had to do something, but she didn’t know what. She could hardly think. She was in daze and her mind was one big blur. And no matter how many deep breaths she took, she couldn’t collect herself.

Normally being in such a state would be upsetting, but all Maki felt was overwhelming happiness.

“I understand, Satomi-kun...”

Maki nodded.

“I’ll pray, but it won’t be for your victory. I’ll simply pray that your future will be bright forever and ever...”

Maki squeezed Koutarou’s hand back. It meant everything to her.

Wrapped in Maya’s flames, Harumi fell to the ground unable to even scream. Without any protection against the high temperatures, her body was severely burned in several places. It was bad enough that it didn’t take a medical degree to tell her live was in jeopardy.

“Sakuraba-senpai, Sakuraba-senpai!”

Even Yurika could tell as she ran over Harumi. But as a magician, she

understood the situation was especially grave.

With these burns, not even my strongest healing spell would be good enough! At this rate, Sakuraba-senpai's going to die!

Yurika had knowledge of healing spells that far exceeded what modern medical care could achieve. But Harumi's injuries were so serious that not even Yurika's best magic could save her now. It was a miracle that she was even still breathing.

What can I do?!

Yurika desperately racked her brain. She ran through every spell she knew in her mind to try and come up with a way to help Harumi, but it was fruitless. With Harumi dying in front of her, Yurika was panicking.

It's going to take something extraordinary! I need to think of a combination of spells that would keep her alive... No, maybe I could anchor her soul and turn her into a ghost like Sanae-chan!

She tried to come up with a combination of spells to save Harumi, but nothing came to her. As a last resort, Yurika began considering anchoring Harumi's soul to the land of living while she healed her body.

Wait, Sanae-chan?! That's right! If I do it like Sanae-chan, then it might be possible!

Thinking of her ghostly friend, Yurika had an epiphany. Confident this new idea would work, she resolutely grasped her staff in both hands.

If I fuse with Sakuraba-senpai like Sanae-chan does with people, then there's a chance I can heal her!

Yurika was going to use a fusing spell.

When fusing two living creatures, their minds would merge and their bodies would create an average form between the two. In other words, if the gravely injured Harumi and uninjured Yurika fused, their shared body would only be half as injured. In that state, Yurika's healing magic might work. And after treating her, they would simply separate.

However, that was an incredibly dangerous bet. There was no guarantee that

the healing magic would work even after they fused. Yurika wasn't even sure she'd be able to use magic once they fused. First and foremost, she'd somehow have to manage to stay conscious through the intense pain. And if her healing magic failed after they fused, Yurika might die too. But Yurika didn't let that possibility stop her. She wanted to save Harumi regardless of the risk.

"Temporary Fusion! Modifier: Stabilize! Effective Time: Half!"

Yurika held her staff overhead and chanted her spell, adding in two additional modifications. Since she just needed enough time to cast her healing spell, she shortened the effective time and used that mana for greater stability instead. All she could do after that was pray that she would still be conscious after the fusion, and that she'd still be able to use her magic.

Please go well! Please, let me save Sakuraba-senpai!

The orange light that had gathered at the tip of her staff enveloped her body as well as Harumi's. Their silhouettes both became faint and melded into the orange light that only grew brighter.

While Yurika was trying to save Harumi, Kanae and Maya continued fighting.

"How foolish... Just what could come of that?"

But when she sensed Yurika's spell activating, Maya stopped moving for a moment. She glanced over at the two girls wrapped in light with a dumbfounded expression. Not missing her chance, Kanae swung her staff down to attack Maya.

"I won't let you interfere!"

"I wouldn't interfere. If I leave her to her own devices, that Rainbow girl will use up her mana this way. And once she can't use her magic anymore, she'll be useless."

Encyclopedia sensed Kanae's great sense of hurry and cast a spell that sped her up. Maya was also wide open since she was distracted by Yurika and Harumi. But even then, she was one step ahead of Kanae. She started moving well in advance and easily dodged Kanae's staff while attacking with the blade on her right hand.

“And you won’t beat me on your own... I win, Kanae.”

“Ugh!”

Just blocking Maya’s bladed attack was all Kanae could do. She was unable to defend herself from the follow-up kick she unleashed right after, and ended up taking it straight on. The attack sent her flying and she slammed into the ground a few meters away. The difference in power was obvious. Like Maya had said, Kanae would never beat her on her own.

“It looks like your disciple will take the same path you did, Nana...”

Ignoring Kanae who could no longer move, Maya stared at Yurika and Harumi. She could see two masses merging in the orange light surrounding them. Yurika and Harumi’s fusion was almost complete, but Maya had no intention of intervening. She knew that she would have the advantage if she didn’t.

Maya figured that even if Yurika managed to heal Harumi, between the healing spell and the fusion spell, her mana would be seriously depleted. Fusion was a highly advanced spell, and so was all strong healing magic. Maya couldn’t imagine that Yurika would had much mana left in the first place considering she just had used several spells in their fight. It wouldn’t take much more before she hit her limit. That’s why letting Yurika do as she pleased now would actually end up working out in Maya’s favor.

“I guess that just means she was a rather good disciple...”

In the past, Nana had thrown away her life as a magician in other to save the powerless Yurika. And now, Yurika was about to throw herself into a situation where she would be unable to win in order to save Harumi. In the end, Nana and Yurika were very similar. They walked the same path of selfless righteousness. That was what Maya was thinking as the orange light started taking the form a person.

However, that was where things took a turn Maya hadn’t expected.

“...What?!”

Suddenly, other colors began mixing in with the orange light. There were blue and white lights that merged with it, making it a tricolor swirl. From there, the orange light began dying down and instead the blue and white lights grew

stronger.

“It wasn’t just a normal fusion?! Is it a transformation?! Or is it a summon?! No, that doesn’t matter! I won’t let you, Rainbow Yurika!”

Maya thrust her arms forward and began incanting a spell.

“Multiple Energy Bolts! Target Option: Sidewinder!”

Maya had lost the majority of her mana now that most of her body was mechanical, but it wasn’t like she was completely unable to use spells. She was limited in what she could cast and how often, so she saved it for emergencies like this.

It doesn’t matter what that is, I can’t let this go the way Yurika wants!

Maya’s intuition as a warrior told her that what was about to appear in front of her was very dangerous. That’s why she didn’t hesitate to use magic.

She focused on the miniature staff built into her right arm and several red lights started to surround her arm. At the same time, Maya took aim with the gun in her left arm. She was going to attack with both at once.

“Take this!”

Maya’s attack was slightly faster than Yurika and Harumi’s fusion. The storm of magical bolts and energy bullets came straight for the girls. Both attacks were deadly, and should’ve been fatal to the defenseless Yurika and Harumi.

“How?! The attacks disappeared?!”

However, the magical bolts and energy bullets all disappeared just before reaching Yurika and Harumi, as if they had only been an illusion. They hadn’t been blocked or repelled, they had simply—quite literally—disappeared.

“That’s not possible! Just the presence of that spell erased my attacks! Just what is going to appear?!”

“Yurika-chan... Sakuraba-san...”

Both Maya and Kanae, who had finally managed to get up, were unable to take their eyes of the spectacle taking place in front of them. They continued to stand and blankly stare at the blue and white light.

The light grew stronger and the ground and air around it began trembling with a roar. Then the expansive light shrank in an instant and a lone girl appeared. It was a girl unfamiliar to both Maya and Kanae.

“That’s... Yurika-chan and Sakuraba-san’s fused form...?”

“No! It’s not something that simple!”

Their fused form should have shared their features. But this girl looked like neither Yurika nor Harumi. She had long, beautiful white hair that shimmered a faint blue here and there. She wasn’t dressed in either of their outfits either. She was wearing something close to a blue and white shrine maiden’s uniform.

But what stood out the most were the two globes floating around her. They were about the size of volleyballs and made from a translucent material like glass. Each one glowed a distinct color, blue and white respectively.

This girl didn’t look anything like a fused Harumi and Yurika should. Moreover, there was no sign of her being burned. It was as if Yurika and Harumi had been replaced by someone else altogether.

“That is without a doubt a being of higher existence... Just what did you do, Nijino Yurika?!”

Maya looked mortified and gritted her teeth in frustration. She had enough experience in battle to know she stood no chance against the girl in front of her. That was just how much power she was radiating.

“What was I... I think I tried to help myself, then we fused...?”

But the girl who had appeared was puzzled as well. Her mind was cloudy and she hardly knew who she was, much less where she was or what was happening.

“Take this, you monster!”

As the girl was standing there in a daze, Maya saw her chance and attacked. She threw out the same mixed attack she had before.

If this doesn’t beat her, I don’t stand a chance!

Maya figured that this was her one and only shot at victory.

“Kyah!”

However, the moment the girl sensed danger, she let out a scream and Maya’s attacks disappeared just like they had before. It was completely bizarre. The girl hadn’t done anything but scream.

“Impossible! That wasn’t magic or spiritual energy, and she didn’t even use a tool or item! She simply negated my attack with nothing! To think such power existed in this world! The difference in power is like night and day!”

Maya was absolutely astonished. There was no fight to be had here. She gave up and accepted her defeat. Like an ant being crushed by an elephant, she would probably be wiped out before her opponent even realized she was an enemy.

“What is happening...? I don’t know... anything...”

But the girl didn’t come after Maya. Maya’s attack had only left her more scared and confused than before. She stood there in a daze, but then looked up.

“But I can tell... that person is approaching...”

The girl was only looking at a wall, but she seemed to be staring at something far, far away. Something beyond that wall. And she saw something there that brightened her expression.

“Everything will be fine... He will save me...”

That was when the two globes around the girl suddenly disappeared without a trace. When they did, her outline became faint as an orange light surrounded her. That orange light separated into two forms, each of which gradually took the shape of a person. One was Harumi and the other was Yurika. After fusing, the two girls now returned to their original forms.

“Ha! What? Was that all?! What a bluff!”

Having resigned herself to defeat after the appearance of an unknown enemy, Maya couldn’t help laughing at herself when that enemy suddenly disappeared.

Sustaining something like that would take a vast amount of energy. Of course

it would only be temporary! There was no need for me to panic.

Maya found her own fear incredibly amusing. Now that she'd escaped imminent danger, she realized how ludicrous the whole situation had been. It would be a while yet before she stopped laughing about it.

Yurika, who had returned to her original form, was surprised by the same thing Maya was.

W-We just transformed into something! I think it's probably because of the surplus of power in the fusion... but that transformation was so powerful that I couldn't sustain it for long! That's why we returned to ourselves!

Yurika didn't have a clear understanding of what had happened either. She still couldn't tell what they had transformed into or what had happened during that time. All she knew was that it was a mystery.

"Th-That's right! Sakuraba-senpai!"

That was when Yurika remembered the friend she'd so desperately wanted to save. She forced her exhausted body to crawl over to Harumi, who was lying next to her.

"Thank god, her wounds are healed..."

Yurika closely examined Harumi and found that all of the burns on her body had vanished without a trace. Yurika figured that it was likely an aftereffect of their transformation.

"I don't know what happened, but I was able to save Sakuraba-senpai..."

Relieved that Harumi was all right, tears streamed down Yurika's cheeks. That was when Harumi opened her eyes.

"...Nijino-san."

Seeing Yurika, Harumi tried to get up. Yurika hurriedly reached out and supported her.

"Sakuraba-senpai! Are you okay?!"

"Yes. Thanks to you, Nijino-san."

Harumi smiled and slowly nodded.

“You can tell?!”

“Yes. Maybe it’s because we fused... but I still have some of your memories.”

“Now that you mention it, I also have...”

Thinking about it, Yurika realized she could remember things that she’d never experienced before. She had memories of knitting and being in the hospital. She was quite sure those belonged to Harumi. But it was mutual. And looking at the situation, Harumi reached a certain conclusion.

“Nijino-san, you really are a real magical girl...”

“That’s... Yes. I’m sorry for not telling you...”

Yurika had been about to deny what Harumi was saying, but she quickly changed her mind. Harumi now had some memories of Yurika as a magical girl, so excuses wouldn’t work anymore.

“It’s okay. You don’t have to worry. I can understand why you wanted to hide it. Because... of him...”

“Sakuraba-senpai...”

Yurika blushed at Harumi’s words, and Harumi started blushing as well. Both girls had fallen in love with the same boy, and now that they had shared memories, they each understood why the other loved him too.

Pretend wrestling with Satomi-kun... It’s painful, but it’s a warm and fun feeling... Maybe I should have Satomi-kun try some techniques on me too... If he does it with Nijino-san, he might be willing to do it with me... Submission, huh?

So this is how Sakuraba-senpai and Satomi-san met... He appeared out of nowhere and saved her when she was surrounded by enemies... It’s like something out of a shoujo manga... Ah, those are her memories from the play. They first met during the club recruitment... But this is just like a shoujo manga too... I’m jealous... As for me, our meeting was...

They both got to see a different side to the boy they loved. Sharing such memories took both of their romantic feelings to new heights. They were more in love than ever before.

But they couldn’t afford to dwell on it now.

“Sorry to interrupt after your little celebration over your recovery, but it’s about time for you two to die.”

Maya approached with weapons in both hands. Her top priority was now to eliminate these two girls. After seeing their fusion and transformation, she couldn’t guess what else they had in store even if Yurika did run out of mana. And even if they didn’t have any other tricks up their sleeve, it would only be trouble if she let them get away. She might even have to fight them at full power again in the future. And so Maya calmly decided to quash that possibility here and now.

“Sakuraba-senpai, get behind me! I’ll protect you!”

“Nijino-san, no! You don’t have enough mana left to fight her!”

Yurika was about to step forward and defend Harumi, but Harumi stopped her. Since Harumi now shared Yurika’s memories, she knew that Yurika didn’t have enough power left to fight.

“Run away, both of you!”

But before Maya could attack, Kanae summoned what strength she had left and stood between Maya and the girls.

“Higashihongan-san?!”

“Kanae-san!”

“There’s no need for all three of us to die! Now go!”

Kanae turned her staff into a bow and fired arrow after arrow at Maya. However, Maya neither shot down the incoming arrows down with her gun nor deflected them with her blade. Badly wounded and without Yurika’s support magic, Kanae couldn’t even hit Maya anymore.

“At least your spirit is the same as it was back then, Kanae.”

“I won’t let you kill these girls! They’re my daughter’s friends!”

“Just stay down, Kanae. There’s no need for you to die as well.”

Unlike Kanae, however, Maya was uninjured and would have no problem hitting her target. Kanae tried to protect herself with her staff, but was unable

to fully block Maya's attacks.

"Guh! Aaah!"

Kanae took a direct hit from Maya's knee and fell down on the spot. She tried to get up yet again, but she had reached her limit. She just didn't have the strength to get back on her feet.

"Goodbye, girls. Nice try, though."

"Sakuraba-senpai!"

"Nijino-san!"

Maya bid farewell to the girls as she turned the barrel of the gun on her left arm on them and began gathering mana in her right arm. Seeing that, Yurika and Harumi tightly embraced as if trying to protect one another. They knew they were about die.

"Energy Javelin. Modifier: Area Effect."

Summoned by Maya's indifferent voice, a spear of red light flew at Yurika and Harumi in a hail of bullets.

"I'm sorry for getting you involved, Sakuraba-senpai..."

"Don't worry. You're my best friend, after all..."

Having used up all of their power, the two girls were helpless. They closed their eyes, tightly holding on to one another. All they could do in their final moments was take comfort in the fact that they weren't alone.

But in the end, neither attack reached Yurika and Harumi. The only thing that reached them was the sound of consecutive impacts, similar to a jackhammer being used on a street.

"H-Huh...?"

Confused by that, Yurika opened her eyes and saw someone in blue armor standing in front of her.

"Clan, it didn't properly block the bullets. Are you sure you didn't break the barrier when you were messing with it?"

"Of course I didn't! The distortion field is operating normally! The enemy's

attack is what's abnormal!"

Next, Harumi opened her eyes wide in shock as she heard that voice. She was met with the same sight Yurika was.

"I guess so. She's a magician, after all."

"Even taking that into consideration, the power behind those bullets is abnormal! Don't rush in until I can gather all the data necessary! Not even your armor can take too many hits from that!"

"Pfft, I'll take as much care as I do for your dinner."

"Veltlion, you're being awfully mean today!"

Vivid blue armor. A tall, manly figure. A powerful voice that instilled courage. But all with a gentle aura to it. His presences was unmistakable. Overwhelmed with relief and nostalgia at his arrival, Harumi instinctively shouted out his name.

"Koutarou-sama! Clan-sama!"

"Satomi-san?!"

Hearing Harumi and Yurika's surprised voices, he turned around.

"Are you okay, Sakuraba-senpai? You too, Yurika?"

"Yes! Nijino-san saved me!"

Harumi was in tears, but she was smiling broadly.

As long as he's with me, I will be okay... No, that's not it... I'd gladly walk into any future with him!

Harumi felt like the last piece of the puzzle fell into place. Like her world was now complete. Like she belonged right here with him. And feeling that she'd been led here by destiny, Harumi was steeped in a deep sense of joy.

"Yeah? Good job, Yurika."

Learning that Yurika had done her best again, Koutarou flashed a small smile. Hearing that the normally useless Yurika had given it her all made Koutarou happy. He felt the same pride an older brother would to see his helpless little sister accomplish something great.

“Th-Thanks!”

And that helpless little sister felt the same way. Yurika nodded her head repeatedly with tears in her eyes. She was genuinely happy.

“But, but, but, Satomi-san, how did you find us?!”

Koutarou’s arrival was quite a surprise for Yurika. She hadn’t been able to contact him, and Sanae who could follow the traces of auras wasn’t with him either. It should have been impossible for a normal person to peek insider her ward.

“Yurika, apparently the ward you magicians make cuts off electromagnetic radiation and sound too well, so you kinda stand out that way.”

Because the ward to keep people away completely isolated an area, it actually made it easier for Clan to detect with her sensors. If the ward had also released dummy electromagnetic radiation and sounds, it would have been like picking a needle out of a haystack.

“‘You magicians’? Satomi-san, d-did you...”

Koutarou’s answer came with another big surprise, and Yurika’s face turned pale. Anxiety, fear, and panic filled her chest. How he’d found the ward wasn’t what spoofed her, but two very specific words: “You magicians.”

He knows... Satomi-san was the only one I didn’t want to find out about this... but he knows...’

Those two words didn’t imply that Koutarou thought she was a freeloading cosplay. No, they revealed that he thought of her as a real magic user.

“Y-You’re wrong! I-I’m not a magician! Um... I’m just cosplaying with the staff you gave me!”

In the past she might have confirmed that he was right, but now Yurika was desperately denying it. She rapidly shook her head, causing her hair to sway and her tears to scatter.

Admitting to being a magical girl would mean losing her normal, everyday life. For the first time in her life, she’d found someone that needed her. Yurika wanted to live her life with that person, both of them supporting each other. It

was to that end that she had to conceal the fact that she was a magical girl no matter what. And it wasn't just for his sake. She just wanted him to think of her as very normal, and if possible, cute girl.

"I'm terrible! I'm just a useless girl! It's not like that! I'm not a real magician!"

She wanted him to scold her when she was sloppy. She wanted him to hit her when she was up to no good. She wanted to be his practice partner for wrestling moves whenever he had free time. She wanted him to praise her if she improved her grades a little. She wanted him to pat her on the head if she didn't place last at the school festival. She wanted the two of them to read manga and discuss it together. She wanted to fight over snacks. Yurika simply wanted to live a normal life and get excited and depressed over normal things.

But she was about to lose all that. If he found out that she was a magical girl, he would definitely look at her in a different way. She was terrified of that, and her fears and frustrations came to the surface in something of an unsightly way. Yurika cried out like a baby being torn away from its family.

"Calm down, Yurika."

"You're wrong, you're—"

A dull thud rang out.

"Augh!"

Yurika had ignored Koutarou's attempts calm her down and continued arguing vehemently. But that all came to an end when she felt a familiar pain in her forehead.

"Yurika, I only want to know one thing."

Putting a hand on her head, Yurika looked up and saw Koutarou staring right at her. He had a powerful, gentle, and very trusting expression.

"What are you going to do after you graduate?"

"Ah..."

Koutarou's words pierced Yurika's heart and easily swept away all the anxiety, fear, and panic that she was feeling. In their stead, she was filled with relief, hope, and happiness.

This person really is... my... my...!

Tears spilled from Yurika's eyes, but she responded with a big smile.

"I'm going to Kisshou U! Together with Satomi-san and Sakuraba-senpai!"

There was a mountain of things that Yurika wanted to say, but simply saying that she wanted to go to Kisshou University was enough to convey all of it. Yurika knew just what Koutarou had meant by his question. That was all they needed for now.

"...Got it. Leave the rest to me. You just sit tight and work on your multiplication."

"Yes... I don't want anything to do with multiplication, but I'll try..."

After nodding, Yurika felt her strength leaving her and she slumped down to the floor. And just like Koutarou asked, she started doing multiplication in her head. No matter how many numbers she put together, however, there was no way to calculate the happiness she was feeling.

Turning his back towards Yurika and the others, Koutarou closed in on Maya one step at a time. She put her hands on her hips and calmly waited for his approach.

"I've kept you waiting."

"That's not quite true. Well... if this was a date we had decided on beforehand, I might have half a mind to slap you."

Surprise wasn't the only reason Maya hadn't attacked Koutarou yet. Since she knew how powerful Koutarou was, she had to make adjustments to her mechanical body to get ready to fight him.

The amount of time I can continue fighting will drop considerably in exchange for this boost in power... But for a date with this boy, I don't have any other choice...

There were normally limiters on Maya's body to keep it from breaking itself by going too fast or strong, but Maya released those in order to fight Koutarou. She wouldn't be able to fight as long this way due to the wear and tear on her

mechanical parts, but it came with a considerable increase in power.

“Well, I was on a date with your disciple.”

“If you’re here... does that mean that Maki is dead?”

Maya narrowed her eyes slightly. It was a subtle change, but her expression became much sharper. Koutarou only shook his head in response.

“No. I have her captured. There’s a lot I want to ask her, after all.”

“I see. Then take good care of her. You should get some good use out of her,” Maya said, her sharp expression easing some.

“Is that all you have to say as her master?”

“Now that she’d been captured, she’s just a liability.”

“I’ll just pretend I didn’t hear that. I feel bad for your disciple.”

“As kind and considerate as ever...” Maya said wistfully as her lips curled into a grin. “Honestly, I wondered after hearing Maki’s report, but to think it really was you... What a surprise.”

“It’s been about eleven years, hasn’t it?”

“You shouldn’t keep a girl waiting for a date that long.”

“Aren’t you a little old to be calling yourself a girl?”

“Putting it like that makes me feel bad for Kanae.”

Maya indicated the collapsed Kanae off to the side of the room. Maya and Kanae were actually around the same age.

“As for me, however, you can see for yourself that both my mind and body are young enough for me to talk like that.”

Maya struck a pose to show off her good looks. And she did indeed have the charm to pass as a much younger girl.

“That said, in the short time since we last met, you’ve turned into quite the strange girl.”

Koutarou observed Maya’s body with a serious expression. Maya was indeed quite beautiful, but her body was covered in strange markings. At her shoulders

and legs, her body had even split apart to reveal mechanical parts. Even Koutarou could tell that her body was mostly artificial.

She has artificial limbs... and her torso is artificial too? She's practically a robot...

No matter how charming Maya was, there was no danger of Koutarou falling for her. If anything, his heart was only beating faster from the tension and fear.

"Good boys don't stare at girls' bodies like that. And I'm not the only one who's changed."

Maya gave a soft smile, but she was carefully observing Koutarou too.

He was a special boy to begin with, but... he doesn't seem to have aged a day in eleven years. And that armor is suspicious too. It wasn't in Maki's report... It seems to have a few tricks to it. It even nullified my Energy Javelin... It was either the boy's power or the armor's... and since he's here after dealing with Maki, he'll probably be using magic too...

Maya had witnessed Koutarou break through the wall and ceiling of the abandoned building to protect Yurika and Harumi. She'd seen firsthand that his armor was powerful. And adding that to the power she already knew Koutarou had, she knew she was going to be in for a serious fight.

"You're not wrong. I guess I've become a little strange myself."

Koutarou let out a laugh, but his eyes remained dead serious.

"Then here's a proposal for you... What if instead of just having this little date today, we start dating seriously?"

"What?"

"I think we both want to avoid a war of attrition against an opponent with unknown powers, no?"

"...Are you asking me to join you?"

"My, we'd be real lovers. I don't hate children like you, boy. If we team up, we could defeat any real enemy."

Maya was serious. Ever since figuring out the boy Maki had fought was the

same boy Maya had encountered years ago, she'd wanted to recruit him. However, her reason was different from Maki's. She only wanted Koutarou's power. That was the other reason Maya hadn't attacked yet.

"It's not like we want to kill you. We're just after the mana in that room. And we'll do anything we have to in order to get it, whether that's fighting or becoming lovers."

"Mana..."

Koutarou recalled what Yurika had said in the past.

Now that I think about it, Yurika was always talking about evil magical girls targeting the mana in my room... Since it turns out she's a real magical girl, I guess it makes sense that she was telling the truth...

Thanks to Yurika, Koutarou had some idea of what Maya was talking about.

"If you become my lover, I will spare the others. Even Yurika over there. Of course, you would have to persuade them..."

Maya knew that Koutarou could control the mana in room 106 to a certain degree. In other words, making Koutarou her ally was essentially the same thing as taking the mana. Moreover, if she could make Koutarou her pawn, she could regain a leading role in Darkness Rainbow. On the other hand, deciphering and controlling the power wouldn't help her much now that she wasn't a serious magic user. That was why pulling Koutarou over to her side was nothing but positives for her.

"I see, so that's how it is..."

While he didn't know exactly why, Koutarou understood that Maya was seriously trying to make him her ally.

"How about it? It's not such a bad deal for you. You'll be able to protect your friends, after all..."

Maya whispered to Koutarou in a sweet and flirtatious voice. She was alluring in a way that could make almost any man's heart waver.

"I refuse."

However, Koutarou flatly rejected Maya's proposal without any hesitation.

Unable to accept no for an answer, Maya questioned him.

“What?! Why?!”

“Honestly, it’s not a bad deal. And you’re beautiful.”

“Then why?!”

“It’s simple. It’s because there’s someone that wants to protect that room from you guys.”

“Yurika?! You’re saying you prefer her over me?!”

The prideful Maya erupted. She could have accepted just about anything, but Koutarou’s reason was Yurika of all things. Maya was convinced that she was superior to Yurika in all ways possible, including her strength and her femininity. That’s why she couldn’t tolerate Koutarou’s answer. Her pride didn’t let her, both as a warrior and as a woman.

“You would probably never understand just how amazing Yurika is.”

“Of course I wouldn’t understand! She’s a complete failure!”

Maya took a stance while furiously denying what Koutarou said. The weapons installed on her body all took aim at Koutarou, one after another.

“That’s right. We’re all failures. Unlike you...”

Yurika’s wish was enough of a reason for Koutarou to stand his ground. And what had led him to feel that way was all the time they’d spent together as failures.

And so, Koutarou chose to fight.

What he was protecting was something that couldn’t be put into words. Power, talent, money, and status meant nothing in the face of this. Koutarou and the invader girls had found something truly special together.

“Cradle, give me my sword.”

“As you wish, my lord.”

“Come, Signaltin!”

Koutarou summoned his sword. The sword that would shine to realize the

oath sworn upon it.

Bonds

Saturday, April 24th

Crimson and Green's cooperation had only been disrupted for half a minute or so now.

Before that, their teamwork had been perfect and they were easily cornering Theia and the others. But in the past half a minute, their coordination had taken a turn for the worse.

"What's wrong, Green?! Your readings are wrong!"

"I'm sorry, Crimson! It seems that some being of higher existence descended into this world a moment ago, and it threw off all my predictions!"

"Just what world did it come from? Damn it! At a busy time like this, no less... Wait! Could it be that devil Maki contracted?!"

"I think so... but if it's near Maya-san, things might be a little troublesome..."

Green's voice was heavy. If the higher being wasn't summoned by Maki, then chances were high that Maya was in danger.

"Wait, you mean that Yurika might have summoned it?!"

With most of her body now replaced with machines, Maya couldn't use any high-level summoning magic. That's why if Maki hadn't summoned her contracted partner, then it seemed likely Yurika was the one behind such a powerful summoning.

"We can't rule out that possibility. That's why we need to hurry and finish up over here!"

"Got it!"

Green and Crimson wanted to wrap things up at Corona House as quickly as possible and move to help Maya or Maki. They were starting to recover their team dynamic, so ending the fight now shouldn't be that hard.

“After the blonde girl attacks with her energy bullets, she’ll pass over the manhole up ahead.”

“Explosion! Modifier: Time Trigger!”

“Force Field! Modifier: Area Effect!”

Following Green’s predictions, Crimson placed a timed spell while Green activated a defensive spell.

“Blue Knight! Fire the particle cannon at full speed!”

“As you wish, my princess.”

Theia took action just like Green had foreseen. The cannon she summoned from Blue Knight opened fire. But since the magical girls had prepared a defensive barrier before Theia attacked, her shots were all blocked.

“Tch!”

Realizing she’d been outdone, Theia charged forward for her next attack. The second she reached the manhole, however, she was suddenly surrounded by an explosion.

“Your Highness!”

Ruth let out a shrill cry. The explosion was from an offensive spell Crimson had planted to catch Theia unawares.

“I-I’m fine! Don’t worry!”

“Alert Message: Increased load on the distortion field. Any further combat action will be dangerous.”

But fortunately, Theia appeared from the flames unharmed. She then returned to Kiriha and the others. That said, her dress was scorched and dirty from the explosion. Having taken several attacks from the enemy now, Theia’s barrier was reaching its limit.

“Kiriha, our attacks have stopped hitting again!”

While reporting the situation to Kiriha, Theia wiped some of the dirt and soot from her face and dress.

“It’s like they’re reading your movements too, Theia-chan.”

Shizuka clenched her jaw in frustration. She couldn't even get close to the enemy. Now that the enemy had regained their ability to see into the future, there was nothing she could do.

"Her predictions have stabilized, huh..."

"They seem to have regained the ability after the second space-time quake."

Kiriha analyzed the situation using the data that Ruth had gathered.

"There was a second space-time quake, their predictions stabilized... so why did..."

Kiriha's expression didn't have its usual calmness to it. Instead of looking like the sweet girl who did Koutarou's laundry, she looked like a fierce commander in battle.

"What do we do, Kiriha? At this rate, we'll all die!"

Sanae knew how the battle was progressing better than anyone else. She could tell the state of everyone's strength, energy, and fighting spirit by looking at their auras. And currently, the magical girls had the upper hand by a considerable margin. At this rate, defeat seemed inevitable.

"...We attack."

"Did you figure something out?!"

"Yeah. I only have a rough idea, but... luck really is on our side."

Kiriha smiled confidently. Sanae couldn't understand what Kiriha meant, so she leaned forward and asked for more details.

"I don't know what you're talking about! Explain in more detail!"

"I know. For now, just move as I tell you to."

Kiriha explained her plan to Theia and the others.

"Will something like that work...?"

"Yes. Judging how things have gone so far, there shouldn't be any problems."

Shizuka and the others were surprised by Kiriha's suggestion, but she gave them a confident smile.

The first hint Crimson and Green got that something was wrong was when they started taking minor counterattacks from the girls. Green's predictions were still accurate and Crimson's powerful attacks were still driving back their enemies, but they would occasionally get surrounded by the five girls momentarily and take small volleys of attacks.

"Damn, again?!"

Crimson frowned and turned her mantle back over. As she did, she knocked away electricity and fire shot out by the haniwas. She took a little collateral damage in the process, suffering some minor burns and experiencing some numbness in her hands.

"Green! Something's wrong!"

"I'm sorry! I don't really— Kyaaaaaaaah!"

"Green?!"

Their second hint was that Green took her first big hit of the fight. It was something she hadn't seen in her predictions, and since she was only relying on her predictions to guide her in the fight, there was no way she could avoid an attack she hadn't seen coming.

"I-I'm fine! Somehow!"

"What's going on?!"

Crimson and Green were falling into a state of chaos. The predictions were mostly still accurate, but they were taking hits here and there. They were mostly small ones, but every now and then it was a serious blow. It was a situation that neither Green nor Crimson had expected.

"It's like the egg of Columbus..."

Theia compared their situation to something she'd just learned about in school while admiring her own bullseye. Their struggle up until now seemed like just a dream.

"Just what did you do?!"

Distancing herself, Crimson hurled her stupefied question at Theia and the others. Despite Green's predictions, the enemy was now getting the better of them. She was so perplexed that she was now turning to her enemies for the answer.

"Nothing. If I were to say, it's simply that we understand the laws of nature in this world better than you."

Kiriha was the one to answer Crimson, and she carefully observed the two magical girls as she did. Kiriha wasn't getting overconfident. She knew that even if she revealed the truth, their predictions still wouldn't help them now.

"That's not possible! Green's predictions are perfect!"

"Indeed, they are."

Kiriha agreed with Crimson. But even with perfect predictions, Kiriha and the others still had a chance to win.

"But even then, there's a limit. Because of the uncertainty of the world, there's only so much you can see. And your own actions aren't taken into consideration, or the predictions would loop forever."

Because the future was uncertain, a prediction saw several possibilities. Green looked through them for the most likely options, and gave Crimson directions based on that. But Green could only see but so far into the future accurately. And as they attacked, their own actions affected the accuracy of her readings. That meant that staying on the defensive and relying on counterattacks was the most effective way to use her predictions.

"On top of that, there's a limit to how often spells like that can be used. Moreover, it's not like she's conveying everything she sees to you."

Since magic was how she was seeing into the future, it came with natural limitations. There was also a limit to what she could convey through a mental link. It wasn't like they had unlimited mana, instantaneous communication, or perfect reaction times.

"You should have finished the fight before we figured all that out."

Their biggest mistake was giving Kiriha enough time to figure out how their

predictions worked. She now understood the true nature of the predictions better than the magical girls did. And using that understanding as her basis, she devised a strategy. That was the reason the invader girls' attacks had started hitting.

"Impossible! How is that even possible?!"

"In the end, predictions are just information. If the user is blinded by that, they'll lose even when victory is right in front of them."

Kiriha's plan was a very simple one. First, they would use large scale attacks to force the magical girls to keep moving. That would reduce the accuracy of their readings since their own movement would become another variable to consider. From there, the invaders divided into two groups: those who would attack first, and those who would wait for Crimson to attack. That would further reduce the accuracy of readings because it made Crimson's attacks part of the formula too. Things would only get more complicated and harder to predict.

In other words, because Kiriha understood how the predictions worked, she could essentially manipulate what the magical girls were reading. Their combat strategies were utterly dependent on Green's predictions, so being able to mess with those put them at a severe disadvantage. That's why Kiriha said they were blinded by them. If they'd relied on reading the future a little less, they wouldn't be in this position. It was a crisis that their overconfidence had caused.

"You should have studied up on the world a little more rather than just focusing on magic. This is the limit for sheltered girls."

"That stings, Kiriha."

Theia laughed. When she had first come to room 106, she hadn't known much about the world either. She had broken out of her shell by now, but she was a little embarrassed to see what she'd behaved like once.

"Your Highness, I've finished altering the settings."

"All right! Blue Knight, attack! I will leave everything to you!"

"As you wish, my princess."

Theia and Ruth were in charge of their ace attack.

“What are you doing?!”

“I couldn’t tell you. Because not even I know.”

“Get away right now, Crimson! I can see hundreds of different attacks and I have no idea which one is coming!”

“What?!”

Following Kiriha’s instructions, Ruth had made changes to the Blue Knight’s settings. Normally Blue Knight’s artificial intelligence chose an appropriate weapon following Theia or Ruth’s instructions. Because of that, it would only make logical attacks according to its priorities, making it relatively easy to predict.

However, Ruth had altered the settings so that the system chose a weapon at random. That meant the chances of any single attack being chosen was equal, and the amount of possible futures equaled the amount of weapons available. Ruth even added space weaponry to the list of available options. And once Theia gave the order to attack at random, not even she knew what would happen. The attack radius, target, and weapon would all be decided arbitrarily by the AI. That chaotic situation rendered Green’s predictions useless.

Simply put, reading the future worked well on a predictable opponent. Especially someone who had a style or a favored method of attacking. But if the attacker essentially rolled a die to attack, the future wouldn’t be determined until it was too late. Now imagine that die having a hundred sides. A prediction of that many possible futures would be worthless.

All Crimson and Green could do now was fall back as quickly as possible. But that was exactly what Kiriha wanted. There was no need for Theia to actually attack. Her goal was simply to create a future that was impossible to predict and make Crimson and Green retreat.

“Sanae-chan Love Love Boost! Gooooo, Shizukaaaaa!”

“Cornering a fortune teller that can see the future with just her mind... Just how does Kiriha-san’s brain work?”

Shizuka chased after Green and Crimson. With her physical abilities enhanced by Sanae, it was easy to catch up to them.

“Mind Bla—”

“You’re too slow!”

Shizuka’s target was the slower runner and fortune teller, Green. As soon as she was in range, Shizuka sent her right fist flying. Green tried to defend herself with a spell, but Shizuka’s fist hit her jaw before she could finish her incantation.

“Guah!”

And while Green was launched into the air by the impact, Shizuka attacked her repeatedly. She unleashed a combination attack of several punches followed by an elbow strike into a roundhouse kick for a seven hit combo. Green was already out cold by the time she hit the ground.

“Green!”

“You’ve finally come!”

Shizuka jumped backwards. Not a moment later, Crimson brought her staff down where she had been standing. The tip of it smashed into the ground and cracked the asphalt.

“Noooooooo! The parking lot!”

Shizuka screamed. The battle between Shizuka and the others against the magical girls was taking place in the parking lot behind Corona House. Of course, since the property was her inheritance from her parents, Shizuka was deeply attached to it. Even seeing the asphalt in the parking lot damaged was painful for her.

“I told you before... if you break something... I’ll make you regret living...”

“You didn’t, you didn’t! You told us, Shizuka!”

“Have you heard of bone breaking torture...? Apparently you start with the hands and feet, and break all the bones from small to large... Heh, heh heh...”

“You better hurry up and run away, red girl! Once she’s like this, you don’t stand a chance!”

“Just the way I like it!”

To Crimson who treasured only strength in combat, going up against a martial arts expert was just what she wanted. She also had to save Green now. Crimson gripped her staff in both hands and charged at Shizuka.

As she ran, her staff started transforming into a halberd. The added blade had no physical form. The staff weighed and handled like it normally did, but now it was even more dangerous. Crimson made use of her exceptional physical strength to spin around like a pinwheel and swing the halberd at Shizuka.

“Take this!”

The halberd tore through the air and headed for Shizuka with terrifying speed.

“Hmph!”

But Shizuka, who had just witnessed her precious parking lot be partially destroyed, moved even faster. She moved so fast that without the help of Green’s predictions, Crimson had no chance of hitting her.

“Haaaaaaaaaaa!”



Shizuka dashed in under the halberd and thrust her hands out forward as she shouted. She poured all of her weight and momentum into the strike and crushed the defensive spell that Crimson was wearing without any trouble.

“It’s not over yet!”

But Crimson wasn’t going to go down just like that. She didn’t hesitate to drop her halberd and pull out a knife from the back of her waistband and used it to attack Shizuka. The knife was much faster than the halberd, and it worked well in close combat. Its silver blade gleamed as Crimson attempted to run Shizuka through with it.

“For you to be able to beat me on your own...”

“Uwah!”

However, Shizuka easily grabbed on to Crimson’s arm and followed through by throwing her. It happened so fast that Crimson didn’t even have time to prepare herself for the landing.

“You should have stuck to being either a pure warrior or a pure magician.”

“Impossible!”

Along with a dull thud, Crimson’s body slammed into ground right next to Green.

“Guah!”

Hitting the asphalt hard, Crimson lost consciousness and lay there motionless. Without the advantages of their future predictions and long range magic attacks, the difference in ability was obvious. The invader girls had claimed victory after putting all their talents together.

“Now then, what should we do with these girls...?”

Despite having beaten them down, Shizuka was still boiling with anger and glared at the two collapsed magical girls.

“I wonder if they can repair the asphalt with magic... If they can’t, I guess they’ll just have to do it by hand...”

Corona House and the property it sat on was all Shizuka had to remember her

parents by. And now it was the place where her new family called home. For damaging it, Shizuka wasn't going to forgive the magical girls after just a quick beat down.

"Quick Cast Mystic Mist!"

The next moment, a dense fog shrouded the two collapsed girls.

"Crimson, keep it together!"

"Huh?! They're escaping!"

The fog was a magical mist that Green used for distractions. Neither Shizuka nor Sanae could see through it, and Green used the time it bought her to grab Crimson to escape.

"Blue Knight, attack!"

"As you wish, my princess."

Theia was able to track them using Blue Knight's heat sensors and radar, but she could only get off sporadic attacks. Lasers and beams were highly ineffective in the mist, and she couldn't point ballistic weaponry at them at such close range. While she had a chance, Green cast a new spell that completely hid their presence.

"Ahhh, damn it! They got away before they repaired the parking lot!"

"So she was just faking it? Or maybe she woke up just then... It seems we still have much to learn."

"Let's throw a net over them the next time they collapse."

"Hmm, that sounds good... I'm sure there are some aboard Blue Knight."

"Yes, there's a net gun for riot suppression. I will prepare it in the future."

The party was disappointed over letting the magical girls escape, but no one suggested that they should have finished off the unconscious Green. They all felt that neither this place nor any of the people present should have to be sullied with blood.

"Shizuka-chan, leave it to us, ho!"

"That's right, ho! We're good at this kind of construction, ho!"

“Really?! That’d be great!”

Eventually the mist cleared up, carried away by the wind. And as expected, nobody was there. The invaders had allowed the magical girls to escape.

“But still... those two withdrew awfully easily...”

Theia continued searching for them via Blue Knight as she tilted her head. Her intuition told her that the magical girls should been able to use the cover of the mist to launch some more attacks.

“That might have been because of their predictions.”

Kiriha answered Theia’s doubts.

“Their predictions?”

“Indeed. The nature of prediction being what it is, it’s more effectively used for macro readings, like for strategy or economy, rather than the micro readings in battle. Strategically speaking, pulling back here might have been the better option.”

“Strategically? That must meant... They might be gathering their forces and going after Yurika or Koutarou?”

“That’s right. We should hurry up and meet up with them too.”

Because the magical girls’ goal was still unclear, it would be difficult to figure out what they were after. But regardless of what their enemy was up to, protecting Koutarou and Yurika was in the invaders’ interest.

“Ruth, Shizuka, could you stay behind? Just in case.”

“Yes, Kiriha-sama.”

“Got it. Be careful, you three.”

“Yeah! We’ll be right back with Koutarou and Yurika!”

“Let’s go, men!”

Thus, Kiriha, Theia, and Sanae left Corona House to go find Koutarou and Yurika.

Obeying Koutarou's summons, a knight's sword and a metal rod similar to a flashlight appeared.

"Clan, what's this?"

"It's a test for dual wielding! We'll start out by using Signaltin with a beam sword!"

"I see!"

"Since the beam sword has no physical form, there's no need to worry about its weight! And since the blade can be turned off and on, there's no need to worry about the two swords interfering with each other!"

"You really are a genius, Clan!"

There was a big drawback when it came to using a sword without physical form. Despite having the same length as an actual sword, it was too easy to swing around. The user could easily end up hurting themselves.

In fact, accidents like that happened frequently when beam weaponry was first developed. As a result, despite how useful it was, not many people used it. For decades, it was considered a last resort in terms of weapon choice. The technology wasn't commonly used until years after proper safety devices that could withstand practical use had been developed and people became less afraid of them.

A beam sword's safety device worked by constantly keeping watch of its blade and turning off if it was about to hit its user. The sword could even be programmed to work the opposite way—only activating when it was cutting down opponents. Once safety devices came standard, beam swords became a lot more user-friendly. There were even people who liked to wield one in each hand. Thanks to the safety device, there was no need for any special training to use them that way either.

As Clan was researching how to practically use two knight's swords, she came up with the idea of replacing one of the swords with a beam sword. If Koutarou was only wielding one real sword, it should be easier to control with one hand. A beam sword in his other hand would lessen the burden on him.

In order to use a knight's sword like a beam sword, the sword's momentum

and mass would need to be controlled, and a special hole in space-time would need to be used to control its length. Just using an actual beam sword would be much easier. It would be a good accompaniment to a real sword.

And just as Clan was about to suggest that Koutarou give it a try, she learned that his opponent was Maya. Since a beam sword would be necessary in order to fight her anyway, it seemed like the perfect time.

“The algorithm for dual wielding is still incomplete, so you’re probably going to have some issues here and there! Don’t put too much faith into the beam sword’s automatic control! Try to use the manual control when it’s important!”

“Got it!”

Koutarou grabbed Signaltin’s handle with his right hand and the beam sword’s handle with his left. As he did, he heard the familiar automated voice of the Cradle’s AI.

“Your Excellency, Lord Blue Knight, this ship, the Cradle, will pray for your fortune and glory in place of the nation of Forthorthe.”

“Thanks...”

As Koutarou pulled on Signaltin’s handle, pure white mana began overflowing from the sword. There was a great deal of it, but it seemed to only be a fraction of what it normally was.

There’s less mana than usual... Is this because of the contract with Aika-san? Or did Her Majesty save someone else?

Signaltin’s mana was weakened, but Koutarou didn’t particularly mind it. He took his stance regardless. Except for under special circumstance, Koutarou was planning on using two knight’s swords in the future. Those were the only two weapons he had sworn oaths on. That’s why it didn’t matter if the mana had weakened or not.

There were several mysteries surrounding Signaltin that Koutarou didn’t understand. But because he believed the sword held Alaia’s wishes and feelings, he wasn’t too bothered by the mana weakening a little. He was sure that it must have been needed for something else.

“I’ve seen that before, but the light is stronger than it was back then... I see. So this is the true form?”

“That’s right.”

Even though its mana wasn’t at full power, Signaltin was far more powerful than normal weapons. So from a realistic point of view, there was no need for Koutarou to even use a second sword.

“But I won’t let you get away like you did eleven years ago! I’ll kill you this time for sure!”

Maya glared at Koutarou with a violent expression. She wasn’t going to let Koutarou, who had rejected her and chosen Yurika, walk away alive. She was fiercely jealous and boiling with rage over her wounded pride.

“I’ve never seen you look like this before..."

Koutarou readied the sword in his right hand and adjusted his grip on the beam sword’s handle in his left while looking at Maya’s mechanical body. Parts of it were in motion, adjusting and preparing for the fight. Tiny parts like her exhaust tubes were being carefully rearranged.

Just how much of her is mechanical?

Trying to figure out where he should attack, Koutarou used the spirit sight he had gotten from Sanae to look at Maya. What he saw surprised him.

All Maya had left of her original body appeared to be her head and the center of her torso. He could clearly see spiritual energy travelling between them. What was strange was that the machinery was circulating spiritual energy as well. Seeing that, Koutarou got a bad feeling.

Could this body be...

A small amount of spiritual energy could travel through artificial arms and legs as an extension of a person, but this was far beyond that level. Though the amount didn’t match what was being circulated through her real body, it was flowing just like it would in a real body.

I guess I’ll just have to find out...

Koutarou tightened his grip on his swords. If his hunch was right, Maya should

have abnormal powers.

“Then burn the charms of this body into your eyes until you die!”

“That sounds like it’ll take a long time!”

Both parties moved at the same time. Maya fired the gun on her left arm. The bullets rapidly approached the charging Koutarou.

“I’m counting on you, Signaltin!”

Koutarou wished for Signaltin to protect him. The bullets had their momentum slowed by the armor’s barrier before being completely repelled by Signaltin’s defensive spell. Signaltin was in a weakened state, but all it had to do was stop bullets that got past the armor’s barrier. That wasn’t a problem.

“I see you still aren’t going to make this easy for me!”

“That goes both ways!”

Realizing that her gunfire wasn’t effective, Maya changed weapons. The gun deployed on her left arm retracted back into her body and a blade appeared in its place. It now matched the one on her right hand. Maya closed in under the hopes of being able to deal more damage in close quarters combat.

“Tiny Memory Flash! Modifier: Touch Trigger!”

Koutarou watched as an indigo light formed around Maya’s bladed hands, but then he heard a girl call out to him. Her voice hadn’t reached his ears, however. It was magically projected directly into his mind.

“Satomi-kun!”

“Is that you, Aika-san?!”

The voice belonged to Aika Maki. She had formed a mental link between herself and Koutarou beforehand.

“The light on Maya-sama’s hands is a spell that will cause amnesia! If you touch it, you’ll lose several seconds of your memory! It’s the specialty magic Maya-sama and I use!”

“So it was memory loss that made it feel like I jumped forward in time!”

“Be careful! If you take that, you’ll just keep taking attacks!”

“Got it! But listen, Aika-san...”

Koutarou laughed a little as he activated the beam sword.

“You don’t have to worry so much.”

It wasn’t just Maki’s words that reached Koutarou—her feelings did as well. She was profoundly concerned about him and his safety.

“Stupid! You don’t even know how I feel!”

“What are you laughing for?!”

Maki and Maya shouted at Koutarou at the same time. Maya assumed he was laughing at her, which infuriated her even more.

“Well, my little angel is quite angry! It’s just too cute!”

“Meanie! You don’t have to put it like that!”

“Trying to make a fool out of me?! I’ll make you regret that!”

Koutarou’s beam sword and Maya’s left blade collided. Thankfully, since the beam sword didn’t have a physical form, Maya’s memory loss spell didn’t activate. But Maya didn’t stop there this time. Thrusting her right blade forward, she tried to run Koutarou through.

“Take this!”

Maya thrust her right blade right behind Koutarou’s beam sword. This way, Koutarou couldn’t swing his second sword because the beam sword would be in the way. In other words, he was defenseless. Confident of herself, Maya came at him with a devilish grin.

“That’s good! But not enough!”

Yet Koutarou swung his sword down anyway. When he did, the beam sword’s blade disappeared, allowing Signaltin a clear path right for Maya.

“Tch!”

Surprised, Maya forcibly changed the trajectory of her right hand. Their blades collided this time. Signaltin had a physical form, but it also had the ability to dispel magic, so Maya’s spell wasn’t activated this time either.

“So this is what she meant... You’re a lifesaver, Clan.”

“That weapon really is cheating!”

Maya kicked off of Koutarou and tried to distance herself from him. Koutarou followed up by slashing out with his beam sword, but Maya performed a somersault midair to dodge it, tumbling out of his range.

Damn, she has way more speed...

Koutarou looked at Maya as he cursed to himself. Now that she had an artificial body, Maya was even faster than before. Koutarou was using spiritual energy to increase his physical strength and his spirit sight to read her intent to attack, but Maya’s movements were too just fast for him to fully track. He was in a tight spot, but the news only got worse from there.

“Veltlion, I’ve figured out a little about your opponent. Whenever that woman moves, she emits an energy pattern that matches with data I have.”

“...What is it matching?”

“Those robots that Kii always has with her.”

By Kii, Clan of course meant Kiriha. And by robots, she meant her haniwas. In other words...

“You think I’m cheating? That body of yours was made by the underground dwellers, right?”

“That’s my boy for you... To think you even know about them...”

Hearing Koutarou’s words, Maya narrowed her eyes and her fury weakened. Being reminded of how dangerous Koutarou was, she regained her usual cool.

“But now that you know that, you’ll have to die.”

Maya wore a cold-blooded smile. It was beautiful, but sent a chill down Koutarou’s spine.

“Not good... The situation might be more complex than we thought...”

Up until now, Koutarou had only had to deal with specific groups of enemies. But an evil magical girl with access to spiritual energy technology had to mean that Yurika and Kiriha’s enemies were working together. Eventually, it was likely

they would attack together. The though of that scared Koutarou more than Maya alone ever could.

With Maya distracted fighting Koutarou, Yurika realized that she might be able to save Kanae, who was still collapsed on the floor. It would take magic to heal her, but Kanae was holding on to Encyclopedia. With its powers, even if Yurika was out of mana, she should still be able to treat Kanae. She might even be able to support Koutarou some.

“Sakuraba-senpai, please wait here.”

“You’re going to help Kanae-san, aren’t you?”

“Yes.”

“Then I’ll go too.”

“If we do too much, Maya will notice us. And I can’t protect you anymore right now, so please stay here.”

“But... No, I understand. Please be careful, Nijino-san.”

Harumi wanted to go with Yurika. She was prepared to die by Yurika’s side. But she didn’t want to hold Yurika back. And Yurika was right; if they did anything too drastic, Maya would catch on. So in the end, Harumi reluctantly listened Yurika.

“I’ll be back.”

“Be careful, Nijino-san.”

“Yes.”

If Nijino-san fails, then it’ll be my turn next... For now, I just have to believe in her.

Harumi said a little prayer as she saw Yurika off. Taking Harumi’s advice to heart, Yurika snuck from cover to cover, carefully moving forward to get to Kanae.

“I’ll stay here...”

Harumi looked back at Koutarou and Maya’s battling it out. At the very least,

she could warn Yurika if Maya noticed.

Satomi-kun is strong... It's like he's the real Blue Knight...

As Harumi watched the battle, that thought snuck up on her. Harumi had some of Yurika's memories now, and a portion of those included Koutarou fighting. But something was different. He seemed much stronger now than in those memories. As Harumi was watching him, her eyes were drawn to the blue armor he was wearing and the knight's sword in his right hand.

Why am I so curious about those? And that crest engraved on his chestplate... it looks like it says "Theiamillis's Blue Knight." That's referring to Satomi-kun's friend Theiamillis-san, isn't it...?

Looking at Koutarou wearing that armor and holding that sword, Harumi grew more and more restless. Her feelings for Koutarou overflowed her heart. She knew she shouldn't just be sitting by and doing nothing. But at the same time, she didn't know what to do. Confused and unsettled, she intently watched the fight unfold between Koutarou and Maya. She was so focused that it didn't even dawn on her that the words engraved on Koutarou's breastplate were in an alien language.

The Blue Knight... Theiamillis's Blue Knight... Satomi-san... Koutarou-sama... What is this? I feel like I know something... But what exactly...? That sword... Is that Signaltin...?

As Harumi lost herself deeper and deeper in thought, a crest resembling a sword appeared on her forehead. When it began shining, all sorts of strange memories came flooding through Harumi's mind.

An old temple... A rusted sword... Satomi-kun and me... I revived the sword and gave it to Koutarou-sama... Is this a scene from the play? No, there was nothing like this in the script... Then what is this? Am I dreaming? Is it from one of Nijino-san's memories? Or is it really mine?

Each strange memory Harumi recalled only served to confuse her more. It all felt like it could be from the play, but something wasn't quite right. It was all too vivid. Unable to differentiate from the play and reality, Harumi was left at a loss.

That was when it happened.

“Oh crap!”

“You’re mine!”

The beam sword in Koutarou’s left hand didn’t activate properly and left him wide open in front of Maya. Not missing her chance, Maya thrust her blade at him.

“Satomi-kun! Satomi-kuuun!”

Harumi screamed, but that wouldn’t stop Maya. What Harumi needed was real power. A power strong enough to save Koutarou. If not, this would be the end. She would never be able to teach him how to knit a sweater.

But Harumi couldn’t do anything. She was helpless, and all she could do was sit there as Maya’s blade went straight for Koutarou’s heart. Each moment felt like an eternity to her. That was just how painful it was to watch.

“Noooooooooooo! Koutarou-samaaaaa!”

Unable to take it anymore, Harumi let out another scream.

“Harumi.”

Harumi heard a voice in her head, and the world seemed to stop around her. Nobody moved. Not Koutarou, not Maya, nor Yurika or Kanae. Harumi was the only that seemed to be aware of what was going on, but not even she could move.

“Who’s there?! Who are you?!”

Unable to shift her glance, Harumi tried calling out to the owner of the voice. But since she couldn’t move her lips, she simply ended up shouting in her mind.

“I am you... and you are me...”

That was when a lone girl appeared in front of Harumi. She felt like she was looking into a mirror. This girl looked just like her, except for the color of her hair and her outfit. She had long, silver tresses and was wearing a white dress that reminded Harumi of the costume she’d worn for the play.

“Wh-What do you mean?!”

“I’m sorry, but there’s no time to explain...”

The silver-haired Harumi shook her head apologetically.

“Harumi... do you love Koutarou-sama?”

She turned to look at Koutarou, who was still frozen.

“Of course! That’s why I have to hurry and do something! At this rate, Satomi-kun will die!”

Harumi desperately shouted in her head. With time stopped, Maya’s blade was just ominously hanging over Koutarou. His end was nigh.

“I see... So you wish to save him?”

“Yes! Don’t you?! Aren’t we the same?!”

“Yes, I wish to save him too... I love him just as much as you do...”

“Then help me! Two’s better than one! Quickly! Before Satomi-kun dies!”

“Certainly, I have the power to save him. However, I can’t do it myself. All I can do is entrust my powers and memories to someone and have them succeed my duty.”

The silver-haired Harumi looked down with a sad expression. That truth pained her.

“Then I’ll do it! If it will save Satomi-kun, I’ll do it!”

“If you succeed my duty, you will no longer be able to live a normal life. Knowing that, will you still do it?”

The silver-haired Harumi didn’t think anyone would be happy to cast aside their normal life and throw themselves into conflict and turmoil. Someone would have to have a very deep, compelling, emotional reason to do something like that.

“Even if that’s true, I’ll be with Satomi-kun, won’t I?!”

“Yes. Even if you’re separated by endless time and immeasurable distance—”

“Then I don’t care what happens to me! As long as I can walk alongside Satomi-kun!”

Harumi had that emotional reason. She wanted to protect the boy that was so dear to her. She wanted to teach him how to knit a sweater. And she was ready to throw away everything for that.

Harumi... so you too are...

The silver-haired Harumi knew Harumi's feelings painfully well. She felt like she was looking at her past self, and that was enough for her to make up her mind.

"...I understand. Harumi, I will entrust you with everything."

The silver-haired Harumi nodded and smiled. She felt like she could safely entrust her power to Harumi. The silver-haired Harumi's body was suddenly wreathed in a pure white light, and her figure gradually lost its form as she began to assimilate into the light.

"But... please don't forget. Your life is your own in the end. You mustn't be influenced by my memories. Just think of my memories... Yes, think of them as a product of getting into your role in the play."

"Play? Role? Wait, could you be—"

"I am you. I was you before you. And like you, I loved the same person."

Moments later, the silver-haired Harumi completely disappeared into the bright white light.

"Could you be the Silver—"

The light then channeled into Harumi's body.

"Goodbye, Harumi... We will probably never meet again. Live your own life... and if possible, stay with him this time... until the end..."

As the light finished pouring into her, Harumi felt a love as deep as her own for Koutarou.

Koutarou and Maya's battle was growing more intense and fierce by the second. Koutarou made up for the overwhelming difference in speed with skill and experience. Adding in the armor and the power of his weapons, he and Maya were well matched.



“This is bad, Veltlion! I can’t keep up with the errors the algorithm is spitting out anymore! Get some distance and let’s reset it!”

“She’s not the kind of opponent that would give me the time to do that!”

Koutarou shouted at Clan and called out to Maki in his mind.

“Aika-san, how much longer will the spell you cast on me last?!

“It’s just about to run out! Maya-sama should still have plenty of spells left though, so you probably won’t be able to block her attacks!”

“Great. I guess we’ll just have to keep at it then!”

Koutarou muttered to himself in a frustrated tone and swung Signaltin at Maya, but Maya quickly moved out of the sword’s way.

“What’s the matter, boy?! Your movements are getting duller!”

“Not yet!”

The beam sword won’t make it in time! I’ll just have to keep this up!

Beam sword in hand, Koutarou swung his left fist at Maya. It was such an unexpected attack that Maya was caught off guard and couldn’t block it. But she wasn’t about to let herself get punched for nothing. As she was falling backward, she swung her blades down and left large gouges across Koutarou’s armor.

“How are you going to repay me for this, boy? You’ve dented the area around my chest.”

“Alert Message: Damage to the breastplate has exceeded the 78 percent threshold. Subsequent attacks to the plate have a 90 percent chance of mortally wounding the wearer.”

Complaints from both Maya and his armor reached Koutarou’s ears at the same time.

Either Koutarou or Maya could win now if their next attack hit. Maya had used up a considerable amount of her mana, and her defenses had suffered for it. She no longer had any effective means of protecting herself from Signaltin. On the other hand, the defensive spells Maki had cast on Koutarou were spent

and his armor was reaching its limits. He wouldn't be able to take any more of Maya's spiritual energy infused attacks. With both sides only one hit away from defeat, speed and technique were of utmost importance now.

"What's the problem? Now you have an excuse to upgrade to bigger breasts."

"Hmph. I was worried that you wouldn't be able to go on, being out of breath and all, but if you can talk like that, then it looks like I can have a little more fun on our date."

Even with both of their defenses lowered, Koutarou was at a disadvantage. Unlike Maya, whose body was almost entirely a machine, Koutarou was flesh and bone beneath his armor. The longer the fight went on, the more exhausted he became. If things went on too long, the fatigue alone would take Koutarou out. And since she knew that, a confident smile remained plastered on Maya's lips.

Crap... Is finishing things now really my only option?

The system controlling his two swords was flashing warning after warning, and his armor blaring alerts. Moreover, Koutarou's energy was nearly spent. He wouldn't be able to go all out for much longer.

But... how do I catch her? I'm this powered up and I still can't keep up.

With her mechanical body, Maya's movements surpassed normal human limits. But Koutarou couldn't move any faster than his body would allow. If he was going to catch her, he was going to have to come up with a good idea. And fast. Maya wasn't going to give him time to think.

"I could do this all day! Let's have some more fun, my dear boy!"

"You should go easy on me! I just escaped from a date with your disciple!"

Maya's blades were wrapped in red light and cut a red trail through the air as she dashed forward with a smile.

"Satomi-kun, she has attack spells cast on both of her blades! Don't fall for her words! She's going for the finishing blow!"

"So she's going for it? In that case...!"

Koutarou heeded Maki's warning and changed his fighting style. Her

knowledge of Maya and magic had already saved Koutarou several times in this fight, and now her advice would give him his last shot of victory.

If she's going to finish me off, she'll be going for my damaged chestplate! And as long as I know where she's going to be attacking...!

"Haaaaaaaa!"

Koutarou swung Signaltin with all his might. The blade whistled through the air straight at Maya.

"Whoops! A little close there!"

Maya lowered her posture a little and dodged the incoming attack. But that was just what Koutarou was hoping for. His goal was to box Maya in and limit her mobility somewhat by swinging Signaltin strategically. If she was aiming for his chest, there weren't but so many ways she could come at him.

"Now it's my turn!"

Maya approached just like Koutarou had expected. Koutarou moved his left arm and stuck his beam sword in Maya's path. Now as long as the blade activated correctly, everything would work out according to plan.

But fortune is not always kind.

With a loud beep, the armor reported an error with the beam sword. Koutarou had overused the malfunctioning system, and now the sword wouldn't come on at all. The timing couldn't have been worse.

"Oh crap!"

"You're mine!"

With the beam sword failing to activate, Koutarou was left completely defenseless as Maya pressed her charge. The blade in her right hand gleamed with an ominous red light. Maya was aiming for Koutarou's chest where his armor was damaged.

"Bye-bye, boy! I loved you!"

Maya thrust her right hand forward. Koutarou steeled himself. Her blade would pierce his armor, and then his heart. It only seemed inevitable now.

“Nooooooooo! Satomi-kun! Satomi-kuuun!”

Koutarou could hear Maki screaming in his mind as he watched Maya’s bladed hand come for him. A dark joy illuminated the vicious grin on her face.

“Nooooooooooo!”

Koutarou could hear someone else scream, and in that moment, Signaltin suddenly began glowing brightly.

“Kyaaah!”

Maya was sent flying backward like she’d been repelled by the scream and the light of the sword.

“What?!”

However, it had no effect on Koutarou at all. He simply stood there bathed in the warm glow. He noticed that the light had a pulse... one similar to a heartbeat. Koutarou was suddenly reminded of someone.

“This is... Her Majesty’s...? Her Majesty Alaia’s...?”

He felt the same warmth he had in the past when Alaia controlled Signaltin’s mana herself. But that shouldn’t be possible. Alaia was an endless time and an immeasurable distance away. There was no way she could be here, yet her sword was radiating her warmth. It was like the feelings and wishes she’d put into the sword were still alive.

“Your Majesty!”

Guided by the light, Koutarou turned around. He saw a long girl standing across the room with long hair and a sword-shaped crest glowing on her forehead. At first glance, Koutarou thought the girl’s hair was silver.

“Alaia— No! Is that...?!”

But he quickly realized he was mistaken. The girl’s hair was black.

“Sakuraba... senpai?”

Though he was disappointed for a brief moment that it wasn’t Alaia, that feeling was quickly blown away by the surprise.

Why is Sakuraba-senpai controlling Signaltin?! And that crest on her forehead

is the same as Her Majesty's... What is going on?!

While Koutarou was too confused to say anything at all, Harumi managed to say a few words through her tears.

"Thank god... he's alive... Satomi-kun is alive..."

Harumi was overcome with joy and relief. Koutarou, who was just about to be taken from her, was alive and well. That's why she couldn't help crying.

"I'm glad... I'm so glad..."

"Sakuraba-senpai, what is this? How are you controlling Signaltin?!"

"I don't know... I don't know what is going on..."

Harumi shook her head at Koutarou's question. She was confused as well. All she really knew was Koutarou was about to be cut down, and she'd wanted to save him. She'd prayed desperately, and her prayers were answered when a light suddenly started overflowing from her body. It made Koutarou's sword glow and sent his enemy flying. This all came as a surprise to Harumi, and caught between her confusion and relief, she simply continued to cry.

"But... Satomi-kun... there's one thing... that I do know..."

Harumi looked at Koutarou with her teary eyes.

"And that is... that from now on, I will protect you."

But through the tears were a strong resolve and deep love. Driven by those, Harumi continued.

"And I will always be at your side..."

With those words, the crest on Harumi's forehead started glowing even brighter. And at the same time, Koutarou could feel Signaltin grow powerful again.

What is going on?! This isn't Her Majesty, but Sakuraba-senpai... It's like she can control Signaltin as well as Her Majesty... No, even better?!

Signaltin was radiating light brighter than anything Koutarou had ever seen.

"...So win, Satomi-kun! I will protect you! From any enemy and any trial!"

As those words left Harumi's mouth, all the confusion and hesitation vanished from Koutarou's mind.

There is no point in asking for who or why! If this rusted piece of scrap iron is still glowing like this, the oath sworn on it and all the feelings poured into it are still alive and well!

"Then I will use my life and everyone's powers to protect our future, Sakuraba-senpai!"

After being separated by endless time and immeasurable distance, the princess and her knight became an upperclassman and her junior, both connected by a sword and everything it stood for.

Once she regained her balance, Maya faced Koutarou without flinching, despite Signaltin clearly getting stronger.

"No matter how much mana you have, it doesn't mean a thing if you can't hit me!"

Maya attacked Koutarou, charging at him with every last ounce of speed she could muster. The mechanisms of her body were screeching and her system was giving her countless warnings, but Maya swung her blades in a wide arc as if to cut through it all.

Signaltin had gotten stronger, certainly, but it had started the battle in a weakened state. Now it was only about on par with what Maki had originally reported to Maya. Moreover, she was convinced Koutarou wouldn't be able to touch her. Maya had shed the limits of a human body, and she wasn't afraid of her flesh and blood opponent.

"...You misunderstand."

"What?!"

Signaltin easily blocked both of Maya's blades. Of course, Maya was moving far too fast for the sword itself to stop her. Instead, she was warded off with a barrier the sword had put up.

Why?! It's not that much more powerful than Maki had reported, so why can't

I break through this force field?!

Maya was stunned. The spiritual energy weapons she was using should have been able to break through magical defensives quite effectively. According to Maki's report on Signaltin's capabilities, it was no exception. So even if Signaltin had grown a little more powerful, her specialized weapons should still be able to get through its barrier. Yet in spite of that, her blades were no match for it. This was an unthinkable turn of events.

"Yeah, it's just that kind of sword."

"I see! That girl is doing something, isn't she?!"

Maya shifted her glance to Harumi, who was standing behind Koutarou. Harumi had her eyes closed and her hands clasped together as if she were praying. Maya could see a line of mana flowing from Harumi to Signaltin. She'd also received a report on Harumi after Maki's encounter with Koutarou. That's how she knew that Harumi could control some unknown form of magic. And it wasn't hard to imagine she was the one responsible for what had happened.

"...That's right."

Realizing that he wouldn't be able to hide it from Maya, Koutarou confirmed her suspicions.

"This sword was made to be used by two people. But we haven't unleashed that until now. That's why you only knew about half of its power. You misunderstood, Maya."

Koutarou would wield the sword itself while someone else wielded its mana. They could control the magic and release it for attacks or bursts of defensive power. They could change its properties depending on the opponent. They could even use the sword's surplus mana to cast magic and support the wielder. That way, the sword wielder and mana wielder would work together as one. That was Signaltin's true form—what Alaia had given to Koutarou to protect him.

"Impossible!"

"Go on, Satomi-kun! Do whatever you want! I'll keep up with you!"

“So if you think the sword’s power only just got stronger, then—”

Listening to Harumi’s voice being conveyed through the sword, Koutarou casually swung Signaltin at Maya. When he did, the mana being used to protect him changed shape and increased his attack range. It altered itself based on Maya’s movements, making it harder for her to dodge. It had also been given an electric charge so it would cause the most damage possible to her artificial body.

“Kyaaaaah!”

The strike broke through Maya’s defensive magic and shocked her badly. The impact was terrific, throwing her to the ground as she twitched.

“That’s what you get.”

Koutarou stopped his attack there, but Harumi didn’t. She started incanting something in High Ancient Forthorthian.

“Gather, spirits of the wind! Gather as an arm and destroy my enemy! Roar! Air Sledgehammer!”

At Harumi’s command, Signaltin’s surplus mana formed a giant hammer of air that descended on the collapsed Maya.

“H-How is this even possible?! This is completely different from before!”

Maya scrambled to get out of the way in time. She just barely managed to avoid the attack thanks to her superhuman speed. Without it, this would have been the end of the fight.

“I’m sorry, Satomi-kun! I was a little too slow!”

“No, that’s great, Sakuraba-senpai!”

Koutarou smiled and readied his sword. He knew the real reason why Harumi’s attack had missed. Even though Maya’s body was mostly machinery, Harumi was reluctant to attack someone. She hesitated just enough that Maya had time to get away. But that didn’t bother Koutarou. Fighting didn’t suit Harumi, after all. Koutarou felt the same way about her that he did Yurika.

“Leave the attacking to me! You just focus on support, Senpai!”

“Okay, I understand!”

Koutarou charged forward towards Maya. As she got back to her feet, she changed her blade weapons into guns and aimed for Harumi.

“Then I’ll just do this! That girl is your Achilles heel!”

Unlike Harumi, Maya didn’t hesitate to pull the trigger. She fired a spray of bullets at the young girl who was still standing there like she was praying.

“Protection from Soul Energy! Please help too, Encyclopedia!”

Two barriers suddenly appeared between Harumi and the barrage of bullets. Yurika had cast a special ward to protect Harumi from spiritual energy, and used the legendary staff to create another to defend from physical attacks. Between the two barriers, Maya’s bullets were completely blocked.

“Are you okay, Sakuraba-senpai?!”

“Thank you, Nijino-san!”

“Satomi-san, I’ll protect Sakuraba-senpai! Don’t worry!”

Yurika didn’t have enough mana to face Maya herself anymore, but she could still cast defensive and support spells. She’d secured Encyclopedia and Kanae now, so she was planning on using her powers to protect Harumi from here on out.

“Yurika, I’ll leave that to you!”

“Yes!”

Yurika always came through when she was needed most. That’s why Koutarou believed in her.

“Curse you, Yurikaaaaa!”

Not only had Yurika stopped her attack, but it was like Koutarou was trying to throw their relationship in her face. Maya was overwhelmed by intense fury and jealousy. Being treated as inferior to Yurika was unbearably humiliating for her.

“I’ll kill you... All of you! I’ll kill you all!”

Her fury and jealousy boiled over into hatred, and she attacked in a dark rage.

She no longer looked anything like the master of manipulation known as Dark Navy.

Maya-sama...

Maki's feelings as she watched over the battle were quite complex.

I'm sure I was once like that too...

Seeing Maya like this saddened Maki. It also made her reflect on herself and the way she used to be. So Maki gathered those emotions and made a wish with them.

"Satomi-kun, please don't kill Maya-sama..."

"Don't worry. I understand. She's still your master, right?"

Blinded by her rage, Maya was attacking carelessly. She was also all alone. Koutarou, on the other hand, remained calm and was fighting with the help of his friends. The conclusion of this battle had already been decided.

"Thank you, Satomi-kun..."

"Heh, don't thank me. I'm just a half-assed soldier that can't kill people on my own."

In order to strike the decisive blow, Koutarou raised Signaltin above his head. He focused on his left hand and used Kiriha's gauntlet to create a fireball. He was using Sanae's spirit sight to read Maya's movements, and he was being protected by Ruth and Theia's armor, Clan's tactical support, and Yurika and Maki's magic. And even now, Shizuka was protecting his home.

Ten versus one... Sanae said allies of justice have the right to gang up on their foes, but... this might be overdoing it a little...

Koutarou swung down his sword at Maya, aiming for her arm. Signaltin cut straight through Maya's blade and chopped off her right arm.

"Guah!"

While she was reeling from the attack, Koutarou launched the fireball produced by his left gauntlet. It exploded right in front of Maya and sent her flying.

“Ugh, d-damn it... To think I’d be bested like this by anyone other than Nana!”

After slamming into the ground, Maya used her remaining left arm to try and pick herself up. The plating covering her torso had been destroyed, exposing the machinery behind it. Maya had taken enough damage now that she couldn’t move properly.

“Checkmate,” Koutarou said as he lowered his sword. “Just give up and go home.”

“...Kill me. If you don’t, I’ll just come after your life over and over again.”

Maya’s body was seriously compromised, but the hatred in her eyes was as fiery as ever. She shot a bitter, livid glare at Koutarou like he was a lover that had betrayed her.

“I bet you will...”

Koutarou was aware of the risk, but he couldn’t kill Maya. To make his intentions clear, he returned the sword to its sheath. Maya took it as an insult and only grew more enraged.

“You’ll regret this!”

“Yeah. But I’m full of regrets. That’s the kind of life I’ve lived, so I’m used to it.”

With that, Koutarou smiled wryly and turned towards a nearby concrete pillar.

“And are the two of you hiding over there going to fight me too?”

Koutarou looked like he was talking to the pillar, but two more magical girls stepped out from behind it—Green and Crimson. However, neither of them looked like they were preparing to fight.

“Are you joking? If I was gonna fight a monster like you, I’d have to make proper preparations first.”

“We only came to save Maya-san.”

“I see. Then take her and leave.”

Koutarou couldn’t sense any intent to attack from either their words or from

their auras. That's why he took several steps back let them pass. The two girls ran over to Maya, glaring daggers at Koutarou as they passed by him.

"Are you okay, Maya-san?"

"I'll lend you my shoulder."

"...Yes..."

Maya somehow managed to stand up with the help of the two girls. But even then, she was still completely focused on Koutarou rather than her supporting allies who had come to rescue her. She couldn't understand or admit it, but that was exactly why she'd lost.

"Boy, what is your name?"

"Koutarou."

"Koutarou... the next time we meet... I'll kill you for sure with my own two hands..."

"If that's what you want, then don't come alone."

"Hmph."

Maya turned her face away from Koutarou and left with the support of Green and Crimson. The three of them disappeared into the darkness of the far side of the abandoned building.

"Veltlion, are you okay with just letting her go like that?"

Clan's communication device displayed her concerned face.

"Clan, is the person you want to make a vassal the kind of guy that would kill someone who's already helpless?"

"Of course not! I'm just worried for your safety! I was going to suggest capturing her!"

"Just have faith in me. That I'll win next time too. That's what I've decided to do."

Koutarou had told Maki they had a bright future ahead of them, and he'd decided to put his faith in his own words.

“Jeez... You don’t understand how women feel *at all.*”

“I hear that a lot.”

As Koutarou laughed, a space-time hole appeared in front of him.

“Clan?”

“I’m retrieving Signaltin. Theiamillis-san and the others are on their way to you right now.”

“That’s no good.”

Understanding what Clan meant, Koutarou pushed Signaltin into the hole. The hole then closed up and vanished, taking the sword with it.

“Now just do what you have to do before Theiamillis-san arrives.”

“Sorry for always making you help me with this stuff.”

“You could say that again. When exactly did I get assigned this role? Jeez...”

The hologram of Clan puffed out her cheeks in a pout. Seeing that expression, Koutarou chuckled and honestly stated how he felt.

“Well, that would be around the time you became a worthy princess.”

“S-Stupid!”

Clan’s face turned red and she shouted at Koutarou before abruptly cutting the call.

“I made her angry again... Even though I was trying to praise her...”

Koutarou smiled bitterly as he looked at the now blank hologram. And after ending the call on his end too, he decided to heed Clan’s advice and take care of things.

“Now then... where should I start? There’s not much time...”

Before Theia arrived, Koutarou had some explaining to do to the several people looking at him.

A Day of Beginnings

Saturday, April 24th

Later that night, eleven people gathered at room 106. With that many people in such a tiny apartment, it was hard to even move.

Next to Koutarou at the tea table were Maki and Clan, who both seemed to be a little uncomfortable. Across from them were Theia, Ruth and Kiriha, who were all drinking tea. And on either side of them were Harumi and Yurika, and Shizuka, Sanae and Kanae respectively.

“Koutarou, should I really be here?”

“Yeah, Satomi-kun. Just a while ago, I was everyone’s enemy...”

“Just shut up and sit down, you two.”

Koutarou wanted to properly introduce Maki and Clan to the group. They’d both allied themselves with Koutarou, but because of their histories, they kept their distance from the other girls in room 106. Koutarou wasn’t pleased with that arrangement, so he thought he’d take this chance to try and set things right.

“So... I’ll start by introducing them. This is Clan...”

Koutarou patted Clan on the head a few times with his right hand when he said her name. Uncomfortable in this situation, she had her head hung low. She was extremely self-conscious of the fact that she was actively trying to kill Theia and Koutarou just a few months ago. And so she just sat there, staring down at the tea table like she was frozen in place.

“And this is Aika Maki-san.”

Next, Koutarou patted Maki on the head with his left hand. Maki was practically in the same boat as Clan. She was all tensed up and had a stiff expression on her face. She knew good and well what had happened between Maya and the Higashihongan family, so she didn’t dare look at either Sanae or

Kanae. She was uneasy just sitting at the table with them, and clung to Koutarou's sleeve for comfort.

"Clan and I went missing during the play, if you all remember. We reluctantly had to work together to get home, and we gradually stopped feeling any hostility toward each other. Ever since then, she's secretly been helping me. Like the incident with Sanae, for example... Hey, don't just sit there and clam up. Say something too, Clan."

"Say something? L-Like what?"

Clan couldn't come up with anything to say. She knew that she couldn't get friendly with everyone after what she'd tried to do to them.

"Like your name or something."

"Clariossa Daora Forthorthe..."

"I can't believe you literally just said your name."

"Y-You're the one who told me to say it!"

Clan was so nervous that it was all she could do to give her name to everyone, but her interactions with Koutarou told them plenty about her personality and the kind of relationship they had.

"Well, anyways, as for Aika-san... You all know about Aika-san, right? She's our classmate, after all. But as it turns out, up until today, she was actually an evil magical girl."

"..."

When Koutarou revealed her identity, Maki held her breath and grabbed on to Koutarou's sleeve even tighter. She knew it was bad.

"Aika-san became an evil magical girl because the woman who saved her was one too, but in the end, being evil just didn't suit her. Aika-san saved me. And at heart, she's a good, honest girl. She was only with the evil magical girls in the first place because she had nowhere else to go and she felt like she was paying her master back for saving her."

"...Satomi-kun, I'm going home. I don't belong here..."

Unable to endure the tension, Maki tugged on Koutarou's sleeve and offered to leave. Koutarou in return put his hand on Maki's shoulder and shook his head.

"Just sit down right there. If you run away now, where will you go?"

"Th-That's..."

"You have to start your new life. You get that, right?"

"Yes..."

Koutarou persuaded her to sit back down and not leave. She had chosen her life as Aika Maki over her life as Dark Navy. That's why she no longer had a place in Darkness Rainbow. But in order for her to live as herself, she had to face her past.

"We're pretending that Aika-san has been captured, and we'll keep her as our 'hostage' until things calm down. If we don't, they'll come after her and finish her off as a traitor. But in reality, she'll just be continuing as our classmate."

After saying that much, Koutarou looked around at everyone in the room before continuing.

"For my sake... I know this might be a difficult thing to ask of you considering the circumstances, but I want you to get along with these two. Please."

Koutarou put his hands on the tea table and lowered his head. Maki and Clan followed suit and bowed their heads as well. They were both as stiff as could be. Their time of reckoning had come.

"There's something I want to say."

Theia raised her hand. Seeing that, Clan's face turned pale.

"Me too!"

"I have something to say too..."

Sanae and Yurika raised their hands as well. Maki's face went as pale as Clan's.

These girls were going to ask them to pay for their crimes. Though they were fearful, they braced themselves for what was to come. They both knew they

deserved this, and it was a necessary part of moving on.

“Go ahead.”

After raising his head, Koutarou urged the three who had raised their hands to speak. They all put their hands down on the tea table and leaned forward as they spoke.

“Does that mean that Clan will be included in the cleaning duty rotation schedule for the apartment?!”

“Hey, Maki! You’re a magical girl too, right?! Let’s make a new outfit for you to match ours!”

“Satomi-san, living in the wardrobe any longer is impossible! Now that Maki-chan is joining, I want to live *outside* the wardrobe!”

“...Huh?”

“...What?”

However, what the three girls had to say left Clan and Maki absolutely stunned. They both raised their heads in shock and stared at the other girls.

“Well, I guess she would be.”

“All right! Now I only have to clean once a week!”

“Isn’t that great, Your Highness?”

“Satomi-san, this is the perfect time to let me move out of the wardrobe and into the apartment!”

“That’s a no.”

“Why?!”

“I can’t let Aika-san stay in the wardrobe.”

“Mama! I need drawing paper!”

“Of course, dear. Maki-chan, that’s what’s happening, so are you free next weekend?”

Not one of them had an unkind thing to say to Clan or Maki. Not Theia, Yurika, Sanae, Kanae, or any of the other girls. If anything, they were welcoming.

“Aika-san, if you have nowhere to stay, why don’t you live with me? It’s convenient since it’s just upstairs.”

“Isn’t this wonderful, Clan-sama? Now I don’t have to sneak around when I come to see you.”

“Wh... Why...?”

“Why isn’t anyone saying anything...?”

This turn of events confused both Maki and Clan. Despite being their former enemies, everyone seemed ready and willing to accept them. Not understanding why or what was going on, the two confused girls sat there with blank looks on their faces.

“It’s because most of us were enemies at one point.”

Kiriha was the one to give them their answer. She then tilted her head a little to the side and gave Clan and Maki a warm, friendly smile. She was especially glad to see Clan after eleven long years.

“If we were to blame you for that, we’d have to treat ourselves the same way. And we can’t have that.”

At first, everyone in room 106 had attacked each other. They’d overcome that to get where they were now. They had no room to criticize Clan and Maki, nor did they want to. As long as they’d both had a change of heart, everything was and would be find. What was important to the girls and Koutarou was the here and now, not what had happened in the past.

“But Kii, even then—”

“Of course, that’s not the only reason.”

When Clan called her “Kii,” Kiriha’s expression became even gentler.

“Satomi Koutarou vouched for you, and we all believe in him. We trust him implicitly... Isn’t that the same for you two?”

“That’s...”

“Yes, it is.”

Maki was still dubious, but Clan’s expression softened. Having an old friend

there helped a lot.

“Theiamillis-san, I formally apologize for my actions up until today.”

Clan properly bowed towards Theia, and in return, Theia nodded with a smile.

“I accept that apology. Don’t worry about it anymore. We may be rivals, but we can reach further heights by competing with respect for each other rather than hate.”

“Theiamillis-san... You’re right! And I won’t lose!”

“Heh, that’s the spirit. I won’t lose either!”

Clan and Theia had a laugh together. Seeing that, Maki glanced at Yurika and the Higashihongan mother and daughter.

“Satomi-kun.”

“Yes.”

Noticing that, Koutarou and Harumi tried to get Yurika and Maki to face each other. Yurika only seemed confused, but Maki suddenly tried to make a run for it. Koutarou had to stop her by grabbing her with both hands. After that, Maki finally gave in and quietly began apologizing.

“I’m sorry, Nijino Yurika. I’ve done a lot of terrible things to you.”

“It’s fine, Maki-chan. After all, if our saviors were reversed, I might be the one apologizing to you...”

Yurika accepted Maki’s apology. Nana had been the one to save Yurika, but that had just been luck. After seeing how Maki had changed for herself, Yurika felt almost no hostility towards her. The only thing bothering her was that Maki was still an official member of Darkness Rainbow. But she knew the circumstances were complicated and she couldn’t give up her title right away, so she decided not to bring it up right now.

“As for Kanae-san and her daughter, it seems my master did some horrible things to you...”

“That’s not your fault, Maki-chan.”

“Mama, did something happen in the past?”

“It did, but that’s all been resolved and has nothing to do with Maki-chan.”

“Hmm... Okay.”

“Thank you...”

Maki bowed her head to Kanae again.

And like that, Clan and Maki were accepted by the girls of room 106, and took their first steps into their new lives.

Though his worries about Clan and Maki had been resolved, there was still one more problem bothering Koutarou. And that was the matter of what to do with Sakuraba Harumi, who had been dragged into the middle of all this.

Harumi had suddenly learned how to control magic and Signaltin’s power. But not even she knew how or why. To her, it seemed like a side effect of fusing with Yurika. And without any other explanation, Koutarou and the others figured that was probably the case too. Yurika admitted that something strange had happened during the fusion, and the space-time quakes that Blue Knight had detected in the area at the time corroborated at least that much.

That meant that Harumi was now the third magician after Yurika and Maki. She was also capable of controlling Signaltin, though Koutarou asked that part be kept secret from the girls who didn’t already know. But with those powers, Harumi had become a somewhat unique assistant to Koutarou and the others. She wanted to use her newfound powers to help everyone, but one person in particular objected.

“I’m against this. Sakuraba-senpai has a weak constitution, and she’s not very athletic. It’s far too dangerous for her to always be with us.”

Koutarou was worried about Harumi’s wellbeing. It was clear that magic would put a strain on her body, and he didn’t like the idea of Harumi doing any fighting.

“I think it’d be better if we only let her help on occasion.”

For Koutarou, the ideal scenario was continuing to leave Harumi out of any trouble that came up.

“But Satomi-kun... I can’t just do nothing after learning about this!”

But just the same as Koutarou was worried for her wellbeing, she was worried about his safety. And that extended to Yurika and the other invaders. They were special to her. They’d all played a big part in the plays and helped her come out of her shell. She didn’t feel like she’d be who she was now without them, and she wanted to repay that favor by doing whatever she could to help them out.

“You’re all my precious friends! Please don’t leave me out! Please!”

That was the real reason she wanted to stand by Koutarou and the others. She wanted to help the people who’d helped her. She wanted to be with her friends. She wanted to be with the boy she loved. She knew better than anyone else just how lonely a life of just watching from a distance was.

“Sakuraba-senpai...”

Harumi’s earnest appeal was enough to make Koutarou waver. He wanted to keep her out of things for the sake of her health, but at the same time, he was worried that he might just be trying to keep her at a distance. He was torn. He didn’t know what the right answer was.

“...Satomi-kun, can I say something?”

As Koutarou was deep in thought, Maki raised her hand and asked for permission to speak.

“What is it, Aika-san?”

“Based on what happened today, chances are that Sakuraba-san will be a target for Darkness Rainbow. And in that case, keeping her close might be the best way to keep her safe.”

“That’s...”

Maki’s opinion was perfectly logical. Keeping Harumi at a distance would make it much harder to protect her. And with a clear threat like Darkness Rainbow around, they’d need to keep a close eye on her.

“But even then...”

Koutarou still couldn’t make up his mind. Like Yurika, fighting didn’t suit Harumi. If possible, he wanted her to live a normal, peaceful life.

“Koutarou, do you hate Harumi?” Sanae asked.

Koutarou shook his head.

“Of course not. I just want her to be safe.”

With an uncharacteristically serious expression, Sanae pointed her right index finger at Koutarou and spoke her mind.

“You know what, Koutarou? Protecting things that are precious to you is something you should do yourself. Keeping your precious things at a distance is one of your bad habits.”

“She’s right, Satomi-san! Let’s just make Sakuraba-senpai promise not to force herself, and then all of us can protect her together!”

Yurika agreed with Sanae. And it wasn’t just her, either. Everyone in the room was in agreement. They all shared the same feelings Harumi did. That’s why they felt she shouldn’t be kept out of things just because of her weak constitution.

“Satomi-kun, please!”

Harumi looked Koutarou right in the eye and pleaded with him.

“Hahh...”

And with that, Koutarou finally changed his mind.

“I understand. Sakuraba-senpai, please try to stay with us whenever possible.”

“Thank you, Satomi-kun!”

“However! You have to promise not to force yourself to fight if a battle erupts.”

“I understand! I promise!”

Tears of joy started welling in Harumi’s eyes as she smiled brightly.

Like that, another three invaders were welcome into room 106, which reached a previously unprecedented population density that evening. With everyone and Kanae in the apartment, they were all grateful it wasn’t summer

yet.

However, the room stayed crowded until after dinner. Once everyone had eaten, the invaders each took their leave one after another. They all had their own business to attend to, whether it was starting work on their new lives or more personal matters, so the apartment slowly cleared out. Only Koutarou and Yurika remained now.

“This room feels so much bigger now that everyone’s left...”

Koutarou muttered as he looked at the front door and sat down at the tea table. Since it was just the two of them, his quiet muttering reached Yurika’s ears.

“Even though I don’t think like that at all when everyone is here...”

“Satomi-san...”

Koutarou’s figure looked awfully lonely to Yurika. She felt like she had to do something to cheer him up, so she decided to follow her heart and slowly approached him from behind.

“Take that.”

After positioning herself right behind Koutarou, Yurika got down on her knees and used her hands to cover his eyes. It looked just like she was hugging him.

“Yurika?”

“Heehee... Say, Satomi-san...”

Yurika whispered into Koutarou’s ear. Her voice was calm and gentle. It was just the two of them, and there was practically no distance between them.

“...Did I leave too?”

“Of course not. I just can’t see you.”

Koutarou could hear Yurika’s quiet voice in his ear. Her hands were pressed against his face, and her body against his back. Though he couldn’t see her, he knew for certain she was there.

“I think that’s true for everyone else too. Even if you can’t see them, their feelings are still around.”

“...Yurika...”

When Yurika pointed it out, Koutarou realized she was right. Though he couldn’t see them, he wasn’t alone. It was comforting.

“Heehee.”



But even then, all he could hear was Yurika laughing and all he could feel was her warmth. Her voice was so gentle and calm that he wanted to see her face right now. But at the same time, he just wanted to stay like he was. It was a strange feeling. Something he hadn't felt before.

I see... So this is the real Yurika...

This was Yurika's true nature, which was normally hidden by all kinds of things. It wasn't until the two of them had spent time alone together that Koutarou could see it. It made it easier to accept certain things about her that had been difficult before.

"Yurika."

"Yes?"

"You... really have been a magical girl all this time, haven't you?"

And that included the fact that Yurika was a magical girl. It wasn't until now that he was finally able to come to terms with it.

"Yes... I'm sorry for hiding it..."

"Don't worry. I understand why."

"Satomi-san..."

Koutarou wanted to protect his everyday life with Yurika as a normal girl, and she had gone along with that. That's why he had no intention of being upset with her for keeping her identity a secret. In fact he felt quite the opposite.

"Thank you, Yurika."

"Yeah..."

As Yurika responded to Koutarou, she gently pressed her hands up against his face. Just doing that was enough to convey how she felt. She then pulled her hands away and wiped away her tears. She wanted to keep her hands on his face a little longer, but crying made that difficult. After she dried her tears, she put her hands on Koutarou's shoulders. And as if waiting for that, Koutarou started speaking.

"But... even if that's the truth, I won't admit it. To me, you're just my

classmate and a stupid, cosplay-loving freeloader.”

That was Koutarou’s wish. He wanted to think of her as a normal friend and not a magical girl. That was something he could only say when the mood was like this and when they weren’t looking at each other.

“Satomi-san...”

With her hands still on Koutarou’s shoulders, Yurika started crying again. But she didn’t move to wipe her eyes. No, these were warm tears of joy. She felt like it would be a waste not to treasure them.

“I... I would prefer it that way too...”

Yurika wanted to succeed Nana and become a splendid magical girl. But at the same time, she wanted to be a normal girl when she was with Koutarou. She wanted to spend her everyday life with him. She felt like that would give her the courage to overcome anything. And in that sense, Yurika and Koutarou’s wishes were the same.

“That’s why... I’ll work my hardest to make sure you don’t have to be a magical girl.”

If an enemy appeared, they would work together to drive them away. If there was a mission that had to be accomplished, he would help her finish it as soon as possible. He wanted to limit the amount of time that Yurika had to spend being a magical girl.

“Yeah...”

Overwhelmed with emotion, Yurika wrapped her arms around Koutarou and tightly embraced him. Right now she could understand how Sanae felt. As close as they were, Yurika still wanted to be closer to him, so much so that she would enter his body if she could. But because she wasn’t a ghost, she just hugged him tightly instead. She didn’t know any other way to convey her feelings.

“So you just take it easy and cosplay to your heart’s content...”

“I’ll believe in you... Satomi-san...”

In the end, Yurika was a cosplayer. She put her life as a magical girl behind her, and continued to cosplay, go to school, and live with Koutarou as a normal

girl. That's what both Koutarou and Yurika wanted. It was the future they both wished for.

And the two of them stayed just the way they were for a while. Having come to such a deep understanding about their feelings, they felt like they didn't need anything else.

Wait... at this rate, Satomi-san and I...

But at some point, Yurika's heart started beating faster. She felt like her heart was telling her it was time to advance their relationship past just supporting each other and become lovers.

We might... be able to kiss... If I get a little closer...

Yurika loved Koutarou, and she was convinced that Koutarou treasured her in return. That's why she felt like they would be able to move to the next stage if she did this. Her heart was screaming for her to take the next step.

"Yurika, it's about time..."

"Y-Yeah..."

Yurika thought her heart might stop altogether when Koutarou whispered those words. She thought it meant that he felt the same way. She was over the moon.

If I died right now, I'd die happy...

Koutarou removed Yurika's arms from around him and forcibly pulled her closer. Yurika didn't resist. She simply entrusted herself to Koutarou. Her heart was racing as she imagined what was to come. She was at the very peak of happiness.

"Grab your pen. We're starting."

"...Huh?"

But sadly for Yurika, things didn't play out the way she'd hoped.

Koutarou forced her to sit down next to him and put a pen in her hand. Surprised by this, Yurika looked up at him in confusion. When she did, she saw him holding a large stack of books.

“W-Wait, Satomi-san, isn’t it a little early for that?!”

Yurika started panicking. Unable to process the growing gap between her dreams and reality, she desperately tried to stop Koutarou.

“If anything, it’s too late! We’re going to go over how to calculate volume tonight! You don’t have any time to spare!”

However, Koutarou was ruthless. He’d already killed the mood from just a moment ago. To Yurika, it looked like the demon tutor from this morning had returned.

“That’s not what I meant! Why can’t we just take a little more time to confirm our bond and love?! Physical contact is important, you know?!”

Yurika thought she was only being reasonable. There was a proper order to these things.

“We can do that all we want later! But now’s the only time you can study! We’re already behind schedule, Yurika! Don’t you understand?!”

Koutarou immediately and thoroughly rejected her proposal. He wasn’t a man who knew how to hold back.

“You’re the one doesn’t understand!”

Yurika knew how the rest of the night would go now, but she refused to accept it. She slammed her fists into the table and tearfully objected.

“Normally this is where things get more romantic! Where we gaze into each others eyes! Hug and kiss! This is wrong, this is completely wrong!”

“Shut it and get to work! You don’t have any rights until your grades go up!”

“Noooooooo, I don’t want thiiiiiss!”

She was heartbroken now, but Yurika would later look back on this and remember it fondly as the day her wonderful everyday life began.

While Yurika was spending another miserable study night with Koutarou, Kiriha and Theia were staring at each other inside the maintenance area of Blue Knight’s hangar. They were in the middle of some kind of work.

“There’s no mistaking it. This is without a doubt spiritual energy technology.”

“You’re sure?”

“Yes. What’s more, this is even more advanced than the currently produced models. It’s not just a cheap knockoff someone was able to produce.”

The two of them were analyzing Maya’s severed machine arm, and they’d just now gotten their results.

“Which means that it’s a prototype developed by the People of the Earth?”

“It must be. All of the parts are high quality, even where it’s not necessary. This is the hallmark of a test model.”

Maya’s artificial arm had been made using the People of the Earth’s technology. On top of that, it was a cutting-edge design, far surpassing that of Karama and Korama. It seemed to suggest only one thing.

“So the magicians are close enough with the radicals that they were given such an expensive prototype... This sure is problematic...”

“Since Maya was behind the incident eleven years ago, it seems evident they’ve been working together since then.”

Kiriha had never seen spiritual energy technology in the shape of a human limb. That meant it was developed in secret, likely by the faction that opposed her. In other words, the People of the Earth’s radical faction and Darkness Rainbow were working together.

When Kiriha was kidnapped as a child by Maya, she supposedly had some kind of spiritual energy technology then as well. Kiriha had only recently learned that from Kanae and Yurika, but it meant that the radical faction and Darkness Rainbow had been working together for at least eleven years now.

“What do you make of the situation, Kiriha?”

“Considering the fact that they’ve given this prototype to the magicians, they must already have the data they need for mass production. I wouldn’t be surprised if they’re being manufactured already. And if they gave this to the magicians, they probably received something equally valuable in return.”

“If that’s the case, your people will have to rethink your strategy.”

“Indeed. I need to report this to the chief right away.”

Mortified, Kiriha gritted her teeth.

I just hope I’ll make it in time.

If the radical faction was supplying Darkness Rainbow with their technology, it was safe to assume that Darkness Rainbow was reciprocating. It seemed highly likely then that radical faction had obtained the power of magic without Kiriha and the others finding out about it. Worse yet, it was likely powerful magic. And if the radicals used that newfound power against the conservatives who had no knowledge of magic whatsoever, they wouldn’t stand a chance. Kiriha and her allies would have to come up with countermeasures before the radical faction took action.

Their conversation on the matter, however, was interrupted when Theia’s bracelet started vibrating. Theia raised her arm slightly and opened a holographic window. She was getting a report that she’d received communications from Forthorthe.

“What is it?”

“I’ve received a message from my home planet.”

Theia walked up to a nearby terminal and called up the long-distance communications system.

A concealed line using gravitational waves? That’s top-tier encryption... What’s going on?

Getting a bad feeling about the level of security used on the incoming message, Theia opened it warily. A mere moment later, her eyes shot wide open.

“Wh-What?!”

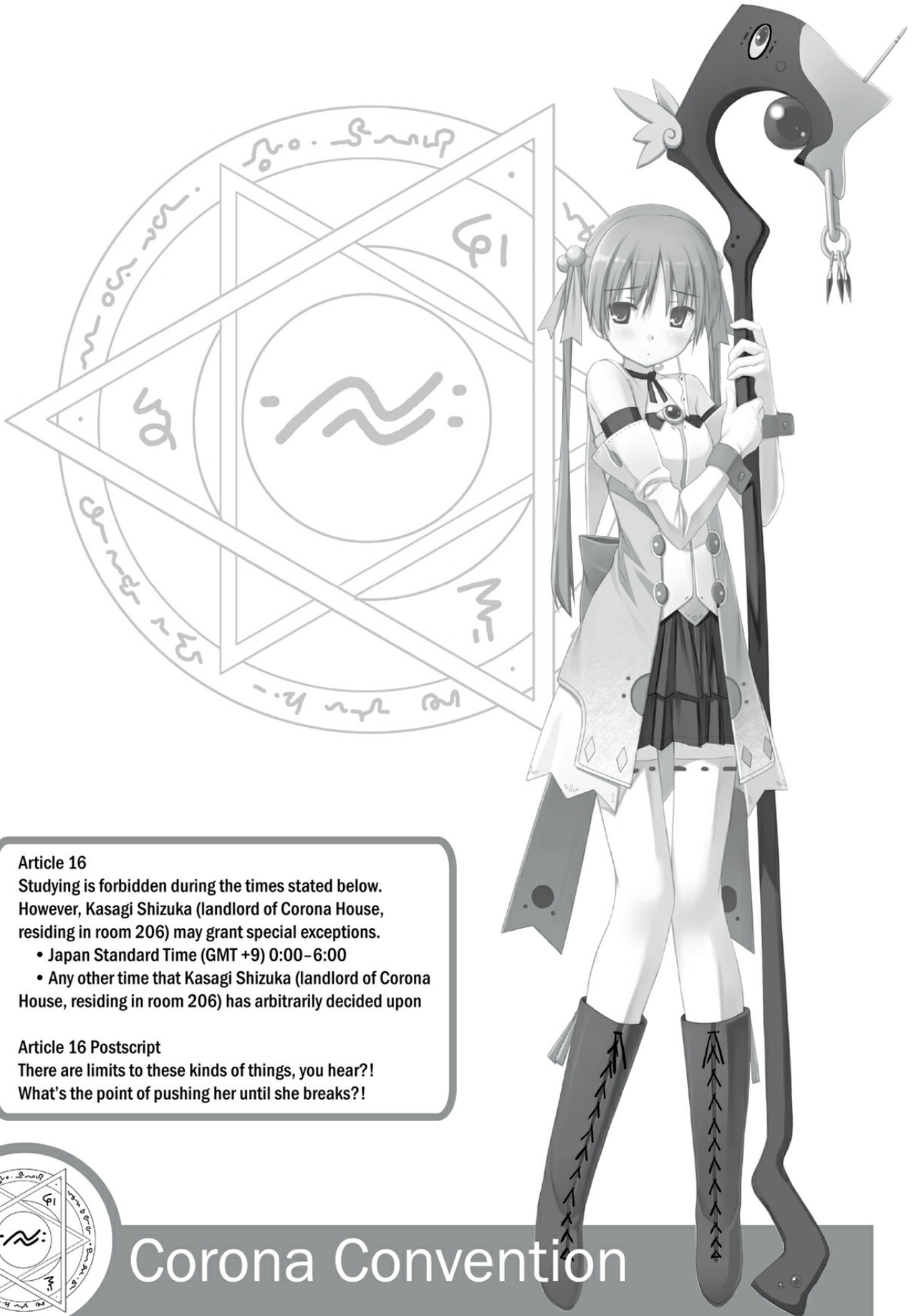
“What’s wrong?”

Worried after seeing Theia’s reaction, Kiriha ran up to her. Theia started to explain the contents of the message in a fluster.

“My mother... It seems my mother has fallen ill!”

“Oh dear!”

That was why so many security precautions had been taken with the message. After all, it was delivering the news that the current leader of the Holy Forthorthe Galactic Empire, Empress Elfaria, had fallen ill.



Article 16
Studying is forbidden during the times stated below. However, Kasagi Shizuka (landlord of Corona House, residing in room 206) may grant special exceptions.

- Japan Standard Time (GMT +9) 0:00–6:00
- Any other time that Kasagi Shizuka (landlord of Corona House, residing in room 206) has arbitrarily decided upon

Article 16 Postscript
There are limits to these kinds of things, you hear?!
What's the point of pushing her until she breaks?!

Corona Convention

New! May 1st, 2010

Afterword

Happy New Year! It's the author, Takehaya.

This time I have safely delivered volume 12, where the magicians become more active and the story's structure starts to change once more.

This series has now been around for four years, and I am deeply moved by that. I planned to make this into a long story from the very beginning, but for fear of it being cancelled early on, I developed it in a way that it could easily wrap up after the third or sixth volume.

In the three volume version, volumes 2 and 3 would have continued very much so in the spirit of the first one. It would end without any foreshadowing and before any serious plotlines were developed.

In the six volume version, volume 2 would have been the same, and then there would have been a feature volume for each invader to cover all of their stories. And all foreshadowing before that would be unburied.

But because of all this uncertainty, I had to write the first volume in a way that would work with all three versions. Since the characters' backgrounds and motivations differed between versions, trying to write their characters got a bit dicey at times.

Fortunately, thanks to the support of my readers, this series has been able to flourish. And thanks to that, the restrictions on the story were eased by the third volume, and then once again with the seventh. That made it easy for me to start gradually using foreshadowing. As a result, it's actually now much easier for me to write than it was at the outset. Now I can just write about whatever I want while making use of what's been foreshadowed. But all of this groundwork was necessary since I tried to write a long story without having much previous experience. So in short, it's my own fault (ha!).

Whoops, looks like I've already run out of space for the afterword, so I'll leave it at this. Though things might have gotten easier, I'm still striving to write

something that lives up to everyone’s expectations, so I hope you can continue to support me.

Well then, let us meet in the afterword of volume 13.

January 2013

Takehaya

P.S. - Though it might be a little late, I’ve made a Twitter account.

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Invaders of the Rokujouma!? Volume 12

by Takehaya

Translated by Warnis Edited by Morgan Dreher

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