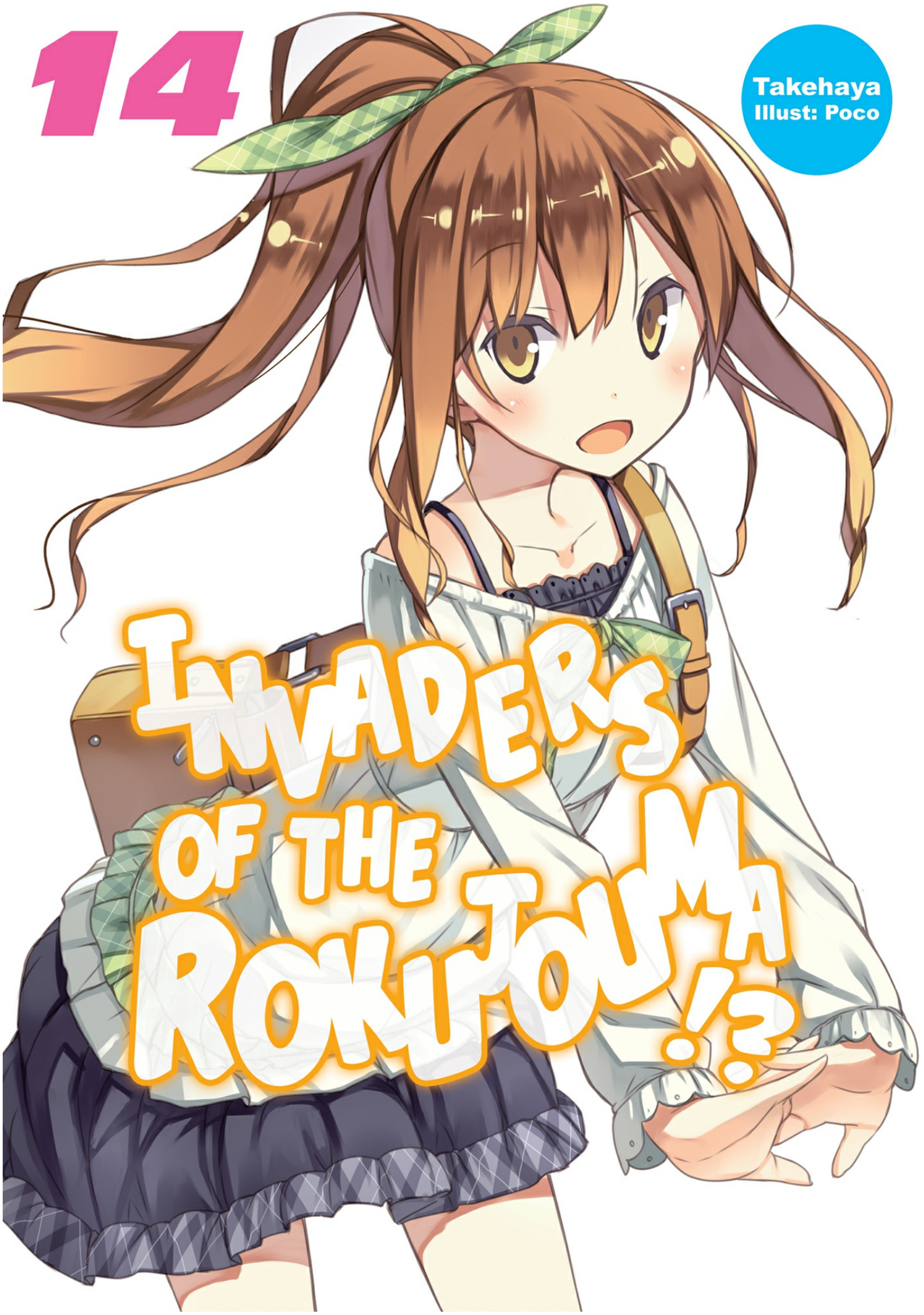
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Illust: Poco



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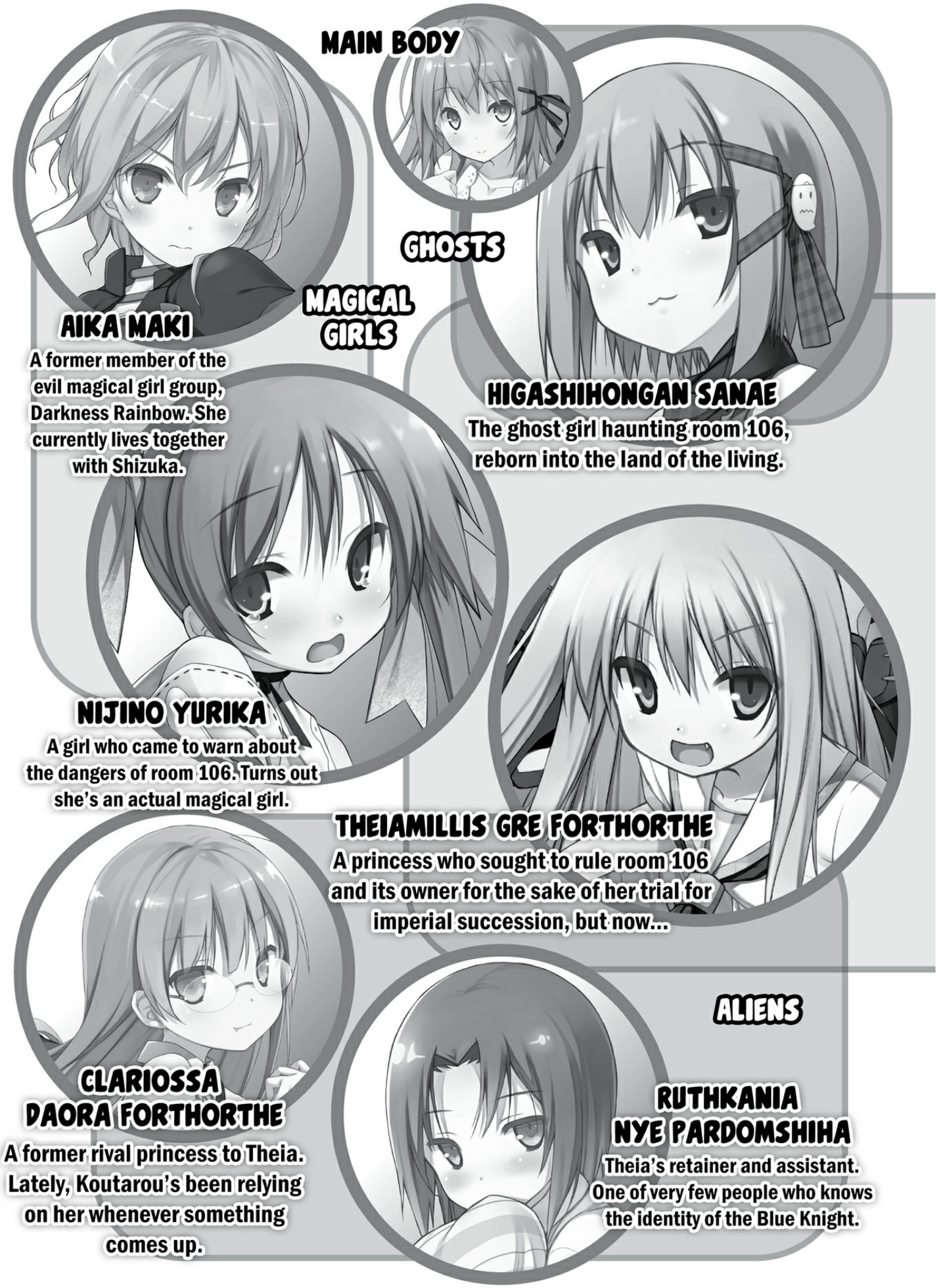
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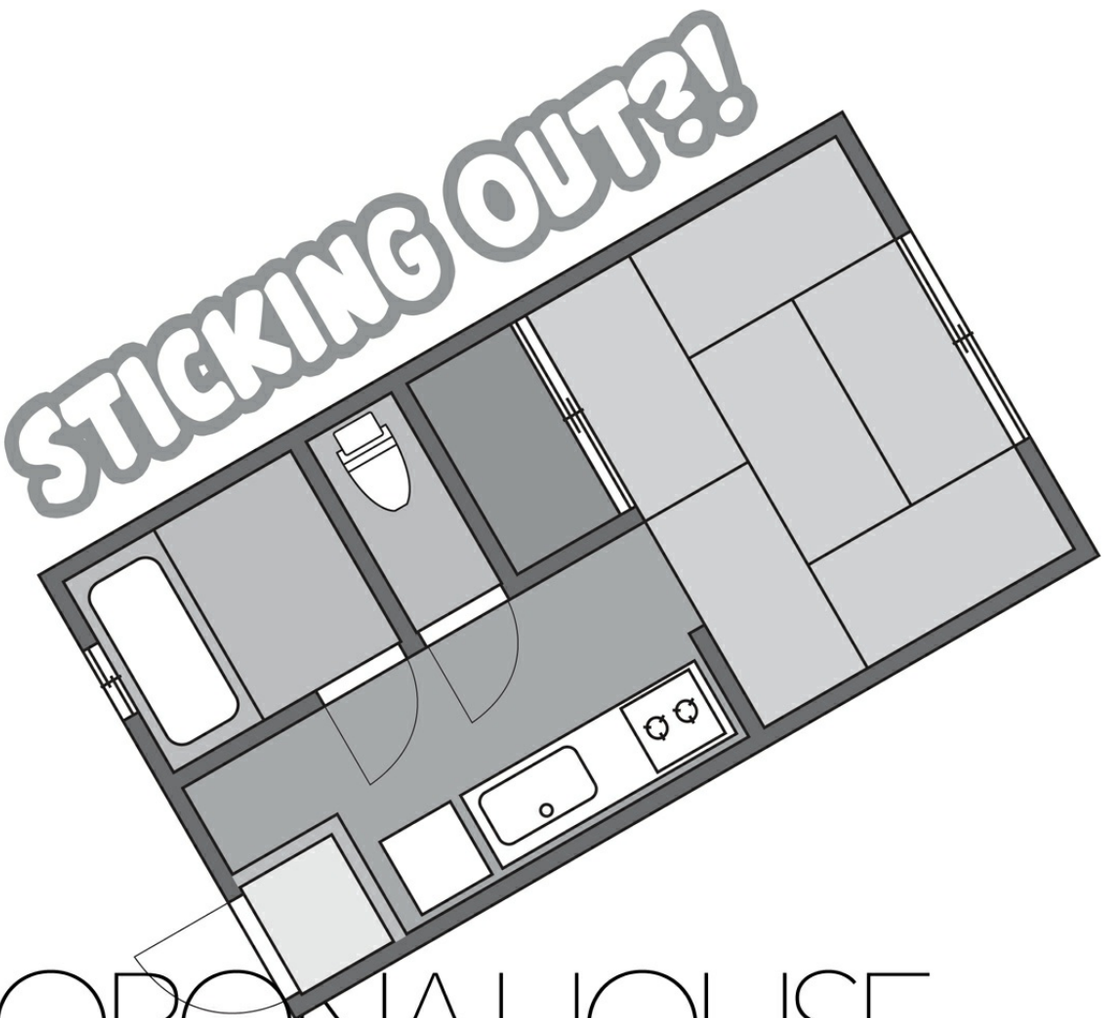
Afterword



INVADERS OF THE ROKUJOUMA!?

FACTIONS MAP


MAIN BODY
GHOSTS
MAGICAL GIRLS
AIKA MAKI
A former member of the evil magical girl group, Darkness Rainbow. She currently lives together with Shizuka.
HIGASHIHONGAN SANAE
The ghost girl haunting room 106, reborn into the land of the living.
NIJINO YURIKA
A girl who came to warn about the dangers of room 106. Turns out she's an actual magical girl.
THEIAMILLIS GRE FORTHORTHE
A princess who sought to rule room 106 and its owner for the sake of her trial for imperial succession, but now...
ALIENS
CLARIOSSA DAORA FORTHORTHE
A former rival princess to Theia. Lately, Koutarou's been relying on her whenever something comes up.
RUTHKANIA NYE PARDOMSHIHA
Theia's retainer and assistant. One of very few people who knows the identity of the Blue Knight.



CORONA HOUSE
ROOM 106

Episode 1: Shizuka’s Path of the Dragon

As it approached the middle of June, summer was finally kicking off. But the landlord of Corona House was feeling a little down.

“It’s that time of year again...”

Staring at the calendar on the wall, deep love, sadness, and loneliness resonated in Shizuka’s eyes. One of the days in June was circled with red pen—the very spot on the calendar she was staring at.

“It’s already been almost five years since that day...”

Shizuka peeled her eyes away from the calendar and picked up a photo placed on the top shelf of her bookcase. The picture was of an elementary school girl wearing a karate dougi and holding a trophy together with her parents. Behind the smiling trio was Corona House. It had been taken to commemorate Shizuka winning a karate tournament.

“Dad, mom, I’m doing just fine...”

Next to where the photo had been was a small memorial tablet. Two months after the picture had been taken, Shizuka’s parents passed away. Ever since, she had been taking care of Corona House on her own. To her, Corona House was her parent’s legacy. It was full of memories for her. That’s why she couldn’t forgive anyone that would bring harm to it.

As Shizuka stared at the photo, Sanae’s face appeared from the floor at her feet.

“Hey, Shizuka. The tea is ready, so come on down.”

Sanae had poked up through the ceiling of room 106 to call Shizuka down for tea. As a former ghost, astral projection was a piece of cake for her, making her the go-to choice for relaying messages between the upstairs and downstairs floors.

“Thanks, Sanae-chan. I’ll be right there.”

Placing the photo back on the shelf, Shizuka decided to head down and join the others. Sanae took a look at the picture.

“...That’s a photo of your papa and mama, right?”

Sanae knew it was a family photo at first glance.

“Yeah. You can tell?”

Shizuka was a little surprised since she’d never shown Sanae a picture of her parents before.

“Yeah. Because Corona House has a lot of... residual memories, I think? It has those things in it.”

“That’s because they really treasured it.”

Shizuka hadn’t started living in Corona House until after her parents had passed away, but she would often visit to help them clean. She always remembered her parents working hard, and those memories remained even now.

“I can tell. That’s what it means when I can see lots of those memory things.”

Sanae could sense Shizuka’s parents’ hard work and care in a spiritual way. Sanae had only brought it up casually, but to Shizuka, what she said served as proof of her memories. Tears began to fill her eyes.

“Well, anyways... Hurry on down, Shizuka. There won’t be any snacks served if you don’t!”

“Yeah, I’ll be right there. Thanks again, Sanae-chan.”

Sanae waved and made a quick exit after that. Shizuka felt she must have done so out of courtesy. Since she was once a spiritual being, there was no way she hadn’t picked up on Shizuka’s feelings.

Shizuka turned back towards the bookshelf, wiped away her tears, and smiled at the photograph.

“Dad, mom, I was lonely after you died... but I’m fine now. When Satomi-kun and everyone else first came around, they were a handful... but I’m really happy now. I wish that these days could continue forever...”

Shizuka's expression was far from dark. The grief of losing her parents wasn't gone, but she'd been able to form new bonds since then to help ease the pain. That's why sadness wasn't the only thing inside of her heart anymore. There was also joy.

"I'll tell you the whole story when I come to visit your graves, but I have to go now. Everyone is waiting for me..."

Drinking tea, eating snacks, and chatting. They were trivial, casual things, but they were things Shizuka was happy to do after so many years of going without. She felt normal again.

The floor creaked as she took a step.

"Hmm, I really do feel like I've put on weight... I should go on a diet..."

She felt so normal, in fact, that she was able to worry over the sound of her floor creaking. Shizuka was living her everyday life to its very fullest like she never had before.

"Heehee, maybe I should ask everyone..."

With a bounce in her step, Shizuka left room 206. Truth be told, "worry" wasn't even the right word. All she was thinking about was how fun it would be to talk with everyone else about their weights.

Coming back from room 206 through the ceiling, Sanae slowly floated towards her body sitting in front of the TV.

"...Say, Sanae, how do you even do that?"

"Huh?"

Sanae was planning on merging with her physical form, but she stopped in midair when she heard Koutarou call out to her. She turned her head to look at him.

"Your body's been sitting there playing games all this time, but you're astral projecting."

Sanae's body was indeed sitting in front of the TV and playing video games. Yet Sanae had left her body behind to go up to room 206 and call Shizuka down.

This was a mysterious spectacle not just to Koutarou, but to everyone else in room 106 too.

“Oh, that’s what you meant.”

Now understanding what Koutarou was curious about, Sanae twirled her finger around as she boastingly explained her trick.

“This is the Sanae-chan God Skill that I learned recently.”

“A new technique?”

“Yeah. Hey, you. Stop acting like a stranger and turn this way too.”

“O-Okay...”

The Sanae floating in the air called out to the Sanae playing games, causing her to put down her controller and turn towards Koutarou as well. For some reason, her cheeks were flushed and she was shyly looking down. She had a somewhat embarrassed and troubled atmosphere to her, completely different from the normal Sanae.

“Huh? Could the Sanae over there be... Sanae-san?”

Koutarou had seen Sanae like this before. It was how she used to act during the time she lost her memories.

“Bingo!”

“H-Hang on a sec! What are you splitting up for?!”

Koutarou began panicking, but the Sanae floating in the air was as calm as could be. In an attempt to soothe him, she flashed her normal smile and waved her hands.

“Calm down. We didn’t split up. Look.”

Next, she turned her back towards Koutarou. There, a tail-like cord extended out from around her waist. It trailed off and connected to the Sanae sitting in front of the TV.

“It’s a safety cable.”

“Then you didn’t split up? You’re okay?!”

Though Sanae had just explained it to him, Koutarou wasn't quite convinced everything was okay. He worriedly looked between the two Sanaes as he recalled the events leading up to her regaining her body.

"Yeah. If it was a bad thing, I wouldn't be this carefree."

"Phew... Then don't scare me like that. Last time was bad enough."

It wasn't until Sanae nodded at him again reassuringly that Koutarou finally felt relieved. The tension left his body in an instant and his shoulders drooped.

"Heeheehee, sorry."

Sanae wanted to show off her new trick, but she didn't want to cause Koutarou any needless worry, so she honestly apologized.

"So how does this work?"

After confirming that she was indeed safe and everything was fine, Koutarou finally got a little interested.

"Well, I only realized it recently, but this is what happens when only I try to leave my body. Isn't it cool?"

In the end, Sanae only reflected on her actions for a few seconds before proudly sticking out her chest again. She was sorry for scaring him, but she still wanted to show off to Koutarou.

"I don't think it's really something to brag about..."

The Sanae sitting in front of the TV slumped her shoulders in embarrassment.

"Are you kidding? This is totally the kind of party trick you brag about! For sure!"

The Sanae in the air puffed out her chest even more and boasted like a proud child. She was the complete opposite of the more mature Sanae sitting in front of the TV.

"...Anything goes with you, doesn't it?"



“Nah. See, since we share the same soul, the parts of it we use together can’t leave our body. I can’t properly astral project on my own.”

Koutarou was dumbfounded by Sanae being split in two again, but the Sanae floating in the air seemed to be having fun. To her, having Sanae-chan and Sanae-san exist at the same time was an exciting and welcome development.

“Sanae-chan, hurry back. I feel restless on my own.”

However, that wasn’t true for Sanae-san. She still looked troubled. The sensation of having a part of herself outside of her body left her feeling uneasy. And with her timid personality, she felt especially shy when she was around Koutarou and the others. That was why she was over by the TV playing games by herself.

“Come on now. You’re me too, so you should be bolder.”

“Easier said than done...”

“It’s not like you hate Koutarou and everyone else, right?”

“Th-That’s true... but...”

Even though their personalities were different, they shared memories and thoughts. The only real difference between them was the way they expressed their feelings. In the end, they were the same person.

“But... saying I *like* them kinda... you know... So hurry and come back, Sanae-chan!”

“You need to stop relying on me when you get shy. If you don’t become more independent, you’ll never become the perfect woman.”

“I can’t be one right away!”

“Jeez... What am I going to do with you?”

The Sanae in the air slumped her shoulders like an older sister dealing with an overly timid little sister would, and then approached the other Sanae. She was planning on returning to her body like she’d been asked. The Sanae on the floor spread her arms wide open, welcoming her.

“Thank you, Sanae-chan.”

“Starting tomorrow, we’re gonna start working on this anxiety around other people.”

“It’s okay. You don’t have to do that.”

“You bet I do. We need to get Koutarou to love you too.”

“That’s impossible...”

“Shut up. I already said we’re doing it.”

“No way...”

The ghostly Sanae entered her half-crying body. The next moment, Sanae’s expression completely changed and became a somewhat dissatisfied frown. It was the face the ghostly version of Sanae had been making.

“So there you have it, Koutarou. Tomorrow we’re gonna start some training for her.”

“Sanae, you’re crazy...”

“What part?”

Confused, Sanae stared blankly at Koutarou. Each time she blinked, the tears that had been forming in her eyes earlier tumbled down her cheeks.

“What do you mean, ‘what part’? Hey...”

Koutarou felt a headache coming on as he wiped away Sanae’s tears. But Sanae was indifferent to his pain, and instead cheerfully kicked her legs back and forth while smiling.

“But the training is necessary.”

“Why?”

“We’re the same, after all. I just want her to get used to you too. And I want you to love everything about me. That goes for everyone else too, of course.”

“Uh...”

The conversation, all things considered, had been rather outrageous up until this point, but Sanae’s line of thinking was quite logical. Sanae-chan and Sanae-san were indeed both Sanae in the end. So if only one of them got along with

the group, that would be problematic. And it wasn't fair for them to ask her to stay as Sanae-chan all the time. Something like that might get in the way of Sanae's personalities merging like they were supposed to. Ultimately, Sanae had a very good point.

"What is it? You don't want to?"

Sanae tilted her head a little to the side and quietly looked at Koutarou. She then brushed her cheek against the palm of his hand that was wiping away her tears. Both Sanaes loved Koutarou.

"It's not that I don't want to, but... Um, when you're in that state, it might be bad for your body, so let's only do it when Korama and Karama are around, okay?"

"Understood, ho!"

Sanae mimicked the haniwas and then spun around behind Koutarou.

"I wonder if you really understand at all..."

"I do understand. Love is all."

"...How convenient."

"Eeheehee."

Sanae jumped up on Koutarou's back and threw her arms around his neck.

As their conversation reached its conclusion, Koutarou returned to his work with Sanae on his back. He was currently in the process of cleaning up a tool that was used for a certain something.

"By the way, Satomi-kun, why are you polishing a net?"

Harumi, who had been showing some interest, peeked at what Koutarou was doing with his hands. He was ardently polishing the bamboo handle of a traditional insect catching net.

"How good of you to ask, Sakuraba-senpai."

Koutarou stopped what he was doing and presented the net to Harumi. Both its handle and his eyes were shining.

“Summertime is when Maximilian’s true value is revealed!”

“Maximilian?”

Harumi didn’t understand the meaning of the word.

“Sakuraba-senpai, Maximilian is what Satomi-san named his net.”

Seeing that Harumi was confused by the name she’d never heard before, Yurika leaned over and whispered the explanation in her ear. The two girls were sitting next to each other on the floor, and Harumi was helping Yurika study.

“Ah, I see...”

Now that she understood the significance of it, Harumi slightly nodded and smiled at Koutarou.

“Satomi-kun, are you going out insect hunting?”

“Sure am. When you think of summer, you automatically think of bugs. And the king of summer insects is—”

Koutarou realized what he was about to say and looked around nervously. Fortunately, he didn’t see any cause for alarm, and was able to finish his sentence without worry.

“The king of summer insects is none other than the mighty beetle! My season has finally come!”

Koutarou tightly clenched his beloved insect net in both hands, his eyes aglow with ambition. He was going to capture beetles during the summer this year. He had his trusty net Maximilian, his insect cage Henrietta, and the bottle filled with sap that he called Geraldine. It was still only early summer, but Koutarou was more than ready to launch his attack.

“But, but, Satomi-san... Even if you catch beetles, you can’t keep them here, right?”

Yurika was worried for the safety of any beetles brought to room 106. Based on past experiences, she couldn’t imagine things would end well for them.

“Heh heh, fear not, Yurika. Things are different this year. After all, I have Princess Clariossa with me now.”

“Hmm? Did you say something, Veltlion?”

Clan reacted to hearing Koutarou say her name. However, her voice was coming from somewhere up around the ceiling. She was using one of her gravity-manipulation inventions to use one of the walls in room 106 as the floor. She was lying on it—sideways to everyone else—and enjoying a book. It was highly useful now that the tiny apartment had more people in it than ever.

“I did. I was telling everyone how I’d be keeping beetles at your place.”

“Ah, that’s what you were talking about. We did indeed make that promise. I have some interest in the life forms of this planet myself.”

“So that’s why you look so happy about all of this, Koutarou.”

Beetles couldn’t be kept in room 106. Yurika had tried it once and it didn’t last long. But this was different. With Clan helping him out, Koutarou could keep all the beetles he wanted on her spaceship. And so he was excitedly preparing for summer to kick into full swing.

“I love you dearly, Princess Clariossa.”

“Jeez... You only treat me like a princess at times like this...”

Though Koutarou had said he loved her, she couldn’t take his words at face value when he was holding an insect net and his eyes were sparkling at the prospect of getting his hands on some beetles. Moreover, Koutarou had officially become Theia’s vassal a while back. Since she felt like she’d gotten a late start, Clan’s thoughts on this matter were complicated.

“Satomi-kun, if you want, I could keep them at my house.”

Seeing Clan’s bitter expression, Harumi offered her assistance. While Harumi was scared of aggressive animals and such, she didn’t harbor any hatred for harmless insects.

“It’s okay, Sakuraba-senpai. Clan has a fully automatic breeding case at her place.”

“...Then why do you look so reluctant, Clan-san?”

Since she had specialized equipment for it, any insects Koutarou brought her wouldn’t be much of a pain to take care of. But for some reason, Clan had a

rather hesitant look on her face, which puzzled Harumi.

“It’s not that I’m reluctant... but...”

Clan blushed slightly and looked down. That gesture was all it took for Harumi to understand.

“Oh, so that’s why.”

Harumi quickly smiled at Clan and glanced at Koutarou.

“...”

That made Clan turn even redder, and she quickly looked away.

“What do you mean?” Koutarou asked.

“That’s a maiden’s secret.”

It hadn’t clicked for him like it had Harumi. And when he asked her to explain, she simply smiled and shook her head.

The conversation about beetles lasted for a while, but it came to its natural conclusion once Theia, Ruth, and Kiriha—who had all gone out to buy ingredients for dinner—returned to the apartment. About the same time, Shizuka who had just come down from the second floor, and Maki who had prepared tea, entered the inner room as well. All told, it made for a total of ten people. It was quite a crowd for such a small room, but as of late, that was the norm in room 106.

“Oh? You’ve gotten better at preparing tea, haven’t you, Aika-san?”

“Thank you, Kasagi-san. Actually, I’ve learned how to enjoy making proper tea.”

“Koutarou, feed me a waffle. Aah!”

“Sanae, stop playing games and get over here instead of trying to be lazy.”

“Clan-sama, have some tea.”

“Thank you, Pardomshiha. You can set it right there for me, thank you.”

“Sakuraba-senpai, how does she even do that? The cup is sideways.”

“I don’t know... I can’t believe it’s not magic, personally...”

“Kiriha, could I have one of these snacks later? I’d like my mother to try it.”

“I understand. I’d better reserve one for her now.”

With so many people all talking together, room 106 was always lively and noisy. There were even times that Elfaria, who was aboard Blue Knight after escaping with a handful of civilians from Forthorthe, would join in. If the apartment hadn’t been sound and vibration-proofed via magic and science, the other tenants would surely have busted down the door and fussed at them by now.

“Kiriha-san, could I have a moment?”

Waiting until after Kiriha set aside a snack to save for Elfaria, Koutarou approached her.

“I don’t mind,” she said with a nod.

And after handing Theia the wrapped snack for her mother, she turned towards Koutarou, who was crawling over to her.

“Could you strip?”

“Okay.”

Kiriha nodded once more, and started removing her school uniform that she still hadn’t changed out of.

“Kyaaaaaaaah! Satomi-kun, what are you just casually demanding?!”

“S-Satomi-sama?!”

“Yeah, Koutarou! That’s not how a Japanese man strips someone! You’re supposed to grab their sash and spin them around!”

“...Um, Sanae-chan, I think you’re worked up over the wrong thing.”

“Sakuraba-san, does Satomi-kun just want to see a naked girl? In that case, I’ll...”

“No, stop! Aika-san, you’ve got the wrong idea! Don’t take your clothes off! Please!”

Thanks to Koutarou asking Kiriha to take off her clothes, a riot broke out in room 106. The first ones to get angry were Shizuka and Ruth, followed by Sanae. After that, Yurika, Harumi, and Maki joined in, making the situation worse. It was a ruckus that pushed the apartment's sound and vibration-proofing to its limits.

"Show me."

"Look as much as you want."

However, Koutarou completely ignored them all and leaned forward to gaze at Kiriha's alabaster skin. It was an awfully intense gaze, even for a pervert.

"Jerk! You jerk! You big, dumb jerk! I thought you were different, Satomi-kun!"

Trembling with anger, Shizuka swung her fist at Koutarou. Just as she did, his expression brightened up and he sat back down. As a result, Shizuka's blow only caught air.

"I'm glad... Looks like your wound has completely healed."

Unaware of the danger he'd been in, Koutarou smiled at Kiriha, who still had her top pulled down. It was a clam, relieved smile. Kiriha smiled back at him and nodded.

"I told you that at school, didn't I? That there's no trace of it left... You've always been a worrywart about this kind of thing, Onii-chan..."

Kiriha whispered the latter half of what she said so that only Koutarou could hear it, and flashed an expression that reminded him of how she was when she was little. It was special for her to call him that, and she gave a special smile to go with it. She felt Koutarou was worrying too much, but at the same time, she was happy about that.

"Say what you will, but injuries are injuries. If I can't see it's better for myself, it's hard to believe."

Koutarou understood what Kiriha was saying. And she'd told the truth: there was no sign she'd even been hurt in the first place. She was seriously wounded during the battle a while back, and Koutarou could vividly recall her horribly

bleeding shoulder. It was hard to get out of his mind, even when she'd told him it was completely healed. That's why he'd needed to confirm it with his own two eyes.

"Onii-chan, do you dislike girls with scars...?" Kiriha teasingly whispered into his ear.

"No, it's not that. But that's not what this is about."

"Oh, but that *is* what this is about, heehee..."



Seeing Kiriha's innocent smile, Koutarou felt glad that the wound hadn't been any more serious than it was. And finally seeing for himself that it was better, he felt a great weight lifted from his shoulders. With that, everything was at last back to normal.

"...Hmm?"

That was when Koutarou noticed that everyone's eyes were fixed on him, and that Shizuka was standing behind him with a blank look of surprise on her face. Unable to understand what was going on, he cocked his head to the side.

"What's wrong, everyone?"

"Satomi-kun... y-you were checking on Kiriha-san's... wound?"

"Yeah, I was. Is something wrong, Landlord-san?"

"I-I-It's nothing! Nothing at all! Right, everyone?!"

Shizuka hurriedly tried to dodge the question and turned to everyone else in the room for backup. When she did, all the other girls involved in the fuss nodded their heads as one. But that only confused Koutarou even more.

"Well, something like that."

"...If Veltlion could be seduced like that, then things might have been a little easier."

The only two that had remained unmoved were the princesses from Forthorthe. They both knew that there had to be a reason behind Koutarou's request. Harumi felt the same way, but she'd had her hands full trying to stop Maki from stripping too.

"...Oh well. So, Kiriha-san, does it hurt when you move your arm around?"

"There's a slight sting occasionally. But that'll heal soon enough too."

While there was no sign of the wound on the surface, it still hadn't fully healed inside. Moving her arm in a particular way caused her pain every now and again.

"I see. Then, Yurika... can't help. Aika-san, could you cast some healing magic on Kiriha-san just in case?"

Yurika wouldn't be able to do anything because her organization, Rainbow Heart, forbade the use of magic for private or personal reasons. But the same wasn't true for Maki, who was part of Darkness Rainbow. So when it came to things like treating injuries, it was more convenient to have Maki do it.

"Yes, leave it to me, Satomi-kun! Come, Night Walker!"

Happy to be needed by Koutarou, Aika joyfully summoned her staff.

"It's not like I *can't* help..."

Yurika, on the other hand, was pouting. While she was forbidden from using magic for private reasons, she was willing to bend the rules a little for the sake of helping a close friend. She was happy that Koutarou was taking her circumstances into consideration, but she didn't like being treated as useless.

"Don't get angry, Yurika."

"I'm not angry."

"You are angry."

"...I'm not really angry."

"You don't have to use magic to help out, you know."

"I-It's unfair when you put it like that... jeez..."

With Yurika's personality, however, she didn't dwell on it for long. By the time Kiriha was presenting her shoulder to Maki, her sour mood had already passed.

"I'm in your care."

"Yes, leave it to me, Kiriha-san."

Maki held her staff in both hands and began her incantation.

"Cure Serious Wounds. Permanent Regeneration."

Maki cast two spells. One was to seal her wounds, and the other was to improve Kiriha's healing abilities. Just sealing the wound mean that it might open again, so Maki used the second spell to speed up the natural healing process. They were considerate and well calculated spells, just like Maki.

"...Okay. That should do it."

“Thank you, Maki.”

“No, it’s nothing.”

Maki revealed an embarrassed smile.

To rely on others and be relied on... It really is nice... How wonderful it would be to spend the rest of my life like this...

A sensation she’d never felt as part of Darkness Rainbow filled Maki’s chest. She was happy to be needed and thanked by someone. It was a little embarrassing since she still wasn’t used to it, but she’d begun to feel like this was what she wanted out of life. And right now, Maki felt she could even understand what Yurika had been fighting for.

That’s right, maybe I should ask him...

Maki put her staff away and boldly spoke up.

“Satomi-kun, there’s something I’d like to ask.”

“What is it, Aika-san?”

Koutarou sipped his tea and nonchalantly looked over at Maki. Seeing her serious expression, however, he put his cup down and turned to face her properly.

“Something serious, huh?”

“Yes. I believe there is something we need to do for the future.”

“Something we need to do?”

“Yes.”

Maki nodded and pulled out something from the bag she was always carrying around.

“I want you to place a curse on me.”

Maki then handed what she’d pulled out to Koutarou. It was a belt made from thick leather. But it was too short to be worn around the waist. If anything, it looked like a collar for a large pet.

“A curse?!”

Koutarou's eyes opened wide in surprise.

"Wait a minute! Why do I need to do something like that?!"

"Since Darkness Rainbow thinks that you've captured me and taken me prisoner, this is what they'd expect you to do."

"O-Oh... you're probably right."

When Koutarou had fought against Maki's master, he lied and told Maya that he'd captured Maki. That's why Darkness Rainbow believed she was being held prisoner.

"But as things are, I'm still walking around freely. Should they ever see me, Darkness Rainbow will suspect something."

"Huh, yeah. I didn't think of that."

Though it hadn't been long since Maki joined Koutarou and the others, Darkness Rainbow would eventually realize that she wasn't actually being held against her will since captives weren't normally allowed to walk around as they pleased. That would put Maki in a tricky situation. There was a high chance that she would be deemed a traitor and disposed of.

"That's why I want you take away my freedom, Satomi-kun. Be it through brainwashing, a curse, or a contract. Whatever you want."

"W-Wait a minute, that's going way too far!"

Koutarou understood what Maki was saying. She wanted to actually play the part of a prisoner so that Darkness Rainbow wouldn't suspect anything. For the sake of making it obvious, she had prepared the collar she handed to Koutarou. By placing a curse in the collar, it would make it look like she was under his control.

"A curse that would kill me if I disobey you, or that would choke me on command. Something extreme like that. Something that gives the impression I'm under your complete and total domination would be good, Satomi-kun."

"N-No way! There's no way I could do something like that!"

Koutarou refused in a fluster. He couldn't even imagine himself doing what Maki was asking.

“If you don’t, we’ll be found out sooner rather than later.”

“If you died because I said something dumb while talking in my sleep, I couldn’t live with myself.”

Curses, brainwashing, contracts. Regardless of what she called it, Koutarou was against doing anything of the sort to Maki. Of course, even with a curse or something like it in place, Koutarou wouldn’t make use of it. Killing Maki was completely out of the question. But he wouldn’t point a gun at Maki, not even if it was an unloaded one. Doing something like that would make both Maki and Koutarou unhappy, and he simply couldn’t accept that.

“Theia, Clan, Kiriha-san. Help me think of a way to trick those guys without using a real curse.”

“That’s more like my vassal. Very well. I’ll help as much as I can.”

“If you’re going to beg, then fine. I’ll help too.”

“Let me think... Those magical girls are lacking in scientific knowledge. I imagine that just by making a device in the shape of a collar, there’s a high chance that they would mistake it for the real thing.”

Koutarou quickly turned to Theia and the others for advice. Maki simply stayed quiet and watched over them as they talked. The only thing she did while waiting for them to reach a conclusion was to pick up the collar that had been left lying around.

“Aika-san...”

Seeing Maki pick up the collar, Shizuka could imagine how she must have really felt. Since they were roommates now, she had a good idea of what was in Maki’s heart.

Aika-san wants something she can rely on, doesn’t she...?

Maki would never again return to Darkness Rainbow. Essentially, she had nowhere to go. While Corona House was her new home, it would take more time for that feeling to truly sink in. Learning to call somewhere home wasn’t something that happened overnight.

That’s why Maki wanted Koutarou to deprive her of her freedom. She wanted

a clear connection to him, and she was using Darkness Rainbow as a means to make it happen. Even if it meant having a gun turned on her at all times.

I have to do something... I feel bad for Aika-san...

Knowing Maki's true feelings, Shizuka couldn't just leave her be. And so she too began thinking of a way to save Maki.

In the end, the countermeasure they decided on for Darkness Rainbow made use of Kiriha's idea. They would use a hi-tech device to make it look like Maki was being held captive.

The ones to make it would be Clan and Ruth. It would have the appearance of a collar, and would be able to make it look like Maki was being choked. Of course, it wouldn't actually have the function to choke her. It would just be for show. Really, it would be something very similar to Theia and Ruth's bracelets.

Koutarou and the others concluded that using technology to make it look like Maki was being choked would be enough to trick the evil magical girls. The only problem was that it would stand out in school, but that could be resolved by concealing it with magic. It wouldn't be hard to make it invisible so that other students couldn't see it, and doing that would make it seem more real to Darkness Rainbow.

Once a conclusion had been reached, Koutarou and the others went about doing their own things. A few of them began playing games, some started working on their homework, and plenty more. Koutarou in particular was in a kitchen holding a knife. It wasn't room 106's kitchen, however, but the kitchen on Blue Knight.

The reason for this was Kiriha. When she'd started to make dinner like usual, Koutarou had stopped her and told her that she didn't need to do any more chores until her wound was fully healed for sure. He then claimed the job of fixing dinner for himself. In response, she requested a roasted chicken like he had once made for her. But since he couldn't have a large open flame in an apartment, he'd have to use an oven. And the one in room 106 wasn't nearly big enough. So in the end, he'd moved to preparing dinner aboard Blue Knight.

“Theia, how’s it going? Are you almost done?”

“J-Just wait a little longer. I’ve never filleted a chicken before.”

“Then should I do it?”

“I don’t just want to watch. I’ll handle it.”

“That’s the spirit. You can do it.”

“Yes, leave it to me.”

“Master, I’ve finished preparing the herbs.”

“Thanks, Ruth-san. Can you mix them in with what you made before? That’ll finish up our sauce.”

“Very well. I’ll do just that. Though I must say, these herbs sure are a bit on the strong side...”

“Ahahaha. Back then, ingredients didn’t keep well, so it was necessary to use spices with a stronger flavor.”

“I see. Her Majesty Elfaria might want to try this as well.”

“Ah crap... she’ll definitely complain later and say I should have told her sooner.”

“Heh, my mother just might.”

Theia and Ruth were lending Koutarou a hand with making dinner. Since it was a Forthorthian-style dish and he didn’t really know how to use their kitchen, he’d needed their help. And so the three of them were cheerfully working together to make a meal for everyone.

The night’s dinner was roast chicken, like Kiriha had requested, with bread and soup on the side. Since they were things Koutarou had learned to cook during his travels, they were all simple to make. The three of them were currently in the middle of preparing the chicken while waiting for the bread dough to ferment. Everything was proceeding smoothly, and dinner would soon be done. Or so it should have been.

“Ouch!”

The chicken’s legs bounced up and smacked Theia in the face. It was the

result of putting too much force into chopping with a knife she was unused to using. Surprised by it, she lurched backwards a great deal.

“What’s wrong?!”

“Your Highness!”

Hearing Theia’s shout, Koutarou and Ruth came running.

“Did you cut your hand?! Or was it somewhere else?!”

Koutarou took the knife out of Theia’s hands and looked over them to see if she’d cut herself. Ruth wiped them clean to make it easier for him to examine her.

“I-I’m fine! I just put a little too much force into it and its legs hit my face. I’m not hurt anywhere...”

Flustered at seeing her two companions so awfully worried, Theia quickly explained what happened. She also wiggled her fingers to show them that she wasn’t hurt.

“I see... Don’t scare me like that.”

“Sorry. My hand just slipped a little.”

“As long as you are safe...”

“Yes. Sorry for the trouble.”

Theia was more concerned about her two worried friends than she was herself. Fortunately, smiles soon returned to Koutarou and Ruth’s faces. Seeing that, Theia felt relieved and took up her knife once more.

“All right, let’s try that again.”

Theia got back to work. Her knife handling was still unsteady, but she was gradually getting the job done.

“I know I’m repeating myself, but are you sure you don’t want me to do it? You only have to sit back and give me orders.”

Koutarou offered to take Theia’s place once more, thinking that preparing a chicken was perhaps a bit much for a beginner like Theia.

“No, I’ll take care of it.”

However, Theia shook her head again. She stopped what she was doing and looked over at him.

“But it is true that I could order you whenever, wherever, and however I wish.”

Koutarou had pledged his loyalty to Theia. As his master, she now had the authority to order him to do anything. That even included how he used his life.

“Then just leave something like this to—”

“But what I want is not a puppet that looks like you. I want to see and feel the same things you do as you act out of your own free will. So if you cook, I will too. That is the path that I and Ruth have chosen.”

Theia smiled quite happily. She was full of confidence, as if to say this was the world to her.

“It is just as Her Highness says.”

Ruth nodded as well. She was standing next to Theia and had the same expression on her face. The two of them had chosen the same path in life.

“So if you ask me to give you an order even now, then...”

The smile on Theia’s face disappeared for a brief moment as she peered into Koutarou’s eyes.

“Koutarou, live the way you wish. Laugh, hate, cry, and love as you please.”

After saying that, Theia smiled again.

“This is the only order I can give to you as your lord right now.”

“Theia...”

Theia’s smile was so beautiful that Koutarou couldn’t answer her immediately. Instead, he just stared raptly at her.

“That might be your last order though. Heh...”

Theia believed that Koutarou would treasure the same things she did. That’s why she didn’t need to order him around. She may give him information and

instructions from time to time, but not orders.

“That’s why I will do this. I might not be able to do it like you, but I want to do it with my own hands.”

Still holding her knife, Theia’s expression turned a little childish. At that, Koutarou returned to his senses and smirked a little at her.

“Yeah, okay. I get it. You’re so stubborn...”

“Heh, your princess is very selfish.”

Koutarou gave up on trying to talk Theia out of it. After what she’d said, he wanted to let her do as she pleased. Otherwise, it would feel like he was rejecting her. As both her friend and her knight, that was something he didn’t want to do.

“But I’ll help. At this rate, you’ll end up cutting your hand off.”

“That’s not true! I’ll show you I can do this perfectly safely! Don’t take me for a fool.”

“Theia, I will live as I please, and that means protecting what I want to protect.”

“A-Auuugh... Fine, then... I will allow you to help...”

Theia reflexively blushed and cast a glance up at Koutarou. Her heart began beating faster as the blood rushed to her head. It was a perfectly normal thing for a knight to say to their master, but she was a little flustered at being told that he wanted to protect her.

“I am most honored.”

“G-Good, then let’s start.”

Like that, Koutarou and Theia began working together. With a clear goal before them and a few minutes to calm herself down, Theia was back to normal in no time. Her knife skills were as shaky as ever, but with Koutarou by her side, there was no need to worry.

“Wait, Theia, you really will cut yourself like that.”

“Oops. Then how do I do it?”

“Hold your hand like this.”

“Like this?”

“No, not like that. Like this.”

“I *am* doing that!”

“You’re not! Look at my hands!”

“I am! And I did do it right! You’ve just got the wrong idea!”

As master and servant, Theia and Koutarou acknowledged and respected each other, forming a strong bond between them. Yet in spite of all that, the atmosphere between them was the same as it had ever been. They would loudly argue, glare at each other, and sometimes even resort to violence. Despite their relationship as a knight and his princess, they were just a normal teenage boy and girl in the end. Before they knew it, they were already long past their difference in status and the planets they were born on.

But I’m sure neither Her Highness nor Master realizes how wonderful of a thing this is...



They were both friends and a master and her servant simultaneously. Neither relationship inhibited the other. Ruth had never seen anyone else with that kind of bond before. Surely it was some kind of miracle. Compared to that, even Ruth and Theia's sisterly relationship was far more commonplace.

"Don't get so full of yourself just because people are worrying about you!"

"Fine! I'll show you who the master really is here!"

They butted heads without hesitation. All kinds of raw emotions were clashing right in front of Ruth.

If possible, I'd hope you can share just even a small portion of that with me...

Being able to join in on that clash was currently Ruth's greatest wish. She knew that Koutarou and Theia's fights only served to bring them closer.

With the chicken in the oven, Theia and Ruth went to take a bath since it would be quite some time before it was done roasting. Once they were finished, Koutarou would take his turn. But for now, Koutarou had parked himself in front of the oven and was taking a peek at the chicken and adjusting the temperature from time to time.

"Right... The temperature should be fine like this..."

Since using the oven was different from roasting something over an open flame, it took Koutarou a while before he could properly adjust the humidity, but the chicken was now cooking the way he wanted it to. All that was left was to avoid overcooking it.

"Hmm?"

That was when he felt the presence of someone behind him.

"That was fast. Are you done already?"

Koutarou figured it was Theia or Ruth, and he called out to them as he turned around to look towards the entrance to the kitchen.

"Huh?"

However, neither one of the girls were standing there. The sliding door was

open, but he didn’t see anyone. As Koutarou started to wonder why the door had opened, several faces appeared in the doorframe and peeked in at him. It was a group of young boys and girls.

“Is that the Blue Knight?”

“It is.”

“But... he’s not blue at all.”

“Stupid. It’s not like he’s always going to be wearing his armor.”

“I think his face is the same.”

“Then it must be the Blue Knight. But why is the Blue Knight cooking?”

“I wonder...”

The children were talking about something while looking at Koutarou. But since he couldn’t understand the language they were speaking, he wasn’t sure what they were saying.

I shouldn’t have left my bracelet behind...

It was a small group of children from Forthorthe who had escaped with Elfaria. They were speaking Modern Forthorthian, which Koutarou would have been able to speak and understand himself with the help of the automatic translation function in his bracelet or armor. But unfortunately, he’d left the bracelet behind in room 106 since he was worried it might get in the way of cooking, and his armor had been stored in the hangar after the repairs on it were complete. As a result, he had no way of talking with the children.

“Do you have any business with me?”

But even then, he couldn’t just sit there and ignore them. He knew he had to say something in order not to scare them. In the worst case scenario, he could always try communicating through gestures.

“Hey, he’s saying something.”

“What did he say?”

“I don’t know. I couldn’t hear it because he’s so far away.”

“Let’s get closer. He doesn’t look that scary.”

“He is cooking, after all.”

“Yeah, let’s go.”

Koutarou still couldn’t understand what they were saying, but he did understand that they seemed to have reached some kind of consensus. Based on the fact that they were now coming closer, he figured they must have been discussing.

“What is it? Did you smell the food?”

Koutarou figured that the children must have smelled the chicken cooking while they were exploring the ship.

“So this is the Blue Knight...”

“Yeah. Me and my dad saw him before. This is definitely him.”

“He’s not as big as I thought.”

“Everyone, we have to greet him properly or Sensei will get mad at us.”

“Hello, Blue Knight.”

“Hello.”

However, the kids surrounded him and began talking about something again. They weren’t so much as glancing at the chicken in the oven. That left Koutarou at a loss as to how to respond. If they weren’t there for food, he wasn’t sure why they’d come.

“So, what brings you guys here?”

The only reaction he could manage was cocking his head to the side.

“What is he saying?”

“Hey, could it be that he doesn’t understand what we’re saying?”

“Did they speak a different language in the past?”

“Yeah. In the movies, there are always words at the bottom.”

“Doesn’t anyone speak the old language?”

“I know a little! I studied it together with my sister!”

“Good! Then you try talking to him!”

“Okay, um... ‘Nice to meet you. I am Myulaua.’”

“Oh?”

There was one girl in the group who could speak a language Koutarou was familiar with: Lower Ancient Forthorthian, the common language used two thousand years ago. Having spent several months in the past, Koutarou had a somewhat decent understanding of the language. Now that they finally had some common ground, he responded with his best Ancient Forthorthian.

“Hello, Myulaua.”

“He understood it! He said hello!”

“Try talking to him some more!”

“Ask him if he’s the real Blue Knight!”

“Okay, I’ll try. ‘Are you the Blue Knight?’”

“Hmm... I am a Blue Knight, but specifically, I am Princess Theiamillis’s Blue Knight,” Koutarou answered honestly.

“It was hard for me to understand... but I think he said that he really is the Blue Knight.”

Unfortunately, the girl’s understanding of his answer was imperfect, and Koutarou’s real intention wasn’t conveyed properly.

“It’s him! It’s the real Blue Knight!”

“I told you!”

“Sorry.”

“I want to take a picture of the Blue Knight! I’ll brag about it to everyone!”

“Me too! Myu, ask him for us!”

“Hang on a second... ‘You, us... make portrait?’”

“Portrait?”

Koutarou was confused by the seemingly random word. But once he saw the small device one of the boys was pointing at him, he understood its meaning.

I see. “Photograph” wasn’t a word back then.

The boy was holding a camera. It was made with the latest technology from Forthorthe, but it was much the same size and shape of those commonly found on Earth. Koutarou had also seen Theia and Clan use something similar before, so he quickly realized what it was.

“I don’t really mind...”

Koutarou figured that the children only wanted to take a picture of the alien that had become Theia’s vassal. He never suspected that the children, much less the adults there, were completely convinced that he was the Blue Knight.

“‘Thank you!’”

“All right! We get to take a picture with the Blue Knight!”

“Send it to me later, okay?”

“Sure!”

“Everybody gather around!”

“‘Blue Knight! Come!’”

“H-Hey...”

The girl that had spoken to Koutarou grabbed his hand and pulled him over to a more open area in the kitchen. The children were planning on taking their picture there. However...

In the midst of the excitement, the girl bumped into a cabinet. Koutarou and the others had left the door to it open to make cooking easier, since several kinds of utensils were stored inside. The impact from the girl bumping into it shook the cabinet quite a bit, causing several of the utensils to fall off the shelf towards the girl—some of which were heavy or sharp. It was a disaster in the making.

“Look out!”

Koutarou was the first to realize what was happening, and immediately summoned his spiritual energy in response. Thanks to Sanae clinging to him on a daily basis, it instantly strengthened him.

Five things are falling!

A kitchen knife, a pot, a frying pan, a large plate, and a bottle of cooking alcohol.

Koutarou started by reaching out for the knife. Since it was falling blade-first straight towards the girl, it was the biggest threat. He snatched the handle of the knife with his right hand and punched the pot with his left. The impact sent the pot flying safely away from the children. Since it was a rather large pot, hitting it like that hurt quite a bit. If he hadn't concentrated his spiritual energy into his fist to do it, he would surely have screamed out in pain.

Next is...!

Koutarou then slammed the butt of the knife's handle into the frying pan with enough force to dent the frying pan and send it crashing into the ceiling.

And finally...!

All that was left was the large plate and bottle. Since they were now both directly above the girl's head, Koutarou didn't have time to deal with them separately. He swiftly spun his body around and launched a kick.

His leg passed just a few centimeters above the girl's head just in time to meet the plate in bottle. It wasn't a second too soon, but his leg caught them and sent them flying in a different direction. They never touched the girl. They both crashed into the floor and shattered in a burst of plate fragments and alcohol.

"Did I do it?!"

After finishing things up with his kick, Koutarou checked to see if the girl was okay. Her eyes were wide open in surprise, but she seemed unharmed.

"Phew... You don't seem to be hurt..."

After confirming that she was fine, Koutarou's shoulders slumped in relief. He then returned the knife in his hand to the shelf and fixed it firmly in place, careful to make sure it wouldn't fall again even if someone bumped into the cabinet. When he closed the door to the unit, the other children who had been standing there stock-still seemed to return to their senses.

“Did you see that...?”

“I did... I mean, I did, but I couldn’t actually see anything...”

“But even if we couldn’t see it... there’s no doubting it...”

“Yeah, that’s *definitely* the Blue Knight...”

“That was just like a cartoon I saw the other day.”

“Hey, did you get that on video?”

“Probably. I was recording from the start.”

“Send me that later too.”

“Sure. Let’s show everyone else, too. I bet they’ll never believe it.”

Having witnessed Koutarou’s power firsthand, the children were even more stunned by him than the girl’s near tragic accident. Even though they’d been told that Koutarou was the real Blue Knight before, it wasn’t until that moment that they were fully convinced of it.

“‘U-Um, Blue Knight, thank you for saving me...”

“Owowow, I messed up! I put too much strength in it!”

However, the legendary knight that had surprised the children and gained their respect was too distracted to even notice their gazes as the pain from punching the pot set in on him.

When Koutarou’s cooking was brought back to room 106, the girls got noisy. The food presented to them looked far more delicious than they had expected.

“K-K-Koutarou! Did you really make this?! You didn’t just let Ruth do it for you?!”

“Yeah, I made it.”

“No way! You’ve gotta be lying!”

“Have some faith in me, jeez! Anyways, calm down Sanae. You’re troubling Sanae-san.”

“Y-Yes, please come back, Sanae-chan.”

“Ah, sorry.”

Most astonished of all was Sanae, who was so surprised that she jumped clean out of her own body. But she wasn’t the only one who felt that way. Apart from Kiriha and Clan (and Theia and Ruth who had been with him in the kitchen), everyone gathered around the table stared at the food in wide-eyed disbelief.

Tonight’s menu was a roasted chicken with bread and soup. The dishes were very simple, but the smell from the chicken and herb sauce whet everyone’s appetite, the bread looked oh-so light and airy, and the stock for the soup that made use of the chicken bones had come out well. A great deal of care had clearly been put into each part of the meal. It seemed unusually thoughtful for the ordinarily rough-around-the-edges Koutarou that the girls couldn’t help being surprised.

“Heehee, Koutarou wanted to keep this part of him a secret too...” said Kiriha, a cheerful expression on her face.

“Kii, it looks like the secrets we get to keep to ourselves are gradually decreasing,” said Clan, pouting in contrast.

The two of them knew about Koutarou’s hidden talents like cooking and cleaning. That was because they’d known him in the past. Since Clan in particular had been with him over a long period of time, she very felt rather strongly that she was the only one who knew what Koutarou was really like. That’s why she got a little defensive every time a different part of him was revealed.

“S-Sakuraba-senpaaai, it looks like Satomi-san could cook...”

Yurika, strangely enough, was in tears. She was well aware of how unfeminine she was, but she never dreamed she’d lose to a boy. Especially not to someone who was normally as unrefined as Koutarou. But now, seeing this, her confidence in herself shattered. She didn’t think she could make something as delicious as what was placed in front of her.

“H-How could I even be of use to Satomi-san like this...?”

Since Yurika had always imagined that she would be able to make herself

useful to Koutarou through cooking, she couldn't help the tears forming in her eyes at the scene developing right in front of her.

"Nijino-san..."

While Harumi sympathized with Yurika, she had no trouble accepting that Koutarou could actually cook.

"If you calm down and think about it... it's not all that strange for Satomi-kun to be handy in the kitchen."

"...It's not?"

"He's so ardent about knitting, and he treasures the equipment he uses for baseball and insect hunting. If he put his mind to cooking, I think it's only natural for him to be good at it."

Harumi could actually think of one more reason as to why Koutarou was able to cook so well.

Satomi-kun grew up without a mother... He must have known the basics of housework even before he went to Forthorthe...

But it was far too sad to say it out loud. Which was why Harumi instead pretended that she was none the wiser and kept her mouth closed.

"Harumi, Harumi! Does that mean that someone who half-asses everything like Yurika will never be able to match Koutarou at anything?"

"Um, well... That's..."

"Sakuraba-senpai, please say it's not true! And don't hesitate like that!"

Harumi found herself unable to deny Sanae's cruel words, and Yurika only cried harder.

Yurika wept bitterly, but it only lasted until dinner started. Once it was time to eat, her tears dried, and she was happily stuffing her mouth alongside Sanae. They both looked like they hadn't eaten anything in days.

"Come on now. The both of you. If you eat like that you're going to ruin your figures."

Shizuka paused from her own meal and worriedly watched them shoveling food.

“Ahm, nom nom, hahm!”

“Mham, hom nom, mm!”

Yurika and Sanae both answered her, but with their mouths so full, they didn’t make a lick of sense. However, since neither of them showed any signs of slowing down, they were probably saying something along the lines of “we don’t care.”

“Jeez... Don’t come crying to me later then...”

Shizuka smiled wryly before tearing off a piece of her bread and popping in her mouth. As she did, Maki who was sitting next to her gave her a pensive look.

“Kasagi-san, do you not like Satomi-kun’s cooking?”

“I think it’s great.”

Shizuka shook her head. All of the dishes were delicious, and she enjoyed the fluffy texture of the bread in particular.

“But... you don’t seem to be eating a lot.”

Maki had noticed that Shizuka had barely touched the dishes. That’s why she figured that she might not like the taste.

“Hahmn?”

“Mah?”

Hearing this, Sanae and Yurika stopped eating and turned to look at Shizuka. To her, it looked like they were offering to eat her portion as well. Figuring now was as good a chance as any, Shizuka began explaining.



“Actually, I’ve gained some weight recently, so I was thinking of going on a diet.”

Shizuka had been worried about her weight for a while now. When she walked around upstairs, the floorboards would creak from time to time. That had never been the case in the past, so she figured it meant she’d put on some weight. Going on a diet seemed like the obvious solution.

“A diet?”

The word was unfamiliar to Maki, who hadn’t given much care to health and beauty in the past. Since she had grown up in the slums, getting fat hardly seemed like a bad thing to her. If anything, she considered it a status symbol. Maki had a slender build because she’d devoted herself to battle, but the thought of intentionally losing weight had never occurred to her.

“This is important, Aika-san. You might be wearing swimsuits in the coming season, right?”

“That... might be the case, yes.”

“If your flab bulges out of your suit, the person you love might lose interest in you.”

“Swimsuits...? Flab...? The person I love...?”

Maki’s more feminine side that normally lay dormant awoke and began working overtime.

That... wouldn’t be very cute...

Maki looked down at herself and reached that conclusion. Just like Shizuka said, she wouldn’t have the courage to wear a swimsuit with flab hanging out of it in front of the person she loved. That was when, for the first time in her life, she realized that the roasted chicken in front of her might be her mortal enemy. She shivered as she faced its devilish temptation.

“I think I’ll diet with you.”

“I think that’s for the best. It’s good for your health, too.”

Having gained an ally, Shizuka was already making plans for their diet in her

head.

“Kasagi-san, you said you’ve gained weight, but by how much?”

Harumi stopped eating and looked at Shizuka. To her, it didn’t look at all like Shizuka needed to go on a diet. Her complexion was healthy and her figure was beautiful. Truth be told, Shizuka’s current figure was Harumi’s ideal.

“I don’t know yet. The scale is broken, but when I stood on it, it showed more than 200 kilos. That’s why I’m going to go out and buy a new one tomorrow.”

“Ahaha, let me know when you find out.”

Being sickly and thin, Harumi had always wanted to be more like Shizuka. That’s why she was interested in her fluctuating weight. Shizuka, on the other hand, wished she was thinner like Harumi was.

“A diet, huh...?”

Listening in on the conversation, Theia put her hands on her stomach while lost deep in thought. As a teenage girl, she was also naturally concerned about her figure. Her childish body type was round in some places, so she began considering joining in on the diet.

“Theia, you shouldn’t do it.”

However, Koutarou was against it.

“Why?”

“Rather than worrying about your width, you should worry about your height. Eat more and grow. If you go on a diet, you won’t grow any taller.”

“Wha...”

Koutarou’s frank opinion left her speechless.

“It’s too early for you to go on a diet. You should wait until you’re at least as tall as Ruth-san.”

“Arrrgh! I go out of my way to listen to you, and *that’s* what you have to say?! Just who do you think I’d be going on a dieting for, anyway?!”

Theia had been thinking that the people serving her would be happier with a cuter princess. Yet here her vassal was, telling her that it was too early for her

to become cuter. It was a remark that hurt her pride.

“I get it. It’s for the people, right? This is just my opinion, but I think the people would feel more at ease with a tall princess rather than a thin one.”

“Guh... Y-You’re right...”

However, once Koutarou brought up her citizens, she was unable to offer any argument. Theia very reluctantly backed down, though large tears formed in her eyes to her chagrin.

“O-One day... One day I’ll make this idiot eat his words...”

“I sympathize with you, Your Highness.”

“I’ll captivate him with my sexy body one day. Until then, Ruth, you do something.”

“I will try my best.”

Ruth accepted with a bitter smile. But in all honesty, Ruth wasn’t confident. It was quite clear that when it came to attractive figures, Ruth was no match for Kiriha. But even then, she remained optimistic.

I can’t imagine Master’s opinion of someone would change depending on how they looked...

The situation wasn’t actually as bad as Theia imagined it to be. But taking things like this so seriously was part of her cute side. Knowing that, Ruth said nothing more and simply watched over the irritated Theia.

Once dinner was over, Shizuka shared her diet ideas with everyone, and the girls of room 106 agreed to participate. They were all interested in maintaining their figures too. The plan consisted of both an exercise program and food restrictions. Of course, since each of the girls had different needs, the food restrictions wouldn’t apply to all of them, including sickly Harumi and short Theia. They would all take part in the exercising, however. They thought that would be good for everyone’s health.

“Being a girl sure must be a pain...”

Being a guy, Koutarou didn’t understand the subtleties of the girls’ hearts. He

simply thought it must be a lot of work to live the way they did as he watched over them from the sidelines.

“Why are you acting like this has nothing to do with you? You’re going to do it too, Satomi-kun.”

“What?! I have to join too?!”

“Isn’t that only obvious? There’s no point in doing something like this unless everyone joins in.”

Since he began training with Ruth, Koutarou’s weight had stayed about the same. He had no need for a diet, but Shizuka was going to impose one on him anyways.

Oh well. Having everyone strive for the same goal does kinda sound like fun...

In the end, Koutarou had no objections. Being the only one left out would be boring, so he figured he might as well join in and enjoy things with the others.

And around the time he came to this conclusion, a low-pitched, masculine voice reached his ears.

“Can you hear me, Blue Knight?”

At the same time, the crest on the back of his hand began faintly glowing. Since male voices were rare in room 106, Koutarou was surprised at first, but once he saw the glowing crest, he quickly understood what was happening.

“Alunaya-dono, you’ve awakened.”

The one calling out to him was the being he’d recently summoned, Fire Dragon Emperor Alunaya. Alunaya had used up all of his energy that day and entered a dormant state while he was recovering. It seemed he’d finally worked up enough energy to be able to talk with Koutarou.

“It seems I’ve caused you worry. Forgive me.”

“Don’t think anything of it. You saved us, after all.”

Koutarou could speak directly to Alunaya in his mind thanks to the connection they had via the crest on the back of his hand. That’s why no one else could hear what they were saying. It was a discussion that not even Alunaya’s host,

Shizuka, could hear.

“But are you okay now?”

“That was what I wanted to talk to you about.”

“Is something the matter?”

Koutarou grew slightly uneasy. It sounded like Alunaya had gotten in touch with him because something was wrong.

“There is no cause for alarm. There are no problems with myself. Mary... No, that wasn’t it. The girl I am residing in... Shizuka, I think it was. She is in no danger either. Everything will return to normal in a while.”

“I see...”

Koutarou was relieved. He’d been concerned for Alunaya who had used up all of his mana, and for Shizuka who had become his host. But fortunately, that all seemed to be unfounded.

“However, there is one minor issue.”

“And what’s that?”

“It’s about this weight management program that Shizuka is about to undergo... A diet, I think she called it. It is, without a doubt, going to fail.”

“Whaaaaaaaat?!”

Completely taken aback by Alunaya’s unexpected words, Koutarou reflexively let out a shout of surprise. When he did, all of the eyes in the room gathered on him. They were all wondering what was wrong.

“What’s the matter, Satomi-kun?”

Shizuka, who was leading the discussion on dieting, asked Koutarou what was up on behalf of everyone.

“N-No, it’s nothing. Sorry for interrupting.”

“Really? That’s good, I guess. So anyways...”

Koutarou hadn’t offered a decent explanation, but the girls were so caught up in their dieting talk that they quickly forgot about his outburst and moved on.

“Jeez...”

With the girls having lost interest in him, Koutarou let out a sigh of relief as Alunaya began talking to him again.

“Sorry for startling you.”

“No, it was just so unexpected... So you were saying Landlord-san’s diet plan is going to fail?”

“Yes. You see, the reason Shizuka’s weight has increased is me.”

At Koutarou’s request, Alunaya began explaining. Apparently, Alunaya was so powerful that he had an effect on his surroundings even if he wasn’t actively doing anything. Since that was troublesome, he ordinarily used magic to offset the effects he caused. Thanks to that, nobody had noticed that Alunaya was inside of Shizuka all this time. However, having used up the majority of his power in the previous battle, he was no longer able to fully counteract the effect he had on his surroundings.

“...And that’s how it is.”

“So Landlord-san hasn’t really gained any weight, it’s just her surroundings that have gotten weird?”

“That’s right. Because I can’t correct the distortions in the space surrounding Shizuka, it appears as though she’s heavier than she really is.”

“So lowering her weight through dieting is...”

“Impossible. Her weight will not return to normal any other way than waiting for me to regain my powers.”

Shizuka hadn’t gained weight, but the space she occupied was distorted in a way that caused her weight to increase. Lowering her physical mass would have no effect on that distortion. That was why Alunaya was saying that her diet would be fruitless.

“If we leave things as they are, Shizuka will eventually notice the abnormality with her body. She’ll probably find out the next time she gets on a scale. What do we do, Blue Knight?”

“Th-That’s bad! We have to do something!”

By summoning Alunaya, Koutarou had gotten Shizuka involved in things. That's why he felt like it was his responsibility to make sure that she could still live her life normally. It was why he hadn't told her about Alunaya. Nobody would be happy to learn that there was another creature residing inside their body, after all. So in order to protect the normalcy of Shizuka's everyday life, Koutarou needed to keep Alunaya a secret.

Koutarou's first order of business was keeping Shizuka from getting on a scale. That, however, was taken care of thanks to Clan, who offered to take more accurate measurements with instruments on her spaceship. Shizuka was given fake data for her weight, or, more precisely, an estimation of her original weight. She was using that as the basis for her dieting plans, and had accordingly put off buying a new scale. So the immediate crisis had been adverted for the time being.

"Sorry for always causing you trouble."

"You can say that again. Do you really only remember I exist when you need something?"

The only remaining problem was Clan, who was sulking on the other end of the communications device. Clan didn't like that Koutarou had recently only been treating her like a convenience. She puffed out her cheeks and shot a resentful glare his way.

"That said, I can't just casually ask Princess Clariossa to go bug hunting. You're not Yurika, you know?"

Clan was a princess of a galactic empire, and Koutarou was trying to be considerate in his own way.

"That's a big mistake. I am not planning on treating you like a legendary knight in return, you know?"

"Then you'd come if I invited you?"

"Of course. I'm just Clan, your partner. I have no way of being Princess Clariossa around you anymore."

"You know, you're a really great girl!"

Since Kenji refused to go with him lately, Koutarou welcomed anyone who was willing to come along on his bug-nabbing adventures. And for a girl to agree to it, she was like a goddess in Koutarou's eyes, which were gleaming with admiration as he looked at Clan.

"I wish you had realized that sooner. Jeez..."

"Sorry, sorry... Anyways, keep your weekends open during July and August. We'll be going all summer."

"Very well. I'll start thinking of insect traps."

A smile returned to Clan's face.

Now that I think about it, it's been a while since we've been like this...

Clan recalled her time-travelling together with Koutarou, which put her in a high spirits. She loved the life she currently lived surrounded by friends, but she couldn't resist the temptations of tromping through the mountains with just Koutarou. It was a considerable change for a girl who used to spend all her time locked up in her laboratory.

"Thanks. But in the end, I'm still just causing you trouble."

"You can't call something like this trouble. Besides, if we can show the children aboard Blue Knight insects from this planet, I'm sure they'd love it."

"Clan... you..."

The children would love it. The words Clan had casually spoken tugged at Koutarou's heart. Thinking of her citizens wasn't something Clan had done in the past. But now that she'd obtained a nature befitting of a princess, Clan looked as splendid of a royal as Theia did to Koutarou.

"What's the matter? You're making a strange face."

"It's nothing. I was just admiring Her Highness, who is being more wonderful than normal today."

"I-Idiot!"

Clan swiftly cut off the call, thinking she was being teased.

"I was being serious though..."

Truth be told, Koutarou was troubled. He was now Theia's vassal, but he also wanted to help out Clan. He couldn't have two lords, so it was quite a vexing problem.

"Regardless... I have to catch a huge beetle this year."

The problem of who he served wouldn't be solved right away. But since Koutarou wanted to see the children and Clan smiling with joy, he decided that he would catch the biggest beetle he could find for them.

There was no way that Clan would have any equipment for hunting insects, and Koutarou couldn't let her go with him empty-handed since he was the one who invited her. So he went to the shopping street with the intention of buying a second net and cage.

"I'm sure Clan could whip up some invention for this, but real bug hunting should be done with some old-fashioned heart."

He figured that if Clan got serious, she wouldn't have trouble coming up with some invention or another that would capture every beetle on the mountain. But he wanted her to swing a net around and get a proper feel for insect hunting. The children would probably respect her more that way too.

"Clan's short and doesn't have a lot of stamina... so maybe one of these kid's nets would be good. But she'd probably get angry if she found out. I need to make sure I remove the label before I give it to her..."

Koutarou entered a toy shop to look for equipment for Clan. She was a good girl, but just like Theia, she was extremely prideful. He'd have to be careful picking out a net for her.

"Oh?"

That was when Koutarou caught sight of a familiar girl by the entrance out of the corner of his eye. She hadn't noticed him inside, and simply passed by the storefront. Her expression bothered him a little, so he returned the net to the shelf and chased after her.

"Landlord-san!"

“Huh? Oh, Satomi-kun.”

The girl who turned around when Koutarou called after her was none other than Shizuka. But something was wrong. Her normally cheerful expression was nowhere to be seen. She was smiling, but it was somehow sad and lonely—the opposite of her usual positive and bright smile.

I can’t say I like that look on her...

The only time the people around Koutarou made that kind of face was when they were shouldering some kind of problem. A recent example was Theia, but the one that had left the biggest impression on him was Alaia. That’s why he’d come after Shizuka. He couldn’t just ignore her when she was like this.

“Did something happen?”

“No, nothing at all.”

Shizuka shook her head, still smiling. But Koutarou couldn’t accept that answer.

“It sure doesn’t look like that to me.”

“It might look like that way, but it’s nothing new. It happened several years ago...”

Shizuka showed what she was holding in both hands to Koutarou.

So... that’s what it is...

Shizuka was carrying a large bouquet. And if it was talking about something that had happened several years ago, there weren’t that many possibilities.

“The Kasagi Family Grave.” That was what was written on the tombstone. Below it, Shizuka’s ancestors rested in peace. This had been Shizuka’s destination. After setting down the bouquet and lighting some incense, she put her hands together and bowed her head in front of the grave. Koutarou followed her lead. He didn’t want to leave her alone like this, so he’d come with her to the cemetery.

“...Thank you, Satomi-kun.”

After Koutarou finished his prayer, Shizuka bowed deeply to him in a display of gratitude.

“No, you’re always helping me, and you’re keeping Corona House clean and easy to live in... so...”

“Thank you. I mean it. I’m sure... dad and mom are happy.”

Shizuka looked up and smiled. But she looked so very sad. There were tears forming in her eyes.

As the tombstone indicated, this was where Shizuka’s family rested. That included Shizuka’s parents, who had passed away several years ago. Today was the anniversary of their deaths.

After finishing her prayers, Shizuka sat there facing the tombstone for a while. Koutarou figured that she had some catching up to do with her parents, so he left her be and took a seat on a nearby bench.

You can see Corona House from here...

The graveyard was at an elevated area, and the bench was placed near the edge of the grounds. As a result, Koutarou could see most of the city from where he sat, and right in the middle of the view was Corona House. Koutarou thought to himself that Shizuka’s parents probably watched over her from the very same bench.

But... still, she must be lonely...

Even though she was being watched over, there had to be times Shizuka felt alone. Koutarou knew a little bit what it was like. Losing family wasn’t easy. It could only be harder when it was both parents.

“You’re wide open!”

As Koutarou was deep in thought, someone snuck up on him and let fly a swift karate chop. It struck Koutarou on the back of his head, but since there was absolutely no force behind it, it only rattled his head a little.

“Ouch.”

“Heehee, I wonder if I could have beat you if I had been serious.”

The person who'd attacked him from behind him was Shizuka. She had finished talking to her parents and had come over to let him know, but when she saw how defenseless he was, she'd taken the mischievous attack of opportunity.

"Hahaha. Please spare me, Landlord-san."

"Don't worry. I wouldn't get serious with you."

Shizuka circled around the bench with light steps and sat down next to Koutarou. When he looked at her, she had a happy smile.

"Why not?"

"Because I'd be troubled if you left your apartment. Financially speaking."

"That's an awfully calculating reason."

"That's right. In order for a high school landlord to survive these days, you need to be calculating."

Now that Shizuka had been able to sort out some of her feelings after talking to her parents, she'd regained some of her cheerfulness. She wasn't back to her full brightness, however, so Koutarou thought it was his job to help her with that.

"Hahaha. I have to say I'm a bit surprised, though."

"Why's that?"

"I didn't think our relationship was built on money."

"If I admitted that, it would be harder to collect rent."

In truth, Shizuka felt like she had a much deeper relationship with the residents of room 106 than that of landlord and tenant. She hoped they felt the same way, too. But in order for her to survive, she still needed to collect money from the people she considered friends where it was due. And since that wasn't an easy thing to do, she couldn't admit that she considered them friends before she considered them tenants, at least on the surface.

"I see... Being a landlord sounds like a troublesome occupation."

Shizuka's subtle feelings reached Koutarou, and rather than take offense, he

smiled at her.

“Really? I think it would be easier than a legendary hero.”

“The person in question just thinks of himself as a normal guy though.”

“Of course. Your job isn’t something you brag about, and it’s not something you became because you wanted to.”

“Isn’t that the same for you? You should be allowed to just be a normal high schooler too.”

“That... might be true...”

Shizuka’s smile vanished and she turned back towards the cemetery. If her parents were still alive, she would have just been a normal high school girl.

“...How did you become a landlord, anyway?”

How did her parents die? Koutarou refrained from asking the question directly. In all honesty, he wanted to avoid the question entirely. But if he did, then he would never be able to be of any real help to Shizuka. So while it might have been a touchy subject, it was something he had to know.

“We went on a trip as a family. The boiler in the hotel we were staying at exploded. My parents were caught in the fire it caused...”

Shizuka had never talked about her past much. She didn’t want anyone’s sympathy. But when Koutarou asked about it, she answered him quite honestly. She knew about his past, after all, so she believed that he would understand without showing her any unwanted pity.

“...Dad and mom gave their lives to protect me. Dad perished in the fire, and mom inhaled too much smoke. ‘Don’t take any deep breaths...’ ‘We’ll protect you no matter what...’ Those were their last words that I remember...”

Even though she didn’t have any problem telling Koutarou, it was still hard to talk about. Her emotions swelled, and her voice gradually grew weaker.

“I was so young... I couldn’t do anything... I stayed wrapped up in a wet blanket while dad and mom carried me. I trained so hard at the dojo, but it was useless. I couldn’t do anything. I was just a powerless child that needed to be protected...”

Shizuka meekly mumbled those words as she clenched her right hand. She'd never forgotten the helplessness she felt on that day.

"That's why... I decided to become stronger. I don't ever want to feel that way again. I'll protect what my mom and dad protected myself from now on..."

That was why Shizuka protected the building that her parents had left behind. She would properly manage it as its landlord, and make sure no accidents or fires ever occurred there. And she trained her body to be able to protect other people. So that her tenants would never have to go through what she did. In other words, Shizuka was far more concerned about her tenants than money.

"No wonder we didn't stand a chance..." Koutarou mumbled and smiled wryly. He couldn't help it.

"Eh?"

"I mean when we first came to room 106. Back then, you crushed all of us."

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

"Unlike us who were just fighting over the room, you were trying to protect something. So of course we didn't have a prayer against you."

Koutarou was sure of it. Shizuka's strength came from her desire to protect. She had a real reason to fight for something, unlike the rest of them who were just fighting for themselves.

"But it's strange. Now I want to protect all of you, too."

Shizuka flashed her own small wry smile while staring into her palms. It was strange. She now wanted to protect the very same people she'd used her fists against that day.

"I think I know what you mean."

"Now that I think about it, your circumstances aren't much different from mine, Satomi-kun."

They had both lost family members, fought against outsiders to protect their homes, and now they were trying to protect the outsiders that had come into their lives. Koutarou and Shizuka had a lot in common.

“If you put it like that, we all might be pretty similar.”

“That’s true... Everyone wanted their own place...”

Everyone sought out room 106 for their own reasons. Yet they had all obtained something they wanted along the way. So while they all had different motivations, their desires were largely the same. They’d all struggled, searching for warmth and a place to call their own.

“Then the reason we’re all together now is all thanks to you, Landlord-san.”

“Me?”

“Yes. It’s because you were protecting Corona House that we could all get along.”

“I... brought everyone...”

Shizuka had never thought of it like that. Wide-eyed, she put her hands to her chest.

“I’m sure your parents would be happy.”

“Would they really...? Dad and mom...”

“Yes. At least, I think they would be.”

“Thank you, Satomi-kun. I’m very happy too...”

Shizuka had struggled ever since the day she lost her parents. Just in the past year, she had found her place again. The love she thought she’d lost for good that day now surrounded her. And it was because of that that the tears now flooding out from her eyes wouldn’t stop for quite some time.

Shizuka didn’t stop crying until the sun had begun to set and the cityscape was painted orange in its fading glow.

“I’m sorry, Satomi-kun. For making you wait such a long time...”

Finally back to her normal self, Shizuka hurriedly wiped her cheeks. It didn’t quite catch the last of all her tears, so Koutarou gently reached out with his hands to wipe away the rest.

“It’s fine. I think you should be allowed to cry when visiting your parents’

grave.”

“Ah...”

Shizuka was surprised by the warmth coming from Koutarou’s hand on her cheek. But the thought of rejecting it never crossed her mind. That warmth, after all, was one of the things she desired.

“Besides, if we come home with you crying, there might be a riot.”

“That... might be true...”

The warmth Shizuka felt slowly grew into something else. She had come into contact with Koutarou countless times before while they were exercising or practicing together. And because she trusted him, she’d never thought much of it.

Something’s strange...

But that was changing now. The warmth touching her cheek gave her a sense of fulfillment and security it never had before. She began feeling that she would surely find happiness if she entrusted herself to that warmth.

It’s not like anything’s different...

While it was true that nothing was different at face value—Shizuka and Koutarou were the same as they ever were—the vague feelings that had been brewing deep in her heart became a tiny fire of conviction.

Koutarou understood what Shizuka treasured, and he would treasure the same things with her. That was what Shizuka now believed. It was the smallest change in perspective that had been sparked by just a few words of conversation between them. It was so subtle that it might even go unnoticed by Shizuka herself. But that small change made all the difference in the world in how she felt.

A wish to be happy. Hope for the future. A racing heart and restless emotions.

Something Shizuka had never felt before bloomed inside of her, slowly growing and growing. She vaguely understood what that feeling was. Since she loved to gossip and talk to other girls about any and everything, she wasn’t so dense about this kind of thing that she wouldn’t pick up on it. But she still

couldn’t accept it that easily. Like Koutarou, she was a lot more timid when it came to herself.

“Th-That’s right, Satomi-kun, there was something I wanted to ask you.”

Mustering all of her remaining will, she pretended everything was normal. Fortunately for her, that succeeded and she was able to talk to Koutarou like she always did. Of course, whether that was actually a good thing was up for debate.

“Sure. What is it?”

Koutarou didn’t hesitate to ask her what was up. He thought Shizuka seemed quite normal, though it was only natural for her to be a little emotional after visiting her family’s grave.

“Um... The truth is that I want you to give Aika-san some attention.”

“Aika-san? I see... She probably still hasn’t gotten used to her new life.”

“It’s not just that...”

Shizuka shook her head. With that, she was finally able to gather her thoughts and return to her usual self. Though it was something she had struggled to bring up, she was really worried for Maki.

“Satomi-kun, do you remember the other day when Aika-san wanted you to place a curse on her?”

“Yeah. Even though it was to deceive the enemy, that sure did surprise me.”

The other day, Maki had asked Koutarou to deprive her of her freedom. While doing so would allow them to fool Darkness Rainbow, the group had collectively decided to use different means to deceive them. What Maki suggested was simply too dangerous.

“Actually, Aika-san had something of an ulterior motive.”

“An ulterior motive? What would that be?”

“Aika-san was originally an orphan... Darkness Rainbow was the only place she ever belonged. And now she’s left them to come and stay with us, but she still hasn’t gotten her feelings in order.”

Maki was currently sharing room 206 with Shizuka. The two girls sympathized with each other's circumstances, and as roommates, there was a lot that Maki had only confessed to Shizuka. That's why Shizuka understood Maki's feelings better than anyone else.

"That's why Aika-san wanted a bond with someone so obvious that anyone could tell."

"So she really wanted me to put a curse on her? Surely there has to be a better way..."

Koutarou was surprised. If what Shizuka was saying was true, Maki had wanted to create bond between them by carving it into her body. It was far too extreme and brutal.

"She's so helplessly lonely that she wants any connection she can get."

Maki was lonely. She had gotten closer with Koutarou, but they'd really only known each other a short time. While she believed in him and the others, she still often felt insecure.

Was it okay for her to be here? Was she needed? Was she unwanted?

Maki worried about a great deal of things. That's why she wanted a bond that would put those worries out of her mind. Even if that essentially meant living with a gun pointed at her head. That muzzle aimed right at her would serve as proof. Acknowledgement that she was there. That someone wanted to keep her there. She was willing to give up her freedom if it meant she could feel that connection.

"Doesn't that ring a bell to you, Satomi-kun? It does to me..."

"Yeah... It does to me too."

Koutarou had felt something similar after losing his mother and his relationship with his father turned sour. He'd thrown himself into getting in fights. Though he was hurting himself doing it, it made him feel like he was still alive. That was more or less what Maki was doing now.

"Aika-san needs someone to save her from that. Just accepting her isn't enough."

“For me, that was baseball and Mackenzie...”

What had pulled Koutarou up from the depths of his insecurity was his baseball team, which included Kenji at the time. By making friends and working together with other people towards a common goal, he found meaning in living that he’d been missing before. And right now, that was what Maki needed. Koutarou understood what Shizuka was saying quite well.

“That might actually be the same reason Aika-san is always after your money. She wants to feel some security through an easy to understand bond like money.”

“Aika-san...”

When Shizuka pointed that out, Koutarou recalled when he and Maki had formed their contract. Deep inside, Maki was a lonely girl shivering inside of a dungeon. And just like Koutarou had been once, she couldn’t rely on others. Not even if she wanted to.

“So, Satomi-kun, I want you to help Aika-san until she can properly settle in.”

“Everyone just wants a place of their own, huh...?”

Koutarou had felt like he’d saved Maki just by bringing her to room 106. But that alone wasn’t enough. If left be, she would still spend her days in anxiety. It was a problem that might eventually resolve itself even if he did nothing, but Koutarou couldn’t find it in himself to just stand aside.

“Please, Satomi-kun. We don’t need to protect just Aika-san’s place, but everyone’s...”

“Everyone’s place... Yeah, you’re right.”

Making a place for Maki to feel secure was the same as making a place where everyone could live and laugh together. It meant protecting all of them. A place for all of them to belong. It wasn’t just for Maki’s sake, but for everyone’s.

“I understand... I’ll think of something.”

He still didn’t know what he should do yet, but he would keep it in mind. As long as he did that, he was sure he would eventually find a solution.

“Thank you, Satomi-kun.”

With Koutarou agreeing to her request, tears began forming in Shizuka's eyes again. He'd said exactly what she'd hoped he would, which made it hard for her to keep her feelings of joy at bay.

How embarrassing... I was trying to cover up these feelings...

Shizuka had brought up Maki to try and change the topic, but in the end, it led right back to the same place. Her plan had backfired. But that result may very well have been the same regardless of what she'd brought up. Her hope for the future and racing heart convinced her that she would be happy as long as she was with Koutarou.

"...Could I borrow your shoulder?"

"Sure."

So Shizuka decided to stop fighting against her feelings. Even if she did, they would still sweep her away like this. And in that case, she figured she might as well just accept them. She also believed that Koutarou would accept her, even like that.

"Landlord-san... you're crying again."

A large hand wiped away the tears on her cheeks.

Now that I think about it, dad's hands were like this...

Shizuka gave in accepted the sensation of satisfaction and security the touch of that masculine hand instilled in her.

"Heehee... Dad, mom, Aika-san, and everyone else, too... I have a lot to worry about..."

Shizuka gave herself over to the warm feelings spreading inside her and to the passage of time. As she did, everything she'd kept bottled up—all of her frozen feelings—slowly melted away. And with that, before long, Shizuka had regained some of the childlike innocence she had when she was with her parents.

Dad, mom... Don't worry. I have Satomi-kun and everyone else with me. I'm fine. I'm happy now...

Shizuka now understood who she needed to be with in order to be happy. She understood where she belonged. And those were both things that she'd been

looking for ever since losing her parents.

“Landlord-san.”

“Mm...What is it?”



Fully entrusting herself to the happiness she'd finally found, Shizuka looked up at Koutarou with somewhat misty eyes. This boy was just supposed to have been another tenant. But before she knew it, he'd taken a prime spot amidst the things she treasured.

"This is just a hypothetical question, but... if we paid several decades of rent in advance and you could live like a normal girl again, would you be able to smile, Landlord-san?"

"Satomi-kun..."

And now this boy was trying to guide Shizuka herself to the same spot. He was saying that there was no need for her to just watch.

I see... So that's what this is...

Up until now, Shizuka had been wondering why she'd fallen in love with Koutarou. But now she understood. He'd filled up that empty place in her heart. And she could fill up the empty place in his. People were attracted to one another because they believed that they needed each other. In short, everyone wanted a place where they belonged.

"Heehee, Satomi-kun, let me tell you something."

"Huh?"

"There's an easier and cheaper method than paying rent upfront."

"And that is?"

"That part, I can't tell you. It's something you have to realize yourself, or it would be pointless... heeheehee..."

Shizuka smiled and leaned on Koutarou's shoulder. She had her pride, after all. He'd just have to figure it out for himself.

With the height of summer drawing ever nearer, the sun was setting later and later. So since waiting for nightfall would take too long, Koutarou and Shizuka decided to leave some time before that happened.

"By the way, what were you doing at the shopping street, Satomi-kun?"

“I was trying to find a new bug net and stuff.”

Shizuka’s expression once again was radiating its usual brightness. She was a bit more talkative than normal, however, and would lean on Koutarou from time to time. He figured it was because she was still feeling lonely after visiting her parents’ grave.

“So did Maximilian break? Was it Yurika?”

“No, nothing like that. Clan will be coming along too, so I wanted to get some equipment ready for her as well.”

“Hmm. You sure do treasure Clan-san a lot, Satomi-kun.”

Shizuka flashed a cheeky smile and nudged Koutarou with her elbow.

“That’s not really my...”

“Not really your intention?”

“Well, it is... But in that sense, I treasure all of you.”

“Then if I say I’ll come along, would you get a net for me too?”

“Well... Yeah, I would.”

Koutarou felt like it would be wrong to get one for Clan and not Shizuka. So if she was going, it would only be fair to prepare equipment for both of them.

“Heehee, Satomi-kun, isn’t there something you want to ask me?”

Shizuka took a few steps in front of Koutarou, spun around, and walked backwards as she smiled at him. That teasing smile reminded him of a child playing a prank on their parents.

“...Landlord-san, would you like to come bug hunting too?”

With an inkling of what was going through her mind, Koutarou asked her what she thought she wanted to hear. Shizuka didn’t have family anymore; the closest she had was Koutarou and the others. So in a way, she was treating him like she would family. Knowing that, he couldn’t find it in him to refuse her.

“Uhuh. And Aika-san can come too, right?”

“Of course, my lady. I was thinking of bringing her along even if I have to be

pushy.”

“Then I’ll definitely come with you. Teeheehee...”

If Koutarou had any idea what Shizuka’s true intentions were, he probably would have been quite surprised. She was indeed feeling a little lonely because she couldn’t rely on her parents anymore. But she didn’t see Koutarou as a substitute. She simply wanted to be with him and rely on him for who he was. Unaware of that, all Koutarou was really focusing on was her strength.

Landlord-san really is something... Since she’s this strong, then maybe we don’t need to hide it from her...

Despite the emotional trip of visiting her parents’ grave, Shizuka hadn’t forgotten about Maki. Knowing how strong she must be to be thinking of someone else at a time like that, Koutarou began thinking that there might not be any reason to hide Alunaya’s existence from her after all.

Shizuka would surely be able to accept Alunaya. Moreover, this was nothing like keeping his visit to past Forthorthe a secret from Theia. Even if Shizuka found out, it wouldn’t have any political consequences. And so Koutarou slowly began to lean towards telling her the truth.

But... how should I tell her? She’ll still probably be shocked. I should check with Clan first...

While Koutarou wanted to tell her, it wasn’t something he could just come out and say without any forethought. But fortunately, Shizuka would be joining Koutarou and Clan on their bug hunting adventure. He would consult with Clan beforehand, and if possible, reveal things to her then.

“What’s wrong, Satomi-kun? You have such a serious look on your face. Ah, could it be that you’re having a hard time financially?”

Seeing Koutarou fall silent, Shizuka worried she’d made an unreasonable request and put him in a difficult spot. Since that wasn’t her intention, her smile withered away at a rapid pace.

“I’m sorry for kinda forcing you into it. Aika-san and I don’t need equipment, though. We just want to tag along.”

“No, it’s not that...”

Koutarou hurriedly began thinking of an excuse. While he’d fallen silent in the middle of their conversation, he couldn’t tell her the real reason why. But money wasn’t the issue, and he didn’t want Shizuka to needlessly worry. In fact, Koutarou currently had money to spare. In order to celebrate him officially becoming her vassal, Theia wanted to give Koutarou a salary. She enjoyed indulging in things that really made her feel like his master.

“We’ll... be going a lot during the summer, so I was just wondering if you and Aika-san will be okay with that.”

“If anything, that’s more convenient. I think it’d be best if Aika-san gets into a routine.”

“Landlord-san...”

Though Koutarou only said what he did to disguise what he was really thinking about, it ended up highlighting Shizuka’s generosity even more.

She really is amazing... I should definitely tell her the truth as soon as possible...

In just a single day, Koutarou’s impression of Shizuka had changed dramatically. It was enough to convince him that he should be honest with her. And as Koutarou made up his mind on the matter, Shizuka unexpectedly stopped walking.

“What’s that, I wonder...?” she mumbled, staring straight ahead.

“What’s the matter?”

Noticing that Shizuka had stopped, Koutarou followed suit. When he did, she pointed at something a little further up ahead and to the right.

“Koutarou, look over there. Doesn’t that look like smoke?”

“It does. Maybe someone is making a campfire?”

Smoke was rising from somewhere in the direction Shizuka was pointing. Seeing it, Koutarou’s first thought was that someone had probably made a fire. But summer wasn’t in full force yet, so it wasn’t quite the season for campfires. On top of that, the smoke rising up into the air was pitch black. It wasn’t the

kind of smoke that a controlled fire gave off.

“No, that’s not a campfire! This is the middle of a residential district! Nobody would set up a campfire here!”

“Is it a real fire?!”

By the time Koutarou finished his sentence, Shizuka was already running. He was so fixated on the smoke that he hadn’t noticed her taking off at first, and couldn’t do anything to stop her.

Koutarou stood before the burning building. It was an old, three-story private housing unit, and even though it had only just caught fire, it was already wrapped in searing flames. Between the stiff evening breeze and the house being made mostly of wood, it burst into flames incredibly quickly.

“Satomi-kun, call the fire department!”

“Right!”

When Koutarou and Shizuka arrived, there was no fire truck on the scene and no one doing anything about the flames. Onlookers were only just starting to gather, and it was unclear whether anyone had called the authorities yet or not. So the first thing they did upon arriving was contact the fire department using their cellphone to report the fire.

“Hello, is this the fire department?! There’s a fire!”

“Satomi-kun, someone’s coming out! I’ll leave this to you!”

“Landlord-san?! Ah, sorry, the address is—”

Two people appeared from the entrance of the burning house. It was an elderly couple, and they slowly edged forward while supporting each other. Shizuka immediately raced over to help them, leaving talking to the fire department to Koutarou. The flames roaring from the building were strong, and Shizuka felt like she was being roasted just getting closer.

Dad, mom...

She’d felt that same sensation once before. The heat washing over her was exactly like she’d felt in the fire where she lost her parents. Partially because of

that, an image of Shizuka's parents overlapped with the two people standing in front of her in her mind.

"Are you okay?!"

Once she reached the couple, Shizuka helped them move to a safe place.

I wonder if dad and mom looked like this... when they were carrying me...

As she was helping them, Shizuka was stunned by their appearance. They were covered in soot and sweat, and they looked exhausted. Practically all she could do was stare.

"O-Our granddaughter is still inside!"

"Please tell the firefighters!"

"What..."

However, Shizuka returned to her senses when she heard what they said. And even more striking than that was the faint voice that reached her ears next.

"Papa! Mama! Grandpa! Grandma!"

Shizuka looked in the direction of the voice and spotted a young girl in a window on the third floor. She was desperately beating on the windowpane with tears in her eyes as the flames drew nearer behind her.

"Yuuka!"

"It's okay, Yuu-chan! The firefighters are coming to save you!"

They'd heard her too, the elderly couple shouted out to her.

They won't make it!

The fire was raging so viciously that it was obvious the girl wouldn't make it if they waited for help to arrive.

"Oh no! Wait, young lady!"

"You mustn't put your own life in danger!"

Koutarou heard the elderly couple's shouting as he got off the phone with the fire department, and looked towards the fire, expecting the worst.

"Landlord-san, no! Wait!"

But what he saw was Shizuka's back as she rushed into the burning building.

Shizuka was aware of the foolishness of her actions. It probably wasn't something she would have done under ordinary circumstances. But because of the timing, because of what day it was... She ran in without a second thought.

Dad, mom... I'm no longer a helpless child!

The elderly couple and the young girl reminded Shizuka of her own family. Her parents had walked through the flames to protect her, and it had cost them their lives. If only she'd been able to do something back then, the outcome might have been different. That was what she'd always thought. That's why she trained her body and continued protecting Corona House on her own. But there was no way to know if it would actually make a difference. That doubt plagued her from time to time.

But right now, a sight similar to the fire from her past was right in front of her. Shizuka thought of it as a chance to test whether or not she had the power to change things. If she was able to save the girl inside, she would know for sure that she was no longer helpless. She would be able to do what she hadn't been able to in the past.

That's why Shizuka, despite knowing that her actions were foolish, raced into the burning building. The fact that the fire trucks wouldn't make it in time drove her forward as well. But she wasn't acting out of pure selflessness. This meant something to her personally. She wanted to stare her past in its fiery eyes and retake her future.

The third floor! I have to get up to the third floor!

Entering through the front door, Shizuka began looking for stairs up to the next level. Since the girl was on the third floor, that would be her fastest path there.

There's so much smoke... and it's so hot...

Shizuka quickly realized that making it there wouldn't be easy. Her vision was obstructed by the rising smoke and flames. Since the smoke naturally travelled upwards, it concealed the stairs from view. And now that she was surrounded

by fire, she began feeling the mental pressure of the situation. Being in a house she was totally unfamiliar with, finding the stairs proved exceptionally challenging.

Calm down, Shizuka! This is a normal house! The stairs should be exactly where you'd expect them to be!

Shizuka attempted to calm herself down as she took one step after another into the hallway. In smaller houses, the stairs were often right by the front entrance. But since this was a bigger house, the stairs were likely somewhere out of view from the front door so guests wouldn't have to look at them when they came over. That said, the stairs should still be connected to the hallway for the sake of convenience. So as long as she moved down the hall, she would find them eventually. Thinking that, Shizuka suppressed her panic and continued her search.

There they are!

Her efforts paid off. She stumbled across the stairs towards the end of the hallway. Since the smoke billowing up them made it impossible to see anything upstairs, she had no way of knowing what kind of condition the upper floors were in. She fought back the urge to rush up immediately, and instead proceeded with caution. Halfway up to the next floor, she spotted several books lying on the staircase. If she'd run, she very well may have tripped on them and found herself in danger.

To think just the smoke was this hot...

With the dense smoke swirling around her, Shizuka was practically blinded. It stung her eyes and naturally provoked tears. But nevertheless, she pushed forward. She slowly crawled up to the second floor while paying close attention to her footing.

"Ack, hack..."

After inhaling smoke all the way up the stairs, Shizuka found herself in a violent coughing fit by the time she reached the second floor. That caused her to inhale even more smoke; it was a vicious cycle. The smoke on the second floor was even thicker smoke than on the first, especially by the stairway.

I need to stay low...

Shizuka was close to panicking as she struggled to breathe, but she barely managed to keep her cool. She summoned all the knowledge she'd learned from fire drills and got as low to the floor as she could. Since there was less smoke there, she could breathe somewhat normally again.

I have to hurry up to the third floor...

She took several deep breaths to calm both her racing mind and her pulse. Getting a hold of herself, she took a good look around the second floor. The fire was more intense here than it had been downstairs. Since both flames and smoke moved upwards, she'd expected about that much. But that meant things would probably be even worse on the third floor. Shizuka prayed that the fire hadn't spread too far as her thoughts turned to the young girl upstairs.

I'm a little burned... but otherwise, I'm perfectly fine! I can still do this!

As she worked her way through the building, Shizuka had gotten burned in several places. That much was unavoidable, but it wasn't bad enough to keep her from moving. After telling herself that she was all right, Shizuka began to climb the stairs to the third floor. Since the stairway continued up from the first floor, there was no need for her to go looking for them again. But something stopped Shizuka in her tracks.

The stairs are burning!

The fire had already spread to the stairs leading up to the third floor. In order to reach the little girl, she would need to cross through those flames. Since the stairs weren't completely on fire yet, she thought it would be possible to cross if she moved quickly.

I see, so that's why that old couple...

For an elderly couple, it was a feat that would be near impossible. They'd probably had to give up on saving their granddaughter themselves here and decided to go get help instead.

But I can do it!

Determination flared up in Shizuka's eyes as she backed away from the stairs.

She then lowered her posture and took a few deep breaths. She was going to hold her breath and dash up to the third floor. She was quite confident in her body and what she was capable of. She was stronger and faster than an average man. The same was true for her lung capacity. She was no longer the powerless child that her parents had had to save. Shizuka believed she could make a difference now.

Here I go!

She held her breath and charged ahead. Only one or two of the stairs were actually on fire, so if she could dash right past them, she was sure she'd be fine. And indeed, her steps were light and she bounded up the stairs just like she'd imagined herself doing. Just before she reached the burning section of stairs, she kicked off the step she was on and took a grand leap.

Hngh!

Though it was only for a moment, her body was engulfed in roaring flames. She grimaced in pain as she sailed through the air, but she didn't let it get the better of her. She maintained her balance as she landed and darted up the rest of the stairs, at last reaching the third floor.

"Hahh, hahh, hahh... I-I should have taken the skirt into consideration..."

Finally at her destination, Shizuka crouched down and gasped for air. Though she'd only held her breath for a few seconds, her body demanded oxygen after that intense action.

But now I can save that girl...

It was getting harder to breathe and everywhere she'd been burned was really hurting now, but she'd made it the third floor. Her goal was within reach. She'd be able to help the little girl.

Dad, mom, are you watching? I've gotten stronger, haven't I...?

Strictly speaking, what Shizuka was trying to save wasn't the little girl, but the helpless version of herself she'd been in the past.

Here we go, Shizuka... Just a little more to go!

Shizuka poured strength into her arms and pushed herself up. Next, her legs.

She remembered which room the girl had been in. As long as she could stand, she could make it there within a few seconds. The finish line was right in front of her.

H-Huh...

But it wouldn't be that easy. As she went to stand, she suddenly couldn't see and strength left her lower body. She promptly fell back down towards the floor. She tried moving her arms to catch herself, but they wouldn't move either. Down she went.

Why...? I should still... be able to continue...

Shizuka's consciousness began fading. But it wasn't from slamming into the floor. She was in a state of hypoxia.

Fire consumed oxygen in an enclosed environment at an alarming rate. And on top of that, smoke produced things like carbon dioxide and carbon monoxide, which further diluted what oxygen was left in the air. It was especially serious on the third floor. But Shizuka had expected that and taken precautions. She'd stayed low and only took shallow breaths when she could help it, doing her best to keep her heart from pumping too fast. That should have lowered her rate oxygen consumption, keeping her up and going for as long as possible.

But one thing had thrown that all off—the fire burning on the stairs leading to the third floor. She was so focused on getting through the flames that she'd forgotten all the other steps she was taking to keep herself safe. Rushing up the stairs had required a lot of oxygen. She expended the majority of what she'd been trying to conserve, and she needed to intake oxygen to replace it once she got to the top. But the air on the third floor was even thinner and more polluted than it was on the other floors. As a result, she was unable to replenish the oxygen she so desperately needed and entered a state of hypoxia.

Shizuka had indeed grown. She had a sturdy body and a quick wit. She was no longer like the powerless child she had been several years before. But there was no denying that she was only human.

My body... won't move... I still... couldn't do anything... Will I... die like this...? Completely helpless...?

As her consciousness faded, she was overcome by a feeling of powerlessness. She had worked so hard up until this day, but in the end, it still didn't make a difference. She couldn't do anything after all.

It wasn't.... supposed to end like this... No... I don't want this...

Shizuka tried her best to move, but her suffocating body wouldn't budge an inch. Right now, Shizuka was like a small boat that had lost its oars and was being carried out to sea by the waves of fate.

Why... Why am I this weak...? If only I were stronger... If I at least had the power to protect the ones I love...

It was painful. Shizuka was mortified. Tears streamed out of her eyes. Her body couldn't respond to her at all. All she could do was cry. And as the first tear hit the floor...

"Girl, can you hear me?"

Someone's voice reached Shizuka's ears, though not as sound. She could no longer hear anything around her.

"Who...?"

Unable even to comprehend the bizarre situation that was developing, Shizuka responded to the voice. As she did, it began speaking to her again in an authoritative yet calm manner.

"Hear me, little one. Two thousand years ago in a certain country, there was a great princess. Her country was endangered, yet she overcame the crisis that befell her and her people using only the talent—the power—within her."

"She must have been strong..."

Shizuka praised the princess. It would take great strength to protect an entire country. Shizuka strove to be someone who could protect people like that.

"That's right. While it wasn't visible to the naked eye, she held a powerful strength within."

There was more than one kind of strength, and it wasn't always physical. It might manifest as the wisdom to see through others, the influence of money, or knowledge of medicine. The power the princess in question had was the power

to attract others to her and lead them towards the future. The strength of a ruler—leadership.

“However, that was what made her unhappy.”

“Unhappy...? Even though she had such strength...?”

“Indeed. Having strength like that means that you can do everything on your own. You needn’t help. You needn’t other people. In short, the girl was too great of a princess. That’s why, though she was able to save her country, she was unable to be with the man she loved, and quietly lived out the rest of her life in solitude.”

“She was always alone...? Poor princess...”

“A strong power will isolate you. The same goes for you, little one. If you grow stronger than you are now, you will cross the line. You would become superhuman, and that strength would surely isolate you. That is the price to pay for power.”

“Solitude... is the price for strength...?”

The greater the power, the more unhappiness it brought. Money was a good example. When someone became rich enough, they would quickly find their family and friends increasing, which would naturally lead to doubt. At a certain point, they would even come to be suspicious of their true friends. In the end, the path of superlative wealth was an incredibly lonely one.

“If you so desire, I can grant you strength. The strength to protect the ones you love from any misfortune.”

“I want it. Of course I do.”

“But it will make you unhappy. You would have to give up your normal life. It would mean turning your back on things like marrying the person you love and having children. Do you desire my strength even then?”

The strength this voice was offering her was the power to be victorious in battle. If she obtained it, she would be thrust into a world of fighting, regardless of what she wished for. It would be drastically different from her life as an average high schooler. The owner of the voice offering her its strength thought

that would be sad.

“Yes. It would be convenient.”

However, Shizuka saw it differently. She thought that not living a normal life would be helpful. That it was a good thing.

“Convenient, you say?”

The voice was puzzled by her unexpected reply. Shizuka happily explained.

“That’s right. The people I love all have strong powers. And just like you say, they’re lonely. Satomi-kun is the loneliest of them all. He’s the strongest, but also the loneliest. And in order to support him, I need to be strong enough to be able to walk by his side. So I would choose loneliness, or whatever else it took to do that. In this world, there are some people you can’t help without that kind of strength...”

“...I understand. So it’s that heart of yours that drew me in...”

This voice wasn’t talking to Shizuka by chance. No, it was no accident. It had chosen a person with a suitable heart—one that it could entrust with its power. And upon hearing Shizuka’s words, the owner of the voice understood why it had been drawn to her. It rejoiced that it hadn’t been wrong about her.

“Huh? What do you mean?”

But Shizuka, who was unaware of all that, was quite confused.

“It’s nothing. It’s just... if the princess of the sword thought like you did, she might have led a happy life.”

“Isn’t happiness all about the situation and mood, in the end?”

If one had a strong power, it stood to reason that they would end up unhappy living among normal people. But that might not be the case if they lived with other people with powers—other people like them. Shizuka didn’t believe for a moment that her strength would really be what determined her happiness.

“Well said. You truly are the embodiment of strength.”

“Is that a compliment?”

“It is indeed. It is the highest degree of praise from me.”

“If you say so...”

Supposedly it was a compliment, but it didn’t feel like it to Shizuka. It didn’t exactly sound like the praise a girl her age should be getting. Thinking that, a nagging sense of doubt and dissatisfaction tugged at the back of her mind.

“That might be true for—”

Shizuka wanted to ask a little the owner the voice for the specifics of what it meant, but as she began to pose her question, she realized something important.

“Wait a minute. I still haven’t heard your name. I’m Shizuka. Who are you?”

Shizuka still didn’t know who she was talking to. She casually introduced herself and asked for the voice’s name in return, but the answer she got blew her mind.

“My name is Alunaya.”

“Huh?! You mean the one from the legends of Theia-chan’s homeland?!”

Shizuka was so surprised that her clouded consciousness that was fading away from hypoxia cleared up for a moment.

“The very same. I am known as the emperor of fire dragons. Shizuka, I will entrust you with my overwhelming power, and you may use it to protect whatever you wish. Now, let us get to it!”

“Ah, w-wait a minute! I still have so much to ask!”

The incredible power that had been hiding inside of her enveloped Shizuka. It welled up, pushing against her surrounds and against her fate. She was given the power to protect that which she held dear. And perhaps the power to draw ever so nearer to those who found themselves in solitude. Rather than pure strength, it was the power of hope. In the end, after all, Shizuka just wanted to make a place for herself, the same as everyone else.

Like that, Shizuka chose to coexist with the dragon of legend.

By the time Koutarou donned his armor and made it to the third floor, all he could see was the blazing fire.

“Where is Landlord-san?! Find her!”

Koutarou worried he was too late as he ordered his armor’s AI to track down Shizuka. Since his armor was originally a piece of equipment for a spaceship, it also doubled as a spacesuit. As such, he would be able move around the burning building without any problems as long he didn’t stick around for too long. But the same wasn’t true for Shizuka and the little girl who’d been left behind. He had to find them before they both succumbed to the growing inferno.

“Two life forms detected: four meters away at ten o’clock.”

“Well done! Let’s—”

“Both life forms are approaching. Warning: Generation of a shockwave confirmed. Deploying distortion field.”

“Wuh?!”

Before Koutarou could make it to her, Shizuka found him. The entire door in front of him, frame and all, were blown away. And on the other side appeared Shizuka, holding the little girl in her arms.

“Landlord-san?!”

“I’m sorry, Satomi-kun. I wasn’t able to properly control my strength. Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine. The armor protected me.”

Since Shizuka was holding the unconscious girl in her arms, she’d used a shockwave emitted from her mouth to blow out the door in her way. Koutarou had been on the other side, but fortunately he was in his armor and had a barrier field to protect him. If not, both he and the wall behind him would have been blown away along with the door.

“But Landlord-san, you look...”

“Ah, this? Uncle Alu saved me. But let’s talk about that later! We should get out of here!”

“Roger that!”

Koutarou was startled by Shizuka's appearance, but he obediently followed her instructions. He could roughly imagine what had happened to her. There was a horn on her forehead, a set of large wings on her back, and a long tail protruding from the back of her waist. And to top it all off, her eyes were glowing red. It was a sight Koutarou had seen before, and proof that Alunaya's powers were in effect.

After meeting up, Koutarou and Shizuka delivered the little girl to the elderly couple and quickly made their exit. While they had saved the girl, the fact that they'd both rushed into a burning building without waiting for the fire department to arrive was a bit of a problem. So they decided to clear the area before they got into any trouble.

"Give me a break, Landlord-san... That's not like you."

Koutarou used the time on their way back to Corona House to scold Shizuka. She was the first one to run into the building, and she'd done it so suddenly that he hadn't been able to do anything to stop her. It was particularly surprising considering how levelheaded Shizuka ordinarily was. That's why the look on Koutarou's face and his words were especially stern right now. Normally, it would be Shizuka scolding someone else for being reckless.

"While everything worked out thanks to Alunaya-dono... who knows what would have happened without him?"

"I'm sorry, Satomi-kun. After visiting my mom and dad's grave, they were all I could think about when I saw that fire. It got to me."

Shizuka knew what she'd done. Even taking the circumstances into account, it was an incredibly dangerous stunt to pull. That's why she was humbly reflecting on her actions as Koutarou scolded her.

"I know it was stupid, and I'm really sorry for making you worry. I'll be careful to make sure something like this doesn't happen again."

"Hahh... I'll forgive you this one time."

Koutarou quickly decided to forgive Shizuka. She was aware that she had made a mistake, and she was honestly sorry for it. Moreover, he understood

how she felt. If he'd come across an accident similar to the one his mother was in after visiting her grave, he was sure he'd rush in without thinking of the consequences too. That's why he couldn't really blame Shizuka for what she'd done.

"There won't be anyone that will be able to stop you in the future, so please be careful."

"...Yeah."

Shizuka timidly looked up at Koutarou's face to see if he was angry or not. She then nodded, and her tense expression seemed to loosen up.

"But anyways, I'm glad everyone was okay."

Koutarou smiled at Shizuka. Though she had been reckless, everything had turned out okay in the end. The little girl was safe and Shizuka was in one piece. Since the fate of the little girl was uncertain if they'd waited for the fire department, her rescue was worth celebrating even if Shizuka's actions weren't.

"Yeah..."

However, Shizuka still had a gloomy look on her face. She was looking down and let out a small sigh.

"Are you still bothered about it?"

Koutarou assumed that she was still kicking herself for being so impulsive. But Shizuka's mind was somewhere else altogether.

"No. I mean, I am sorry about that, but that's not it... In the end, I still couldn't save anyone, just like when dad and mom died. So I'm disappointed that I haven't grown at all..."

Shizuka was feeling down because she felt like all the training she'd done since that day was meaningless. Her parents had saved her back then, and this time it was Alunaya. Shizuka herself had been powerless in the fire. That was mortifying.

In order to walk alongside the people she loved, she would need to be stronger. It was now clear that her own strength wasn't enough. She felt like she'd hit a wall, and it wasn't something she'd get over anytime soon.

“I thought I would be able to do better, like you...” she said with a heavy sigh. “I’d like to learn the secret behind being a legendary hero.”

She felt like there was a vast gap between herself and Koutarou. Complex feelings were swirling inside of her, and she was having a hard time reigning them in.

“Landlord-san, there’s nothing I can teach you.”

“Are you saying I don’t have any talent?”

Shizuka couldn’t help the bitter smile that crept across her lips. It was a very self-torturing smile.

“That’s not what I meant...”

This time, Koutarou was the one who smiled bitterly.

“According to your way of thinking, I’ve never saved anyone with just my own strength before.”

With those words, Koutarou admitted his own incompetence. Of course, Shizuka couldn’t accept that. She stopped in her tracks and objected in an upset tone.

“That’s a lie! Satomi-kun, you’re always—”

“Always borrowing everyone else’s power to fight.”

Koutarou stopped as well and turned to face Shizuka. But in contrast to her, he spoke calmly.

“My power only amounts to being able to handle a sword a little. Truth be told, I’m far weaker than you are, Landlord-san. That’s why there’s nothing I can teach you.”

His sword, his armor, his psychic powers, his spiritual weapons, and his magic. Everything Koutarou used to fight was something he’d gotten from someone else. The only power he could boast of on his own was a bit of skill with the blade, which he’d worked to train in past Forthorthe. But even then, he couldn’t claim to be a martial arts expert like Shizuka. So if Shizuka was powerless, then what was he?

“I have an idea. The next time there’s trouble, why don’t I lend everything to you? I’m sure you’ll be able to do far more than I ever could.”

“Satomi-kun...”

Shizuka realized that Koutarou had the same look of helplessness in his eyes that she did.

That’s right... I even knew that’s the position Satomi-kun is in...

Shizuka and Koutarou had both matured upon experiencing similar events. That’s how she knew Koutarou had tasted the same powerlessness she had. Even if she asked him for the solution to overcoming it, he probably didn’t know. Once she realized that, Shizuka was embarrassed of her narrowmindedness. She wasn’t the only one who’d suffered a tragic past. Wasn’t that exactly why she believed she could walk by Koutarou’s side? She’d been so obsessed with strength that she’d overlooked something so basic, and so very important.

“...I’m sorry, Satomi-kun.”

Shizuka’s apology was brief, but loaded with all manner of emotion.

“Landlord-san... No, it’s fine.”

Each and every one of those feelings reached Koutarou. And once he understood how she felt, he realized that there was one piece of advice he could give her after all.

“Actually, Landlord-san, there is one thing.”

Koutarou smiled. It wasn’t a bitter smile this time, but a warm one intended for someone who shared his worries.

“And what is that?”

“What you need right now is to be able to honestly rely on others.”

“Rely... on others?”

“Yes. I was just like you once. I couldn’t forgive myself for not being able to do anything. I thought it was disgraceful to depend on other people...”

Koutarou couldn’t have protected the girls of room 106 or the people he’d

met in past Forthorthe with just his own strength. It was only through the borrowed powers from his friends that he'd been able to accomplish anything. That's why every time they showed him gratitude, he felt guilty about it.

"But... I have people I have to protect no matter how. And I need power to be able to do that. I don't care whose power that is, because I don't have the room to be picky."

If he only grieved his powerlessness, Koutarou wouldn't have been able to protect anyone. He had to make full use of the power that was given to him, no matter who it came from. He had something he wanted to protect more than his pride.

"So what about you, Landlord-san? What do you want to protect?"

As Koutarou asked her that, he began wondering if he was being mean and going a little too far. Shizuka sought strength because of the regret she felt over losing her family. That's why, to her, strength wasn't a goal but a means to an end. And knowing that, he knew there was only one answer she would give.

"I want to protect everyone. I want to be with everyone forever..."

"I see..."

Koutarou nodded. He was satisfied. Just as he thought, Shizuka was also after something more important than her pride.

"That's about all I can teach you."

"Satomi-kun..."

Tears began spilling out from Shizuka's eyes. She felt like she now understood why Koutarou was so strong. It wasn't because of his powers. He was strong because he acknowledged that he was weak. And that led Shizuka to come to understand something else as well.

"Hey, Satomi-kun..."

She wanted him to see it too. She was so eager to tell him that she even neglected to wipe away her own tears.

"You said that you had never saved anyone, right?"

“Yeah, I did...”

“But... But you know that’s not true.”

“Huh?”

Koutarou let out a puzzled voice. Shizuka was looking at him, though she couldn’t see his face through her overflowing tears.

“You just saved me. You saved me all by yourself, without borrowing anyone else’s power.”

“Landlord-san...”

“You’re not powerless. Stay confident. You definitely have the power to save others.”

Shizuka took Koutarou’s hand and squeezed it tightly. As she did, her tears fell onto the back of his hand.

It’s so warm...

From the warmth of Shizuka’s hand and tears, Koutarou knew that she was being sincere. And in response, he squeezed her hand right back, conveying just as much warmth.

“Then that’s true for you too Landlord-san. You just saved me too.”

“...Satomi-kun!”

In that moment, Shizuka let go of Koutarou’s hand and wrapped both of her arms around him in a hug. She knew that doing it so suddenly would probably surprise him, but she was unable to contain herself. She was convinced more than ever that this was where she belonged.

“Landlord-san...?”

“Don’t forget. Whether you’re weak or strong... I love you.”

And she was confident that Koutarou wouldn’t reject her, even for acting this way.

“...Thank you, Landlord-san. I love you too...”

Because Koutarou had said so himself. That she should rely on others more.

Upon returning to room 106, Koutarou and Shizuka explained to the other girls what had happened and introduced them to Alunaya. They were all surprised, but at the same time, it made a certain amount of sense.

“I see... No wonder Shizuka has always been so strong... It must be the effects of Alunaya-dono’s powers...”

“That would be the case. I held back my power until the Blue Knight summoned me, but even then, some of the spiritual energy leaked out and strengthened Shizuka’s body.”

“Hey, this is kinda like that *Enter the Dragon* movie or whatever.”

“Sanae-chan, I think that was a little different...”

Back when the girls first invaded room 106, Shizuka had used her combat prowess to overwhelm them and suppress their riot. Thinking about it rationally, there was no way that a normal high school girl would be able to defeat a ghost, an alien, and an underground dweller all at once. That’s why no one had any trouble accepting that Alunaya had always been inside of Shizuka. If anything, this answered a long-unresolved mystery.

“Anyways, I give you all my best regards for the future.”

Alunaya was currently running mana through the crest on Koutarou’s right hand to project a small image of himself, something like a hologram. The projected Alunaya looked quite happy. He had originally come to this world for fun and to visit Koutarou. So not having to hide his identity any longer was a big plus for him. Now he would be able to move about freely, and he was planning on asking Koutarou and Shizuka to go on a trip to see the world.

“By the way, Uncle Alu, how long will you be staying on Earth?” Shizuka asked as she turned to him.

She could actually speak to Alunaya in her mind, but if she did that, no one else would be able to join in on the conversation.

“About that, Shizuka...”

Alunaya responded to Shizuka in a cheerful tone. He was a very sociable

being, and curious by nature. He even had a niece around the same age as Shizuka, so he did indeed feel like an uncle to her and the other girls.

“I will stay until everyone is safe enough. I’m worried about you, after all.”

Koutarou was a precious friend of Alunaya’s. That’s why he wouldn’t leave while Koutarou and the others were still in any kind of danger. He was at the very least planning on sticking around and helping out until their situation stabilized.

“And after that?”

“I will stay until I get sick of this planet, or until you no longer need me, Shizuka.”

Alunaya looked around as he said that. To him, Earth was completely foreign. He was interested in everything he saw.

“...Then you’ll stay as long as I don’t hate you?”

“Indeed. I can’t imagine that I’d be able to see all of this planet’s attractions in a mere hundred years.”

With the overwhelming mana coursing through their bodies, elder dragons had lifespan far longer than that of humans. Thanks to that, a century felt like nothing to Alunaya. Comparing it to a human’s perspective, it was only the equivalent of a few years. Besides, what had come to Earth was really just a copy of Alunaya’s soul and his mana. He would eventually rejoin with his real body, but the time spent on Earth wouldn’t pose much of a problem.

“Good.”

Alunaya telling her how things would go down in the future gave her peace of mind. Alunaya’s eyes, which had been constantly darting around as he looked at everything, stopped on Shizuka’s smile.

“You welcome me? Are you not scared?”

“I was surprised, sure, but you’re Satomi-kun’s friend, so I’m not scared. And I was just thinking how happy I was to have someone always watching over me... I feel like I’ve made a new family member.”

“Me too. I feel like I’ve gotten more nieces.”

“Ahaha! Okay, but just make sure you don’t look at anything you shouldn’t, Uncle Alu.”

“Have no fear. My niece has scolded me thoroughly on such matters in the past, so there is no need to worry. I’ll make sure to close my eyes while you change or visit the bathroom.”

Alunaya smiled as he talked, revealing his fangs. He then continued by speaking directly to Shizuka’s mind so only she could hear.

“And I’ll take extra care when you build a family with the Blue Knight... Perhaps I’ll sleep for half a year or so...”

“Uncle Alu!”

Shizuka’s face turned beet red and she shouted out. But Alunaya didn’t seem to pay it any mind. He simply continued to smile at her cheerfully. It was indeed the look of an uncle watching over his niece.

“Sorry, sorry. Do you mean you would prefer if I watched?”

“Of course not, jeez...”

Shizuka’s angry expression reminded Alunaya of his niece back home. Seeing it, he began thinking that he would enjoy the time he spent on Earth here with Koutarou and these girls.

“Now then, with Shizuka angry, I believe it is time for me to go to sleep for a while.”

“Oh, you’re leaving already, dragon uncle?”

When Alunaya said he was leaving, Sanae frowned. Now that she’d officially become friends with a dragon, there were all kinds of things she wanted to ask him.

“You should stay a little longer.”

“Heh, I would love to, but I’ve pushed myself a little too far.”

“I see. What a shame. Will you come play again?”

“Of course.”

“Are you okay, Uncle Alu?”

“Regarding that, Shizuka, there is something I need to apologize for.”

“What? Are you sure you’re okay, uncle?”

“I am fine, but... to be honest, that transformation in the burning building sapped me of all my mana.”

“What does that mean?”

“Your weight will increase even more.”

With a long creak and a loud crack, Shizuka fell right through the tatami floor of room 106 and a good ways into the ground below.

“...Ah, are you okay, Shizuka?”

“I-I’m not... okay...”

And so Shizuka’s diet failed before it even began.

Episode 2: Yurika’s Stand by Me

Kenji was well aware that he and Koutarou didn’t see eye to eye when it came to their ideas about relationships. But he thought that was only natural when he considered Koutarou’s upbringing.

After losing his mother and watching his family fall apart in the aftermath, Koutarou became very selective about the people he got close to—especially girls. He never wanted to lose someone like that again, and he certainly wasn’t anxious to be in the unenviable position his father had. So if he was going to be in a relationship, it would have to be a serious one with someone he thought he could protect. Someone who was right for him.

And though Kenji understood Koutarou’s feelings, he had a different approach to things. He indulged in shallow relationships with girls that he knew he could get out of easily. That way, he could see if things might work out in the long run—if it might turn into something serious—and then jump ship if not. Not only did that solve the same problem, but Kenji’s method was more realistic than Koutarou’s.

But ultimately, Koutarou and Kenji were coming from the same place. Koutarou’s personal experience, and Kenji’s experience after looking at Koutarou, enabled that. They only appeared to be at odds on the surface because their methods differed. Which was why, regardless of how often they butted heads on the subject, it never hampered their friendship. Somewhere deep down, they both knew they were on the same page.

That said, Kenji was starting to worry. They were now in their second year of high school, and Kenji thought that Koutarou should at least get some experience with love. He’d received chocolates from several girls last Valentine’s Day, and Kenji didn’t think that it would be impossible for Koutarou to form a relationship with one of those girls. And so now, as far as Kenji was concerned, it was time for Koutarou to show some guts and make a move.

“Hey, Kou. You’re always saying that I’m insolent or careless or whatever,

but...”

“I’m right, aren’t I? I’m sure the girl you were going out with the other day is crying by now.”

“I’m not talking about me. I mean, even if I reluctantly admit that I’m careless, there’s a problem with you too.”

“With me?”

“Yeah. Carelessness isn’t the only thing that makes people unhappy. People also end up unhappy if they’re with someone overly serious like you.”

“That’s not true. People are at their best when they’re serious. That’s what being a man is all about, right?”

“Good grief... You really are stuck in your ways.”

About as expected, Kenji wasn’t getting through to him. In light of that, he decided to tell Koutarou about something he’d been keeping quiet.

“Kou, I’ve never told you this before now, but I’ve had my heart broken countless times because of you.”

It was true he’d been avoiding admitting it for quite some time. He had his pride to think of. But he put it aside for the moment because he was putting his best friend first. That was just how worried he was about him.

“Don’t try and pin that on me. I’m pretty sure that’s exactly because you’re so careless.”

“That’s not it. There have been plenty of girls that told me they couldn’t go out with me because they liked you.”

“They were probably just using that as an excuse.”

“As if there would be that many girls that would use you as an excuse! Do you understand what kind of a coincidence that would have to be?! Even if some of them were lying, there have still been a good number that honestly liked you!”

Getting a bit worked up on the subject, Kenji slammed his fist into his desk. The whole class turned towards him in a startle, but they soon looked away. That wasn’t the first time Koutarou and Kenji had been so noisy, after all.

“That might be true, but that has nothing to do with me.”

“It does. Just think about it. You’ve never gone out with anyone. That’s why all the girls that like you back away and give up on their own.”

Finally having gotten that out of his system, the volume of Kenji’s voice dropped a few notches. He then looked right at Koutarou and spoke in a whisper that only he could hear.

“They all see what’s hiding behind your smile. That’s why they give up. You get it, right? Just by doing nothing, you made those girls unhappy...”

“Mackenzie...”

Though Kenji’s voice was hushed, Koutarou could tell that he was serious. He could see it in his eyes.

“Those girls wouldn’t have to suffer like that if you had a girlfriend to begin with. So how about it? Is there really no girl you’re interested in?”

If there was someone Koutarou was interested in, no one was winning by him not acting on it. That’s how Kenji saw it.

“Hmm...”

Normally Koutarou would just brush off this kind of conversation, but he understood that Kenji was worried for him and decided to at least give it some thought.

“For example... what about my little sister Kotori? You know her. She’s a little obsessed with me, but she’s cute in a way.”

“Kin-chan, huh...”

Matsudaira Kotori, nicknamed McKinley, was Kenji’s precious little sister. She was something of a spoiled girl and used to follow Koutarou and Kenji around whenever she could. If they left her out, she would cry out of loneliness. The image of Kotori desperately chasing after them had left a strong impression in Koutarou’s memories.

Because of that personality of hers, Kenji had become protective of her and had high requirements for anyone that wanted to be her boyfriend. Koutarou was one of very few people he considered up to spec. Kenji believed he could

entrust her to him. For Kenji, having Kotori and Koutarou become a couple would solve two of his worries at once.

“I think she’s a good girl, but I haven’t seen her for a while, so that wouldn’t feel right.”

“You last saw her over New Year’s, right?”

“I think so.”

It was just half a year to Kenji, but it was a little different for Koutarou. The time he’d spent in the past made it quite a bit longer. So, strictly speaking, he hadn’t seen her for over a year. Koutarou did think she was a nice girl, but since they hadn’t seen each other for so long, he had no idea what she was really like now. On top of that, Kotori’s own feelings needed to be taken into consideration.

“Okay, fine. Forget Kotori for now. But what about them?”

“Them?”

“Don’t play dumb. I mean the girls over there.”

“Ah...”

Koutarou looked in the direction Kenji was pointing and saw the girls of room 106. It was currently lunch break, and the group of them were chatting together after eating their lunches. The only exception was Yurika, who was sitting the closest to Koutarou. She had eaten her fill, gotten sleepy, and was now in the middle of taking a nap.

“You’ve gotten pretty close with all of them lately. Is it because of the play?”

“Ah, yeah, well, something like that.”

As Koutarou casually looked over at the girls, Sanae noticed his glance and turned around. She cheerfully waved her hand at him, which alerted the other girls that Koutarou was looking their way. They all looked over and smiled at him before returning to their conversation.

“Considering they’re like that, I think you have a chance with all of them.”

“I think you have the wrong idea. They’re just all really nice.”

“You can’t just call it there. Try grading them. I bet the girl with the highest points will ‘feel right,’ as you put it.”

“How am I supposed to grade them?”

“Grade their personality and looks. And then add or remove points based on any special memories you have with them. Aim for something like 50 points being friends, 75 being someone you’d like as a girlfriend, and 100 as someone you’d like to marry.”

“Huh... Well, I guess that kind of makes sense.”

“Then give it a shot. How about starting with Nijino-san, who is oh-so casually asleep over there?”

“Yurika, huh? All right, gimme a sec.”

Kenji pointed at the closest girl, which just so happened to be Yurika. As Koutarou looked at her, he began thinking over the scoring rubric in his head.

Yurika isn’t unattractive. If anything, I guess I’d say she’s cute? But her personality’s a problem. She’s lazy and whiny...

From Koutarou’s point of view, Yurika’s personality detracted a lot from her looks. Because of that, if he were to grade her on just those two aspects, she would fall below even the friend benchmark.

And then you add or remove based on special memories...

With Yurika’s looks and personality decided on as a baseline, it wasn’t that hard to add or remove points from there. Koutarou scanned his memories, flipping through everything that had happened since the day he met Yurika. Things only got better from there.

It was terrible at first... but looking back at it now, there were a lot of misunderstandings too... And lately, there have been a lot of plusses...

Yurika was timid and weak to pressure, so she’d made a terrible first impression with Koutarou. However, as time passed and she matured, Koutarou came to see her for who she really was. Lately, she’d even been impressing him. It was quite a reversal in her favor. She was still lazy and whiny, but he knew that he could trust her when he needed to.

“...All right.”

“What’s the score?”

“Hang on, I’m totaling it up now.”

After finishing grading each event, Koutarou added the points together.

H-Huh...? W-Wait a minute, is this...?

Koutarou was confounded. While Yurika’s points had taken a hit out of the gate, they’d steadily gone up with everything else he considered. She’d passed the 50-point friend line while they were working on the first play. And by the time the second play rolled around, she was rapidly scoring more points and had easily passed the 75 and 100 point lines. And it had only gone up since then.

H-Hey, wait... This has to be wrong...

Koutarou was astonished as he added on the last two points, one from Yurika scoring high marks on a test and the other from when they went out for takoyaki together as her reward. But even though he’d added it all up himself, Koutarou couldn’t accept the score. He took a moment to start over from scratch and make sure his math was right. But even then, it all checked out.

“To think something like that was...”

“How was it?”

“I-I didn’t get the kind of score I was expecting...”

Koutarou tried answering as calmly as he could, but he could feel his emotions rampaging inside of him. Yurika’s final score was 322 points. The result was the same no matter how many times he counted it. Certainly, that wasn’t the total he thought she’d get. He’d never imagined that she would get a score that would warrant marrying her three times over. Moreover, that score was still increasing on a daily basis.

“I see. That’s too bad.”

“Y-Yeah...”

“Then what about the other girls?”

“The others...?”

However, that would only be the start of Koutarou’s bewilderment. There were still eight other girls he had to consider, and Koutarou didn’t think their scores would be much different from Yurika’s.

As Koutarou was fretting over his new problem, Yurika was wandering through a frequent nightmare. In this nightmare, she was walking around lost in a dark place where she was plagued with accidents as death came for her. And it wasn’t just once, but a total of three times. First she ran out of food and starved to death. Next she ran out of strength as she was attacked by some kind of beast. And finally, she was blown up by a bomb.

“Why is it always meeeee?!”

As red flames engulfed Yurika, she woke up.

“Eh, huh...?”

“What’s wrong, Yurika?”

“M-Maki-chan?!”

Maki, who was sitting next to her, stared at Yurika with wide eyes. Yurika’s sudden shouting had startled her, not to mention everyone else nearby.

“A-Actually, I had a scary dream.”

Since it wasn’t really anything to hide, Yurika gave her an honest answer. Kiriha couldn’t help smiling. It was a very Yurika-esque thing to say, after all.

“To think you’d be able to dream in a noisy place like this... That’s rather impressive, Nijino Yurika,” she commented.

“I don’t think impressive is the right word. She’s just an idiot.”

“Sanae-sama, isn’t that going a little too far?”

Sanae was dumbfounded. Ruth tried to soften the blow a little, but she had a wry smile on her face. In truth, she was just as dumbfounded.

“So, Yurika-chan, what kind of scary dream was it?”

Shizuka, however, enjoyed disturbances like this as long as they weren’t too

serious. She was looking at Yurika intently, her eyes full of curiosity. She couldn't wait to hear what kind of dream she'd had.

"Well, I was walking around a dark place, and then terrible things happened to me and I died. Three times, even..."

"Terrible things... like food poisoning?"

That was Sanae's best guess. Considering how Yurika spent her life, that was the only thing she could image.

"No! I starved to death, was eaten alive, and then blown up!"

"They're kind of the same thing."

"They're completely different!"

Yurika's face turned red as she adamantly protested. In the past, she would have just gotten angry that she was being made out to look like an idiot, but things were a bit different now. She didn't want the boy she loved to get the wrong idea about her, and so her anger gave way to embarrassment. That's why she desperately wanted to correct this misunderstanding.

"Oh yeah, there was a game like that..."

The only one who had a different reaction from the rest of the group was Theia. She had a nostalgic look in her eyes as she nodded repeatedly.

"A game? What are you talking about?"

That word seemed to catch Yurika's attention. She temporarily forgot about her embarrassment and asked Theia for an explanation.

"There was that dungeon crawler game that Koutarou and I used to play, remember?"

"Aha!"

Once Theia brought it up, Yurika remembered it. It was a while back, but there was a time when she and Koutarou would frequently argue as they played a game that involved exploring a vast labyrinth.

"Something similar to what you described happened in that game."

"Really?"

“Yes. If I remember, Yurika ran out of healing items and was left to die. I think Yurika A was killed by a monster. And Yurika B—”

“I remember now!” Sanae clapped her hands together with an enthusiastic smile. “Theia was haphazardly controlling Yurika B, and she walked into a trap and blew up!”

“What?!”

Suddenly it all came back to Yurika. The game in question was extremely difficult, and required the player to create many characters to challenge its depths several times over. But halfway through, Theia gave up on thinking of names since it was becoming a hassle, and just named the characters after the people in room 106. The name Theia defaulted to for magicians was Yurika. But Theia’s playstyle was rather rough on magicians, and they often wouldn’t make it out of the dungeon alive. Theia would create new characters to replace them, so the original Yurika was followed by Yurikas A and B.

And Yurika now recalled that all three of them met with violent ends. But since it was too much of a pain, Theia never bothered to recover their bodies and revive them. She did give it a try once, but it didn’t work out. She’d beaten the game shortly after that, and no one had touched it since. So even though peace had returned to the world and all was well otherwise, there were still three abandoned corpses in that cold, labyrinthine dungeon.

After dinner, Yurika sat herself down in front of the TV and picked up a game controller with a strained look. Sitting next to her was her ally Sanae. The two of them were going to challenge the game in question.

“How does it look?”

“Ah, the save data is still there!”

Yurika pointed at the TV screen with a big smile on her face. Since the game cartridge was quite old, there was no guarantee that the save data from when Theia was playing it remained. But fortunately, the game’s battery was still alive, and the save file was there just like she’d hoped.

“That’s good. But Yurika, why are you doing this? Couldn’t you just erase the

data and make it like it never happened?”

“Because... isn’t it really scary knowing that three of your corpses are lying in an underground labyrinth?”

“...How?”

Sanae simply tilted her head to the side in a confused fashion and blinked repeatedly. Having been a ghost until recently, she didn’t exactly see the issue.

“I feel like it’s a bad omen. That’s why I don’t want to erase the data until I’ve revived them or properly buried them.”

“Hmm, I guess I can kinda understand that... Good luck then, Yurika.”

“Yes.”

Yurika was going to recover her bodies. Even though it was a game, she didn’t feel alright knowing she’d been left behind like that. And since she was such a scaredy-cat, she was sure she’d never be able to sleep well knowing that the game rested right below her, in the lower half of the wardrobe. She began thinking of the inside of the wardrobe as a part of the labyrinth. If she erased the save data and that didn’t solve her problems, she’d never be able to recover. That’s why she wanted to find her corpses and either revive them or bury them.

“Now that I think about it, I had a lot of trouble with this game...”

Theia, who was staring at Yurika’s back as she started the game up, mumbled to herself. After spending so much time playing the game before, she’d gotten a bit attached to it.

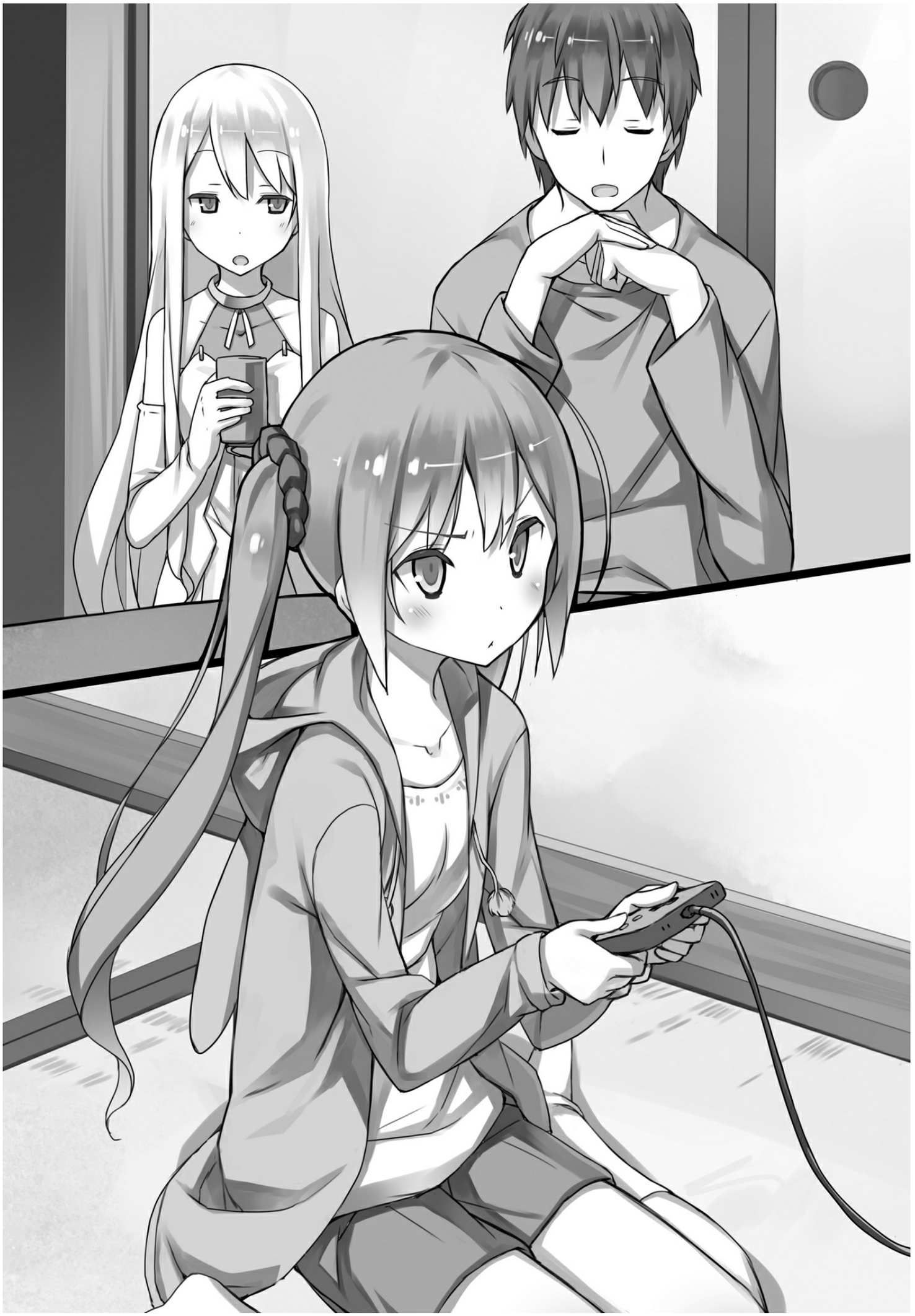
“You beat the last boss, right?” Koutarou joined in as he watched Yurika too.

“Yes. Even though the enemy was closing in, he was casually drinking tea with his subordinates.”

When Theia was playing the game, Koutarou had helped her out. Because of that, the two of them had traversed most of the underground labyrinth together. They were just like Yurika and Sanae now were.

“But in the end, I didn’t get to fight the rare monster.”

“That stuff’s all based on luck. There’s nothing you could do about that.”



Theia had only one regret after beating the game. That was that she had never been able to defeat a secret monster that very rarely appeared in the dungeon. The chances of encountering it were extremely low and defeating it took a long time. It was something she wanted to do, but she was quite busy at the time and had unintentionally gotten distracted from the game and moved on.

“Well, you’re a busy girl, so it’s not like you have much time for games.”

As of late, Theia had only gotten busier. She’d been chased out of her home country and had to take care of the citizens that had fled the nation with her. She certainly didn’t have time to casually be playing video games. Partially because he’d become her vassal, Koutarou understood that quite well.

“That’s true.”

However, Theia showed a bright smile.

“But truth be told, I played games in part because I wanted to get along better with you. And that’s not necessary anymore, right?”

“You’ve gotten friendly with everyone, after all.”

“Indeed.”

Koutarou remembered seeing Theia play video games by herself. Unable to leave her alone, he would often sit down next to her. But now she was different. She was sitting by the tea table with everyone else, smiling and surrounded by friends.

“Theiamillis-san, I understand how you feel.”

Harumi, who was sitting at the same tea table with them now, joined in on the conversation.

“In my case, it was the plays.”

Harumi put a hand to her chest and smiled happily. At first, she had worked hard on the play for Koutarou’s sake. He was the one who’d gotten her involved, and it was her desire to draw his attention that had made her agree to it. But as she got into the play, she became fast friends with the drama club and everyone else working on the production. She wanted to live up their

expectations. Harumi was now sitting at the tea table in room 106 exactly because she'd held fast to those inspired feelings and let them lead her. Overall, it was quite like what had happened with Theia. A single spark had led to all this.

"I see. I'm glad it was of use to you."

"Yes. Thank you very much."

Theia and Harumi exchanged smiles as they drank their tea. The two girls had both changed a great deal since they first met.

"It seems I'm in quite an awkward position considering I was an enemy until recently..."

That was where Clan, who was lying down on the wall and reading a book, joined in. When she thought back to how she used to be, it was quite a source of embarrassment. She couldn't help but turn red and smile bitterly.

"What are you saying, Clan-sama? Most all of us were once enemies. It's not like you were the only one."

Ruth comforted Clan, whose shoulders were drooping rather dejectedly. Apart from Shizuka and Harumi, all the other invaders had once been enemies due to a conflict of interests. Though Clan had made enemies of everyone due to timing, Ruth didn't think she had to worry about it.

"It's just as Ruth says. And considering how things turned out, it must be said that I was your ally from the very start."

Ruth wasn't the only one on Clan's side; there was also Kiriha. To her, the older girl with the glasses was a precious friend she'd made when she was just a child. While it had taken a while for both of them to realize that, Kiriha had always considered herself on Clan's side. That's why, though her words were as calm as always, the light in Kiriha's eyes was much more reflective of her younger self when she spoke of it.

"Thank you, Pardomshiha... You too, Kii..."

Thanks to that, Clan was able to smile again. She then opened up her book and started reading once more. She had to bury her face in it in order to hide

the tears that came with her smile.

“Then, strictly speaking, I guess I was everyone’s common enemy, wasn’t I?”

“That might be true. I remember everyone working together to hide their wrongdoings in order to defeat you, Shizuka.”

“Is that true, Theia-chan?!”

“Yes. Though it made no difference in the ensuing commotion...”

“Oh my...”

The one that had united the girls, for better or worse, was Shizuka. They’d all had to pull together in an attempt to defeat her, and that alliance was what later laid the groundwork for them to coexist on peaceful terms. In the end, that even included Shizuka too. The relationships that had first taken form in this tiny apartment now stretched beyond the very galaxy.

“...”

And as they all indulged in a little nostalgic reminiscing on the subject, only one person refrained from joining the conversation: Aika Maki. She used to be an evil magical girl, and she had the shallowest connection with room 106 and the people in it. She’d known Yurika the longest, but since she’d always been after her life, she felt like that wasn’t exactly in her favor.

Compared to everyone else, Maki’s relationship with the others was lacking. That was only natural since she’d only recently been introduced to the circle of friends. But that troubled her. Time would eventually solve the problem, but her outsider status stuck out like a sore thumb at times. It made her wonder if she even belonged here sometimes, and this was one of those times. She had to wonder if she deserved a place among such good friends.

If she had just been a captive, she wouldn’t have to worry like this. It was the fact that she could decide for herself where she wanted to be that tormented her. Since she’d only just turned her life around, Maki still didn’t know who she was or where she belonged. She barely knew what to do with these things she was discovering that were precious to her. And it was almost all too much for her. That’s why she wanted to abandon her freedom and have Koutarou put a curse on her. Her role as Koutarou’s captive would be clear and defined that

way. As his tool or his property, she would know what she was to him and where she stood.

It really is like Landlord-san said... I have to do something...

Koutarou noticed Maki's hesitation. That said, it wasn't like he noticed on his own. He'd only started to pick up on it because Shizuka had said something about it the other day. And as he looked at Maki now, he began wondering what he should do about it.

Maybe I should just start with the short term for now... All right.

He still hadn't found a solution, but he'd come up with a way to alleviate her worries and moved to implement it right away.

"Aika-san, do you have a moment?"

"Yes. What is it?"

When Koutarou called out to her, Maki quickly looked up. Before he had even really said anything, she came to his side. She looked like a puppy waiting for her master's orders.

This really isn't good...

He could feel the anxiety coming from her, which only reaffirmed his drive to do something about it.

"Aika-san, how much do you weigh?"

"Let's see... Probably around 42 or 43 kilograms, I think."

"So you're below 45?"

"Yes. Is there something wrong?"

"We'll be going bug hunting later, right? When we do, I was thinking of suspending you in the air with rope and having you go further above us."

Koutarou drew a simple figure on the back of a newspaper to demonstrate his idea. It was a picture of Maki being lifted into the air using a pulley and rope.

"I'd like you to be in charge of the canopy like this. If you're 43 kilos, using a pulley and rope that can handle 50 kilos shouldn't be a problem."

“I understand, but... is this supposed to be me, Satomi-kun?”

“Yeah.”

“Heehee, I’m not this cute you know?”

Maki had been perplexed at first, but after Koutarou explained what he was thinking, she quickly returned to her normal expression. As a result, her gloomy mood from a moment ago disappeared.

Aika-san...

That in and of itself troubled Koutarou. If that was all it took to cheer her up, just how worried and lonely was this poor girl really? With that painful thought, it took a lot of work for Koutarou to maintain his smile.

“You know, you can tell me that I suck at drawing.”

“You suck at it.”

“Shut it.”

“Jeez... You’re the one who said I could say it. And besides, Satomi-kun, I can use magic, so something like this isn’t necessary.”

“You idiot.”

Koutarou smacked Maki’s forehead.

“Ouch!”

Maki let out a cry of pain and clapped her hands over her forehead. But contrary to her outburst and gestures, her eyes were sparkling with glee.

“Using magic on the bug hunts is forbidden.”

“Why? It would be more convenient that way. Ah, don’t worry. I won’t charge you for it.”

“That’s not the problem.”

“...Then what is?”

“Bug hunting only has meaning when it is done using a child’s intellect and courage.”

“A child’s... I understand. Heehee, a child, huh? Teeheehee...”

Maki narrowed her eyes and let out a cheerful giggle. When she did, Koutarou was finally able to relax.

This girl really needs to find happiness...

Seeing Maki finally regaining her smile made Koutarou feel that way.

But Aika-san isn't the only one that needs to...

Alongside Maki, there were eight other smiles in the room. Koutarou had only realized their value very recently. But those smiles belied all kinds of troubles. And every time those troubles came to the surface, the smiles would vanish. Koutarou hated that. After all, every single one of those girls had a score of over 300 points.

Although, that's a problem I should have realized by now...

Koutarou had a reason to stake his life to protect all nine girls. He would probably die for any one of them. That's what it meant to have a score above 300. That's why Koutarou wanted them all to find happiness, regardless of what form that happiness took. That's just how much they had done for him. He didn't mind at all if his happiness came last.

Landlord-san?

Looking at each the girls in turn, Koutarou's eyes met with Shizuka's. After glancing at Maki for a brief moment, she smiled. That gesture was enough for him to understand what she was thinking.

Yeah. We can't have any one of them be unhappy...

Right now, Shizuka just happened to be sympathizing with Maki, but that wasn't something limited to just the two of them. The girls all paid attention to each other, and Koutarou firmly believed that such goodhearted and considerate people should never be allowed to be unhappy.

And as he was thinking such things, Sanae's face suddenly filled his field of vision.

"Koutarou, Koutarou, this is terrible!"

Seeing her serious expression, Koutarou's face turned pale.

“What’s wrong?!”

“Yurika died again!”

“What?!”

Since Koutarou already had the girls’ wellbeing on his mind, his first alarmed thought was that Sanae actually meant Yurika had really died. But he soon realized that it was a misunderstanding.

“Hngh, I... I...!”

The Yurika in question was bent over in front of the TV and weeping bitterly. She was continuously beating on the floor with her fists.

“I hate gameees!”

The reason was obvious. Yurika’s adventure had ended in a grand failure.

Unlike modern ones, older generations of games were often unforgivingly brutal. The slightest misjudgment could lead to a game over. And indeed, the game Yurika was playing was one of that variety. Shortly after entering the dungeon, her whole party had been wiped out. She got lost, walked into a trap, and was attacked by an enemy.

“Well... that *was* kind of expected.”

“Satomi-saaan, if you knew that, then help me instead of being so mean!”

“But you were so enthusiastic about doing it yourself.”

“Please don’t just have faith in me at weird times like this!”

Yurika was carefree, careless, and let her guard down often. Because of her peaceful personality, she wasn’t suited for games like that. Lately her sloppy life had started to shape up, so Koutarou thought the new and improved Yurika might even be able to handle a game like that. But just like with studying, it wasn’t something she could do right away.

“Okay, okay. Theia?”

“Yes.”

Being called upon by Koutarou, Theia inched closer. Since she was the one

who played the game to completion before, she would be the perfect advisor for recovering the corpses. Not to mention she was the one responsible for leaving them there in the first place.

“Theia and I will help, so give it another try.”

“You can count on us.”

“Really?! I knew you were both good people since we first met!”

Yurika took Koutarou and Theia’s hands and shook them up and down emphatically.

Oh...

But when she realized that she was holding Koutarou’s hand, she instinctively stopped.

“You sure turn on a dime... What’s wrong?”

“I-It’s nothing! Let’s get started right away!”

Since she didn’t want Koutarou to ask anything more than that, Yurika quickly let go of his hand and picked up the controller again. She then continued the game, this time following Koutarou and Theia’s advice while Sanae cheered her on. But it still wasn’t pretty.

“You sure died quite a bit.”

“Indeed. You’ve almost reached the character limit.”

“Koutarou, what happens if you reach the limit?”

“If you reach the limit, you’ll have to delete old characters to make new ones.”

“But the old ones are dead inside the dungeon, right?”

“Yeah. So if she kills any more, she’ll have to delete the dead characters.”

“I can’t do that! I’m doing this because I can’t delete them!”

“Settle down. You still have one last chance.”

In going about her dungeon crawling haphazardly, Yurika had gotten several adventurers killed. She only had one last chance to get it right. She was standing

on a razor’s edge.

“To begin with, let’s create your final party. Lend me the controller.”

“Please don’t call it the final one!”

“It’s okay. Just calm down.”

“I can’t!”

Taking the controller from Yurika, Theia began the creation of a new party of characters. There was a trick to doing so, but since explaining that would take too much time, Theia took over and did it for her.

“Ah, the names...!”

“Heh, I’m forming the Satomi band of knights.”

In total, Theia created five characters. Two fighters called Koutarou and Theia, a thief called Ruth, a priest called Sanae, and a magician called Yurika C. Apart from Yurika C, they were the elite characters that she had used several times before.

“Why am I the only one who’s done half-assed?!”

“I didn’t feel the motivation coming. I wonder why...”

“Don’t ask me!”

After creating the characters and buying them weapons and armor, Theia headed for the underground labyrinth. Before anything else, they would need to level up their characters for a while, so Theia handed the controller back to Yurika and returned to the tea table.

“Yurika, don’t go too far in right away.”

“I know. I’ve been punished for that several times already.”

“Yurika, I’ll look at the map, so just walk the way I tell you, as I am the leader.”

“Thank you very much.”

Until the characters grew stronger, there wasn’t much else they could do, so Theia left the grinding to Yurika.

“Good work, Your Highness.”

“Thank you, Ruth.”

Ruth set a cup of tea in front of Theia and then handed out some to everyone else in the order they were sitting at the table, ending with Koutarou.

“Here, Master.”

“Thank you.”

She then clutched the now empty serving tray to her chest and began watching the events unfolding on the TV screen. It was rare for Ruth to show interest in games.

“Ruth-san, are you interested in that game too?”

“Well... I was a bit curious about what Her Highness said before.”

“What I said?”

“Yes.”

Ruth sat down opposite Koutarou and nodded to Theia. She then began talking with a serious expression.

“There is actually something I wish to request of you, Master.”

“A request? Sure, I don’t mind.”

Koutarou had no reason to decline anything Ruth might ask of him. She was always helping him out, after all.

“So what is it?”

“Um...”

But for some reason, Ruth was hesitating. Since she always gave clear answers, this was rather unusual. Moreover, her cheeks were turning red. After mumbling for a while, Ruth looked up at Koutarou and finally said it.

“...Well, I was wondering if you could form a band of knights, Master.”

Ruth typically didn’t ask things of other people. She felt like simply making a request was shameless, and moreover, she was asking for something as strange as a band of knights. She was only willing to because it was Koutarou, but she was still embarrassed about it. She felt like she was digging a hole and burying

herself in it.

“A band of knights... You mean that?”

Koutarou pointed at the TV. Theia had created a party of characters called the Satomi band of knights, so that’s what first came to mind when Ruth said something about a band of knights. Ruth, however, shook her head.

“Not that. I mean a real band of knights.”

“A real band of knights? What do you mean?”

“Master, you are a knight that has been appointed directly by Her Highness. That makes you an established knight, which is considered a high position of nobility in Forthorthe.”

“Nobility...? When did you become so important, Satomi-kun?”

Harumi, who was sitting nearby and listening in, opened her eyes wide. She only knew Koutarou as Koutarou, so hearing that he was now nobility didn’t feel real to her.

“I wouldn’t say I’ve become important... Ah, sorry, Ruth-san. Please continue.”

“Of course.” Ruth continued explaining after nodding slightly, “Master, an established knight is permitted the charge of both territory and a band of knights. In this world’s terms, it would be equivalent to the Satomi family having a private army. That is what I would like you to establish.”

“A-An army?” Koutarou was astonished. “You’re talking about an army in this room?”

There were already ten people in the small six tatami mat apartment. It would be impossible to station an army there on top of that. The best he could do would be to arrange some miniature soldiers. And that seemed far too outrageous a request coming from Ruth.

“Are you serious?!”

“That’s not what I meant; I just wanted you to establish the organization! A band of knights doesn’t necessarily mean you have to have a lot of soldiers! There are plenty of pacifistic families that only have very few soldiers!”

Her face still red, Ruth hurriedly shook her head. What she wanted was for Koutarou to create a band of knights under his name. She had no expectation of him gathering an army.

“A-And then... if you’d let me join...”

Ruth was an established knight herself, so she had her own band of knights as well. But since Koutarou held the highest rank of knight there was, given to him personally by Alaia, Ruth could also join his band of knights. In other words, Ruth wanted the honor of being a member of Koutarou’s band of knights, even if that could never be publicly revealed. On top of that, the Blue Knight establishing his first band of knights would be a historic and monumental event. Both as someone who’d been born a knight and as a woman of Forthorthe, belonging to that band of knights would be like a dream come true.

“Oh... That’s an interesting idea you’ve come up with there, Ruth.”

That was when Theia, who had been listening to Ruth, joined in.

“But it’s unfair if you’re the only one!”

Theia puffed up her cheeks. As a princess, she couldn’t join a band of knights, and she was currently rather unhappy with that.

“Your Highness, you are the one who makes use of the band of knights. If anything, I would love to trade places with you.”

“That’s true. Then I am in favor too! But... I won’t trade.”

“Yes, Your Highness. I will forever serve you alongside Master.”

“Good. So there you have it Koutarou. Hurry up and announce your establishment of a band of knights. I will approve it right away.”

“Wait a second! What are you going on about without me?!”

“Are you not satisfied with something?”

“How am I supposed to know?! I don’t even know what’s going on!”

“Ruth is saying that she wants to join your band of knights. As a knight yourself, you must know what that means, right?”

“Well, I do, but...”

For a knight, choosing a band of knights was a life-changing decision. It was on the same level as a marriage. Koutarou understood that well.

“Or are you scared of taking the responsibility?”

“...”

Truth be told, that was exactly was Koutarou was feeling uneasy about. Having Ruth join his band of knights meant that he would be responsible for her the rest of his life. It wasn’t anything to be taken lightly. It would be like taking Ruth as his bride.

“Don’t worry. Everything will remain the same. You made a promise with me, right? That you won’t die until you’ve seen us all live full, happy lives...”

“That might be true...”

Koutarou had made a promise with Theia in the past—that he would make sure that all girls lived their lives happily. And he would make sure he saw to it, even if he hadn’t made that promise. So having Ruth join his band of knights shouldn’t change anything. It was just as Theia said.

“Besides, Master... You once told me that you would fulfill any one wish I had. I would like to make this my wish. Please.”

“I did promise that, didn’t I?”

He’d made that promise with her before their last battle. That he would grant any wish of hers if he came back alive. That wasn’t the kind of promise he could break, even if that meant forming a band of knights. But there was also one more reason giving Koutarou a push forward...

It’s possible this might solve my other problem too...

That reason was Maki, who was currently happily counting money before their bug hunt. The existence of an organization like a band of knights might give Maki the foundation she needed.

“How about it, Koutarou?”

“Wait a minute, Theia... Aika-san.”

“Hmm? What is it, Satomi-kun?”

Maki stopped counting and twirled the pen in her hand as she looked at Koutarou. She was in a good mood, and there was no trace of her previous gloominess in her cheerful smile.

If she can smile like that because she has a purpose, then...

With that, Koutarou made up his mind.

“Aika-san, you’re greedy, right?”

“What are you telling a girl all of a sudden...? Well, I might be a little strict when it comes to money.”

“Then I have an offer to make you.”

“What?”

“It seems like I’ll be making my own band of knights, so how about you work for me?”

“Work? What do you mean?”

Maki had a perplexed look on her face and blinked repeatedly.

“Since it’s a band of knights, you’d technically be a squire, but you would primarily be working as a treasurer.”

“Treasurer?”

“Since this is all official business, I want to make sure our finances are in order and the capital is flowing properly. But I’m not really good at that kind of thing.”

“Master, if you need someone to manage finances, I— Mhhmph!”

Ruth was about to offer to take the job. She was confident it was something she’d be able to handle. But Koutarou didn’t let her finish her sentence. He forcibly grabbed on to her, pulled her closer, and covered her mouth. Surprised by that sudden action, Ruth froze up. But then she began to internally panic when she realized she was so close to Koutarou.

M-Master, what are you...?!

He was holding her securely, and Ruth could barely struggle against him. She had no choice but to give up her weak resistance altogether. When she did, she began imagining all sorts of things.

“It’s a boring job, and you can refuse if you want... but how about it?”

“I’ll do it!”

Maki answered immediately with a smile and large tears falling from her eyes.



“I see. Then it’s decided.”

“Yes!”

Maki nodded happily as her tears continued to fall. She felt like someone stranded who had just been rescued. Shizuka was probably the only other person in the room who understood what was really going on. Ruth was rather clueless, and subsequently quite confused by Koutarou’s actions and Maki’s tears. But when Koutarou let go of her, he whispered something into her ear.

“I’m sorry for taking your job away, but Aika-san needs a goal to strive for right now...”

“Oh...”

In that moment, tears began pouring out from Ruth’s eyes as well.

Master... you...

It wasn’t the answer that Ruth had expected, but it exceeded her expectations in a different meaning. Koutarou was going to form a band of knights just like Ruth and Theia wanted. And he was going to take responsibility for those who joined. Ruth had wanted to be a part of it for the sake of the title; that was all she’d hoped for. But Koutarou was going to provide much, much more than that. That’s why, even though he’d let her go, Ruth wasn’t able to move for a little while longer.

By the time Yurika had gotten her characters up to a sufficient level, the rest of room 106 was in the middle of discussing something completely unrelated to games.

“How cool, Maki! You’re a magical knight now!”

“I’m really just a treasurer. I’m only a knight in name.”

“Koutarou! I want to join the band of knights too! I’ll be in charge of the chores!”

“Not yet. You can’t become Theia’s ally yet. Keep trying to take over this room for a while.”

“Boo! Why can’t I join under the assumption that I’ll overthrow the current lord?”

“Higashihongan-san, let’s wait for everything to calm down a little more before we join the band of knights.”

“You’re joining too, Harumi? What position do you want?”

“Um... maybe his secretary?”

“All right! You, me, and Maki makes three of us. We’ll form the magical knight trio!”

“You’re not gonna let Yurika join?”

“Tsk, tsk, tsk. Maki, magical girl teams have always consisted of either two, three, or five people.”

“I see... I’m a magician, but I never knew that...”

“Kiriha-san, you could probably join as a strategist.”

“And with your martial arts, you could probably join as a normal knight.”

“Your Highness, it seems like there are a lot of applicants.”

“Very good! That makes me proud!”

“Veltlion, I will be your science advisor, of course. Right?”

Yurika had put down the controller and turned to the group to report on her progress, but she was perplexed by the situation.

Um, have I been forgotten? In more ways than one...

Yurika’s eyes started to moisten. Being abandoned in the game was one thing, but Koutarou and the others leaving her behind in real life was an even bigger problem.

“Oh, Yurika, are you done leveling?”

“How does it look?”

But it seemed like Yurika was worrying over nothing. Koutarou and Theia noticed her right away and moved over to in front of the TV, which puzzled Yurika for a different reason.

Something really is different from before...

With that vague notion lingering in her mind, Yurika looked up at Koutarou and Theia. When Koutarou sat down next to her and leaned in some, she recalled when she had hugged him from behind a while back. On that day, she'd felt like they needed one another. Recalling it, her heart started to beat faster and she suddenly got bashful.

"I-I've gotten to the level you asked me to!"

Yurika quickly wiped her tears away with both hands. She didn't want anyone to see them. And with her hands over her face as she wiped them away, she also hid her red cheeks as well.

"Yes, it seems like you've reached level 8. With this, we should be able to proceed."

"Good job, Yurika. This is where the game really begins."

"Th-Thanks."

Fortunately, neither of them seemed to notice, and Yurika nodded firmly as she patted her chest in relief.

In total, there were three dead Yurikas in the game. Theia recalled the location of the first, the original Yurika.

"It's just past this point."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. It was when I ran out of healing items. Yurika was already out of mana, so I prioritized the other characters. That's when she died."

"Theia-chan!"

"That's why I sent another character with a bunch of healing items here—"

"And replaced the dead Yurika"

"That's right."

"Aaaauuuuugh!"

"S-Sorry! But it was thanks to Yurika's sacrifice that we were able to beat the

mid-boss! So rejoice!”

“I can’t rejoice if I’m dead!”

“Okay, okay. I was wrong. But let’s push on ahead, okay?”

“Uuuhh... Something doesn’t sit right with me.”

Theia was guiding Yurika by relying on a map she’d created herself while playing the game. Since the labyrinth was made using a simple wireframe and repeating textures, it all looked the same. If it wasn’t for Theia’s guidance, a search and rescue operation would be difficult.

“It should be around here.”

“Really?!”

The characters Yurika was controlling had reached their destination. She then commanded them to search the area. And at last, a joyous message was displayed on the screen: “Found Yurika’s corpse.”

“There she is!”

Yurika pointed at the TV with an excited smile on her face. She was ecstatic to have finally found her first corpse.

“...Koutarou, this is kind of surreal.”

“...Shh, Yurika will hear you.”

Koutarou and Theia didn’t quite share her reaction, but now that Yurika had safely completed her first goal, morale was high.

“All right. Just two more to go! Where’s the next one?”

“Before that, check Yurika’s inventory. She might have something we can use.”

“I understand... Huh? She doesn’t have anything at all.”

“It seems like the monsters devoured most of her because she was down here so long...”

“Whaaaaat?!”

Yurika imagined how the magician must’ve looked, and her face turned pale.

As a result, all the excitement from having found the corpse in the first place was now gone.

“No time for tears! We’re moving on to the next one! I’m curious about Yurika A and Yurika B!”

“Hnnngh, I’m sure they’ve been devoured too...”

Yurika continued playing through her tears, but her suffering had only just begun.

Theia had remembered where the first Yurika had been because she’d died before a major battle, but her memory of Yurika A was vague. Since she’d died during a round of regular dungeon crawling, it was hard to say exactly where it happened.

“Hmm, I think it was around here...?”

Theia tilted her head as she checked her map. Based on what she’d scribbled down, she was certain that Yurika A was close by, but she didn’t know her exact position.

“How did the search spell go?”

“She’s still out of range. We’d have to try it repeatedly around this area.”

“Sounds like it’ll take a lot of time, so brace yourself, Yurika.”

“Augh, okay...”

Normally Yurika would whine more than that, but she was so concerned about Yurikas A and B that she didn’t offer a peep of complaint. That was when a helping hand reached out to Yurika.

“Veltlion, may I say something?”

That hand, surprisingly enough, was Clan’s. She closed the book she was reading and laid down on the wall she was using as a floor, looking down at Koutarou.

“What?”

“While having me analyze the game’s data to pull the correct locations might

be going too far, couldn't you have Sanae use her spirit sight?"

"I see. That's just one of Sanae's talents..."

Since Yurika was playing the game, she wanted to do it without using any cheat codes or unfair help. That would include having Clan analyze the game to pinpoint the corpses. However, Sanae's spiritual powers were just an extraordinary sense she had, similar to sight and hearing. Koutarou felt like that should still be allowed, even if it was toeing the line.

"Sanae, can you do it?"

"I tried it on this game once."

Sanae pulled out a mystery game that was about a serial killer from the pile of games lying next to the TV and showed it to Koutarou.

"But I couldn't see the killer, only numbers and old men."

Sanae and Koutarou had played it together once upon a time. Sanae wanted to know who the killer was, so she'd tried cheating and using her spiritual powers to figure it out. But even with her spirit sight, she wasn't able to learn anything useful. They'd ended up having to play through to the end to find out.

"What do you mean? It doesn't work on games?"

"It's probably something like this..."

A confused Koutarou tried asking Sanae for details, but it was Kiriha that answered him. She began explaining her own theory.

"When humans play games, they absorb information from the television screen. Which means that any spiritual traces are not in the game itself, but in the television. If she gets anything from using her powers on the game itself, it's probably from the creators of the game."

"So she could just use her powers on the TV then?"

"That won't exactly work. The television has been used for far more than just this game, so if she used her powers on it, it would be difficult to narrow it down to information pertaining to that particular game."

Far more than one game had been played on Koutarou's TV. It had also been

used to watch countless shows. So extracting the residual thoughts and feelings concerning any one particular game, much less finding specific information like where Yurika A and B had died, would be next to impossible.

“So it’s no use, huh? I thought it was a good idea...”

“That still might be the case. There are other things Sanae could use her powers on.”

Koutarou’s shoulders had visibly drooped in disappointment, but Kiriha was still confident.

When Sanae tried using her spirit sight, a broad grin flashed across her lips.

“Ah, this works! It’s probably around here!”

She then confidently pointed to a specific point on the map.

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah. I mostly see complaints about Koutarou, but I can see faint traces of disappointment in Theia where she failed.”

“Well done. Your spirit sight is most useful.”

“But, Theia...”

“Hmm?”

“If you want to kiss him, just do it.”

“Waaaaaaaah! You don’t have to look into anything you don’t need to!”

Sanae had used her powers on Theia’s hand-drawn map. By reading the emotions associated with specific areas on the map while they were being filled out, she could get an idea of what had happened there. She then looked for places where Theia had failed and felt disappointed.

“Yurika, turn at that corner. Then when you reach the end, turn right.”

“Okaaay.”

Following Koutarou’s directions, Yurika headed towards her destination. And before long, her second objective was complete: Yurika A was recovered.

Though she'd managed to find Yurika A's corpse, Yurika's face went pale at her accomplishment. That was largely due to where she found the body.

"Th-The last corpse was better off..."

Yurika A had died next to an underground lake. But as time passed, it seemed like the monsters had pulled her into the lake, and they found her body all the way at the very bottom. What was even worse was that as her body decayed, it had generated a cloud of miasma in the area, further decaying the corpse. Many of the girls imagining the scene before them felt relieved that it wasn't them.

"D-Don't feel bad, Yurika! Let's go find the last corpse!"

Not even Theia could say anything, so instead she suggested that they quickly move on.

"Um, Theia-chan, you... you know..."

With tears gushing out of her eyes, Yurika slowly approached Theia like a zombie.

"I-I'm sorry, Yurika, I never expected she would be buried underwater! It was my fault!"

Theia caved to the strange pressure washing over her and earnestly apologized.

"But it's a game, Yurika! It's just a game! Calm down!"

"It might be to you, Theia-chan..."

Yurika continued approaching, but the oddly intimidating aura she was emitting seemed to run out of steam. Before her outstretched hand reached Theia, it stopped short. But that did nothing to abate the tears streaming down her cheeks.

"L-Let's move on! Sanae, could you find the last spot?!"

Having narrowly escaped death, Theia picked up the controller herself to get them away from the lake as quickly as possible. She then headed in the direction of the last location she could vaguely recall.

“Hmm, about that... Something is strange...”

That was when Sanae, who was in charge of navigation, cocked her head to the side in a befuddled manner.

“S-Strange? What do you mean?”

Since Theia was anxious to resolve all of this as soon as possible, Sanae’s words troubled her.

“Well, I can’t really tell where Yurika died. Theia, is this really the right place?”

“What floor does it say on the map?”

“Floor 8.”

“Are there a bunch of marks for bombs drawn on it?”

“There are. Almost the entire floor is covered with bomb marks.”

“Then there’s no doubt about it. This is the place.”

As Theia recalled, Yurika B had died somewhere on the eighth floor. But it didn’t seem like that to Sanae.

“But it’s strange... Yurika’s presence is kind of spread throughout the entire area like a mist.”

“Kiriha, what could that mean?”

“Let’s see... It could mean that you weren’t focused too much on Yurika or the characters as you were exploring this floor. That might be why their presence isn’t focused single location on the map, but it is rather spread throughout. What were you doing on this floor?”

“Well, I think... Ack!”

The blood drained from Theia’s face. She had an idea as to why she hadn’t been so focused on the characters when she was drawing the map for this floor.

“Wh-Who knows? I don’t really remember... I must have been busy back then.”

Bur rather than revealing that reason, she attempted to hide it. She had to cover up the evil she had committed in the past in order to protect herself. But

there was one person in the room who didn’t care anything about that...

“I know. When Yurika B died, Theia was half-assedly exploring while humming. I think she was using Yurika B alone, and then she walked into a bomb and went kaboom.”

“H-Hey!”

“D-Does that mean...”

Even someone as unfamiliar with games like Yurika could figure out why Theia had sent down Yurika B alone into a minefield.

“D-Did you throw me... Did you throw Yurika B out there to use her as a living mine detector?!”

“N-No! That’s not true!”

Theia hurriedly denied the accusation, but Yurika pressed the matter.

“Then why?! Why did you have me walk out all alone in a dangerous place like this?!”

“Th-That’s...”

Theia couldn’t answer her. The truth was just as Yurika had surmised.

As Theia was exploring the eighth floor, she ran into the problem of the minefield. In order to get past it, she created a large amount of dummy characters to send through the area. Yurika B was one of those characters. They were killed, revived, and sent back into the minefield several times over. As a result, she was able to locate all the bombs, clear the area, and complete her map.

That was why her memories of the area were so dispersed. Because each character had died so many times and their deaths were relatively expected, none of it made a profound impression on Theia. All she really remembered was the experience of the floor itself, which was why Yurika B’s location felt like a mist to Sanae.

“That’s...”

“Theia-chan!”

This day marked the first time Yurika beat Theia in a fight. But even though Yurika was the supposed winner, she looked as though she'd suffered a disastrous defeat and was crying bitterly.

Theia was rubbing her head as she explored the underground labyrinth. She actually had quite a large bump on it now. She'd been quite mercilessly attacked, but she knew good and well that she deserved it. As penance, Theia even volunteered to continue the search herself.

"Really, Theia-chan... You don't think of how others feel at all."

"The past me was a fool. Forgive me."

"Jeez... Just this one time, okay?"

"Y-Yes. Sorry."

Yurika was still angry. But it was nearly a year ago that Theia had been playing the game originally. Comparing them, Theia then and Theia now were like two different people. Taking that into consideration, Yurika was able to forgive her, albeit just barely. She ultimately knew that no good would come from continuing to hold Theia's past offenses against her.

"That aside, how does it look?"

Waiting for an opening, Koutarou extended a friendly hand to Theia. She answered him, feeling a sense of relief.

"Not good. The search area is too large. I have to go in and do what I can, then fall back and repeat."

"Yeah, that's no good, is it?"

Unable to rely on Sanae's help any more, they had no choice but to search the entire floor. It would take time to find what they were looking for.

"Say, Satomi-kun..."

"Yes, Senpai?"

"I was wondering about something."

That was when Harumi joined in on the conversation. She wasn't very good at

games, so she'd stayed quiet for a while. But sensing that they had reached a dead end, she decided to speak up. Now that they were stuck, maybe even her input would be useful.

"The map of this area is complete, right?"

"Yeah. Right, Theia?"

"Indeed, it's completed... but what about it?"

Koutarou and Theia were immediately interested. Like Harumi had expected, they were desperate.

"Well, if you threw Nijino-san and the others into the minefield until—"

"Aaauuugh..."

"—the map was completed, then she should have been alive until then, right?"

"That's right. I revived and used her several times."

"Aaauuugh..."

"Then shouldn't she be in the area of the map you finished last? You stopped reviving her because the map was complete, right?"

"Aaauuugh..."

"Ah, of course! Theia!"

"Yes, I'm headed there right now."

Theia had been centering her search around the path leading through the floor from the seventh to the ninth level, but she'd actually found the stairs to the ninth level just halfway through the floor. From there, she went through the rest of the floor for the sake of completion. Theia realized exactly where she was going with this, and went immediately for the end of the area. She was sure she was onto something.

"How clever! That's Harumi for you, the perfect woman!"

"You're exaggerating..."

Harumi started blushing as Sanae complimented her. She was embarrassed by

the exaggerated praise, but she was happy that she could be of use to Koutarou and the others.

“Koutarou, the search spell reacted to something! Looks like Harumi was spot on! Yurika B is just up ahead!”

“All right!”

“Finally, the last one... though she’s been blown up...”

Koutarou rejoiced at Theia’s report while Yurika started tearing up. It was just a game, but she was deeply attached to the characters named after her. She thought about everything she’d been through to reach this point as they approached her body. She couldn’t help being emotional. They were just a few steps away from completing their quest. But then the screen suddenly changed —they had encountered a monster that dwelled on the eighth floor.

“Hurry up and kill it.”

“I know. It’s probably just a weakling any— Wait, what?”

To her surprise, it was a monster that Theia had never seen before. It looked similar to a zombie, but it was bigger and stronger. The battle music playing was even different from the norm. In fact, it was the same song as the one that had played during her battle with the final boss.

“Koutarou! C-Could this be...?!”

“Whoa, there it is! The rare monster! To think it’d appear now...”

This was the rare spawn that Theia had longed to fight. The monster had been designed after a person that the creator hated during his time in school, and defeating it gave the player a medal to commemorate their achievement. Whether or not you had that medal was one of the hottest topics among kids in the days the game was popular. And the appearance of this monster meant only one thing.

“Sorry, Yurika! It seems I have terrible luck!”

“Wh-What are you saying all of a sudden...?”

“Yurika, calm down and listen carefully. You can’t escape from this monster.”

“Then let’s hurry up and beat it, Satomi-san.”

“But this monster is strong. Very much so. In fact, it’s stronger than the last boss.”

“...Which means?”

“This is where Yurika C dies”

“Noooooooooooo!”

And so their adventure reached its end with yet another of Yurika’s corpses abandoned in the underground labyrinth.

Episode 3: Forthorthian Holiday

Trying to return from Forthorthe of the past to present-day Earth, Koutarou and Clan ran into a big problem. Her spaceship, the Cradle, was damaged and wasn't capable of spaceflight.

The part of the ship in question was actually a small part, and as long as Clan could get her hands on a replacement, she would be able to finish repairs within five minutes. But that part wasn't something she could get her hands on two thousand years in the past. So Koutarou and Clan had to wait around until its technology advanced enough for the part to be manufactured.

There were two things they needed in order to be able to wait for two thousand years. One was the technology to stop time, and the other was a place where they could safely wait out the two thousand years. The former was something the Cradle was already equipped with, and Clan had an idea for the latter.

The place she had in mind was called Veltlion's special territory. Alaia would later declare its domain inviolable, so Clan would take her ship there to hide. They would then freeze time aboard the ship and wait two thousand years.

"It's done."

"Are you sure? It doesn't feel like anything happened..."

"That's only natural. Time did stop for us, after all."

It didn't feel like it to Koutarou. He'd just been watching Clan work away fastidiously at the operator's panel, and the moment had come and gone without any sort of indication. It was nothing like what he'd expected.

"I thought it would glow or shake or something..."

"I imagine that it did, but since we were frozen in time, we couldn't perceive it."

"So we're twenty years in the past now?"

“That’s right. If you step outside, you can see for yourself.”

Using the Cradle’s ability to distort space-time, Clan had altered the speed at which time progressed inside the ship compared to the outside. With that, two thousand years had passed in the blink of an eye. There had indeed been glowing and shaking, but that only lasted for a few seconds on the outside, so there was no way it was perceivable to Koutarou on the inside.

“However, it isn’t *exactly* twenty years in the past.”

Clan continued to work away at the panel as she explained things to Koutarou. She had to confirm the Cradle’s current condition and the like, so there was a lot to do.

“What do you mean?”

“People celebrating the bimillennial anniversary of Alaia-san’s ascension might be there if we’d arrived precisely two thousand years in the future, no? I set it so that we’d arrive a little before the ceremony.”

“I see.”

While Veltlion’s special territory was an inviolable domain decreed by Alaia and entry was normally forbidden, it didn’t mean that people couldn’t enter at all. Members of the Pardomshiha family, in charge of managing the territory, would regularly patrol the area, and historical programs could get permission to film in the area on the condition that they didn’t disturb the environment.

And since exactly twenty years in the past would be the bimillennial anniversary of Alaia’s ascension to the throne, there would inevitably be people there to celebrate. Which was why Clan had adjusted the time so that they wouldn’t accidentally run into anyone.

“Then I’ll take a look outside. You keep doing what you’re doing.”

“I’m counting on you.”

Koutarou left Clan behind and exited the cockpit. Since she had plenty of things to check on, he went outside to confirm that it was safe.

“But don’t go too far.”

As Koutarou left the cockpit and entered the living quarters, Clan’s hologram

appeared and moved along with him.

“Yeah, I know you get lonely easily.”

“That’s not what I meant!”

“Don’t worry. There’s no way I would leave my beloved Princess Clariossa behind and vanish.”

“You... I *will* kill you one day...”

Clan’s hologram was there to assist him. As long as he stayed in range of the Cradle, he could talk to Clan and she could offer support with equipment from the ship. That was why she had told him not to go too far away. Koutarou knew what she meant, but pretended to misunderstand on purpose to tease her a little. That irritated her, even more so than usual since she actually was feeling a little lonely. Because of that, her tone of voice and eyes became more aggressive than normal.

“When we get back to the future, prepare yourself for pain!”

“Oh, are you gonna teach me a Forthorthian sport?”

“Jeez, I hate that side of you!”

While listening to Clan’s angry voice, Koutarou walked through the living quarters and headed for the airlock leading outside. Doors and hatches opened automatically for him, one after another. That was thanks to Clan.

“Isn’t it a little bit too late for us to fight?”

“Then stop with that provoking attitude!”

As Clan’s bitter voice rang out from her projection, the last hatch opened before Koutarou. As it did, a warm breeze blew in from the outside.

Wow, two thousand years really have passed...

Koutarou and Clan had parted with Alaia and the others in the cold of winter. So the change in temperature alone made Koutarou appreciate the difference—time really had gone by without them.

“Yeah, my bad.”

“Seriously now... That aside, I don’t want to get into the same kind of trouble

we did two thousand years ago. Let's be careful in this age."

"That was the plan, but... there's something I want to apologize for."

"What?"

"It's already too late."

Just outside of the Cradle on the other side of the airlock was a lone girl who had fallen on her butt. She was staring blankly up at Koutarou with an astonished look on her face.

Theia...?

Koutarou was just as surprised as the girl was. He had been startled by her sudden appearance, but what shocked him the most was her looks. She was the spitting image of someone he remembered very vividly, except that she was taller, her face was more mature, and her hair was much longer. Since they were in a different age, he knew right away that it couldn't be her, but he couldn't hide his surprise at the similarities between them.

The girl was there because she was an archaeologist. Her archaeology team was working to shed light on the many mysteries surrounding the life of Forthorthe's legendary hero, the Blue Knight. Research on the Blue Knight was mostly centered around the notes that the famous Silver Princess, Alaia, had left behind. But it wasn't like she'd been able to record every detail about him. Different approaches and methods of study were essential to filling in the blanks.

But no matter how much material was gathered, there were still two major unanswered questions regarding the Blue Knight. Where did the Blue Knight come from? And where did he go?

The Blue Knight's appearance and life had made a profound impression on the nation. Even two thousand years later, he was still beloved and remembered by the citizenry. But very few people had actually ever known him. He'd disappeared after the war without a trace. And not even people who had known him were able to enlighten his origins.

Because of that, there were a lot of theories about him in the field of archeology. As for where he'd came from, some people said he was from a

distant country or even a love child of some noble. As for where he'd disappeared to, popular theories included he had went into voluntary exile, died from wounds suffered in the war, or was assassinated. And that was just the tip of the iceberg.

But these theories were all largely suppositions not based on any fact or evidence. Not even the most credible among them had corroborating proof from multiple sources. If only those parts had been written down in Alaia's notes... But sadly, they hadn't. Some archaeologists even suspected that Alaia had omitted that information on purpose.

And if that were the case, the Blue Knight's secrets might lie somewhere in Veltlion's special territory. That was what this girl had felt when she applied to do an archeological investigation in the area. Normally such applications would be rejected. Veltlion's special territory was granted to the Blue Knight by Alaia, meaning that not even royalty could do as they pleased there.

But this girl had something special working in her favor. Forthorthe would soon be celebrating the bimillennial anniversary of Alaia's ascension. To commemorate it, all kinds of events honoring the Blue Knight and the Silver Princess had been planned. If a new discovery were made in time for the celebration, it would serve as the crowning feature of the anniversary.

On top of that, the citizens were terribly excited. Blue and silver decorations filled the cities. Several movies were being screened, some of which were even based off of the findings of this girl's archeological work. Capitalizing on that celebratory mood would go a long way for her in gaining the support and understanding of the citizens. Parliament could even intervene on her behalf as well. The political groundwork for that was already being laid under the surface.

All that was needed now was some proof or incentive. If she found something related to the Blue Knight and announced it to the public, surely the people would be in favor of a large-scale investigation in the area.

That's why this girl had secretly entered Veltlion's special territory. And what she found there far, far exceeded her expectations.

It was inside a large cave in Veltlion's special territory.

This cave was said to be one of the bases that the Silver Princess and the Blue Knight used in the fight against the coup d'etat army. And there was plenty of archeological evidence to support it, consisting primarily of plates, cups, and other items that had resisted the wear and tear of time.

And all the way in the back of the cave was a stone monument that Alaia had erected after the war, engraved with the following epitaph: "May the knights who left for the other side of the sky rest peacefully. Let none disturb their sleep." She'd constructed it as a memorial for the soldiers that had fallen in the war.

And so, when the girl saw what was on the other side of the monument, she thought she was seeing things. The readings she had just taken told her that the monument was over two thousand years old, and the weathered condition of the monument and its engraved text backed that.

"This is impossible..."

That meant anything on the other side of the monument had to be equally as old, if not older. It had to be.

"What is this...?"

But the other side of the monument was a small spaceship. More precisely, it was the airlock hatch on the side of the ship. And it was slowly opening up in front of the girl who had fallen backwards onto her rear end in surprise.

"I don't understand... but this must be the answer..."

Endless time and immeasurable distance.

Those words echoed inside of the girl's head. She could barely understand what was happening, but she was convinced that she was facing the hidden truth of Forthorthe.

Since the girl had just confirmed the age of the spaceship and she saw him come out of it as it opened, she immediately put two and two together and realized that Koutarou was the Blue Knight. After all, if he emerged from a sealed ship that was two thousand years old, that meant that he was two thousand years old as well. There was no other explanation. She was convinced.

“Time travel...? Then you really are Layous-sama?!”

“No, that’s not it. I got in the way of the Blue Knight and the Silver Princess meeting, so I just played the part as his substitute.”

“But if you were there from beginning to end, then you *are* Layous-sama in this world. That is a historical fact... Wow, it’s the real Blue Knight!”

The girl was squirming and squealing. Pointing a camera at Koutarou, she snapped one picture after another. She looked less like an archaeologist and more like a fan meeting her favorite idol.

“Like I said, I’m not the Blue Knight...”

“Why don’t you give up and admit it already, Veltlion?”

“How irresponsible... Besides, it’s because you called me Veltlion that she found out.”

“Ugh... Th-That’s...”

Koutarou and Clan were resigned. Since the girl was an archaeologist, there was no way they would be able to fool her on facts or details. And on top of that, she had evidence, so there was nothing they could do. As Koutarou and Clan both slumped their shoulders in defeat, the girl finished up with her pictures and sidled up to them.

“Heehee, I’m sure everyone would be surprised when they find out that Layous-sama was actually an alien...”

She was smiling from ear to ear as she clutched her camera to her chest. She looked like a child who had just gotten her birthday present.

“About that... Could you wait a while before making it public?”

They had given up on keeping the truth from her, but there was one thing they absolutely couldn’t back down on. And that was the truth getting out.

“Why, Layous-sama?”

The girl had a confused look on her face. It was impossible to lie to someone as keen as she was. They would need to persuade her using the truth.

“That’s... Um, Clan?”

Koutarou had wanted to explain it himself, but he quickly abandoned that idea. He felt like Clan would be able explain it far better than him.

“Jeez... You really only need me at times like these.”

Clan seemed a bit annoyed as she adjusted her glasses, but she started explaining the situation.

“We told you that we were trying to protect history in the past , yes?”

“Yes... You travelled to the past, but Layous-sama wasn’t there. That’s why you served as his replacement so you could return to your own time.”

“The truth is... this is still the past to us.”

“Then that means that you don’t want to change history now either?”

“That’s right. In the future we came from, the Blue Knight’s identity is still unknown.”

“Then if I announce the truth...”

“History would change, and we would never be able to return to our own world. In fact, who knows what would happen to us?”

If the girl publicly revealed the truth of what happened two thousand years ago, the Earthling named Satomi Koutarou would become known as the Blue Knight all throughout Forthorthe. Which meant that there was next to no chance that Theia would come to invade. Which in turn meant that Koutarou would no longer be able to become the Blue Knight. Of course, Clan most likely wouldn’t come to Earth either, which would also mean that they’d never travel to the past using the Super-Space-time Repulsion Shell.

With all that, there was no way of knowing what would happen to the current versions of Koutarou and Clan. Rather than just being prevented from returning to their own world, it might be something far worse. But regardless of what the consequences were, it wasn’t something that they wanted.

“At the very least, could you keep it quiet until Veltlion and I leave? Please.”

“But...”

Archaeology was the girl’s raison d’être. She was especially enthusiastic when

it came to the Blue Knight. But revealing the truth about the Blue Knight would put his very existence in danger. It was a painful problem for the girl.

“You’re asking me to run down the previously set rails of time?”

“Sadly... I’m afraid Veltlion and I have no other option but to ask you to do so. We’ll leave the decision up to you, however.”

Since Koutarou and Clan needed to return to their world, twenty years from where they were now, they couldn’t keep watch over this girl forever. They had no control over what she would do after they left. All they could do was plead with her in the here and now.

In order for Koutarou and Clan to explain the situation in more detail, they invited the girl aboard the Cradle. They were currently preparing tea using leaves they’d obtained two thousand years in the past.

“Could this be the extinct Rubustori tea?!”

“Extinct?”

“Yes! These leaves were harvested from Rubustori trees, but due to a rash of disease from out of the country about eight hundred years ago, they’re now extinct. There are a few remaining samples of a subspecies that had some resistance to the disease, but... I’m moved to be able to drink this, Layous-sama!”

“Hey, Clan, sounds like our favorite tea has gone extinct.”

“That’s no problem. I acquired some of the seeds for research.”

“You have seeds?!”

“I do. Would you like to take some with you?”

“Please, I would gladly take some!”

The Cradle’s living quarters contained a mountain of treasures for the girl. Marvels of the future and relics of the past existed together in plenty. She was surprised no matter where she looked. There was no end to the excitement. Her favorite things so far—as expected—were Signaltin and Koutarou’s armor. The girl was absolutely fascinated with them and could barely take her eyes off

of them. Even now she was relishing the sight of Signaltin, which had been pulled from its sheath, while drinking her extinct tea in delight.

“Veltlion, come over here for a moment.”

Waiting for the girl to get distracted by the items inside the living quarters, Clan called Koutarou over. There was something she wanted to talk with him about in secret.

“What is it?”

Koutarou spoke in a hushed whisper when he walked over to Clan. He could tell that she wanted to keep whatever it was quiet just based on her behavior. After all the time they’d spend together, he knew her at least that well.

“It’s about that girl’s identity.”

“Elle said she was an archeologist... right?”

When Koutarou and Clan had brought her inside the Cradle, the girl had introduced herself as an archaeologist named Elle. Since he had no particular reason to suspect her, Koutarou believed her.

“Yes, but she actually has another title.”

“What do you mean?”

“Before that, excuse me for a moment...”

“Mmph?”

Before she said anything more, Clan covered Koutarou’s mouth with her hands.

“That girl is Theiamillis’ mother.”

“Mmmhhhhhhhhmm?!”

Just as Clan had anticipated, Koutarou let of a cry of surprise. But since she had taken preemptive measures, his voice didn’t reach Princess Elfaria. Clan waited until he had finished shouting before letting him go.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. Her age fits, she’s an archaeologist, and her name is Elle. Most of all, she

looks just like Theiamillis-san, right? There's no doubt."

"That's not good..."

Koutarou could understand the gravity of the situation well enough. If Elle was Theia's mother, then they were in a very precarious situation.

"So please be careful about what you say."

"Roger that. I'll watch out. You be careful too, Clan. If you make another misstep like before, it might be fatal."

"Indeed. I'll take that to heart."

If Elfaria's life changed because of something Koutarou or Clan said, Theia might not ever be born. And if she was, Elfaria may come to call her by a different name. Even a change like that might prevent them from returning home. This chance encounter put them in a position where they might have a direct effect on Theia's life. The risk was huge.

"Layous-sama, Clan-san! What are you talking about?"

That was when Elfaria approached the two of them with a smile. She was more interested in Koutarou than Signaltin and the armor. As an archaeologist, and as a girl.

"That's..."

"We were talking about what to do next."

Koutarou stumbled on the sudden question, but Clan followed up without missing a beat.

"What to do next... By the way, why did you awaken in this age, Layous-sama?"

"Actually, our ship is malfunctioning. We had to wait for the part we needed to be invented before we could get one."

"For a part...?"

"Yes, and the problem now is how we get our hands on that part."

Clan crossed her arms and furrowed her brow. This was a problem that she had been racking her brain over for quite a while.

“Huh? Can’t we just buy it?”

“It’s not a part you can just buy.”

“What do you mean? Surely you’re not using illegal parts.”

“This one’s not! It’s just that this part is special, so it’s not in general circulation. There’s no telling if we’ll be able to buy one in this age when we can’t reveal our identities.”

“‘This one’s not’? That means you’re using other illegal parts, doesn’t it?”

“Th-That was in the past! I don’t anymore!”

Clan desperately tried to explain herself. In the past, she’d never hesitated to use illegal products. But she was different now. She had matured as a princess.

“I know. Don’t get so angry. But what do we do?”

“Well, either we ask someone we can trust... or in the worst case, we’ll just have to acquire it illegally...”

Clan was red in the face. Since she had just said that she didn’t use illegal parts, she was a bit embarrassed to admit she might go back on that as a last resort.

“Don’t worry, Clan. If I ask you to do it, it’s technically not illegal. Did you forget about Empress Alaia’s exemption?”

“Th-That’s right!”

Clan had been more concerned about what Koutarou would think of her than the fact that it was illegal, so hearing his support on the matter was a relief.

“Layous-sama, you don’t have to do anything questionable. There’s a better way.”

That was when Elfaria, still smiling, joined the conversation.

“What do you mean?” Koutarou asked.

“I can help. Despite how I look, I’m quite a high-class lady, so I think I can get my hands on this part.”

Elfaria’s real name was Elfaria Kua Forthorthe. She still hadn’t yet acquired

the title of Dana, which would indicate her status as empress, but she was still the lone daughter of the oldest of the royal families, the Mastirs. As Elfaria said, there were very few ladies in the entire galaxy that were on her level.

Koutarou and Clan agreed to Elfaria's suggestion. After discussing the details, Elfaria temporarily returned to town on her own. She needed to find stores that had the part in question, and chaos would break out if she didn't return to the hotel where she was staying for the night. A search party would be sent out immediately.

"Well then, Layous-sama, Clan-sama, see you tomorrow!"

"Yeah."

"Farewell, Elfaria-san."

Elfaria turned around several times and waved her hand as she headed towards the exit of the cave. Koutarou and Clan were seeing her off from just outside of the airlock of the Cradle.

"Hey, Clan, being a high-class lady sure seems like it has its share of problems."

"I can't let that one slide. I'm just as much of a high-class lady as her, you know."

"Oh yeah, I forgot."

Koutarou's comment irritated Clan, but that anger faded away as she looked at his face. She understood that he wasn't teasing her. So she swallowed the words that were about to come out of her mouth, and said something else instead.

"...By the way, Veltlion, should you have made a promise like that?"

"Like what?"

"Compensating her for her help. Giving her your data, I mean. Isn't that too dangerous?"

In exchange for her assistance, Elfaria wanted data on Koutarou. It started with the records from the past, but she also wanted the specs of his armor and

its operational data, a 3D model of Signaltin, and so on. In total, the list of what she asked for was extensive. Though it didn't include information that might change the future, Clan still felt that it was dangerous.

"Even though she might not look all that reliable, Elle is Theia's mother. I want to believe in her."

Koutarou shrugged as he smiled at Clan. Seeing his smile, Clan recalled Koutarou's family situation. After the time they'd spent together, she'd gotten a grasp of what his family life was like. Based on that, she could somehow understand his reason for wanting to trust Elfaria, so she chose not to voice any further complaints.

"I'll believe in her too then."

"That's good... Okay, Clan, let's eat."

Koutarou smiled at Clan before turning around and heading back into the Cradle. Just as he put his hand on the airlock, he caught a glimpse of the stone monument that had been pushed to the side nearby.

"Is... that..."

The stone monument had a familiar crest engraved in it. As Koutarou approached it, he removed the sheathed sword hanging from his waist and held it up next to the crest.

"It is. This is Empress Alaia's crest..."

Signaltin had been engraved with Alaia's crest ever since its awakening, and it was identical to the one on the monument.

"What's the matter, Veltlion?"

Noticing Koutarou's behavior, Clan walked up to him.

"Take a look, Clan. It looks like Her Majesty helped us out."

Koutarou moved over a little to make room for Clan, and she looked down at the monument alongside him. She then read the ancient inscription engraved on it.

"'May the knights who left for the other side of the sky rest peacefully. Let

none disturb their sleep.’ Huh...”

“It looks like Empress Alaia knew we were here.”

“I’m sure of it. And that’s why she made this area an inviolable domain...”

“Your Majesty...”

Koutarou’s chest suddenly felt warm and tears formed in his eyes. The bonds they had supposedly left behind two thousand years in the past were still protecting them even now. He couldn’t keep his cool after coming face to face with proof of that.

“Thank you so much, Your Majesty...”

Koutarou squatted down by the stone monument and traced the engraved letters with his finger. As he did, he felt like he could feel Alaia’s presence. He was sure she had knelt here and done the same thing.

“Say, Clan...”

“What?” she asked, her voice surprisingly gentle.

“We have a place we have to return to, so we couldn’t change history. That’s why... I know we had to do this, but I...”

Koutarou’s tears fell on the monument, just above Alaia’s crest. They flowed down into it and disappeared.

“But... even... even then, it’s so hard...”

“It is, Veltlion... It really is...”

Tears glimmered in Clan’s eyes behind her glasses. But she didn’t know why she was crying. In the past, she’d never cared about others. Her tears, however, were proof that she had formed a tight bond. So she didn’t fight them, and simply cried together with Koutarou.



Elfaria witnessed it all. She'd forgotten the tea seeds and left them on the table in the Cradle. She turned back around as soon as she remembered, but her playfulness got the better of her, so she decided to sneak up on her two new friends so she could surprise them.

"Layous-sama... can you..."

However, just before she was about to jump out, she overheard Koutarou and Clan's conversation. And when she did, she immediately understood that now wasn't the time for something like that.

"Can you only live according to the fate prepared for you as well...?"

Elfaria was the crown princess. As things were, she would eventually become empress. But she wasn't satisfied with that. She wanted to live freely rather than following a path that had been laid out for her. That was one of the reasons for why she had devoted herself to her research. When Koutarou appeared before her, she'd hoped that he would be the one to free her from her path.

"Layous-sama..."

But it seemed that Koutarou was someone else who was bound by what fate had in store for him. Realizing that, Elfaria was disappointed. But at the same time, there were other emotions budding within her—sympathy for the suffering Koutarou, and a sense of yearning born from that sympathy.

Koutarou and the others were using Elfaria's private plane to travel from Veltlion's special territory to the capital city of Fornorn. Koutarou was surprised that the flight took less than hour. He'd assumed it was farther than that based on how long it had taken to walk on foot.

"To think that long and painful journey could be over and done with in just an hour..."

It was a strange feeling. His journey had started just before the Mastir checkpoint. They'd crossed the mountains and checkpoint, and then cut across the Mastir territory. From there, they then forcibly broke through the border to the Pardomshiha territory, pushing forward to what would later be known as

Veltlion's special territory. Since that journey had taken place only a few months ago, Koutarou remembered very clearly just how hard it had been.

"It took the same amount of time when we travelled from the capital to the cave in the Cradle, remember?"

"But we were running around all over the place looking for somewhere to hide the Cradle back then."

"Layous-sama, look. We can see Fornorn now."

As they reached Fornorn's airspace, Elfaria ordered her private plane to lower its altitude. The plane dropped below the clouds, revealing the city. It was a massive metropolis filled with skyscrapers. It greatly resembled what one would expect to see of a large city on Earth, with the addition of plenty of greenery. It had skillfully been added into the city planning to soften the sharpness of the modern cityscape.

"This is amazing... So from where to where is Fornorn?"

"Oh, silly Layous-sama... Everything you can see is Fornorn."

Elfaria smiled at Koutarou's question. She wanted to boast about the large capital, but she also found his reaction amusing.

"Veltlion, that large dome you see over there was built on the ruins of the coliseum. And the largest tower you can see over there is just around the north gate."

"I see... Thanks."

In the end, it was Clan who told him what he really wanted to know. He was interested in how big Fornorn had grown compared to two thousand years, and for that, Elfaria's explanation was insufficient.

"To think that Fornorn has turned into this..."

In Koutarou's memories, Fornorn only had buildings made out of brick, stone, and wood. At most, they were three stories tall. Excluding the royal palace and the magician's tower, of course.

But in the current Fornorn, high-rises were commonplace. The tallest, of which there were quite a few, reached over a kilometer into the sky. Moreover,

the buildings here weren't made out of concrete like he was used to, but some lustrous material he'd never seen before. It truly looked like a futuristic city out of a movie.

"Guess it was inevitable... It's been two thousand years, after all..."

From the sky, Fornorn bore no resemblance to its past self. So to him, it was just like any other unfamiliar place. It didn't feel like he had returned to the capital, which made him feel wistful.

"Even though it might not look the same, this is the country that you and Alaia-san protected. This isn't like you, Veltlion. It's like a knight getting flustered because the decorations on his sword changed."

"...What's important is what's inside, huh? You're right. Thank you, Clan."

Clan's words changed Koutarou's perspective. It brought him back to himself.

Layous-sama and Clan-sama sure have a strong bond...

Elfaria was looking at the two and slumped her shoulders. She hadn't understood the meaning of Koutarou's question, nor had she been able to say anything when she saw him looking plaintive. But Clan had easily found the answer to both. Since Elfaria had only just met Koutarou, that much was to be expected, but she couldn't help but feel depressed since she felt like she was losing out as a princess.

If there's no bond, then I'll just make one! I won't lose to this fate!

However, Elfaria wasn't one to get discouraged by something like that. She could take a hit if need be. And even though she didn't wish for the throne, she had the qualities of an empress.

Seeing Fornorn from the surface didn't have the same level of impact it did from the air. When you couldn't see past the buildings in front of you, it felt just like being in a city on Earth. Buildings lined the wide roads with vehicles going up and down them. Of course there were differences in the details, but the overall impression was the same.

"I think I've managed to calm down."

“Please don’t look around so much. You look like a country bumpkin. It’s embarrassing.”

That might not have been the case if it had just been the two of them, but with Elfaria with them now, Clan was a little more sensitive than usual.

“All right, I’ve ranked up.”

“Eh?”

“You used to call me a neanderthal, remember? So being a country bumpkin is a big step forward.”

“Is that true, Clan-san?! How could you say something so audacious to Layous-sama?!”

“W-Wait a moment! That was before I knew who he was!”

The three of them were currently on the move, having changed their mode of transportation to a car—though one far different from what you would find on Earth. It didn’t need a driver, and the vehicle itself floated above the road. It only needed its tires when it was stopped or broken down. And since it ran on electricity, the interior of the car was very quiet, with nothing hindering the discussion between the three passengers.

“Hahh...”

Even Clan’s sigh reached Koutarou’s ears.

“What’s wrong?”

“Look over there. You can see the Schweiger residence.”

The Schweiger family residence was inside the Fornorn city limits. It looked like an annexation of several large research facilities, and could easily be seen even from afar. It slowly passed by as the car moved along, and for some reason, Clan seemed to be suffering a little.

“Hey!”

A thud rang out.

“Ow! What are you doing?!”

“You didn’t look like a girl who was finally able to return home after going

through such a trying journey... Now that you've gotten your energy back, tell me what's up, Clan."

"You really are... If you want to comfort me, there are softer ways of doing it."

Clan shot a nasty look at Koutarou. But thanks to him, her pained expression from just a moment ago was gone.

"...This is the world twenty years in the past, right?"

"Supposedly. It only looks like the future to me, though."

"In that case, my grandmother will pass away soon."

Clan's expression turned dark once more. She was recalling the death of a family member, and was wondering what she should do.

"Do you want to save her?"

In Forthorthe of the past, they had tried to save everyone in danger, regardless of what history dictated. And by that mindset, Clan should save her grandmother now that she was here and had the chance.

"I would like to, but the situation is complicated."

"What do you mean?"

"Grandmother will die five years from now. Since I know what the disease she passed away from is called, it probably won't kill her if I intervene now... It was brought on by aging..."

"Natural causes as they call it, huh?"

"Yes. But... should I really change history? Grandmother apparently wasn't very Schweiger-like. After her death, her fortune was invested into a lot of different funds as per her will. The amount of children that her money saved should be quite considerable."

"That does make it a difficult decision..."

Clan was worrying because she had a very complicated problem on her hands. Her grandmother would die because it was her time, but Clan was resistant to simply letting a blood relative pass away. Yet on the other hand, her death would lead to great things.

Up until the day she died, Clan's grandmother continued to increase her assets, and she left it all to good causes. Saving her now would delay that donation, which would deny help to children who needed it. The lives her money could save immediately would be lost. That said, the longer Clan's grandmother lived, the more she'd be able to increase her fortune. It would increase the amount that did go to saving lives, ultimately saving more of them in the long run. Clan didn't know what to do.

"All right, Clan. Let's just think about it for a while. This might be a distasteful way of putting it, but there's still five years left."

Koutarou was planning on thinking about the problem for a while. It was complicated enough that even his input might be useful.

"...You'll think about it too?"

Clan was surprised by what Koutarou had said.

"Yeah. That's what we've done all this time, right?"

"That's... true, but..."

Clan had figured that this would be her problem to deal with. But Koutarou didn't feel that way. That made her strangely happy.

I see... So this is what it means to not be alone...

She had someone she could share her feelings and her future with. It was reassuring in a way that brought brightness back to her expression.

After getting out of the car, Elfaria led Koutarou and Clan down an unpopulated alley. Their destination was just beyond it. It was a shop that Elfaria purchased research materials from—one that could be pressed for a little extra assistance when need be. She was planning on having them order in the part Koutarou and Clan needed for the Cradle.

"Even though the city's more advanced, these kinds of alleys have the same feel to them."

Compared to the futuristic and colorful main roads, the older looking alleyways seemed more familiar to Koutarou.

“Again? Jeez...”

Clan got embarrassed when Koutarou started looking around like a tourist again. That was when Elfaria pulled on her sleeve.

“Um, Clan-san.”

“What is it?”

Since Elfaria was whispering, Clan whispered back in response.

“Are you and Layous-sama going out?”

However, after hearing what Elfaria had to ask her, Clan instinctively raised her voice.

“N-N-No, no, no! Of course not!”

“Hmm? What’s wrong, Clan?”

Reacting to Clan’s shouting, Koutarou looked over at her.

“It’s nothing! It’s just girl talk!”

“You guys sure do a lot of that...”

Thanks to his everyday life with the invaders, Koutarou knew it was best not to touch on anything that qualified as “girl talk.” So when Clan said the magic words, he quickly lost interest and began looking around the area again. Right now, the futuristic alien city was far more captivating.

“Phew... That surprised me.”

“...So you’re really not going out?”

“Veltlion and I are just stuck together. Could you please not blurt out something so shocking all of a sudden?”

“I see. I’m sorry.”

“So... why are you asking about that?”

Clan filed her relationship with Koutarou under being stuck in the same boat, but she was still interested in that kind of talk.

“Actually, I wish to go out with Layous-sama myself.”

Elfaria blushed a little and looked at Koutarou. She was embarrassed, but she didn't try to hide her feelings from Clan. Elfaria was extremely honest in that regard.

"...Huh?"

In that moment, Clan felt like her heart was being squeezed by someone. She was far more surprised than before, but because it was a different kind of surprise, there was no shouting this time.

"I didn't think it would be possible if you and Layous-sama were already dating, but if that's not the case, I still have a chance."

"Please wait. That man is the Blue Knight, but what's told in the legends is not everything there is to him."

Clan assumed that Elfaria's words were the byproduct of her admiration for the legendary hero. But she knew that wasn't all there was to Koutarou. He worried. He suffered. He even shed tears at times. While he was a legendary hero, he was a normal person underneath it all. So any relationship born from revering him as a hero would end up with both parties unhappy.

And that wasn't the only problem. If Elfaria and Koutarou were to be joined in marriage, history would change significantly. Also, though Clan might not want to admit it, she needed Koutarou. For the problem regarding her grandmother, and for the journey to come. Those complex feelings were what made her try to stop Elfaria.

"I know. That's why."

"Huh?"

"He knows the pain of living his life in accordance with his fate..."

Elfaria had a very serious expression as she spoke. Feelings she couldn't abandon.

"Elfaria-san, you..."

Elfaria knew that Koutarou was suffering because he'd been forced to take on the role of the Blue Knight. And when she realized that, Clan could no longer oppose Elfaria.

After introducing Clan to the shopkeeper, Elfaria returned to the storefront so she could talk with Koutarou, who was curiously staring at the items on display.

“As expected from Forthorthe... They’re just selling robots like it’s perfectly normal...”

“Welcome, customer. I am Weyland, a domestic robot made by DKI—a new model released this spring!”

What had caught Koutarou’s eye was a humanoid robot. Several different kinds of them were on display amongst the heavy equipment and other machinery. Out of them, Koutarou was talking to a domestic model.

“Oh, Layous-sama, do you like robots?”

“Yeah. In our world, fiction with robots is really popular with kids. When I was small, I loved watching shows where they had people controlling giant robots to fight monsters.”

“Giant robots? I see...”

Elfaria flashed a cheerful smile. Her heart leaped for joy each time she learned something about Koutarou that was unrelated to the Blue Knight, something about him unconstrained by the path set for him.

“How regrettable. It seems that I cannot live up to the customer’s expectations.”

Meanwhile, the robot called Weyland drooped its shoulders. Its reaction was quite the opposite of Elfaria’s.

“What kind of robot are you?”

“I was made to perform chores for people too busy to do them themselves. Our company has always been distant from the war industries, so we specialize in domestic products. This model boasts the top performance in housekeeping.”

“Sorry, but we’re doing okay on our chores.”

Koutarou remembered the faces of the girls in room 106. They didn’t need a robot to help with anything around the apartment. While the two haniwas were

technically robots, their main job was playing with Koutarou and the others.

“That’s a shame.”

“That’s right. I’ll do all the housekeeping, so Layous-sama doesn’t need a robot.”

“You will? Why?”

“Silly Layous-sama, what are you saying? That’s a wife’s job, isn’t it? Heeheehee.”

Elfaria giggled with an innocent smile on her face. It was the smile of a young, high-class wife.

“Elle, when did you become my wife?”

Koutarou felt a headache coming on. But at the same time, this reminded him of talking with Sanae, Yurika, or Kiriha, so there was something pleasant about it. If he ignored the wife comment, that is.

“Just recently. I made the decision.”

“Without even asking me?”

“I believe fate is something you take into your own hands.”

Elfaria asserted herself, flashing a very princessly expression for a moment. She was going to use any means necessary to become Koutarou’s wife.

“Don’t take my fate into your hands as well.”

“Do you hate me?”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“Then there are no problems. I’m confident I’ll make a great wife.”

Elfaria placed her hands on her chest and nodded. Just as she said, her expression was overflowing with confidence.

“There are major problems!”

“Layous-sama, if you marry me, you’ll obtain half the galaxy! I think that’s a great deal!”

“You idiot!”

A thud rang out.

“Stop spouting things a villain in a movie would say! Treasure yourself more!”

Koutarou had a place he had to return to and a reason to go back. He was also bothered by Elfaria selling herself short. And he didn’t know how to respond to marriage offer out of the blue from someone he’d just met. His fist responded for him instinctively.

“Eeheehee...”

Yet for some reason, Elfaria was mischievously smiling as she held her forehead.

“Wh-What?”

Sensing something ominous from her smile, Koutarou took three steps backward in retreat. Elfaria responded by taking three steps forward and peering up at him.

“Layous-sama, you finally hit me.”

“What about it?”

“I already know that Layous-sama only hits those he really hates and those he thinks of as more than friends. Heehee, now I’m one step closer.”

Koutarou would say harsh things to Clan and sometimes even make use of light violence. But not with Elfaria, who he had just met. She’d realized even in just the short time they’d known each other that she needed to become someone worth hitting in order to get along better with him.

“Come on now...”

“Despite how I look, I’m good at laying groundwork and establishing facts.”

Seeing Koutarou’s shoulders droop, Elfaria donned a proud smile. She was serious about trying to become his wife. They were both troubled by the paths they were bound to. She wanted to take his hand and blaze a new trail.



After they were done making arrangements for the part they needed, Koutarou and the others went out to purchase food and water. After that, they would return to Veltlion's special territory and wait until the part was ready. Since Koutarou and Clan were still in what was the past to them, they didn't want to walk around carelessly and accidentally change history.

"Is this the last of it?"

"There's one more box, but I'll get that. So yeah, the box you're carrying is the last."

"Give me that one too. I'll put it on top of the one I'm carrying."

"It's okay. This is nothing."

"Clan, you can return to being a princess when you're back home for real."

"That's right, Clan-san. Leave this to the married couple."

"Ah, hey, Elfaria-san!"

Koutarou and the two girls were in the parking lot, in the middle of loading the provisions they'd purchased into the car. It was a rather noisy affair. Now that they'd gotten used to each other, Clan and Elfaria talked to each other like girls their age usually did.

I'm sure neither of them have someone they can discuss their true feelings with...

Koutarou believed that their meeting had been a positive one. In the hierarchical society of Forthorthe, princesses were normally rivals. But because these two were from different ages, they didn't feel that sense of competition between them. Thanks to that, they could understand each other's worries and sympathize with each other. And because they would eventually get separated by time, there was no need to hold back in what they shared with each other. Clan only had to worry about not giving away too much information about the future, but that didn't affect anything personal. In other words, it was the perfect situation to befriend one another. That's why Koutarou left them be, even if they clashed a little.

"Clan-san is a princess. I am Layous-sama's wife. My husband's luggage is my

luggage. What's wrong with that?"

"Nothing's right with it! I can't have another princess carry my luggage! I especially don't want to become indebted to the Mastir family!"

"It's okay. I'm soon to become part of the Veltlion or Satomi family."

"That's not the problem! My pride won't allow it!"

"Wait up, you two. Let's just leave it at that."

However, Koutarou suddenly broke things up.

"Okay, Layous-sama."

"No, I won't— Wait, what's wrong, Veltlion?"

Unlike Elfaria who obediently stopped, Clan was too worked up to let it go right away. But when she saw the serious expression on Koutarou's face, she understood that something was up and got serious too. He looked just like he did when an enemy was upon them in past Forthorthe.

"People are coming. Looks like three of them."

"Are they enemies?"

"I can't tell. There's no murderous intent, but I feel hostility."

Koutarou could use the psychic powers that Sanae had given him, but since he had been separated from her for so long, they were growing weak. He couldn't see auras as clearly as he used to, which was why he hadn't noticed the mysterious people approaching until they were quite close.

"It's them."

"That's the imperial military uniform. And it seems like all three of them are quite high up the ladder... What is the meaning of this?"

Three men wearing military uniforms were approaching with hostility directed at them. The part that Clan ordered under Elfaria's name was not illegal, so it wasn't something that should have attracted the military's attention. The only other possibility Koutarou could think of was that the Cradle had been discovered. But Elfaria quickly informed him that wasn't the case.

"I'm sorry, Layous-sama, Clan-san. Those people are here for me."

Elfaria was watching the men with a sharp look. She stood perfectly upright and carried herself with gravity. It was as if the carefree attitude from before had just been a dream. That was the first time Koutarou and Clan saw the true Princess Elfaria.

Knowing that the approaching men were from the military, Elfaria left Koutarou and Clan behind her and stepped forward alone. That was both because she wanted to protect their identities, and because she knew that the situation wouldn't be dangerous in spite of the hostility.

"What is the meaning of this? I don't have any recollection of calling for the military."

Elfaria's voice echoed through the parking lot. With few other people and cars around, her voice reached far.

"We've come because we have business with you."

The person in the middle of the approaching group of men answered. He was the highest ranking of the three and acted as their leader.

"I can't ignore that. If the military is coming into contact with a princess during her private time for an arbitrary reason, their responsibilities will need to be taken into question."

"Worry not. Our responsibility won't be taken into question from just your testimony. We are currently doing deskwork right now, after all."

"Nonsense..."

Elfaria's stare grew sharper.

Is the military running amok...?

Seeing how Elfaria and the men were interacting, Koutarou could get a rough idea of the situation. The military was pulling away from the control of the empress and the government, and was acting on its own. Even the most well constructed organizations would deteriorate after two thousand years, it seemed. Forthorthe's current military was nothing like the one Koutarou and Alaia had led in the past.

“You have drowned in your power and haven’t realized that you are out of control.”

“I can assure you that we are not out of control. We are acting under proper management.”

“Someone never using the breaks can’t tell if they’re broken.”

“Let us stop with this meaningless chatter, princess. This topic will never lead us anywhere. There’s something more important right now, is there not?”

The man grinned and forcibly changed the subject. He showed the princess no respect, not even in conversation. In fact, it was like he was looking down on her.

“Now that would be meaningless. I have no intention of withdrawing my stance on disarmament.”

“Surely you can do something, Princess Elfaria. It would be easy. Your Highness won’t get in our way, and we won’t get in yours.”

“You are already in the way, yet you say you won’t be? You jest.”

Elfaria laughed, but her eyes said nothing about this was funny. The laugh was just a tactic. And in the response, the man’s expression changed.

“We don’t want to have to do anything violent, now. You’re the next in line for the throne, after all.”

He couldn’t stand to have a young girl laugh at him. It brought his brutal nature to the surface, and he spoke to Elfaria in a low, deep voice. The men’s goal was to threaten her.

“How unsightly. The military brass has sent you over several times because they fear me. Threatening me now is surely meaningless.”

But Elfaria didn’t falter. She maintained her smile and stared down the men with cold eyes.

“You brat, don’t get so full of yourself!”

“Look, you’re already out of control. What happened to your proper management?”

“Tch.”

Humiliated, the man grinded his teeth. He’d lost the moment he let his temper get the better of him.

“Go back where you came from. And tell your superiors that Forthorthe’s royalty won’t yield to anyone.”

The winner was Elfaria Kua Forthorthe. Though young, she was a prideful Forthorthian royal.

Even after the men had left, Elfaria remained quite serious for a while. The girlish expression she had with Koutarou and Clan had vanished somewhere. It was replaced with a dour look that stuck with her even after they returned to Veltlion’s special territory, and the rest of the day.

“I’m starting to understand how it’s all fitting together...” Clan muttered as she watched Elfaria leave the cave.

“He knows the pain of living his life in accordance with his fate...”

That’s what Elfaria had said about Koutarou back in Fornorn. But looking at it differently, it also meant that she did as well.

Elfaria-san has been after a life different from that of an empress all this time. But fate won’t allow it. If she doesn’t become empress, a princess that opposes military disarmament would come to power and the military would continue to run wild. She’s caught between the life she wants and the life she must live. And that’s when Veltlion appeared. No wonder she fell for him...

If Elfaria didn’t become empress, the military’s rampage might develop past the point of no return. But in order to do anything about it, she’d have to become empress, which wasn’t what she wanted. Her desires and her duty were at odds.

“Elle is in a tough spot... Just like Empress Alaia...”

Koutarou understood that Elfaria was conflicted. Alaia had been the same way. She wanted to avenge her parents, but she was also willing to give up on that for the sake of her people. So it was thanks to Alaia that Koutarou was able

to understand how Elfaria felt now.

“What do we do?”

“Let’s have Elle do what she wants. She probably...”

“...You’re right.”

Elfaria was getting further and further away from Koutarou and Clan. After waving to them one last time, she left the cave.

“Hey, Veltlion...”

“Hmm?”

“After seeing her, I’ve made up my mind as well.”

Clan turned to Koutarou and clasped her hands in front of her chest. A strong determination shone in her eyes. She’d reached a decision as a princess.

“I will leave Grandmother be,” she said with firm determination.

“Are you fine with that?”

“Yes. I think trying to save someone who’s reached the end of their natural life is going too far. She is certainly someone I would like to meet, but...”

Clan’s voice gradually grew quieter as she looked down at the ground. They were talking about family, so this wasn’t something easy for her. But she soon looked back up, the will behind her eyes still present.

“I really don’t think time travel should be intentionally taken advantage of.”

“You mean don’t travel through time with a purpose?”

“Yes. I believe the policy we adopted in the past is the correct approach. Time travel should only be used to return to where you belong. But if you come across someone in trouble in the process, you help them.”

Koutarou and Clan didn’t want to change history, but they couldn’t overlook tragedies occurring right in front of them. That was how they’d justified their actions in past Forthorthe, and Clan thought it should still apply now.

“If not, we’ll never be able to return home. Who knows how much time it would take to resolve everything happening around us?”

Koutarou and Clan knew a lot about what would happen in the next twenty years. If they wanted, they could probably prevent a great deal of tragedy. But that would completely change the course of history, preventing them from returning home.

“Travelling through time sure is difficult...”

“Normally this is the Goddess of Dawn’s domain.”

“That’s right. You and I aren’t gods. We should respect the people earnestly living in their respective ages.”

There were other issues apart from the matter of the course of history, however. For instance, Koutarou and Clan knew a lot about what would happen in the future, but the people alive right now in this day and age didn’t. Yet even without that knowledge, they were working hard towards their goals and dreams. Having people with advanced knowledge of the results of that hard work intervening would stomp on all those dreams. Koutarou and Clan’s interference would be the same as being told their dreams won’t come true, so they were a waste of time and they’d be better off doing something else.

On top of that, there was a limit to how much time Koutarou and Clan had. They couldn’t resolve absolutely everything that would come up between here and there. They would have to choose what to intervene in, and those would be decisions that affected a great number of lives. They would literally be deciding who to save and who not to save. But how could they decide the value of each life? Everyone only had one shot at life; all lives were equally important. So if they acted to save some people and not others, they’d be saying that wasn’t true.

“Clan, you’re not wrong. You’re just human.”

“Thank you, Veltlion. I feel like some of the weight has been lifted off my shoulders because you said that.”

It would be a difficult problem for anyone. This was the first time in history that humans had been faced with the worries of a god. It was no surprise that they couldn’t reach a perfect solution for those worries. For Koutarou and Clan were no gods.

The several days it would take for the ordered part to arrive passed peacefully. Elle would come to visit the Cradle in the morning, and after staying with them until the evening, she would go back home. She even stayed the night a few times. And it was like that that the three of them spent their time in a fashion suitable for their age.

“Layous-sama, let’s go take a look at our wedding hall.”

“Oh yeah, where do Forthorthians hold their weddings?”

“Normally in a temple before the goddess.”

“You mean the Goddess of Dawn?”

“That’s right. However, as life has become more modern, it’s more common to use hotels or similar venues decorated like temples. With the increase in population, there aren’t enough temples to handle all of the weddings.”

“Well, that makes sense. Fornorn is pretty impressive, after all.”

“Our ceremony will of course take place in the temple dedicated to Signaltin.”

“Nobody’s allowed to enter that place, right?”

“Clan-san is the only one we need to attend. Now, let’s go and have our wedding!”

“Wait a moment, weren’t you just going to see the place?!”

“What does this food taste like?”

“Well, you’ll just have to find out.”

“All right, let’s give it a try.”

“Veltlion, if you eat that many at the—”

“Hack, ack, ack! What the... It’s so spicy!”

“Ahahah! Here, Layous-sama, some water.”

“Th-Thanks... ahem... That’s just playing dirty. Something that looked like this on Earth would definitely be sweet.”

“It’s because you ate so many.”

“If you knew, you should have stopped me.”

“You shoved them all in your mouth before I could.”

“A-Anyways, Elle...”

“Mmhmm?”

A thud rang out.

“Ow! Why did you hit me?!”

“You did it on purpose, didn’t you? That water you had prepared beforehand is all the proof I need.”

“Bingo! Teeheehee...”

Yet another thud rang out.

“Can I stay over tonight?”

“Are you sure? Won’t everyone worry?”

“I’ve already let them know that I’m not returning for the day because of fieldwork.”

“Jeez, you sure come prepared... Well, I don’t have any complaints.”

“All right! Layous-sama, let me hear all your wonderful stories tonight.”

“I don’t mind, but... why are you putting your luggage in my room?”

“O? If we’re not in the same bed, how am I supposed to listen to your stories?”

“Sleep in the room next door!”

“You’re telling your wife to sleep in another room?! Is this marriage going downhill already?!”

“Stop playing around and go!”

“Okaaay.”

“Jeez, what a girl...”

“Clan, you should stop talking and chase after her.”

“Why?”

“Elle is carrying her luggage into your room.”

“All right! This room is a goldmine!”

“Heeey!”

“Clan, aim to kill, okay?”

“That’s the plan. Ah, but aren’t your psychic powers weakening?”

“Probably.”

“Layous-sama, can I shoot instead of Clan-san?”

“No. you can’t.”

“Whaaat?! Why not?!”

“Why not? Well, that’s because you only ever think about playing tricks, right?”

“Psychic powers tell you that too?!”

“I can tell even without them!”

“That means we understand each other!”

“You sure are gutsy, Elfaria-san...”

“Could this be the bond between a husband and wife?!”

“You idiot!”

And just as the three of them began thinking that it wouldn’t be so bad if they could spend their days together like this for a while longer, Elfaria got a call saying that the part she’d ordered had arrived at her hotel.

“What’s the matter, Elfaria-san? Bad news?”

“No, I got a call that the part was delivered...”

Elfaria realized that they would part ways soon enough, and with that, her happy feelings turned into loneliness. The magic vanished in an instant.

“I see...”

The same was true for Clan. Because their time together had been so fun, it would be hard to say goodbye. And things would be even harder for Elfaria. Koutarou and Clan might be able to meet Elfaria again soon enough, but to her it, would be more than twenty years. The problem with time travelling presented itself yet again.

“Layous-sama, I got a call saying that the part has arrived, so I’m going to go pick it up now.”

“I see...”

Koutarou was in the middle of cooking when Elfaria came in and gave him the news. Struck by loneliness, he immediately stopped what he was doing. Since he had only recently parted ways with Alaia and Charl, it stirred up complex feelings in him. And because of that, he said something rather unlike himself in response.

“Elle, you can leave the part for later. Let’s go get it together when it’s time for you to leave for the day.”

“Layous-sama... are you sure?”

“Yeah. We need to hurry in order to not change history, but a few hours isn’t going to make a difference. It’ll just change when we leave a little.”

“I agree. We should at least have enough time to eat, drink some tea, chat, and say goodbye to the people we’ve met.”

“Those are quite the illogical words for a member of the logical Schweiger family.”

“I’m sure I take after my grandmother.”

“Teehee, did your grandmother try to kill Layous-sama as well?”

“Of course not, jeez...”

Even though the part they needed had arrived, Koutarou and Clan didn’t leave immediately to go get it. They would go pick it up with Elfaria when she went home for the day. For now, they’d eat dinner together. They still had a few hours left. They weren’t planning on using that remaining time for anything

special. They would just let their little vacation continue for a little while longer. Koutarou and Clan figured it would be forgivable to indulge a little bit at the end of their long time travelling voyage.

But there were those that wouldn't be so understanding of the peaceful time they were spending together. It was just after the clock passed 4 PM and the sun was starting to set when they came.

"Damn it!"

Koutarou was the first to notice their approach, and he slammed his fists into the table in anger.

"Layous-sama? Did you not like the snacks?"

"What's the matter, Veltlion?!"

Elfaria and Clan were taken aback by Koutarou's sudden action and stared at him in surprise.

"It's the enemy! I'm not sure on their exact numbers, but I think there's five or six of them. They're headed this way from the entrance of the cave."

Koutarou sensed blood thirst closing in. Unlike the hostility he'd felt from the military men the other day, this was bona fide intent to kill. As a result, even though Koutarou's powers were growing weaker, he picked up on it as soon as it was in range.

"Give me a second... I've confirmed it with the Cradle's sensors as well! There are six of them! They're headed this way, fully equipped!"

Using the Cradle's sensors, Clan set her sights on the approaching men. Their movements were precise and organized like that of trained soldiers. Each of them was equipped with a rifle and black body armor. They were quite clearly a combat squad.

While it was a small ship, they were too few to attack the Cradle. But that was only obvious; they hadn't expected to find a spaceship here. They had assumed it was just a dig site. In other words...

"They're here to kill me. They're most likely illegal mercenaries sent by the

military.”

Their target was Elfaria. Six men was more than enough to take out a single girl. The military had seen an opportunity and decided to act on it. In order for Elfaria to get her excavation approved, she’d snuck into Veltlion’s special territory alone in hopes of making a compelling find. Thanks to that, there was no one but Elfaria around, and nobody was aware of her exact location. If they killed her here and now, no one would ever find the evidence. They’d tracked the delivery of the spaceship part to her hotel, and then from there followed her to the cave.

“It’s been two thousand years since then...”

“Layous-sama?”

“It’s been two thousand years, and you still won’t stop fighting...”

Koutarou slowly rose from his seat. He was fuming. He could never find it in him to forgive those who dared to trample on the Forthorthe that he and Alaia had fought so desperately to protect.

“Clan, could you prepare my sword and armor?”

“Understood. Veltlion, show them the power of the legendary Blue Knight.”

Koutarou thought that after two thousand years, he could be rid of the title of Blue Knight. But he was quite wrong. The legend of the Blue Knight was about to get its second chapter.

Elfaria’s first impression of the Blue Knight in the flesh was that he was beautiful. His armor was a vivid blue, and he had both a gold and silver sword hanging from his waist. On his chest was an insignia made from wood and wool. But the armor had been through many fierce fights; it showed signs of severe damage and had several large dents in it. The mantle on his back was dirty, and so were the swords. Their silvery and golden sheens had lost much of their luster.

“So this is Layous-sama... the real Blue Knight...”

But even with Koutarou in this state, Elfaria was moved at the sight of him. He

was a real knight, something very rare these days. It was a beautiful thing to her.

“He’s completely different from his normal self like this, isn’t he?”

“Yes...”

It was a beautiful sight indeed, but it wasn’t his appearance that was beautiful. Koutarou was a normal looking boy, and the armor he was wearing was dirty. But his dignified behavior and his overwhelming willpower were so knightly that he transcended aesthetic beauty. He was the very image of a Forthorthian’s ideal knight.

“But will he be all right? He’s going up against six people.”

“There’s no need to worry. When he’s making that face, Veltlion won’t lose to anyone.”

As Elfaria and Clan watched over him, Koutarou drew one of the swords from his waist—the silvery white one. It was the sword of kingship, Signaltin, proof that its wielder was a guardian of Forthorthe.

“Just watch, Elfaria-san, how the legendary knight who protected Forthorthe alongside the Silver Princess fights...”

Koutarou paused, as if waiting for Clan to finish speaking, and then charged towards the soldiers with just one sword in hand. Looking at it rationally, he shouldn’t stand a chance against six fully armed men. However, neither Clan nor Koutarou had any doubt of his victory.

The Blue Knight had a special place in the hearts of the people of Forthorthe. But he was a historical figure that had lived nearly two thousand years ago. It was unthinkable to imagine that he would just suddenly appear in front of them. That’s why, when the six soldiers saw Koutarou, they assumed he was just a deranged Blue Knight maniac.

“Hey now, that armor has seen better days.”

“He must have been playing around in that armor for a long time.”

“But still, it’s well made. Even I might want to play around in that armor.”

“Stop spouting nonsense and kill him. Even though he’s crazy, a witness is a witness.”

“Hey, everyone, aim for his head. I want to take that armor back home with me.”

“Sheesh, guess we don’t have a choice...”

That carelessness was their first and worst mistake. They should have attacked Koutarou the moment they saw him. But they underestimated him. On top of that, they never expected that he would be completely aware of their positions and movements. As a result, Koutarou had the upper hand and struck first.

“Uwaaaaaaaah!”

All of a sudden, the man in the front was blown away. He lost consciousness after being bathed in an intense shockwave and collapsed to the ground like a marionette with its strings cut.

“Huh?! What just happened?!”

The men were stunned. They had no idea what was happening until after Koutarou attacked a second time.

“It’s him?! The Blue Knight maniac— Waaaaah!”

One of the men repeatedly fired his rifle. The soldiers were using beam rifles, which fired beams at incredible speed. On top of that, they were at close range. Their shots would be impossible to dodge ordinarily.

“Phew...”

Koutarou exhaled a small breath and twisted his body. When he did, each and every one of the beams passed by him. It was like he knew where the beams would travel beforehand.

“They missed... I can’t hit him! The beams won’t—”

After making his way through the beams, Koutarou casually swung his left arm at the man who’d fired at him. When his fist caught the man, the electricity built up within his gauntlet zapped him, knocking him out instantly.

“F-Fire! Fire!”

“Damn it! That damn joke of a kid!”

Now two men down, the remaining soldiers finally realized that they weren’t going up against any normal opponent, and hurriedly turned their guns on Koutarou.

“If you were going to fire, you should have done so sooner.”

The next moment, the men were deprived of their sight. That was because a small globe that had rolled up to their feet was spewing out smoke at a fierce rate. It was one of Clan’s custom-made smoke grenades, and the heat of the smoke even nullified the soldiers’ thermal vision. It was very simple, but it proved quite effective in modern combat.

“Damn it, a smokescreen!”

The four men hurriedly cast aside their thermal goggles and attempted to get out of the smoke.

“But he can’t see through the smoke either! Don’t panic—just get out of the smoke!”

“Uwaaaaah!”

However, for Koutarou who could see his enemies’ auras, it was as if there was no smoke to begin with. As the men tried to escape the cloud of smoke, they lost yet another of their ranks. But their misfortune did not end there.

“Captain! The enemy!”

“What?! There are three of him?!”

Standing in front of the three remaining men as they emerged from the smoke were three Koutarous. And all three of them attacked the men at the same time.

“It doesn’t matter how many there are! Kill them!”

“U-Understood!”

The men repeatedly fired their rifles, each attacking the Koutarou in front of them. The three Koutarous struck by the beams vanished like smoke. They were

all illusions created by magic.

“They’re gone?!”

“Holograms?!”

While the three men were distracted by the illusions, the fourth Koutarou emerged from hiding and snuck up on them.

“You should have wondered why I was relying on a heated smokescreen.”

The fourth Koutarou swung his sword with both hands, sending two of the remaining three men flying. And just like the first man, they rolled along the ground and lost consciousness.

The first three Koutarous were illusions created using Signaltin. However, they weren’t advanced enough to produce a heat reaction, so there was a risk that the men might see through them with their thermal vision. That was why Koutarou had gone with the heated smokescreen. So once the soldiers took off their thermal goggles, everything was going according to Koutarou’s plan. And while the men were distracted by the illusions, the real Koutarou moved in. Attacking a defenseless opponent was child’s play to him.

“Wh-Who are you?!”

All the remained was one man, the leader of the squad. He was a skilled shooter, but on his own he couldn’t hurt Koutarou. The armor’s barrier was still going strong and Koutarou could see through the man’s aim with his spirit sight. He no longer stood a chance against Koutarou, and repeatedly fired as he slowly backed away.

“Who? I’m just a Blue Knight maniac like you said. But I might have gone a little too far.”

“Why are you siding with that girl?! What could you possibly get out of that?!”

“Isn’t it obvious? Aren’t I dressed as the Blue Knight? Of course I’ll protect the princess. I’m stupid, after all.”

Koutarou walked up to the man and casually punched him in the gut, sending his last enemy to his knees. A long time had passed since Koutarou had been

separated from the girls of room 106, and the powers he borrowed from them were growing weaker. But even then, he'd come out victorious and unharmed. The fight ended precisely how Koutarou and Clan had expected.

Replacing the part only took a few minutes. It was operating fine, and Clan confirmed that there should be no problems returning to Earth. So now that the problem with the Cradle was resolved, only a personal problem remained...

"Layous-sama, Clan-san. Thank you for everything up until today. Thanks to you, I've made up my mind."

Elfaria was saying her goodbyes before Koutarou and Clan departed. In the end, she'd chosen to not go with them.

"I think I should become the empress of Forthorthe."

"I see... I thought you might."

"So you *did* know."

"I've seen the way a princess looks when she makes an important decision before."

"You're the Blue Knight after all, Layous-sama. Heehee..."

Elfaria flashed a broad smile. She no longer had any doubts or hesitation. She was determined to live as the empress of Forthorthe.

"But Elfaria-san, why did you decide to become the empress? I thought you didn't want to walk down the path laid down for you."

"You're right. I wanted to break free from my fate and struggled to do so. But I also had to wonder if it was the right path to walk down regardless. That's why I studied the Blue Knight and the Silver Princess."

"To find out how they acted when faced with a similar choice?"

"Yes."

Should she live her own life, or should she live for the sake of her people as the empress? Elfaria didn't know, which was why she sought her answer in the chronicles of the Blue Knight and the Silver Princess.

“And just when I wasn’t getting anywhere with my research, I met the real Layous-sama.”

“So that’s why... Weren’t you disappointed?”

“A little. But that’s why I fell in love with Layous-sama. Because I knew he struggled against his own fate like me.”

Koutarou hadn’t been able to give Elfaria the answer she needed. He had only walked down the path chosen for the Blue Knight. He hadn’t made any heroic decisions of his own. But Elfaria was able to sympathize with the hardships he’d suffered. She hadn’t found her answer, but she began feeling like they could look for it together.

“That’s why I was serious when I said I wanted to date you and marry you, Layous-sama. I seriously wanted to escape the path laid for me together with you.”

“Then why did you give up on that?”

“I don’t think of it as giving up. Rather, it’s because I couldn’t give up.”

Elfaria smiled. She certainly didn’t have the expression of someone who’d given up.

“You couldn’t give up?”

“Yes. I love Layous-sama. That’s why I want to protect the Forthorthe that he had protected despite his own worries.”

If they were to hold hands, they would need to protect the same things. In other words, after learning that Koutarou worried about the same things she did and falling for him, Elfaria’s path was sealed.

“Even if I must walk down the path in front of me, I get to decide how I walk. And I was able to find a way of walking that I could accept.”

“I see... Then your research is complete, isn’t it, Elfaria-san?”

Hearing the conclusion that Elfaria had reached, Clan smiled.

“Pardon?”

She then brought her mouth to Elfaria’s ear and whispered so that only she

could hear.

“The Silver Princess felt the same way you do, and chose to continue to protect Forthorthe...”

“Then the Silver Princess really did...?”

“Love Veltlion, yes. Despite knowing that he was only a fake... No, perhaps it was because she knew he was a fake, just like you...”

Clan smiled once more as she said those words. And with that, tears began forming in Elfaria’s eyes. All kinds of feelings were being stirred up inside of her. Not just feelings directed towards Koutarou, either, but also feelings for the Silver Princess and for Clan.

“Thank you, Clan-san.”

“Y-You don’t need to thank me...”

Clan started blushing. Having lived her life always keeping people at a distance, she wasn’t used to being thanked.

“I think I should be allowed to say thanks to a friend who worried for me.”

“Friend...? Then, thank you too, Elfaria-san.”

Finally, the two girls shook hands. Clan was looking away, her face bright red, but her feelings were properly conveyed to Elfaria.

“Layous-sama.”

After having said her farewells to Clan, Elfaria turned to Koutarou. It was their turn now.

“I’m repeating myself, but thank you very much for everything. I will never forget these days we’ve spent together.”

“Become a great empress. That’s what both Empress Alaia and I wish for.”

“Yes... Teehee.”

While listening to Koutarou’s words of encouragement, Elfaria nodded and giggled. Since this wasn’t anything someone would laugh at ordinarily, Koutarou gave her a quizzical look.

“What is it?”

“I was just thinking that if you had said that at the very start, this might have only taken five minutes.”

“This is the kind of thing you needed to decide for yourself.”

Koutarou firmly believed that everyone chose their own path in life.

“Heehee, that might be true for men... but not so much for women.”

Elfaria didn’t mind following the path the man she loved had illuminated for her.

“No, it’s true for women too.”

Koutarou was adamant. That stubbornness would later make Ruth cry, but Elfaria only giggled.

“Oh my, teehee...”

“Can you understand my hardships, Elfaria-san?” asked Clan from the side.

“Heehee, I’m starting to.”

After the two girls had a good laugh, Elfaria turned back to Koutarou. There was something she wanted to ask him.

“Layous-sama, can I just ask you one last thing?”

“Yeah, what?”

“If I seriously asked you to take me with you, what would you have done?”

Elfaria wanted to know what Koutarou would have done if she hadn’t chosen the life as the empress, and had instead chosen to walk alongside him.

“That wouldn’t have happened.”

However, Koutarou shook his head.

“Elle, you were a proper princess of Forthorthe the day we first met. That’s why, no matter how much you joke around, I know you would have chosen this in the end.”

“Layous-sama...”

Elfaria’s smile crumbled and gave way to tears streaming down her cheeks.

“Thank you very much, Layous-sama. I will forever take pride in those words...”

And so the time for Koutarou and Clan to part ways with Elfaria had come. The two of them departed for Earth, and Elfaria went on to become empress. They wouldn’t reunite for another twenty years, but despite all that time, the bond between them never weakened.

The mellow smell of tea filled room 106. It was an unusual aroma compared to the tea they normally drank. And the person preparing it all was equally unusual.

“It will be ready soon, Layous-sama.”

“It’s fine. Let’s take it slow. It’s the weekend after all.”

Elfaria was sitting at the tea table opposite Koutarou. She was the one preparing the tea.

It was Sunday today, and all of the girls had left to go buy swimsuits, leaving only Koutarou behind. As he was pondering what to do, Elfaria had appeared. Seeing that he was free, she prepared him some tea.

“Oh yeah, that reminds me. There was something I wanted to ask you.”

Koutarou and Elfaria were rarely alone together. Since Theia or Ruth were always with her, there were several things he wanted to talk to her about, but couldn’t. Fortunately, neither of them were here now, giving them a real chance to talk.

“As long as it’s not about my age, I don’t mind.”

Elfaria casually nodded as she watched the tea leaves stirring inside the glass pot. As far as she was concerned, she had nothing to hide from Koutarou other than her age.

“What’s Theia’s dad doing right now?”

Koutarou had heard plenty about Theia’s mother before, but he had never heard about her father. He’d always wondered about it, but he wasn’t sure if it

was something he should ask Theia about. He thought Elfaria would be a better option.

“Theia doesn’t have a father,” she said, shaking her head.

“What do you mean?”

“I had a fiancé determined for me, but he died of an accident before we married... So his sperm, which had been cryopreserved just in case, was used for artificial insemination.”

“So that’s why... No wonder she never mentions her father.”

“Yes... So I’m afraid I’ve made her feel lonely all this time.”

Elfaria had raised Theia on her own. But as the empress of a galactic nation, raising a child was incredibly difficult. That’s why Theia’s personality had turned out the way it had, and why she’d clashed with Koutarou and the others at first. If it weren’t for Ruth, there was no telling how she might have ended up. Elfaria regretted that.

“But that’s not the case anymore. She has you, and she’s made friends too.”

“Yes. While this might be imprudent to say in this situation, having been chased out of my country and all... I am incredibly happy to be able to see Theia smile the way she does.”

Elfaria smiled, and there was a gentle look in her eyes. She may have been looking at Koutarou, but he was sure she was only thinking of Theia in that moment.

“Can I ask you something else?”

“Yes.”

Elfaria rubbed her eyes and nodded. But the tears weren’t the result of sadness. Far from it. The look on her face was bright.

“Was Theia coming to this room your doing?”

That was another thing Koutarou was curious about. It was unthinkable to believe that the daughter of his friend from the past had come to his room for her trial just by pure chance, especially since the trial was supposed to be

decided at random by a computer.

“Yes. I was the one who sent Theia here. Because I knew you were here.”

Elfaria readily confirmed Koutarou’s suspicions.

“Why did you do that?”

“There were two reasons.” Elfaria raised two demonstrative fingers. “The first was to protect Theia. If she was by your side, I was hoping you would keep her safe.”

“That sounds just like you.”

Koutarou could clearly understand that reason. If it was Elfaria’s daughter, Koutarou would protect her unconditionally. That said, he’d actually already formed his own bond with Theia before he met Elfaria.

“And the other reason was... revenge on you, Layous-sama.”

“Revenge...?”

Koutarou’s voice faltered in surprise. He wasn’t at all expecting her to say that. She then puffed up her cheeks and played with her hair as she glared at Koutarou.

“You were my first love, Layous-sama. But I happened to overhear you and Clan-san speaking, and you called me ‘Theia’s mother.’ With that, my first love came to an abrupt end. I was heartbroken. Isn’t that just cruel?”

Koutarou did indeed see Elfaria as Theia’s mother. And since Koutarou had had no intention of changing history, there was no way he could be with Elfaria. It meant, even though she loved Koutarou, she had no chance with him.

“So as revenge for that, you sent Theia?”

“Don’t you think fulfilling both a mother and daughter’s first love is wonderful?”

Since she couldn’t be with Koutarou, she wanted Theia to be. She wanted her daughter to be happy where she couldn’t. That would make up for what she’d been through. And if Theia and Koutarou got married, Elfaria would be able to pester him as his mother-in-law.

“...I feel sorry for Theia.”

“There’s no need to. She became a Blue Knight fanatic even without my intervention. I guess it was destiny. All I did was make sure her trial was the invasion of this room.”

Elfaria had sent Theia to room 106 in order to protect her, and to get her revenge on Koutarou. While she was here on Earth, she would be out of the reach of the military. Moreover, she’d made a place for herself in Koutarou’s heart. Elfaria’s plan was proceeding smoothly.

“Thanks to you, Layous-sama, I could focus on trying the military’s disarmament without any worries. The existence of my daughter was my weakness, after all.”

“I’m not so convinced on this disarmament thing anymore.”

“On what grounds?”

Elfaria pouted again. She felt like her senses from twenty years ago were coming back a little.

“Who would believe that someone who made that ridiculous spaceship was pushing for disarmament?”

To Koutarou, Blue Knight didn’t look like it was made by a disarmament pacifist. It looked like a brutal weapon of war, specialized in mobility and attack power.

“That ship has several safeties, I’ll have you know.”

“You disabled those, remember?”

“That’s not what I mean. That ship is a power that can never be misused,” Elfaria said with a boasting smile.

“It can’t be misused?”

Not following what she was getting at, Koutarou urged Elfaria to explain.

“Indeed. Layous-sama’s aspirations are the first safety, you see. Then Theia and Ruth, who are on the same wavelength as you, are needed for offense and operation. On top of that, you can’t control the ship with just your power alone.

If you're missing any of your powers, the ship's performance will reflect that. Everyone has to be united under one cause. As such, there's no weapon safer than that ship."

"...Now that you mention it, your enemies were the ones who misused power."

"Yes."

Elfaria's enemies were those who lost control of themselves without even noticing in their quest for power. Compared to that, Blue Knight was a power that was always under control. As long as Koutarou and the others' bond remained firm, Blue Knight held tremendous power that could not be abused.

"Elle..."

"Go on."

"What's your personal goal?"

"Whatever are you talking about?"

Elfaria flashed an awfully cute face. It was quite clearly the expression of someone playing dumb.

"Don't act like you don't know what I'm talking about. You didn't make that weapon *just* because it could be controlled like that."

"As expected of Layous-sama. You know me so well!"

Elfaria seemed happy, and she began her explanation as she waved her finger around gingerly.

"My goal was to make you essential for the control of that ship so that you couldn't run away from us. I won't repeat the Silver Princess's mistake."

"You're the same as always..."

Elfaria's tactical ability to lay groundwork well in advance had Koutarou slumping his shoulders. However, since he had already decided to walk down the same path as the girls of room 106, he didn't think too much of Elfaria's interference now. If anything, he was happy that an old friend hadn't changed even after all this time.

“You won’t tell me I’ve gotten beautiful?”

“That will depend on the tea.”

“My, my, you bully.”

Elfaria poured tea as Koutarou watched. The red tea sparkled as beautifully as liquid rubies.

“Here, Layous-sama.”

“Mm.”

Koutarou received the tea cup and took a sip. As he did, a familiar, rich flavor spread throughout his mouth.

I had my suspicions from the smell, but this really is Rubustori tea...

The tea that Elfaria had prepared was made from Koutarou and Clan’s favorite, Rubustori tea leaves. But since the Rubustori plant had been extinct for over eight hundred years, it was impossible to acquire in modern Forthorthe. Which meant that this must have come from the seeds that they’d given to Elfaria twenty years ago.

So Elle has been growing those seeds...

It was difficult to grow an extinct plant with no data on the species. On top of that, she would’ve had to discover the ideal way to brew the leaves on her own. It was an endeavor that required some serious dedication.

“Hey, Elle.”

“Yes? Do you not like the taste?”

“That’s not it... Do you still—”

Koutarou was about to ask something, but he changed his mind midsentence.

“Do you know that you’re still beautiful?”

In the end, he said something else. What he was about to say at first was something that required a great deal of courage to say to someone far older than him, even if she looked young.

“My...”

Elfaria blushed a little and smiled happily. As she did, she really did look like her younger self. She looked just like she had twenty years ago.

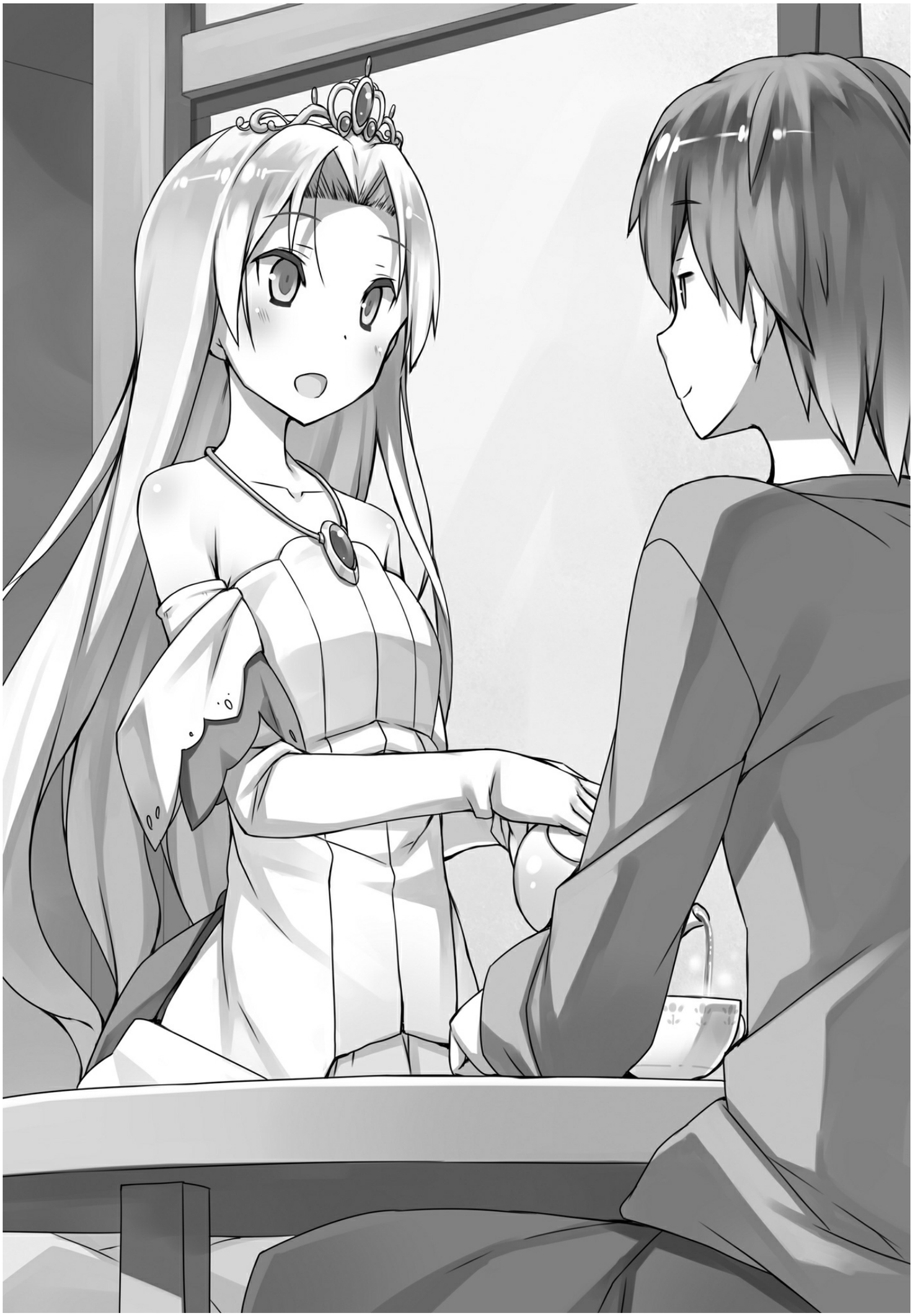
“That’s right, Layous-sama. I have snacks as well.”

“I know your game. I bet they’re spicy.”

“Would you like to eat them together?”

“Only one at a time.”

“Teehee, okay.”



It was a clear Sunday afternoon. The sunlight was shining in through the window on Koutarou and Elfaria. Only their calm voices could be heard inside of the normally noisy apartment. The only other sounds were the ticking clock, the cars driving by in the distance, and the singing birds just outside. It was a gentle, calm, and quiet Sunday.

“These are pretty good when you only eat one at a time.”

“That’s how they are. I still... love them.”

And so Koutarou and Elfaria spent their first weekend together in twenty years like no time had passed at all.

Bright lighting illuminated the formerly dim office. The cracked wall had been plastered up and the ancient desks had been replaced with brand new ones. It was completely different from how it was a few months ago.

“Kenichi-niichan, are you okay?”

“I’m not okay, but if I admit that, my heart might break. So I’m fine. By the way, where’s Hayato?”

“In the infirmary. He couldn’t move his finger, so he went there to have them fix it.”

“Megu-chan, you should eat something.”

“I don’t have the appetite. You can have mine, Daisaku-kun. You’re our only hope right now.”

But compared to the renewed office, the people inside were worn down. It was like the former gloom of the office had been transferred to them.

Their leader, the man in the red jacket, was covered with injuries and leaned over his desk to rest his body. Next to him was a boy in a green jacket with bags under his eyes. The girl in the pink jacket looked a lot thinner then she had before. The man in the yellow jacket next to her was worried for her, but even he had bandages wrapped around his head. There was one more member to their group, but he was currently in the infirmary. They were all in bad shape.

“Kotaro, how many times have we mobilized this month?”

“Eighteen... No, nineteen times?”

“If we’re going to be mobilized this often, we’re all going to done in eventually.”

“Things suddenly got a lot busier since last month...”

A waste of the national budget. Tax thieves. That was what the group used to be called. But nobody would dare use those names now. They had been working nonstop for a while now, taking on dangerous jobs on their own and fighting for the good of everyone.

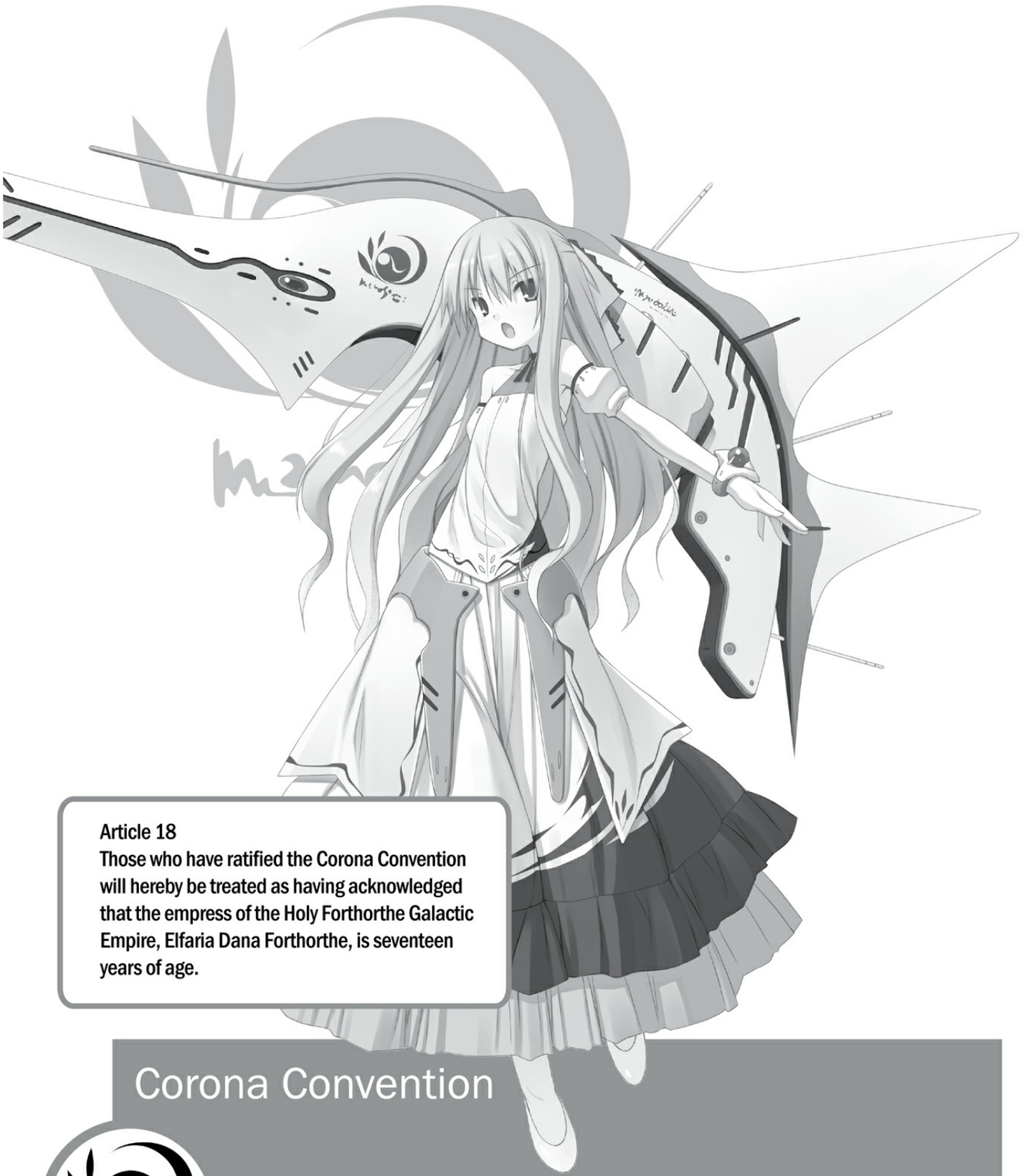
“Sun Rangers, I bring bad news.”

“What’s the matter, professor?”

“It seems like a major battle will be taking place shortly.”

“What?!”

The Sun Rangers of the Sun Squad. They were the nation’s ace in the hole when it came to unknown threats, and the only squad around capable of dealing with invaders. When they were busy, it meant the bad guys were busy too.



Article 18
Those who have ratified the Corona Convention will hereby be treated as having acknowledged that the empress of the Holy Forthorthe Galactic Empire, Elfaria Dana Forthorthe, is seventeen years of age.

Corona Convention

New! July 1st, 2010

Afterword

Long time no see, everyone. It's the author, Takehaya.

This volume is a little irregular compared to normal. It contains three episodes I wanted to write, but none of them would fill up a volume on their own. It's not exactly an independent collection of short stories, however, since they address various problems about how Koutarou and the others have progressed. I wonder what to call these slower stories... (Ha!) This time, I would like to continue answering some of the readers' questions. This is one I received through mail: "The genres used in Takehaya-sensei's works are quite varied, but which one is your favorite?"

It's true that I work in a lot of genres. *Ano Hibi wo Mou Ichido* was a romance, and *Kaze to Lute no Shirabe ni Nosete* was a fantasy. The PS2/PSP game I wrote the scenario for, *Secret Game*, was suspense, and another game I wrote the scenario for, *Seihou no Prismgear*, was sci-fi. On top of all that, I'm not even sure how to classify this series.

The truth is that I have never intentionally decided on a genre from the outset. When I write something, I first decide on the theme. After that, I pick the genre that will let me cover that theme in the most natural way possible. It might be hard to imagine, but genres are just a means to an end. That's why I think I'll keep doing things that way the next time I write something. All I can do is pray that it suits everyone's taste.

That about sums it up. Since this afterword is quite short, this is where I bid you all farewell! I would like to thank everyone at the editorial department who helped publish this book, Poco-san who always draws me cute illustrations, and all the readers who bought this book.

Then let us meet again in the afterword for volume 15.

July, 2013

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Invaders of the Rokujouma!? Volume 14

by Takehaya

Translated by Warnis Edited by Morgan Dreher

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