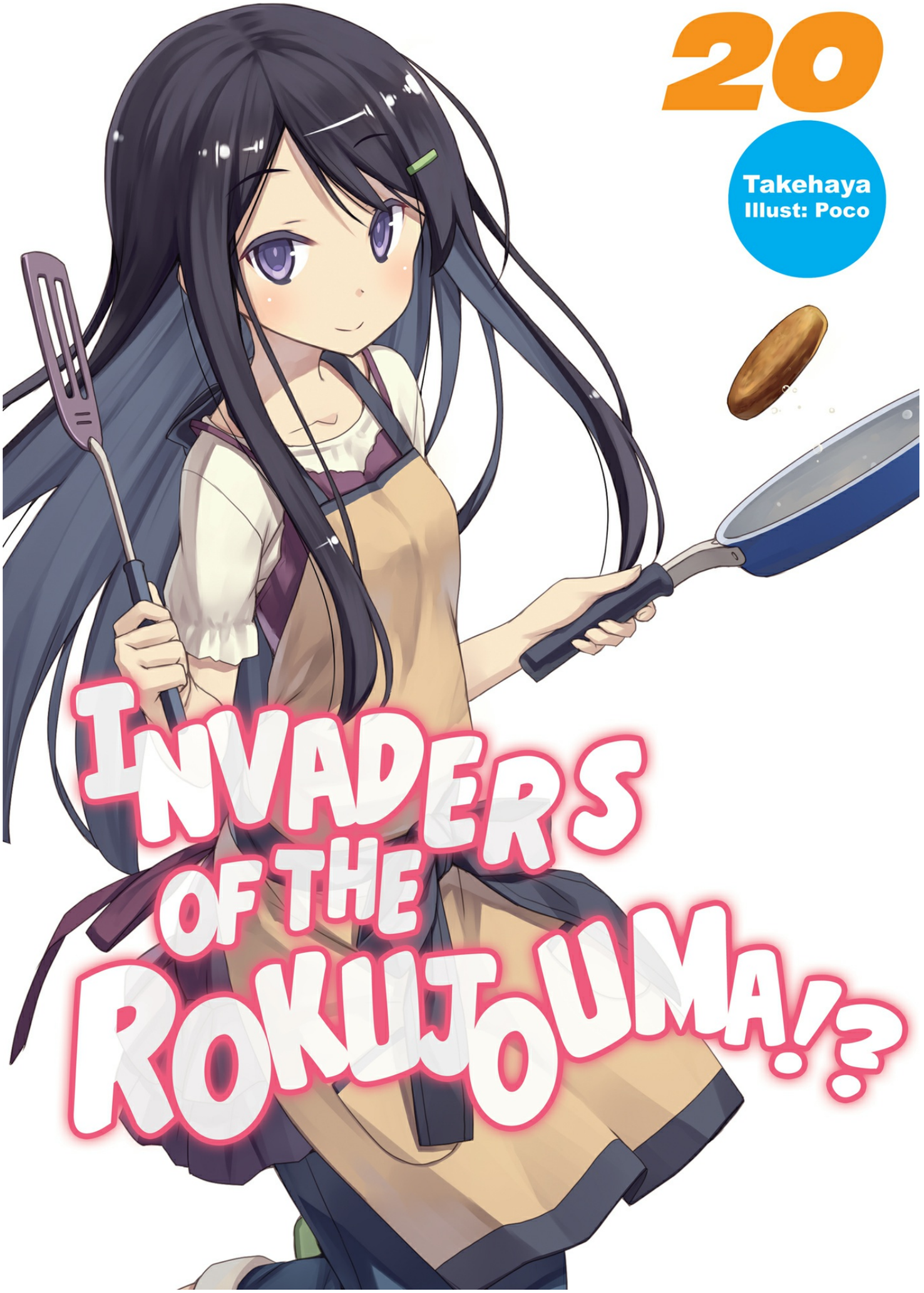
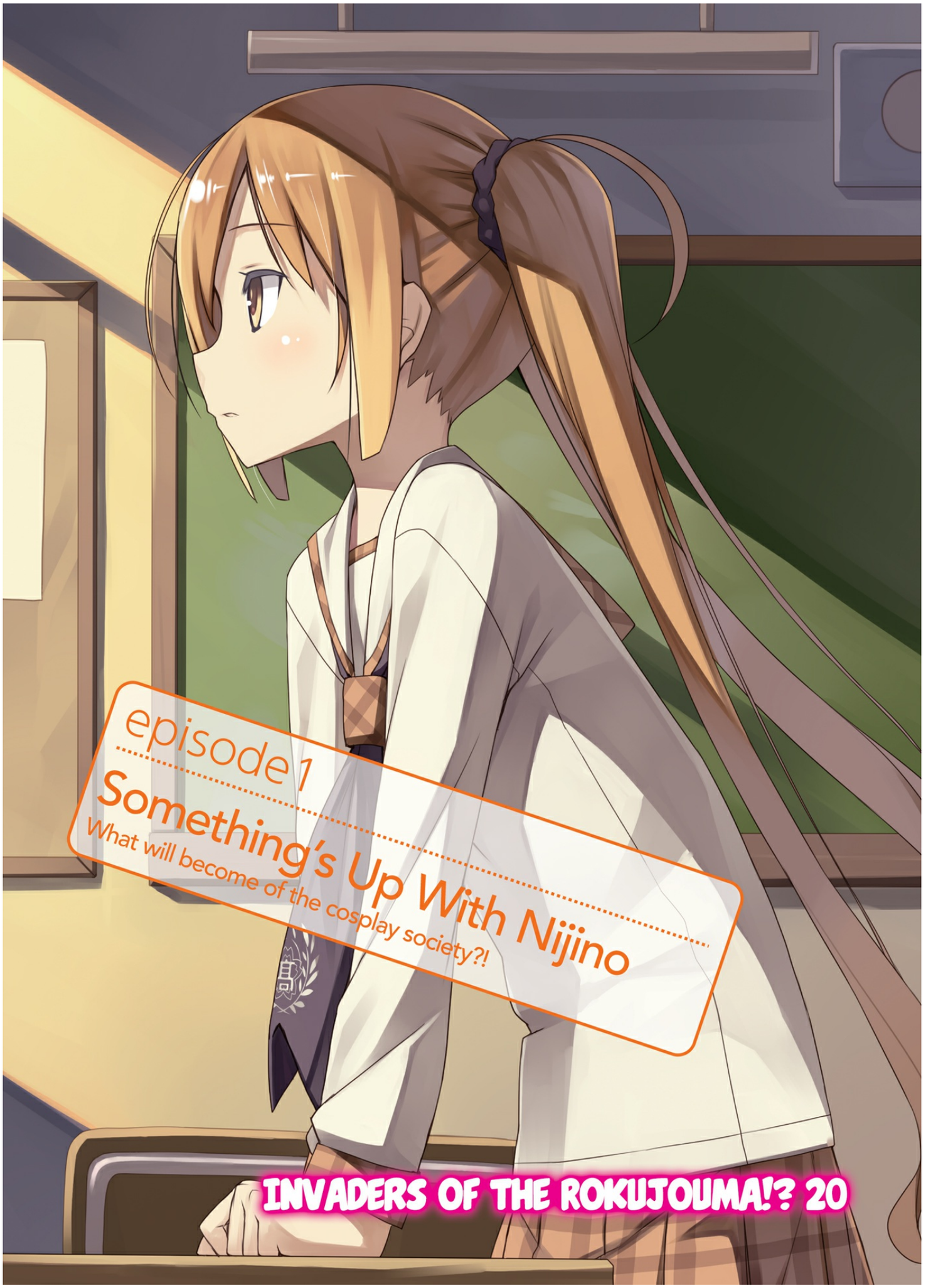


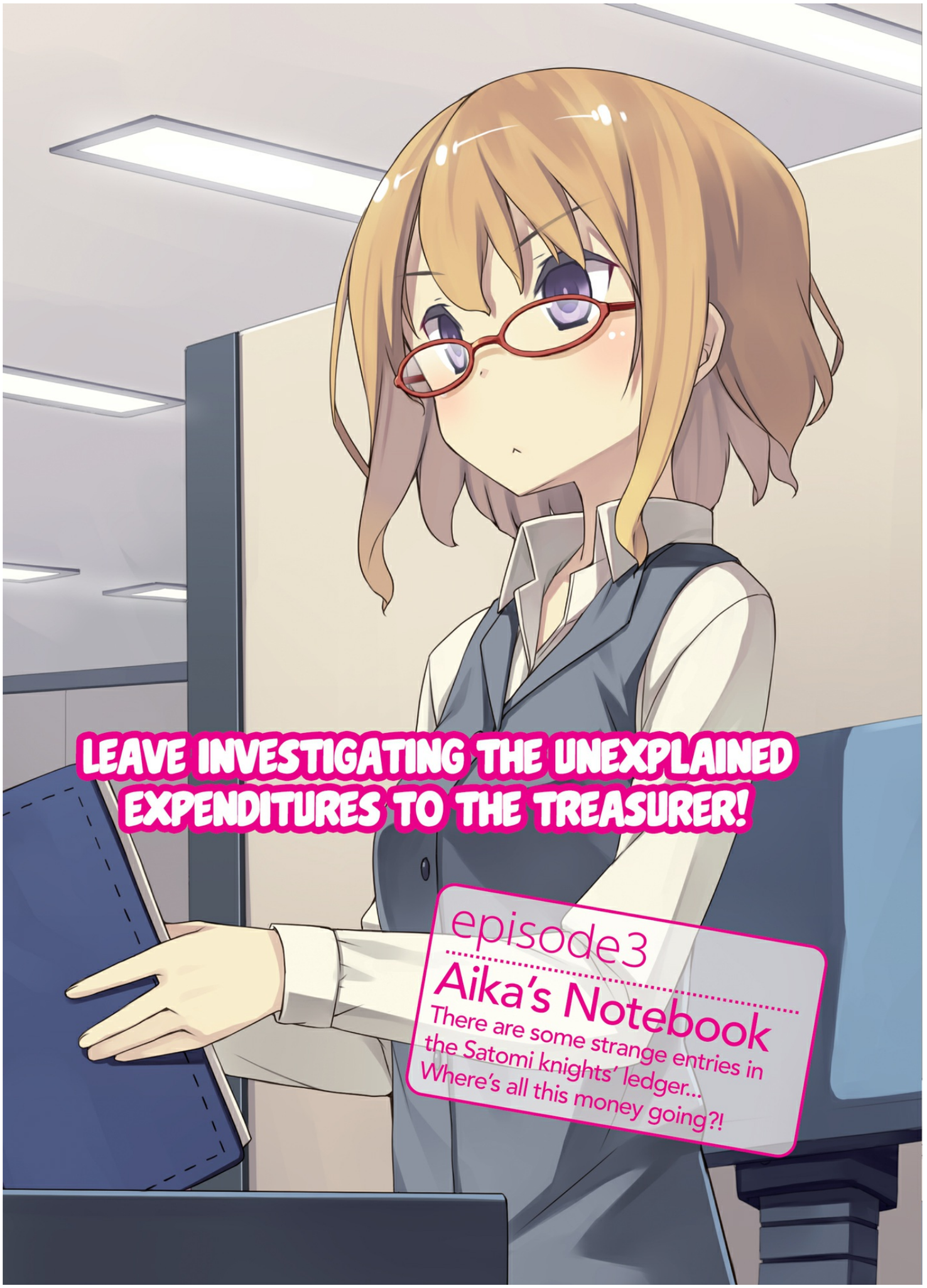
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Takehaya
Illust: Poco

Invaders of the Rokujouma!?


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Something's Up With Nijino
What will become of the cosplay society?!
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STUDENTS OF KISSHOUHARUKAZE HIGH SCHOOL



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



MATSUDAIRA KENJI
Koutarou's childhood and best friend.



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



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

RESIDENTS OF CORONA HOUSE

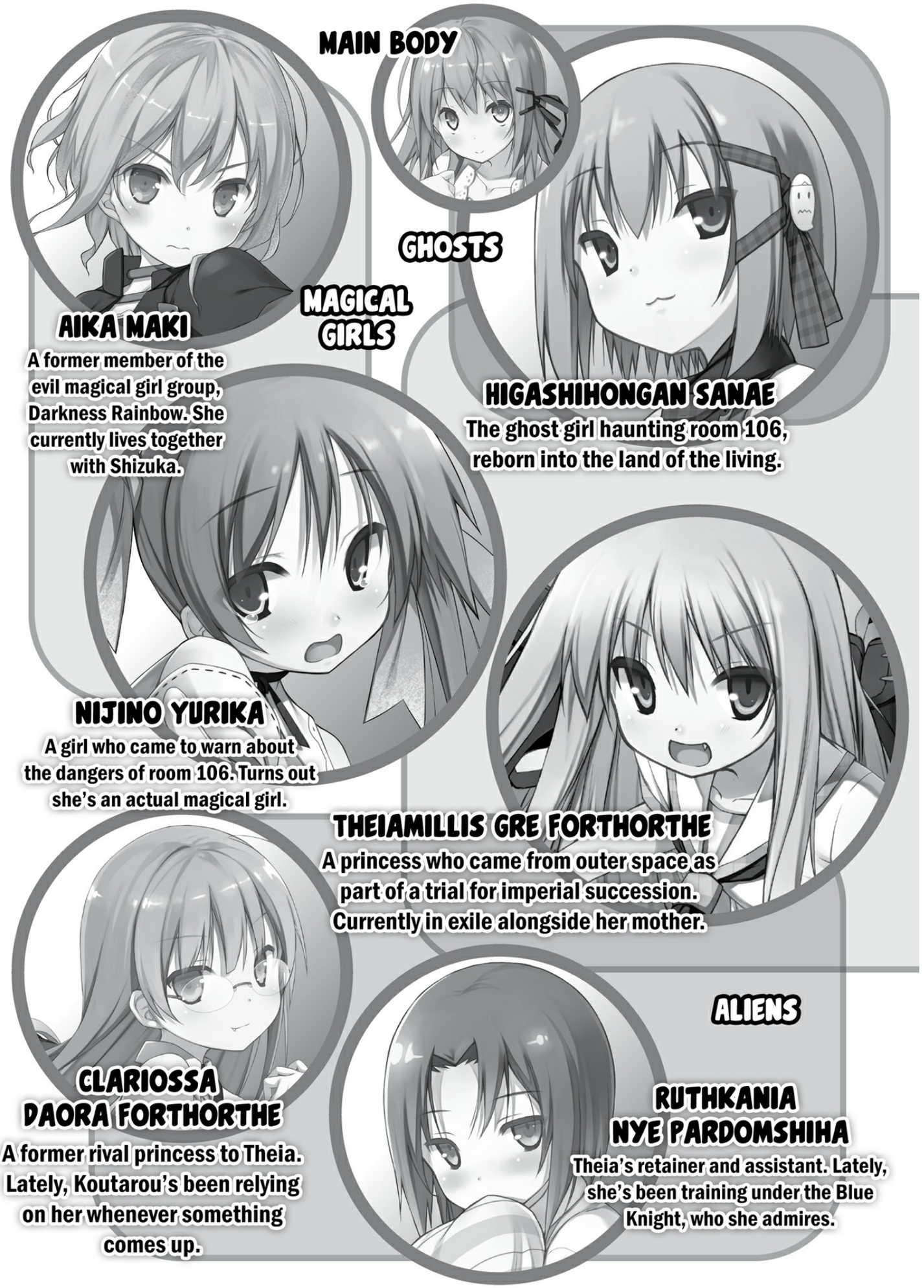
UNDERGROUND DWELLERS



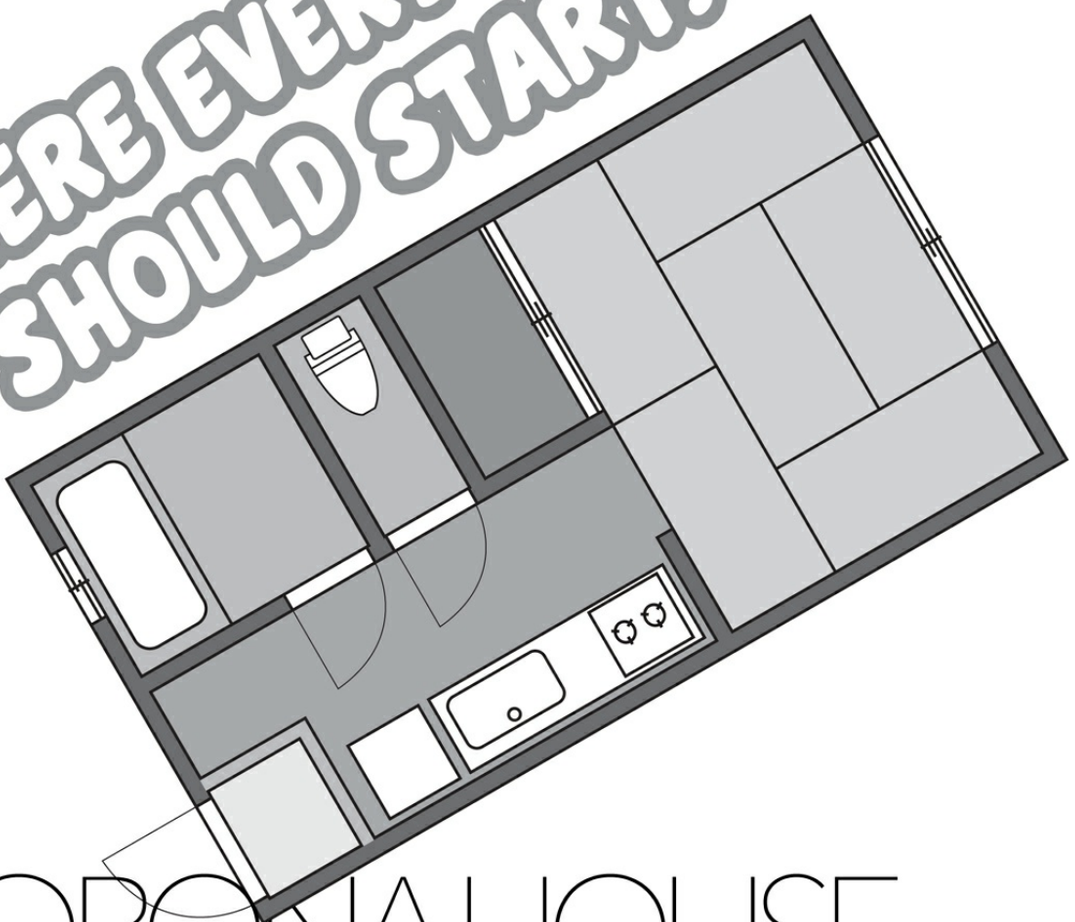
KURANO KIRIHA
A crafty woman who pretended to be plotting to invade the surface while searching for the person she loved.

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 came from outer space as part of a trial for imperial succession. Currently in exile alongside her mother.
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. Lately, she's been training under the Blue Knight, who she admires.

WHERE EVERY DAY SHOULD START!



CORONA HOUSE

ROOM 106

Episode 1: Something's Up With Nijino

As the cultural festival crept ever closer, the various clubs of Harukaze High grew more and more lively. And the cosplay society was no exception. In fact, in their case, they were perhaps more excited about the festival than anyone. As well-mannered girls who took great care in abiding social decorum, it was rare that they had opportunities to cosplay at school. Moreover, the cosclub president had recently passed the torch to the former vice president who was anxious to prove herself as the new leader of the club.

"I'd like to get Yurika-chan a new look... She's been wearing that outfit for some time now."

"President, even if you say that—"

"You're the president now, remember?"

"R-Right. Anyway, Senpai, Nijino-san has an extreme affinity for magical girls. We can't just haphazardly change her style."

"That's true... I'd like to honor her preferences, but that's going to be difficult."

The cosplay society's contribution to the cultural festival would be twofold; they were putting together a collage of photographs of their work as well as actually cosplaying the day of the event. The collage was an important part of their exhibition as it would serve as a record of their club activities and all the hard work that went into making the costumes that they wore. It was supposed to be rich, fun, and inviting in a way that would—ultimately and hopefully—attract new club members next year. Because the cosclub had so few chances to recruit otherwise, they were prepared to go all out on the exhibit.

But because they wanted it to have as much impact as possible, they were trying to avoid doing anything that might undercut that impact... like wearing the same costumes over and over again. If people saw that, they might think the cosplay club wasn't all that active or perhaps wasn't very talented. That's

why they wanted to wear all-new outfits the day of the festival, which meant Yurika was a problem. She loved her custom magical girl outfit so much that she rarely wore anything else. Practically any time they had an opportunity to cosplay, Yurika went right for her favorite costume. Saying she was devoted would be putting it nicely; alternatively, she was a bit of a one-trick pony.

"I know, Senpai! How about we just update her outfit? That way, even if she wears the same thing, it'll look new and different. That should make everyone happy, right?"

"Ah, a brilliant idea! That's the new president for you—I can see I made the right choice in selecting my successor after all!"

"Somehow that doesn't actually sound like praise..."

"What? No, I'm definitely praising you! Now let's get to work on a design! Bring me pictures of Yurika!"

"I already have a collection here."

"See? This fastidiousness is exactly why I wanted you to become the next president."

"I learned to be this way because you *weren't*, Senpai..."

"Things sure are going to get busy around here!"

"She's not even listening..."

Both the new and former club president worked together to come up with a new design to freshen up Yurika's outfit. They had a great dynamic that carried over despite the change in their titles, and with their teamwork, things were going quite smoothly. Inspired by the two of them working away, the other cosclub girls began narrowing down ideas for their own costumes.

"What if we all do a magical girl theme?"

"That might be good. In the future, Nijino-san and her magical girl passion are going to be the stars of the club anyway, right?"

"Ooh, then I want to be the evil magical girl!"

"Hey, you're always taking the good parts!"

“Heehee, the early bird gets the worm!”

And so the cosclub collectively settled on a magical girl special for their cosplay exhibition this year. While the vice president had recently taken over the reins of the club, everyone embraced Yurika as more or less the club mascot. Their long-term strategy for ensuring the success of the club was putting her and her passion at the forefront. Little did they know there was about to be a very abrupt roadblock in their plans.

The bad news came from one of the newer members that had joined the club in the spring. She was energetic and boyish by nature, but her usual lively expression was nowhere to be seen when she came bursting into the club room looking like she’d just been through hell. And then she dropped the bomb.

“Nijino says she’s quitting as a magical girl!”

That alone was enough to send the entire cosclub into a full-blown panic.

The seemingly ordinary girl known as Nijino Yurika had taken a long time to fully blossom as a magical girl. But by learning love and courage, caring for her friends, and striving her hardest to do what was right, she’d undergone a transformation and truly grown into her role. Yurika wasn’t the only one changing, however. As she matured into a proper magical girl who could hold her head high, the residents of room 106 grew to respect her. They now believed her whenever she was serious, no matter how farfetched or out-there what she said might seem. They had absolute faith in her. Indeed, as she was now, everyone believed in Magical Girl Rainbow Yurika.

“Really?! Then let’s go right now! Taiyaki, taiyaki, taiyaki!”

“No.”

“Satomi-san, why are you being so mean?!”

But as for regular old, everyday Yurika, things were pretty much business as usual. She was still a slacker through and through. She’d grown a bit more mature and responsible lately, but her bad habits still frequently got the better of her. There would probably never be any helping her clumsiness, either. As a result, bar serious emergencies, Yurika was still on thin ice with most of the group trust-wise.

“You still haven’t finished your career report, have you?”

“Ugh...”

“You can only have taiyaki *after* you’re done with it.”

“But that was supposed to be my reward for doing well on my last test! Can’t the report wait?!”

“Nope. You really gotta get your priorities straight. Your future is important. You can’t get distracted by every little fun thing in front of you.”

Koutarou’s study sessions with Yurika were finally starting to show some progress, commemorated by Yurika’s recent test scores. She’d actually managed to pass something. It was a low benchmark, certainly, but considering Yurika’s protracted history of miserably bombing tests, it was a remarkable achievement for her. That was why Koutarou had decided to take her out for taiyaki as a reward, but he’d had to put the celebration on hold upon realizing the deadline for the report was coming up and Yurika hadn’t made any headway on it. He wanted her to prioritize, and didn’t believe for a minute that she actually meant it when she said, “I’ll do it later.” He’d put his foot down, which was why Yurika was currently pouting... and why she turned to Harumi sitting next to her for aid.

“Help me, Sakuraba-senpai. Satomi-san is being mean.”

As it was a lovely afternoon, the knitting society was holding their activities outside today. They’d staked out the sunniest bench on the school campus and were sitting three across it, all of them working away on their knitting as they chatted. Harumi paused for a moment when Yurika asked for her intervention, then turned to Koutarou.

“Satomi-kun, you’re trying to push Yurika-san towards the future you want for her.”

“She’s right, Satomi-san! This is tyrannical!”

Yurika latched on to Harumi’s words and puffed up her cheeks in dissatisfaction.

“So? She’d end up in the gutter if I didn’t drag her out of it.”

“I have to admit... I’m envious of Yurika-san.”

However, Harumi’s point ended up being quite different from what Yurika had expected. She was hoping she would take her side and defend her against Koutarou, but what she’d said was practically the opposite.

“There’s nothing to be envious of, Sakuraba-senpai! He’s just a bully with a carrot and a stick... except the carrot is taiyaki!”

Yurika frantically tried to win Harumi over. Without her support, Yurika could already feel the taiyaki slipping away.

“Silly Yurika-san. Satomi-kun is taking responsibility for your future. That’s why he’s so harsh on you.”

Harumi flashed a gentle smile. The truth was that she wasn’t explicitly on either of their sides, which was why she had qualms about exposing Koutarou’s true intentions. It caught both Yurika and Koutarou off guard.

“What...?”

“S-Sakuraba-senpai!”

There was no doubt that Yurika would live a downtrodden life without anyone there to lift her up. And because he knew that and wanted better for her, Koutarou had resolved himself to take on that role. It was a full-time job, and he devoted a great deal of time and attention to Yurika’s betterment. Rather than letting her life fall to pieces, he was going to keep her close—and keep a close eye on her.

“I had to join a band of knights to get Satomi-kun to think that way of me. But not you, Yurika-san. You never had to. You should take some time to think about that.”

“Then Satomi-san is...”

Yurika glanced at Koutarou out of the corner of her eye and saw him flinch at Harumi’s words. Upon seeing his expression, her own gradually changed.

Does that mean this is Satomi-san’s way of treasuring me...?

Her dissatisfaction softened and faded into something sweeter. She was already red in the face from vehemently trying to defend herself, but her

blushing cheeks now turned a deeper shade of crimson. She'd realized that Koutarou wasn't doing all of this to be mean.

"U-Um, Satomi-san, I... Th-That's right, I have to do my career report!"

Yurika awkwardly rummaged through her bag and pulled out a printed sheet of paper—the career report she was supposed to fill out with her ambitions for her life after graduating high school.

"My name! I have to write my name first! A-And then..."

With the blood rushing to her head, Yurika was blanking out, holding her pen the wrong way, misspelling her own name, and so on.

"After graduating, I want to get m-married—I mean go to university. Yeah, I want to go to Kisshouharukaze University!"

Yurika was fumbling for answers to easy questions. She already had a clear plan for her life in her head, but she was struggling to get it on paper. She knew the first step would be getting into Kisshouharukaze University, but in her current condition, just articulating that was as much a hurdle as entrance exams would be.

"Satomi-kun, you certainly have your work cut out for you."

Seeing Yurika like this, Harumi cheerfully turned to Koutarou. Her eyes seemed to be asking him, "What will you do with yourself?"

"...Sakuraba-senpai, you really understand Yurika, don't you?"

At times like this, there was no arguing with Harumi. Koutarou raised the white flag and shrugged with a smirk. That he treasured Yurika was indeed an undeniable fact.

"We're both girls, you know? Besides, Yurika and I are looking forward to the same future, so I have a bit of insight there."

Next spring, a year earlier than Koutarou and the others, Harumi would be graduating and attending Kisshouharukaze University. However, that wasn't the future she was talking about. She had her sights set much further ahead.

"I... don't know if I'm going to be able to live up to your expectations for the future, Sakuraba-senpai."

Koutarou by now had realized that the girls had feelings for him, and that he treasured each and every one of them. He couldn't pretend otherwise anymore. He knew that he had a choice ahead of him, but because the girls were precious to him, he knew that he couldn't lead any of them on. He had to be reasonable, and that meant acknowledging that his future choice might end up hurting Harumi or the other girls.

"You're too naive, Satomi-kun."

However, Harumi didn't flinch in the slightest. She extended a slender finger and poked Koutarou's nose. Her eyes aglow with gentle determination, she looked right at him as she spoke.

"I— No, this goes for all of us. I don't think anything will be different for us regardless of the future you choose, Satomi-kun. Thinking your choice alone would change our minds is a little too conceited."

Harumi had long decided that she would stay by Koutarou's side regardless of what he chose to do, and she was quite sure the other girls felt the same way. Moreover, the girls weren't only concerned about Koutarou anymore. They deeply loved and cared about each other too, and that was something his choice wouldn't change. And in that respect, at least in Harumi's eyes, the future was already decided.

"You said I had my work cut out for me, but I feel my workload increasing by the minute..."

"Teehee, it just might be. But I know you're a dependable man."

"Please cut me some slack, Sakuraba-senpai."

"All right, heehee. I'll leave it at that for the day."

Koutarou wore an embarrassed smile, but Harumi's warm grin radiated nothing but love. It was painfully clear who was in the right. Even Koutarou himself was starting to see that, but seeing it and accepting it were two entirely different stories. That's why Harumi was willing to relent for the time being. She knew that Koutarou's inability to accept things right now simply meant he'd have another choice to make in the future. He'd have to come to terms with things eventually, whether he liked it or not..

While talking with Koutarou, a certain word had come up that made Harumi remember an altogether different problem. Something urgent that would need to be resolved as soon as possible.

“That’s right, Satomi-kun. Speaking of the future, there’s something we have to decide on.”

“Something we have to decide on?”

“I’m talking about the next president of the knitting society.”

Harumi currently held the title, but she was already in her third year and would be graduating soon enough. She’d have to find a successor before then. Hearing talk of this, Yurika—who was still filling out her career report—suddenly looked up.

“The next president’s gotta be Satomi-san, right?”

With a few minutes to herself to calm down, Yurika was now back to her normal self. Other than her, the rookie member, the club was just Harumi and Koutarou. She figured it was only natural that Koutarou would be stepping up to take over after Harumi was gone.

“I think so too.”

Harumi readily agreed that Koutarou should be the next president, but Koutarou seemed to have some reservations. He pensively folded his arms and began thinking.

“Hmm...”

“You don’t want to do it?”

That was how Harumi interpreted Koutarou’s reaction. It was perfectly understandable that he wasn’t interested in the position, but after he’d shouldered the club with her for over a year and a half now, she was also a little disappointed. Koutarou, however, quickly shook his head.

“That’s not what I meant... Sakuraba-senpai, to be honest, do you think anyone else would join the knitting society with me as the president?”

“What? I know I would...”

Harumi cocked her head slightly with a confused look on her face. In her mind, there was absolutely no reason anyone shouldn’t want to join the club with Koutarou running it.

“That’s because you know me personally, right?”

“Certainly.”

“But the new students won’t. With me in charge, I’m pretty sure they’ll just think the club is sketchy and avoid it at all costs.”

Koutarou was concerned about his image as club president. He was a tall, built, rough-and-tumble boy—pretty much the exact opposite of what anyone would expect from a knitting society member, much less the president. He was worried that would be off-putting enough to scare away prospective new members.

“I’m reluctant to admit that myself...”

Harumi loved Koutarou, so it was simply hard for her to imagine that anyone would be afraid of him. Nevertheless, the odds of it happening were pretty high. Despite how kindhearted Koutarou was underneath it all, people were all too inclined to judge books by their covers.

“Satomi-san’s always got a scary face, he’s always mean, and he’s quick to hit people. Of course new students would be afraid of him.”

And Yurika didn’t have any trouble calling it like she saw it. She was all too happy to list Koutarou’s faults. Since opportunities like this were rare, she wanted to get a leg up on him as best she could. But her complaining was soon interrupted when Koutarou smacked her on the head.

“Only with you,” he declared.

“See?!” shrieked Yurika. “He’s mean and hits people!”

“I’d never do that to a new student.”

“Liar, liar, pants on fire!”

Another thud rang out.

“I-I’m sowwy... I said too much.”

“That’s better.”

In the end, Yurika only got a sweet taste of being on top for a few seconds. Koutarou quickly knocked her down again and returned to the topic at hand.

“Anyways, I don’t think I should be the next president.”

“But if it’s not you, Satomi-kun, the next president would be—”

“That’s right. So we’re counting on you, Yurika.”

“Huh?”

Having been convinced that Koutarou would become the next president, Yurika’s eyes shot wide open at this unexpected development. She could hardly believe what she was hearing.

“W-Wait, whaaat?! M-M-Me?!”

“Who else...?”

Yurika and Koutarou would be the only two remaining club members, and if Koutarou couldn’t take over, then process of elimination said it had to be Yurika.

“I-I-I can’t! I can’t do it! There’s no way I could be the next president!”

Finally getting her head around the situation, Yurika desperately shook her head, her twintails whipping this way and that. She’d never even considered herself president material and didn’t think for a moment she was cut out for the job. But Koutarou put a manly, supportive hand on her shoulder to steady her.

“Don’t worry. It’ll only be on paper.”

“Huh? On paper?”

“I’ll do all of the actual work. All you have to do is stand in as president for club introductions and speeches and stuff. It’ll make for a much better impression of the club.”

Even though he’d suggested Yurika for the job, Koutarou wasn’t planning on pushing all of the responsibility on her. Emergencies were one thing, but he knew what Yurika was like under ordinary circumstances. That’s why his plan

was for him to take care of the heavy lifting while Yurika acted as a figurehead. That way, the club would get things done and look good doing it.

“I-If that’s all, then...”

“That said, at least work on your knitting some. You’re gonna be the president, after all.”

“I’ll do my best.”

If it was only a formality, Yurika thought she could probably handle it. But having Koutarou there to back her up made her feel much better about the whole thing. A lot was on the line here, after all. If they didn’t recruit any new members come next spring, the club would end with them. They’d have to use any means necessary to get some new blood before then.

“But still, becoming the president and participating in school events...” Yurika muttered softly.

“What?” Koutarou prodded, glancing over at the smiling Yurika.

“I was just thinking that, in that case, I won’t have to dress up as a magical girl anymore.”

Before now, Yurika had always participated in school events as a member of the cosclub. If she made a commitment to the knitting society as president, however, she wouldn’t be able to do that anymore. That said, the knitting society didn’t do too much that actually required its president’s attention, and most of the cosclub’s activities took place outside of school. In the end, there wouldn’t be much of a change for her. But...

Nijino’s not going to dress up as a magical girl anymore?! Is she serious right now?!

That wasn’t how the freshman member of the cosclub interpreted what she said. She just so happened to be passing behind the bench that Yurika and the others were sitting on. They were chatting away and looked like they were having fun, so she’d refrained from calling out to Yurika and interrupting.

But just as she was about to walk off, she overheard Yurika say something she just couldn’t ignore. Having only caught the tail end of the conversation,

however, she misunderstood. She assumed that Yurika meant she was giving up cosplay, and rushed immediately off to the cosclub to report the bad news.

Hearing that Yurika wasn't going to be a magical girl anymore was like a bomb going off in the cosclub. Everyone's first reaction was utter shock, and then came the denial.

"That can't be! This is a joke, right?!"

They all knew how fanatical Yurika was about magical girls. She stood out for it, even among the other passionate cosclub members. They'd all been convinced Yurika would be cosplaying her magical girl OC for life. That's why the president couldn't possibly believe what the new club member was saying, and the rest of the club shared her doubts.

"But it's true! I heard her say it myself!"

Even the new member who'd overheard Yurika's declaration doubted her own ears, which was frustrating.

"Then why?! Did she say why she was quitting?!"

"I don't know! Maybe she got a boyfriend?!"

There was an infamous list handed down the generations of the cosclub, aptly referred to as "The Top Ten Reasons for Retiring from Cosplay." The number one spot? Ending up in a relationship.

You see, when someone gets a significant other, they tend to invest more time and energy in their personal life—meaning they have less for cosplay. Once that happens, their enthusiasm for cosplay inevitably decreases, creating a vicious downward spiral. There's always the initial excitement of being able to show off one's cosplays to their new partner, but when they aren't spending any time and effort on creating new ones, the excitement quickly wears off and their creative passion wanes. Of course, there are rare, harmonious exceptions —like a cosplayer and a photographer getting together—but by and large, getting into a relationship spells the end for cosplay as a hobby.

Because of that, the cosclub despised the idea of any of its members getting boyfriends. And upon hearing that Yurika might have one now, the temperature

in the room dropped several degrees.

“Now that you mention it, Nijino’s in the same class as the school ladykiller...”

“You mean Mackenzie-senpai? No way. It can’t be him. He’s going out with someone else right now.”

“That doesn’t necessarily mean anything. Men are animals.”

The conversation quickly deteriorated into gossip, largely centered on Kenji and his terrible reputation with women.

“Everyone, please calm down!”

Seeing her clubmates so stirred up, the former president intervened. She’d supported the club for years and had everyone’s respect, so they all stopped talking and turned to her when she raised her voice.

“Even if this is all true, we still don’t know the reason! We have to talk to Yurika-chan first!”

Indeed, even if Yurika was quitting cosplay, they didn’t know why. If she really was in a relationship, that would be a problem, but there were easily a hundred other reasons she might be pulling back. Maybe there was something going on at home, for example. So rather than letting their imaginations run wild, it would be better for them to go straight to the source. Everyone knew the president was right, and the room quickly quieted down.

“But Senpai, how are we supposed to confirm that?” the new president asked.

The fact that directly asking someone if they were in a relationship or not rarely got a direct answer was another piece of conventional wisdom passed down within the cosclub.

“Heh, we’re all cosplayers here. We just need to investigate what’s going on with Yurika-chan the way cosplayers do!”

The girls present were all members of the cosplay society. With their talents, coming up with disguises would be easy—and so would secretly looking into Yurika’s personal life.

Police, nurses, store clerks, waitresses, and more. The cosclub’s cosplay

repertoire included lots of everyday characters and uniforms, plenty of which were kept right there in the club room. The girls didn't hesitate to get down to action, either. They immediately picked out their outfits and began the investigation, believing they would get closer to the truth by observing her from a distance rather than cross-examining her in person. Considering they'd potentially been betrayed by the posterchild for the club, the girls were all raring to go.

"Look, Satomi-san! A bunch of beautiful flowers are blooming over there!"

"So it's already that time of the year, huh? I guess it is autumn..."

"I wonder if any of them are edible..."

"Not everything is about eating! Is food the only thing that's ever on your mind?!"

"But I never know when I'll have to go back to living like a pauper..."

"That's not gonna happen."

"U-Um, do you mean... that's because you'll always support me?"

"..."

"Hee... heeheehe..."

"Stop asking stupid questions already and let's go."

"For taiyaki, right? Heehee..."

"What part of Sakuraba-senpai's body is so weak, anyways?"

"It's not something specific; her body's just weak in general. She doesn't have any reserve strength and can't overwork herself like we might."

"So that's why she collapses if she runs around..."

"Yeah. I'm glad I don't have to worry about that anymore."

"Huh? How come?"

"Because you're always with her now."

“Satomi-san...”

“Am I wrong? You’re best friends, right?”

“...N-No, you’re not wrong at all! I, Nijino Yurika, will do my best!”

“Very good.”

“Say, Satomi-san...”

“Hmm?”

“You’re being awfully gentle right now.”

“That’s because all of this is very near and dear to me. It’s not the kind of thing I would joke around about.”

“Then can I hold your hand until Sakuraba-senpai is done with her checkup?”

“...Do whatever you want.”

“Okay!”

“Sakuraba-senpai, it’s time for taiyaki! Taiyaki, la la la!”

“Yurika-san, you sure are in high spirits. Did something good happen?”

“Nothing in particular.”

“It doesn’t seem that way to me...”

“She was worried about you during your checkup, Sakuraba-senpai. I told her there was nothing to be concerned about since she’d always be with you as your best friend, and she’s been like this ever since.”

“Heehee, silly Satomi-kun. That *is* something good happening.”

“I don’t understand girls at all...”

“Yurika-san loves you because you do what you do, whether you understand or not. If you were the kind of man that only acted after calculating everything, she never would’ve fallen for you.”

“Sakuraba-senpai...”

“Of course, that goes for me too.”

“...”

“Come on, Satomi-san! Sakuraba-senpai! Hurry! The signal is going to change!”

“Look, Satomi-kun. She’s calling for you.”

“Yeah...”

“If we don’t hurry the taiyaki will get cold!”

“It can’t get cold before we even buy it!”

“Heeheehee...”

“Okay, you guys wait here. I’ll go get the taiyaki.”

“Thank you, Satomi-kun.”

“Make sure you come back before they get cold, okay?”

“They won’t get cold immediately after buying them!”

“I never know, Satomi-san. You always bully me however and whenever you can.”

“You idiot!”

Thud!

“Ow! See?!”

“You brought that one on yourself. Anyway, I’m actually going this time.”

“Jeez... He always resorts to violence...”

“Teehee.”

“This is no laughing matter, Sakuraba-senpai!”

“But you love him right?”

“Um... W-Well, yes...”

“What about Satomi-kun do you love, Yurika-san?”

“Um... Satomi-san knows about all of my bad sides, but he still needs me... even if he doesn’t say it...”

“Satomi-kun is a boy, after all. I’m sure it’s hard for him to say it. Besides... don’t you think it’s a little extra special if he doesn’t have to say it?”

“Yeah... You’re right.”

“Hey, wait a minute, Satomi-san! Is your taiyaki bigger than mine? I think it is! Let’s trade!”

“Of course it’s not bigger! They were all made the same way!”

“No, look at it! It’s totally thicker than mine!”

“That’s because you sucked the red bean paste out of yours already!”

“I’ll know if I try yours. Mmmmm!”

“Hey, don’t suck on mine too!”

Thud!

“Ow... But see? Yours really is bigger.”

“That’s because I didn’t let you suck all the red bean paste out of it!”

“Hmm, I think I’ll try it too... Hom!”

“Wait— Sakuraba-senpai?!”

“Mmm, Satomi-kun, this place’s taiyaki really are delicious. Even the tail’s jam-packed with filling.”

“Hey, my tail’s gone...”

“Satomi-san, I’ve changed my mind. I’ll eat mine instead.”

“I bet!”

While morale started high, the excitement of uncovering the truth quickly gave way to frustration as the cosclub observed Yurika. She was practically living the dream high school life with a wonderful best friend and boyfriend on either side of her. It was sickening.

“Wh-What is this?!”

“I’ll tell you what it is—it’s betrayal! Betrayal against all cosplayers!”



“Nijino-san’s sold out! She sold her soul for love!”

“No wonder she’s giving up cosplay! Who wouldn’t under the circumstances?!”

“God, please smite Yurika-chan! Show her your divine, righteous wrath!”

Just what were they doing compared to Yurika? The source of their increasing irritation was obvious.

“C-Calm down, everyone. We still don’t know for certain yet.”

The new president pulled herself together as best she could and tried to take control of the situation by reassuring her fellow club members, but her words alone wouldn’t be enough.

“Ugh, I can’t take it anymooore!”

“What?! No, Senpai, you can’t!”

“Rrraaaaagh!”

Contrary to the new president, however, the former president—who had been liberated of her formal duties and responsibilities—felt like she had nothing to lose. She dashed off, headed straight for Yurika. She was going to hear it straight from the horse’s mouth. The other cosclub girls took her lead and followed suit, completely ignoring the new president.

“GET HER!”

“Kyaaah! Wh-What is this?!”

“We have you now, Yurika!”

Suddenly surrounded, Koutarou instinctively stepped in front of Yurika. She responded by huddling close to him and clinging onto his back. This gesture, however, only fanned the flames of the girls’ irritation.

“Wh-What are you doing, you guys?!”

Though she was somewhat relieved to see it was just the girls from the cosclub, Yurika was still a little intimidated and bewildered by their apparent aggression.

“Yurika-chan, answer us honestly!”

Her eyes bloodshot and a menacing light gleaming on her glasses, the former president approached Yurika one slow step at a time. Meanwhile, the other girls gradually closed in, tightening their encirclement.

“S-Sure, I don’t mind...”

Overwhelmed by the pressure, Yurika took a step backward. As she was clinging to Koutarou’s shirt, he moved with her. And that was yet more oil on the fire.

“Is it true that you’re going to become the knitting society’s president?!”

“Y-Yes, that’s the plan.”

The former president was shouting like a banshee. Yurika knew better than to do anything to incite someone like that, so she obediently answered her question with a nod.

I see... They came all the way here because they were worried about that...

Yurika was still intimidated, but Koutarou finally relaxed when he realized the cosclub girls weren’t planning on doing anything to Yurika. In fact, it was the opposite.

“Yurika, it’s okay.”

“Satomi-san? R-Right...”

Though she had no idea what was going on, when Koutarou gently held her hand, all of Yurika’s nervousness vanished. If Koutarou said it was okay, then it was okay. She believed in him.

“So what?! You’re going to have club activities with just the two of you?!”

“If we don’t find any new members, then yes.”

Thud!

“What are you being so timid for?”

“Ow...! Do you not want to be alone with me, Satomi-san?”

Now that things were calming down, the mood between Koutarou and Yurika

was returning to how it had been before the cosclub girls appeared.

“At this rate, we’ll be the end of the knitting society.”

“Oh, so it’s not that you don’t want to be alone with me?”

“L-Let it go already.”

“I’m looking forward too it, teehee!”

Thud!

“I’m sowwy, I went too far...”

“As long as you understand.”

Seeing Yurika and Koutarou’s back and forth up close, the cosclub girls’ burning fury was swiftly extinguished.

“You really are such a handful...”

“Satomi-san, could you wipe my runny nose while you’re wiping my tears too?”

“Jeez... Raise your head a little.”

“Okaaay.”

“Hahh...”

After going through the emotional ringer—surprise, confusion, and frustration—the cosclub girls were finally overcome with one emotion in particular.

“Must be nice...”

“I wonder if I’ll ever get a boy like that...”

“No way, the competition is way too fierce...”

“Life is unfair...”

It was an overwhelming sense of defeat. More accurately, they’d gotten so fired up that they ended up burning out. With Yurika and Koutarou behaving so naturally like a couple, the cosclub felt like completely ignored. But none of them were mad—they all knew that if they were in Yurika’s position, they’d be doing the same thing.

“Let’s go home...”

“Yeah...”

“Man, coming here was just a waste of time...”

Now feeling defeated, the cosclub girls began to slowly trudge home. Yurika probably wouldn’t even notice them leaving. How could she with Koutarou and the rest of her happy life right in front of her?

“You’re cute if you keep yourself straight, so put a little more effort into your appearance for crying out loud.”

“What?! Satomi-san, you think I’m cute?!”

“Huh?! Er, well, that’s... What, what’s up with the cosclub?”

“I won’t be fooled by that! Answer my question!”

“I’m not lying. Look.”

Crack!

“Kyaaah! Owowow, that hurts!”

“Oh, sorry.”

“Don’t give me that! Jeez!”

“But I wasn’t lying, right?”

“Well... it doesn’t look like it. That really did hurt, though.”

“Sakuraba-senpai, what happened to the cosclub?

“Um... I think you’ll just have to excuse them.”

Harumi flashed a bittersweet smile and dodged the question. Having been a third party to the entire situation, she more or less understood what was going on. She had an idea of how the cosclub felt, but chose not to tell Koutarou and Yurika. If they tried to stop the cosclub girls from leaving now, it would just feel like rubbing salt in their wounds.

“Hahh...”

“Okay.”

Neither Koutarou nor Yurika questioned Harumi; they trusted her implicitly. Instead, they simply looked at each other in confusion. They had no idea why the girls from the cosplay society had shown up out of the blue, then disappeared as quickly as they came.

“But even so...”

Harumi glanced over at the girls walking away.

To normal people, I suppose we do look like a couple.

It likely wasn’t limited to just Yurika. To anyone who didn’t know any better, the invaders were all so close with Koutarou that it must look like they were dating. Knowing that made Harumi feel sorry for the cosclub girls, but at the same time, it also made her rather happy.

The cosclub girls still hadn’t recovered from the shock of it all by the next day. They were so devastated after being shown a glimpse of a life none of them had that not one of them even had the motivation to work on new costumes.

“I guess this is what they call youth...”

“Probably...”

“I mean, with Blue Knight-sama and everything...”

“She’s one lucky girl...”

“I thought this was something that only happened in anime and manga. Seeing it for yourself is pretty eye-opening...”

“Yeah, I honestly thought it was just a 2D fantasy too...”

“In the end, are we just cosplaying because we’re trying to compensate for the fantasy we can’t live...?”

“Maybe. But talk about a rude awakening...”

“Go figure she’d choose the 3D, IRL version...”

Rather than carrying on with their club activities, the cosclub girls were all lethargically laid out on their desks. The gloom in the room was palpable. After seeing how happily Yurika was living her dream life, they were all left

despondently wondering what they were doing with their own lives. Little did they know someone was about to walk in the door and shake everything up.

“Hey, everybody! Sorry I’m late!”

That someone was Yurika.

“Could it be?!”

“Yurika-chan?!”

The president and former president both jumped out of their chairs in astonishment. They were the only ones to move, but the other members were just as surprised as they were.

“Huh? What’s the matter, everyone? You guys are acting strange...”

Reading the peculiar mood of the room, Yurika looked around in confusion. At least this time she had a hint something was up.

“U-Um, Yurika-chan, why...?”

The former president spoke up, asking what everyone in the room wanted to know.

“Why what?”

Yurika stared at her blankly, still not fully grasping the situation.

“Weren’t you going to focus on the knitting society because you’re going to become the president?”

Hearing the former president’s complete question, the lightbulb finally came on for Yurika. She realized what the cosclub girls were so surprised about.

“Oh!”

She realized that they must have been worried she was going to abandon the cosclub for the knitting society. And in response to that, she smiled and shook her head.

“Well, um, I’m becoming the president, but Satomi-san is going to be the real president.”

“Satomi-san is?”

This time, the cosclub girls were the ones staring at her blankly. Yurika smiled at them all and continued explaining things.

“He said that a male president would look bad for the club and wouldn’t help us attract any new members, so I’m only taking over as president for the sake of appearances.”

She wrapped up her explanation with her brightest smile yet. If she were taking over as president alone, this would be a much more dramatic ordeal. But with Koutarou by her side, she was actually kind of looking forward to it. Indeed, her smile was dazzling.

“S-So that’s what it was...”

As Yurika’s words sunk in for the cosclub girls, they realized their misunderstanding and their energy swiftly returned.

“Wait, who was it that said that Nijino-san was quitting as a magical girl in the first place?!”

“Sorry, that was me...”

“So you jumped to conclusions again?! Keep it together, Jeez!”

“Sorry, sorry. I didn’t mean any harm.”

For the cosclub girls, Yurika quitting cosplaying would be a huge problem. Finding out they had nothing to worry about after all was a huge relief.

“Heehee...”

Satisfied that things were normalizing, Yurika walked over to a large cabinet in the corner of the room. It was filled with accessories the cosplay society shared, and members were free to use them as they saw fit.

“Oh? That’s unusual for you, Yurika-chan.”

Seeing Yurika open the cabinet and peek inside, the former president approached with a smile. As far as she knew, Yurika had always been so fixated on her magical girl-ness that she’d never bothered with accessorizing before. This was the first time she’d ever shown any interest in it.

“Heehee... I was just thinking I should make myself a little cuter.”

Yurika's cheeks were ever so slightly pink as she browsed the accessories. She looked herself over in multiple mirrors as she started picking and choosing things that suited her.

"So you're finally going to come up with a new style, Yurika-chan!"

Moved by Yurika's bold step forward, the former president's eyes and glasses were alight. She stood right next to her, eager to help her pick out something.

"I-It's nothing big like that. It's just... Satomi-san said I was cute, so I wanted to find something cute to wear..."

There, Yurika's cheeks went from pink to bright red. It seemed she'd been maturing not just as a magical girl, but also as a woman. She wanted to look nice, both for herself and the boy she liked.

"..."

However, when she explained this to the cosclub, the atmosphere in the room froze over. Even if Yurika wasn't quitting the cosplay club, she still had something over on the rest of the members.

"Huh? What's the matter, everyone? You're acting strange again..."

Yurika picked up on the frosty change in the room, but she had no idea that what she'd said was the cause.

"Damn it!"

"There are always going to be winners and losers, huh?"

"In the end, we still drew the short straw!"

"Why, god?! Why?!"

The girls all burst out into frenetic shouting and lamenting. Some were even slamming their fists on their desks. It looked like they were angry about something, but Yurika still didn't know what. Today was simply a nonstop circus of confusion for her.

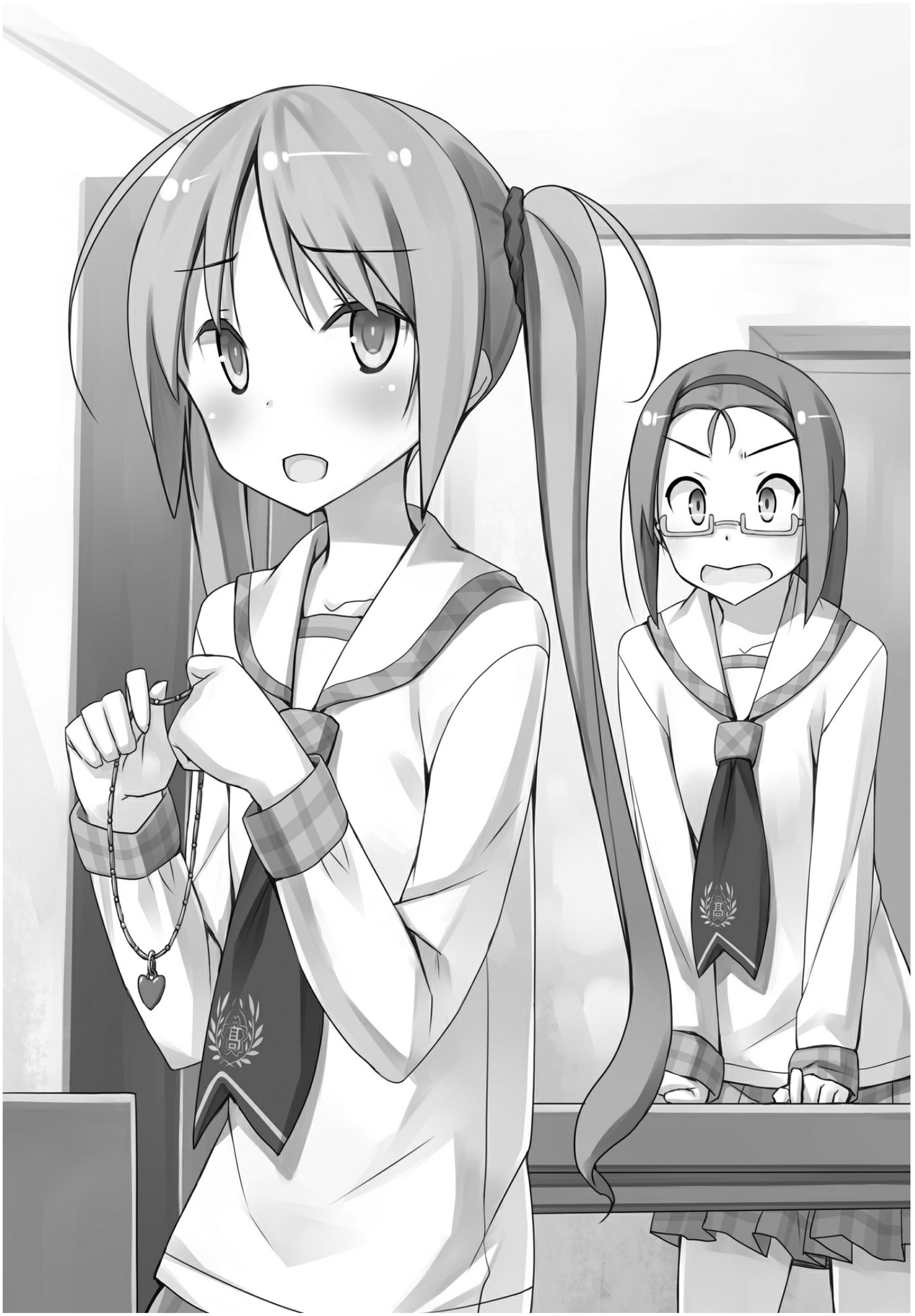
"Yurika, what's going on?"

That was when Maki entered the club room. She was also a member of the cosplay society and had stopped by to join in on club activities for the day, but

was quite perplexed to find the room in such a state.

“Maki-chan... everyone’s been acting strange. I don’t really know why.”

“Hmm... Well, they seem to be full of energy, so isn’t it a good thing?”



“Well, I guess so... Oh, I know, Maki-chan! Why don’t you pick out accessories together with me?”

“I’m—”

“I’m sure Satomi-san will call you cute too.”

“—really interested. Let’s get to it.”

“Yeah!”

And so Yurika and Maki began picking out accessories together. The strong bonds of friendship between them were obvious, as was their love for the same boy. The wonders of youth are multifaceted, and discovering this was utter heartbreak for everyone else in the room.

“Argh, damn it! Screw you, youth!”

The cosclub girls then began preparing for the cultural festival at a furious pace. After coming out on the other side of this ordeal with Yurika, they now realized cosplay was all they had. They were going to put their hearts and souls into it.

“What’s with them?”

“I wonder...”

The cultural festival was now less than a month away. But with this much zeal and cohesion, the cosclub exhibit would surely be a success. Indeed, the cosplay society was more motivated than ever.

Episode 2: Ruth and Sanae in Wonderland

One clear autumn afternoon, Ruth had finished shopping and returned to room 106 to find Koutarou lying sprawled out dead asleep in the middle of the apartment. Since it was Saturday, there was no school. Koutarou had instead gone off to his part-time job early this morning and only just recently returned. After refreshing himself with a quick shower, he'd camped out in the afternoon sun streaming in the window and ended up falling asleep.

"Heehee. Oh Master..."

Ruth set her shopping bag down in the kitchen, then pulled a blanket out from the wardrobe in the inner room and walked over to Koutarou. She looked down at him with calm, loving eyes.

"Achoo!"

As she gently lay the blanket over him, however, she accidentally tickled his nose and made him sneeze. It would take a lot more than that to wake Koutarou up, but the sudden movement caused the blanket to slip off of his chest.

"Goodness me, heehee..."

Ruth let out a giggle and sat down next to Koutarou to tuck him back in.

"Oh..."

As she was fiddling with the blanket, trying to put it back in place, Ruth's hand brushed against Koutarou's chest almost like she was about to lean in and kiss him. Realizing it, she froze in place and blushed.

Um, that... wasn't on purpose...

She also began making excuses in her head. Even though what she'd done was unintentional, the virtuous Ruth still thought it was shameless. In her eyes, this was completely different from walking around arm-in-arm. But though it was embarrassing, she didn't really want to stop. She wanted to stay like this

forever. Or, if possible, get even closer. She would have loved to lean in just a little more so that their lips were almost touching. She couldn't help thinking about it, and as she stared at his lips intently, the rest of her body moved all on its own. She was so spaced out, it was almost like she was dreaming. Indeed, the whole thing felt like a dream...

"Kyah! No, no, no! I can't do something that bold! In his sleep, no less! I just can't!"

Just before their lips touched—right before the decisive moment—Ruth snapped back to reality. Her serious, sensible side kicked in and pumped the brakes. And when she realized what she was about to do, she thought for a moment that she might actually die of embarrassment. She couldn't believe that she, the earnest girl she and everyone else admired as fastidious, would fall so hard for a man that she would forget herself. She wanted to just flip up one of the tatami mats and hide under it in shame.

Still, I'm glad that I didn't end up doing something meaningless...

On the other hand, Ruth was somewhat relieved. What she truly wanted was the feeling, not the act itself.

If we were lovers, it would be one thing... But even though it feels like we're something closer than that, the first time being so one-sided would just be too cruel...



Forcing herself onto Koutarou in his sleep wouldn't mean anything. If they were in a relationship, stealing a kiss would be fair game... but not like this. Ruth knew that she would regret such frivolousness later.

"Master..."

Instead, she began poking at Koutarou's cheek. She felt Koutarou was somewhat to blame for the compromising situation. Certainly, there was no way he'd actually done anything in his sleep, but Ruth still thought she deserved a little revenge.

"Take that, and that... Heehee... Do you give up yet, Master?"

Since she asserted herself so little on a daily basis, she seemed to be having particular fun poking Koutarou. Knowing no one was watching, she felt a little bolder than usual.

"Hnnn... ngh..."

However, she suddenly pulled back when she saw Koutarou grimace.

"Oh no, I went too far... I'm sorry, Master."

Realizing she'd lost sight of herself yet again, she decided she'd had enough of revenge.

"That's right... If I do this, then..."

And in order to make up for going too far, Ruth decided she'd let Koutarou use her lap as a pillow. She felt making him more comfortable would be an appropriate apology for disturbing him in his sleep. She then slipped her legs under Koutarou's head and looked down at his sleeping face.

This is the least I could do. He'll be able to sleep better like this, after all...

Really, she could have simply gone and gotten a pillow out of the wardrobe. Ruth knew that, of course. But love blinded her in a way—she was happy to ignore it for the time being.

Sanae returned to room 106 about thirty minutes after Ruth. She ran straight to the apartment like a bullet to show off a new hoodie she'd gotten that had

bunny ears on it.

“Koutarou, Koutarou! Look at this! Isn’t it cute?!”

“S-Sanae-sama?!”

Her sudden, dramatic entrance caught Ruth off guard. She’d spent almost the last half an hour with Koutarou’s head in her lap, lovingly stroking his cheek and fiddling with his hair. She was almost in a dreamlike trance, and certainly hadn’t expected someone to come bursting in on her. It was such a shock that she felt like her heart had leaped right out of her chest.

“Oh, he’s sleeping...”

“...”

“Hmm? What’s wrong, Ruth?”

Sanae, meanwhile, had no idea why Ruth looked so startled. When she was a ghost, Sanae was often close to Koutarou, clinging on to him one way or another. She couldn’t imagine that Ruth had anything to be embarrassed about—even with Koutarou’s head in her lap.

“N-No, it’s nothing...”

Ruth shook her head, blushing as brightly as a tomato.

“You see, Sanae-chan...”

It was there that Sanae-san stepped in to explain to Sanae-chan exactly what had Ruth acting so on edge. After getting used to Koutarou and the others as of late, Sanae-san was less nervous about making an appearance from time to time.

“Ah, so that’s what this is!”

When she saw the lightbulb come on over Sanae’s head, Ruth hurriedly looked away. When she did, Sanae could see that she was blushing right up to her ears.

“I don’t see what the big deal is about you being close with Koutarou. It’s cute. It’s like something out of an anime.”

While she now understood why Ruth was feeling bashful, she didn’t really

think it was anything to be bashful about. She didn't relate at all, eliciting a little bit of laughter.

"Augh, but even if you say that..."

Ruth was too embarrassed to even look up at Sanae right now. They had totally different takes on the situation. Yet even so, Ruth was rather lucky it had been Sanae of all people that walked in on her. If it had been Shizuka or Yurika, she would have gotten teased a whole lot more.

"It's fine if you love him. There are certain feelings you *have* to get close to someone to convey, you know?"

"I admit this would be a whole lot easier if I could just think like you, Sanae-sama... but I'm afraid I was born this way..."

Ruth glanced up at Sanae. After confirming that she was gently smiling and letting out a sigh of relief, Ruth was finally able to look her friend in the eye again.

"You're such an honest girl, Ruth. I just think you need to be a little more honest with yourself."

"This is about as honest as I can get. I can't sense Master's heart like you, Sanae-sama. And I don't want to go too far and end up making him hate me..."

"Koutarou could never hate you."

"I can only hope not..."

Ruth lightly furrowed her brow and looked down at Koutarou's sleeping face again. Despite all the commotion, he hadn't so much as flinched. In fact, the bright expression on his face seemed to indicate he was having a pleasant dream.

"I can't help but wonder what's going through his mind..."

"Then why don't we take a look?"

"Huh? Whatever do you mean?"

Ruth was puzzled by Sanae's sudden proposal. She had no idea what she was talking about.

“You want to know what Koutarou is thinking and dreaming about, right?”

“Well, yes... But I’m afraid it’s not so easy. Not even the most advanced Forthorthian technology can peer into a person’s mind directly.”

“We don’t need anything fancy like that. It’ll be simple.”

Ruth didn’t think what Sanae was suggesting was really possible. If anyone might be clever or savvy enough to come up with such technology, it would be Clan. But it didn’t seem Sanae’s plan had anything to do with consulting her, or science at all for that matter.

“All we have to do is astral project into Koutarou’s dreams.”

“A-Astral project?!”

For the second time today, Sanae caught Ruth completely off guard. She announced her plan with her arms folded, nodding in confidence. And poor Ruth looked like she could hardly believe what she’d just heard.

Dreaming is just one form of mental activity. It’s a special stimulation of the subconscious, an inherently more spiritual part of the mind. That made it possible for souls to assimilate with dreams via astral projection, or so Sanae explained to Ruth with wild hand gestures and sound effects that made the whole thing a little hard to follow. Ruth, however, fortunately seemed to get the gist of it.

“So you’re saying you can astral project into Master’s mind?”

“Yeah. It won’t even be hard.”

“I don’t doubt that that’s within your power, Sanae-sama, but I don’t have any such abilities.”

“Don’t sweat it! Now let’s get a move on!”

“W-Wait—”

“Bam!”

“—a minute... What?”

Sanae was in such a hurry that she didn’t even wait for Ruth to agree before

grabbing her soul and pulling it right out of her physical body. This way, Ruth would be able to astral project too.

“S-Sanae-sama! M-My body!”

“Calm down, Ruth. You’re astral projecting right now, so it’s not like you can take it with you.”

“B-B-But...”

Ruth had never astral projected before, and the all-new uncanny experience was hard to get her head around. But most alarming of all was seeing her own body slumped over right in front of her.

“Sanae-sama, am I dead...?”

“Of course not. Look. There’s the cord.”

Sanae pointed to her waist where, right out of the bunny tail on the back of her hoodie, there was a translucent rope that led from the ghostly Sanae to the one on the floor.

“This thing keeps you connected to your body.”

“Oh, I have one too!”

Ruth could feel something similar coming out of her back. It was quite literally her lifeline, connecting her body and soul. And as long as she had that, it would be easy to return to normal.

“Get it now?”

“Y-Yes, I think so...”

This was clearly how Sanae ordinarily separated from her own body, which was somewhat reassuring to Ruth. Slowly but surely, she was calming down.

“Then let’s get to it! Come on over here!”

“W-Wait a minute, Sanae-sama! What are we doing now?!”

“Hup!”

Alas, Ruth wouldn’t have the time to completely calm herself down before Sanae grabbed hold of her hand and leaped towards the sleeping Koutarou. But

strangely enough, rather than landing on him, she landed *in* him. Her translucent body entered Koutarou's feet-first, and she dragged Ruth right along with her.

"Kyaaaaah!"

All she could do was scream.

"You sure sound like you're having fun, Ruth!"

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

And so Ruth ended up following a magical white rabbit right into the dreamworld of Koutarou's mind.

The inside of Koutarou's mind was a very bright place. There was nothing there, but it was warm and comfortable like bathing in the autumn sun.

"Where are we...? And why are our bodies back to normal...?"

Ruth looked around in confusion. She didn't know where they were or why her body suddenly appeared to be solid again. It was strange, considering they'd literally just jumped into Koutarou.

"We've entered Koutarou's dreams now, so we look like we do in his dreams. See? You're wearing a different outfit now."

"Now that you mention it, you're right. These are my workout clothes."

Seeing Ruth so uneasy, Sanae thoughtfully explained what was going on. According to her, the two girls were now inside of Koutarou's dreams. They looked as he saw them, which meant they appeared to be completely corporeal even though this was a dream world. They were also wearing something appropriate for the dream, which just so happened to be athletic wear.

"Does this mean Master is having a dream about exercising?"

"Seems like it. Based on these outfits, I'd guess it's *that*."

Sanae had a hunch of what Koutarou was dreaming about. This wasn't her first time entering his mind, and she'd seen him dream about similar things plenty of times before.

“What do you mean by ‘that’?”

“Well, it’ll be faster to show you than tell you. Let’s go!”

Sanae then grabbed Ruth’s hand and began walking at a leisurely pace.

“O-Okay.”

Ruth, on the other hand, was still baffled by this bizarre situation. She walked with timid steps, looking around anxiously as they went. But despite her confusion, she no longer felt like she was in any danger. It was warm, bright, and comfortable. No one would hurt them here. It was safe. And all of that helped put Ruth at ease. Once she began to calm down, it slowly set in on her that she and Sanae were inside Koutarou’s mind right now.

If we’re really in Master’s mind, I’ll gladly accept whatever lies ahead...

And upon realizing that, all of her fears vanished. The unease she’d been feeling was replaced with wonder. Though she was somewhere strange and unfamiliar, she was happy to be here.

“Oh, you’re amazing, Ruth!”

That was when Sanae, who had run up ahead, turned back to her with a smile.

“Pardon?”

“This is your first time here, but you can already come this far.”

“What do you mean?”

Ruth didn’t understand what Sanae meant and looked around in puzzlement. Their surroundings were slowly changing, and Ruth could now start to make something out in the bright white light. To her, it was all amazing. She wasn’t sure why Sanae had said she was. And seeing this confusion, Sanae began explaining in a confident and proud voice.

“Well, you get that we’re inside Koutarou’s dream, right?”

“Right.”

“So when we want to go somewhere, it’s the desire to go that’s important—not the walking. Koutarou senses our desire and moves us where we want to

go.”

“I see... So both parties have to respond to each other’s desires.”

Walking didn’t explicitly accomplish anything in a vast, infinite dream world. The only way to get anywhere was if the dreamer and invader were connected in some way.

“So congratulations.”

“But whatever for, Sanae-sama?”

“Like I said, we’re inside Koutarou’s mind. And he thinks it’s okay for you to wander around here. What do you think that means?”

“Ah...”

That was it—the answer Ruth had wanted to know. And hearing it, her eyes shot wide open.

“Koutarou isn’t angry even though you’re walking around his mind without permission. Instead, he’s welcoming it. That’s how much he loves you, so congratulations.”

Dreams took place in a deep, guarded part of the mind. Having them invaded could be a painful, traumatic experience. But if the dreamer wanted to see the invader in their dreams, they would be able to enter with the power to move around freely. In other words...

“Master is treasuring me...”

“That’s right. Koutarou loves you. And since he accepts you here, in the deepest part of his soul, getting a little close with him in person should be nothing.”

Not even Sanae had been able to move around freely in Koutarou’s dreams at first. In the very beginning, the wall around his heart had prevented her from even entering. But the more and more time they spent together when they were awake, the more and more freedom she gained while he was asleep. Now, she was able to go virtually anywhere she wanted. And it was because of that change that she had no trouble acting without reserve in front of Koutarou. She already knew that he utterly and completely accepted her the way she was.

“But... if I suddenly started acting like you, Sanae-sama, don’t you think it would surprise Master?”

“Yeah, probably. So you’ll have to start slow. The foundation’s what’s really important, after all.”

“Heehee, then I’ll do just that.”

As the two girls walked along together smiling at each other, they arrived at their destination much quicker than Sanae had expected. She suspected Koutarou was probably especially welcoming of them right now because they were getting along so well.

The area they’d reached appeared to be a riverbed dotted with several playing fields. There was one for baseball, soccer, tennis, volleyball, and more. People filled each field, with multiple games taking place at the same time. It was as bright and warm here as it had been in the white light, making it the perfect weather for an afternoon of sports.

“I think I understand the meaning of the setting and this outfit now.”

“This *is* Koutarou’s dream after all.”

“Indeed.”

Ruth could see Koutarou himself out on the baseball field, having a game with a group of his friends.

“Looky, looky! Everyone else is here too.”

“You’re right. I see Her Highness and the others... And there’s Mackenzie-sama and a few other boys from school...”

It seemed they had two full teams playing baseball. Koutarou and the nine invaders had split evenly between the two teams, and the extra spots were filled by Elfaria, Kenji, a few of their other classmates, the cosclub, the drama club, and even some people from the neighborhood association. Everyone else who couldn’t fit on the teams was seated around on benches and bleachers, cheering for the players. It was a lively gathering to say the least.

“It looks like everyone Master cares for is here...”

“Check it out. There’s even more than one of some people.”

“Is that Kiriha-sama when she was younger?”

“Yeah, every memorable person from Koutarou’s life is gathered here.”

Everyone present was somebody that had made a difference in Koutarou’s life at some point or another. They came from different places and times, with the living and the dead all gathered together. It was a dream world, after all. Logic didn’t necessarily apply. The baseball field was like a living collage of Koutarou’s entire life.

“But... I can’t say I’m happy about being on Mackenzie-sama’s team.”

Ruth realized what this all meant, and it was a wonderful thing, but one of the finer details irked her. She wanted to be on the same team as Koutarou.

“It happens. Even with Koutarou, there’s only ten of us. Besides, the teams are different every time. Today you just so happen to be playing against each other.”

“Y-You don’t say...”

“Actually, there’s one thing that never changes.”

Sanae flashed a bittersweet smile at Ruth and lowered her voice. It seemed there was something about the “never changes” part that saddened her.

“What is it?”

“Glasses-kun is always on the team opposite Koutarou. I think it’s because he trusts him more than anyone else.”

“Mackenzie-sama is...”

There was no question that the invaders were the most important women in Koutarou’s life right now. But when it came down to sheer trust, Kenji was still Koutarou’s number one. It made perfect sense, of course. Kenji had been the first person to reach out a hand to the suffering Koutarou—he was the first to ever try and save him. Because of that, Koutarou trusted Kenji more than he even trusted himself. They were thick as thieves, which was why Kenji was always appointed as the team leader on the opposite side. Koutarou was willing to entrust the people he loved most to his best friend.

“That makes Glasses-kun our real rival. We need Koutarou to think more of us than him someday.”

“You’re right. Let’s work towards that.”

In order for the girls to truly save Koutarou, they would have to do more for him than Kenji had. It was only once that happened that they’d know for sure they occupied the most special place in Koutarou’s heart. And since that was something the girls all wanted, that would be their goal in the future.

Meanwhile, the game was going back and forth. The individual plays all reflected the players’ characters. Yurika struck out, Shizuka knocked the ball out of the park, Theia managed to snag two bases with her speedy sprinting, and Kiriha threw all kinds of clever pitches. Sanae and Ruth took a seat and enjoyed watching them all play.

“Looks like Theia is up to bat again.”

“The batting order is all wrong, but I guess it’s just a dream. Heehee...”

Theia stepped up to the plate, holding the bat so confidently that she looked larger than life despite her small frame. The pitcher, Kenji, threw a tight, sharp ball. Being a skilled player, he dexterously aimed right for a tricky-to-hit spot. But Theia saw right through it and made a bold swing.

“Run, Your Highness!”

The satisfying, unmistakable sound of bat meeting ball instinctively made Ruth stand up and cheer. Indeed, Koutarou’s dream Ruth behaved almost exactly like the real thing. But the same went for everyone else—the rest of the crowd began cheering too as the ball sailed over second base and rolled split between right and center field.

“That’s amazing, Your Highness! Nice batting!”

With a swing like that, Theia made it all the way to third. She then turned and waved to the cheering Ruths—it seemed there being two of them didn’t bother her at all. Seeing the next batter step up to the plate, however, Sanae turned to her excited companion.

“Well, Ruth, I guess it’s about time to go.”

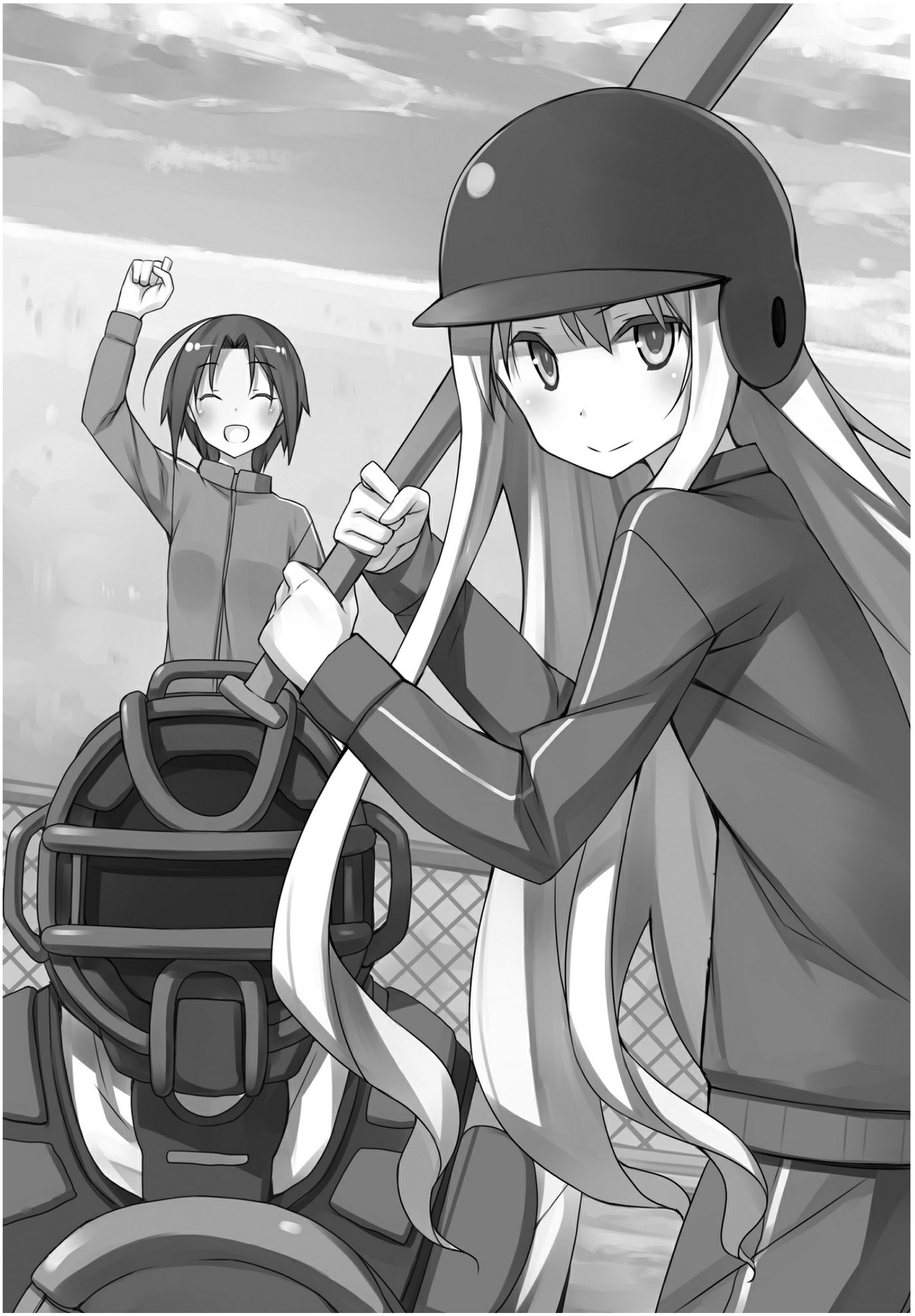
“But the game isn’t over yet...”

“Heh, well, that’s because it never ends.”

“Does that mean this is the dream Master always wants to have?”

“Something like that.”

Koutarou’s wish was clear. He wanted this ordinary happiness to last forever. That’s what the neverending baseball game represented. The only thing that would bring an end to it was Koutarou waking up, but it would start right back up again the following night.



“But first, why don’t we go see Koutarou?”

“What? Master’s the one batting right now...”

Koutarou was up after Theia, but he was currently arguing with Kenji about something. She couldn’t quite hear what, but it was clear this kind of banter was typical for them.

“Come on!”

“What...? But Sanae-sama, Master is over there...”

“Just come on already.”

Sanae tugged on the confused Ruth’s arm and approached the riverside. There was a concrete embankment meant to ward off flooding, but there was a nice, sprawling lawn just before it that ran the length of the river.

“Heya, Koutarou!”

“Ah, you’re back here again, Sanae.”

Koutarou was there, lying in the grass and sunbathing as he watched the game. Sanae knew that this was the real Koutarou, or rather, the center of his mind.

“I brought Ruth with me today, too!”

“H-Hello, Master.”

Ruth stepped out from behind Sanae and greeted Koutarou. He returned the gesture with a smile.

“Welcome, Ruth-san.”

“Hey, no fair! That’s not how you greeted me!”

“It’s not like it’s your first time here, you know?”

“But you forget all about this whenever you wake up.”

“But I remember right now, so it’s fine.”

“Then you should welcome me nicely every time!”

“Welcome, my beloved Lady Sanae.”

“Much better.”

Koutarou welcomed the two girls. They were both extraordinarily special to him, so he didn’t at all mind them stopping by for a visit in his dreams. And once Sanae was pleased, Koutarou turned back to Ruth.

“So what brings you along today, Ruth-san?”

Koutarou was happy to have her around, but he still didn’t know what the occasion was. The playful Sanae was here almost daily to goof around, but he couldn’t imagine that the reserved Ruth would invade someone’s dreams without a special reason.

“Th-That’s... well...”

Ruth blushed and looked down. She couldn’t bring herself to tell him that she was really here to see if she could get him to dote on her a little more. Sensing Ruth’s dilemma, Sanae decided to give her a helping hand.

“It’s because of girl stuff! Boys don’t get to know!”

“Even though we are in *my* dream?”

“Girl stuff trumps everything else!”

“You forcibly pulled her in, didn’t you?”

“Eeheehee...”

“Jeez, you’re always like this...”

“Ruth was worried about something, so I thought this would be the best way to make her feel better.”

“...Then I guess it’s fine.”

“Duh!”

Koutarou was against Sanae’s selfishness, but it seemed she’d actually dragged Ruth along as an act of kindness, so he let it slide. Besides, fussing at her when the weather was this nice just didn’t feel right. This was supposed to be the perfect calm, casual, relaxed weekend.

Ruth had a cheerful look on her face as she watched the back-and-forth between Koutarou and Sanae, but a certain doubt began sprouting in her heart.

When their conversation reached a lull, she took the opportunity to speak up about it.

“Master, may I ask you something?” she asked shyly.

“I don’t mind.”

Koutarou couldn’t think of a single question he wouldn’t answer coming from Ruth, so he gave her free reign to ask anything she’d like.

“Why are you watching the match from over here?”

Koutarou was observing his own dream from a third party perspective. If this was his ideal version of happiness, then he should be out there on the field playing. Yet for some reason, a different version of himself was out there having all the fun while he just sat here watching. Ruth couldn’t help but wonder why.

“I know this is a dream. There are still a ton of problems to be solved in real life, so I can’t really cut but so loose.”

“You can’t even forget about all that in your sleep? You’re so awkward...”

As it turned out, Koutarou had taken a step back from everything because he knew he was dreaming. He felt like he couldn’t just let go of everything and get lost in the fun, which both Ruth and Sanae thought was unfortunate. Koutarou should be able to do whatever he wanted to in his dreams. However, his next words made Ruth realize he wasn’t standing back because he was awkward. No, it didn’t have anything to do with him.

“It all involves you guys. I couldn’t forget about it that easily.”

“Master...”

He was doing this because he was fixated on the girls. He treasured them so much while he was awake that he couldn’t even bring himself to abandon them in his dreams. And when Ruth realized that, her chest tightened and tears formed in her eyes.

“How loving of you, Koutarou!”

“That’s not what we’re talking about. Don’t make fun of me.”

“I’m not making fun of you; I meant it. That was very loving.”

“Yeah, I guess...”

It wasn’t a personal, romantic love, but something much bigger. Koutarou was watching over the girls from here because of his desire to protect them.

“Anyways, I’ll get my chance to play when everything’s all said, done, and taken care of... probably.”

“You mean you’ll finally play with us over there?”

Ruth wiped away her dripping tears as she smiled at Koutarou. She couldn’t help imagining how wonderful things would be when everyone’s problems had been resolved and Koutarou could dream freely.

“No... I’ll play in real life. The best dreams are the ones that come true, right?”

However, Koutarou’s ambitions for the future far exceeded Ruth’s hopes. He probably had no idea what he was saying meant to her, but it was akin to a declaration of love. It no longer mattered if it was romantic or not.

“M-Master...”

Ruth felt her heart skip a beat as powerful emotions welled up within her. Her mind stalled and spun in circles, making it hard to even form a cohesive sentence. All she knew right now was that she’d made the right choice when she decided to spend the rest of her life by Koutarou’s side.

“R-Ruth-san?!”

And so, despite her best attempts to hold it in, Ruth began weeping.

After meeting up with Koutarou, the three of them spent some time chatting. He was somewhat more honest here in his dream, so the two girls were able to ask about things they ordinarily couldn’t. It was fun and interesting, so despite the fact that she’d been crying just a little while ago, Ruth was already perfectly back to normal.

“...Master really loves Her Highness then.”

“He loves me too. And you, Ruth.”

“Of course I do.”

“Isn’t that great, Ruth?”

“Indeed it is.”

But despite being in a dream, Ruth began worrying about how much time had passed. It was now almost evening in the dream world, surely meaning it was time for them to go back to the real world.

“Unfortunately, I think it’s time for us to leave, Master.”

Ruth was reluctant to go and found it hard to say goodbye. Even though they would see each other again as soon as they woke up, it was still hard to fight those feelings.

“Whaaat? Can’t we stay a little longer?”

Sanae, however, wasn’t willing to go at all. She hadn’t had enough of playing with Koutarou, and rolled around in the grass and kicked her feet in protest.

“I have to prepare dinner. Besides, I have to wake up Master too.”

“Wow, it’s already dinnertime?”

However, Sanae’s temper tantrum was cut short as soon as Ruth mentioned food. She immediately bounded to her feed with an eager look on her face.

“It is. And you can always play more when we wake up, Sanae-sama.”

“Sounds good to me. All right, let’s hurry up so we can wake up Koutarou and play more!”

In a complete one-eighty, Sanae was now ready and raring to go. It was fun here in Koutarou’s dream world, but with only three of them, they were lacking their usual group dynamic. As far as Sanae was concerned, returning home would be even more fun.

“Do what you want, but let me sleep a little longer.”

Still lying in the grass, Koutarou looked up at Sanae and Ruth. Since this was his dream, he didn’t need to go with them. Or rather, it was impossible for him to.

“A little longer? Like five minutes?”

“A little more.”

“Ten minutes, then.”

“Deal.”

“Then it’s settled, Koutarou. I will allow you to doze off for just a little longer.”

“Thank you very much, Lady Sanae.”

“Very good.”

“Heehee... Then this is goodbye for now, Master.”

Ruth giggled a little at Koutarou and Sanae’s continued back-and-forth, and bid Koutarou farewell when she got a chance. Realistically speaking, however, they’d all see each other again in just a few minutes, so it wasn’t a particularly somber goodbye.

“Yeah, see you later.”

“I’m waking you up in ten minutes, okay?”

“I know, I know.”

Koutarou, still lying down, waved to the two girls and turned his attention back to the baseball game. Knowing they’d see each other again soon enough, he didn’t think twice about seeing them off. Sanae knew that, but was still unhappy about him treating the whole affair so casually.

“I swear... What a baseball dweeb.”

“Heehee, don’t say that.”

Entering someone else’s dream without the slightest bit of resistance was actually an incredible feat. Yet the two girls who’d accomplished it seemed to think it was perfectly ordinary.

Leaving a dream was the same as entering one, and Sanae and Ruth’s surroundings changed in response to their desire to return home. The riverbed and baseball field moved away from them far faster than they were actually walking.

“I think this will always feel strange, no matter how many times I experience it...”

“It’s not as strange as your mystery warp.”

“I suppose that’s fair.”

As the two girls dreamily walked along, the scenery grew brighter and brighter until everything was pure white. This was the brink between dreams and reality—their exit to the real world.

“Oh?”

However, Ruth stopped just shy of actually leaving. She’d spotted something that caught her eye.

“What is it?”

“Sanae-sama, what is that?”

Ruth pointed to a black mass in the distance. It was far away enough that it was hard to get a grasp of its size, but it was striking. Once she’d noticed it, it was hard to ignore.

“Oh, that’s the part of Koutarou that gets sad or lonely. We’re inside his head, after all, so there are even things like that here.”

Just like the riverbed from before, the black mass was another facet of Koutarou’s mind. However, the negative emotions symbolized by that black color had the opposite nature of the riverbed.

“But Koutarou is keeping that away from us, right?”

“Yes.”

“Then I think it’s best not to touch on it.”

The black mass was in the opposite direction of the exit. It was also difficult to see because of the bright white light surrounding them. It would have been easy to miss altogether; Ruth had only spotted it by coincidence. Koutarou was trying to be considerate by keeping it away from them so that they wouldn’t accidentally run into it.

“Sanae-sama, have you ever gone over there?”

“At first, I walked around this place without knowing any better.”

Sanae now knew Koutarou’s dream world inside and out, but she’d been

utterly clueless at first. She'd accidentally stumbled into the darker parts of his mind before, and that's what the black mass in the distance was a part of.

"Is that how you know what it is?"

"Yeah, but I turned back before I reached it. The darkness pushes you back with a lot of force. I felt like I was going to be crushed, so I ran away."

There, Sanae led Ruth away from the exit and towards the black mass. As they got closer, it became clear that it wasn't a solid mass. It was a shifting, hazy orb like a planet shrouded in the black mist of night. The two girls stood in front of it, dwarfed by its size. It was easily big enough to encompass the entire riverbed from earlier. They stared at it for some time, but Ruth eventually turned to Sanae and took her hand.

"Sanae-sama, why don't you try challenging it one more time with me?"

Ruth was suggesting that they try and enter the black haze together. Sanae was surprised by the sudden proposal and reflexively questioned her in disbelief.

"What?! That's insane!"

Sanae was against the idea. She'd felt badly the first time she'd trespassed in the darker parts of Koutarou's mind, and moreover, she was worried it was dangerous there.

"I know, but... thinking about Master and our future with him, I believe this is something we'll inevitably have to face."

"That might be true, but..."

Ruth knew what she'd suggested was risky, but this wasn't something they could walk away from forever. Sanae knew that just as well as Ruth did, but having felt the dangers of the black mist firsthand, she couldn't help hesitating. However, Ruth had an ace up her sleeve. There was another reason she thought they should proceed.

"Besides... I'm sure this is what Master wants."

"How can you tell?"

"Because it was easy for us to come here in the first place."

“I see. If he really didn’t want to, we wouldn’t be able to get close to it... Which has to mean Koutarou wants us to do something about it.”

“I think so.”

If Koutarou had truly wanted to keep his darkness away from the girls, he never would’ve let them get near it. The world of Koutarou’s mind was under his complete control, so its position wasn’t a coincidence. It was distant, but just barely in sight. And the girls were allowed to approach if they so desired. It was like a subtle invitation—a reflection of his true desires.

“We’ll do our best, Master, so please accept us...”

“You’re completely useless without us... Jeez.”

Ruth and Sanae held hands and stepped into the black mist. The darkness of Koutarou’s mind was deep. Only Maki, who held a similar darkness within her, had ever seen this far inside him—and that had only been with the help of Signaltin. Really, this was the first time that someone had made it here on their own strength alone.

“Urgh, th-this is...”

“Keep it together, Ruth!”

With each step they took forward, the black mist got thicker. As it seemed to close in around them, the girls were assaulted by two forces. The first was a pressure trying to crush them, and the second a repulsion trying to push them away. That was the manifestation of Koutarou’s mind, kicking and screaming to get them to stop and turn back.

“B-But... I think it might be weaker than before...”

“Master is t-trying his hardest too...”

“Y-Yeah...”

Sanae and Ruth held hands as they pushed forward through the black mist, the darkness of Koutarou’s mind. The pressure and repulsion were strong, but because they were together, they were able to endure both. The simply kept moving ahead, supporting one another along the way.

“M-Master, everything’s... going to be okay...”

“You’re not alone anymore... You have us... to rely on now...”

Just like they’d been able to see the riverbed in the distance before they reached it, they were now catching glimpses of the greatest tragedy of Koutarou’s life—the accident where his mother had sacrificed herself to save him. It was because of that accident that his relationship with his father soured and their family collapsed. It was something he never wanted to think about again, so thoughts of it were suppressed. The memories only appeared in flashes and random order like someone was flipping through a deck of shuffled cards. But what the girls could see was more than enough to convey the sorrow of the tragedy, and that spurred them forward still. Even though it was painful, they were determined to get to the heart of it all... all for the boy they loved.

“R-Ruth... There’s someone over there...!”

“Is it... a child?”

Thanks to Sanae and Ruth’s earnest struggle—and probably Koutarou’s as well—the girls eventually reached the center of the black haze. There they found a lone boy, who was splattered with blood and clinging to a half-knit sweater.

“Koutarou!”

“Master!”

That young boy—the incarnation of all of Koutarou’s sorrow—was the center of the black mist. He was who the girls needed to save, and so they endured the pressure and repulsion in order to reach out to him.

“J-Just a little more! We can do it!”

“We made it— Kyaaah!”

But alas, just as their hands were about to reach the boy, the girls let their guard down for a moment... and that was all it took. As soon as their guard caved, the pressure finally stopped them in their tracks and the repulsion blew them backward.

“Kyaaaaah!”

“We are almost there!”

In the end, there was nothing they could do as they were hurled out of the black mist. The boy at the center of it all only watched them go in silence.

Koutarou awoke to the waning light of the setting sun on his face. Its warm glow was streaming in the window, dying the entire apartment a brilliant red. However, that wasn't what had woken him up.

"You again..."

Sanae was collapsed on his chest. That made it just difficult enough to breathe that it had roused him from his slumber.

"What's so fun about sleeping on me like this all the time?"

Koutarou was just a normal human boy, so it wasn't like he could recall his dream with any extraordinary clarity. He had a vague feeling it had something to do with Sanae, but even then he never imagined that she'd actually entered his dreams. He had no idea what she was smiling about as she slept.

"Jeez, I wonder what she's dreaming of..."

Sanae, on the other hand, possessed incredible spiritual power and could recall dreams like any other memories. She'd never seen a reason to tell Koutarou that, however, so he remained blissfully unaware. She thought explaining would just be a pain, but more importantly, she felt she implicitly had permission to be doing what she was doing. If Koutarou really didn't want her to, she never would've been able to enter in the first place.

"Huh? Ruth-san?"

As he was wondering what to do with Sanae, Koutarou glanced up and was surprised to see Ruth's face so close to his. She was leaning forward, but her eyes were closed. She appeared to be sleeping just as peacefully as Sanae, but this position... Realizing that he could feel something soft underneath his head, he put two and two together.

"I see... She let me borrow her lap to rest."

Indeed, it seemed Ruth had tried to make Koutarou comfortable, then gotten comfortable herself and dozed off in the warm afternoon sunlight too. Sanae

must have shown up afterward and invited herself to take a catnap right along with them. Otherwise, it probably would have been impossible for Ruth to get his head in her lap. Koutarou was sure that must have been what happened.

“Wait, what is...”

Realizing just how close the two girls were to him, Koutarou was suddenly overcome with a strange sensation. An impulse that steadily grew stronger.

Why do I want to give Sanae and Ruth-san a hug?

He wanted to embrace them as strongly as he could, but that wasn’t the kind of urge he could just give in to. He didn’t want to wake them, and more importantly, he didn’t want to behave inappropriately. But above all else, he was unsure why he felt this way in the first place. He would feel weird doing something like that without understanding the reason, so he held back and turned the matter over in his head. Yet try as he might, he couldn’t figure it out even after the girls woke up.

After waking up, the first thing Sanae did was show off her new hoodie to Koutarou. That was the whole reason she’d come running over to room 106 to begin with; she’d just gotten distracted by naptime in the process.

“Well, what do you think?! Isn’t it totally cute, Koutarou?!”

“Yes, it’s very cute.”

“What do you think is cute about it?”



“The bunny ears and tail.”

“Oh, come on! Make it sound good!”

“Your ears and tail are stunning, my lady.”

“Much better! Much, much better!”

Satisfied with getting the praise she wanted from Koutarou, Sanae crawled over to the tea table. And with Sanae finally off his chest, Koutarou was free at last and let out an extended yawn. Seeing him do so, Ruth leaned over to whisper to Sanae...

“It doesn’t look like Master remembers anything.”

“Yeah, it’s always like that. That’s why I make the distinction between here and there.”

“I see...”

Ruth let out a rueful sigh, and Sanae looked at her curiously.

“What’s wrong?”

“In the end, we couldn’t do anything...”

Ruth regretted not being able to do anything for the young Koutarou that sat at the center of the black mist—an amalgamation of all his negative emotions. She and Sanae should have been able to accept those negative feelings and pulled him out of the haze, but they were torn away from him at the last second and tossed back into reality. Protected by Sanae’s powers, Ruth retained her memories of everything that happened, which now instilled a powerful sense of regret in her.

“We were almost there, too...”

“Yeah, but that’s not the kind of thing we can fix in a day.”

“You’re right, Sanae-sama... We’ll have to be patient.”

Sanae felt the same regret Ruth did, but it wasn’t all bad news. There was no doubt they’d gotten closer to their goal than ever before. And knowing that, they felt a sense of hope.

“What are you two talking about?”

That was when Koutarou carefreely moved over to the tea table and joined in on the conversation. He had no idea they were really talking about him.

“It’s girl stuff. Right, Ruth?”

“Yes. It’s a secret.”

“Yeah, yeah... I know the drill,” Koutarou chuckled, picking up the remote on the table and turning on the TV.

“The news? Blech! Put on some anime instead.”

“At least let me watch the start. I’m the head of this household after all.”

“So what does that make me? Your dependent?”

“Yeah.”

Koutarou nodded right away. Sanae had been something like his sister, or perhaps even something closer, for a long time now. But upon hearing their little exchange, Ruth flashed a mischievous smile.

“Then what am I, Master?”

“Don’t you have your own household, Ruth-san?”

In Ruth’s case, she received a considerable salary and even held property of her own back in Forthorthe. There was no way, as the daughter of a distinguished family of knights, she could be Koutarou’s dependent. A small, six-tatami apartment was far too small for a lady of Pardomshiha.

“This is a matter of principle.”

“...Then you’re my dependent too.”

“Thank you very much, Master.”

Satisfied with Koutarou’s embarrassed admission, Ruth happily turned towards the TV. The clock in the top right corner of the screen told her it was now past 5PM, meaning it was about time to start dinner.

“Well then, Master, Sanae-sama... I shall go prepare dinner.”

“Hey, wait a minute, Ruth-san.”

Koutarou grabbed hold of her hand as she was about to head for the kitchen.

“Y-Yes?”

This sudden turn of events set her heart racing as the warmth of his hand sunk into hers.

“As thanks for being my pillow earlier, I’ll go make some tea. You can fix dinner after that.”

“If it’s tea, then I can—”

“It’s fine. Let me do it for you for once.”

Koutarou smiled at the puzzled Ruth and flipped channels to some anime before getting up from his seat and heading into the kitchen. As soon as he walked out of the room, Sanae and Ruth turned to look at each other.

“It looks like we were able to do something after all...”

“Yeah, it sure does.”

Both girls giggled happily. They were pleased they’d been able to help the boy they loved, even if it was only a little.

“Hey, Sanae, Ruth-san! What kind of snacks do you guys want with your tea?”

“I want the monaka from the other day.”

“There’s also the yōkan I bought today.”

“Oh, yeah! That too!”

“All right.”

However, they were quickly distracted by snacks and put the day’s dreamy events out of their minds. They knew all too well that’s what Koutarou would want.

Episode 3: Aika's Notebook

Theia enjoyed competition in all forms because it allowed her to put her skills on display for all to see. And the more she proved herself, the greater an asset she could become to her mother. To that end, victory was always her first and foremost concern. The content and fashion of the competition itself was relatively trivial; all that mattered was winning. That was what she'd always believed, but her mindset gradually began to change after coming to room 106.

At first, her singular goal was defeating the other invaders. But by the time their first summer together drew to a close, she had begun simply enjoying her rivalry with them. Winning and losing no longer mattered in the face of friendship; what became important was that they were having fun together. This was something that Theia could only come to experience after leaving Forthorthe. With the harsh political climate back home, Ruth—her childhood friend—was the only person she could share that kind of fun with. In short, coming to Earth was what had allowed Theia's love of competition to truly blossom. She now had friends like never before, and could play to her heart's content like never before. And, of course, the naturally competitive Theia loved a good game.

"Come on, Koutarou. Don't keep me waiting all day for your decision."

"...Please."

"Hmm? What was that? I didn't quite hear you."

"Please marry me, Your Highness."

"Ohohoho! If you're that desperate, then of course I'll marry you, my knight!"

"You little twerp! Don't get a big head just because you're winning right now!"

"But this is all to help you, Koutarou. Now you won't have to go bankrupt. All gain requires a little sacrifice, no?"

"Tch... I'll remember this later, *honey*."

“Ohohoho, try me if you dare, darling! I’ll teach you who wears the pants in this relationship!”

Theia’s favorite opponent was none other than Koutarou. He’d been an inveterate foe to her in the past, but now she saw him simultaneously as the best of allies and the best of rivals. He was the kind of friend she could go all out against, making the outcome of their match inconsequential. The thrill of the clash was far more precious to her than any victory. And no one put up a better fight than Koutarou.

“Now then, Koutarou... Transfer the rights to the ironworks to me. That will make our system rock solid.”

“No way. If I give away the ironworks now, I’ll never be able to make a comeback.”

“What?! You dare defy your beloved wife?!”

“What did you expect from a sham marriage made to avoid bankruptcy?!”

“You’re my knight, aren’t you?! So at least say that you love me, even if it’s a lie!”

“Oh, I love you all right, Your Highness. I really freaking love you.”

“Argh! Don’t say it like that!”

When Theia and Koutarou played games together, things would always get heated. They practically acted like children, both sides stubbornly doing everything they could to get the upper hand against each other. Yet, ironically, it was their steeled trust in each other that facilitated this. And in a strange way, them battling it out over games was just another way of deepening that trust. Neither one hesitated to reveal their childishness to the other.

“I’ll teach you!”

Thud!

“Ow! What are you doing, Theia?!”

“Like I said, I’m teaching you a lesson! This is my whip of love!”

“Argh, two can play that game! Take this!”

Whack, whack, whap!

“Ow, ow, ow! Hey, can’t you hold back a little against your princess?! What are you going to do if you really hurt me?!”

“Don’t worry! I’ll take care of you for the rest of your life!”

“You’ve said it now, pleb!”

Thud, whap, bam, snap, whack...

“Guah!”

“Ouch!”

Their stubborn battles often deteriorated into physical altercations. Those in the room observing couldn’t help but wonder what it meant for an imperial princess to stoop to the level of punching someone, and conversely what it meant for someone to have the audacity to punch a princess. But such fights never had any consequences past the immediate tussle. Really and truly, their “fights” were just an extremely intense way of showing their affection for one another. Rather than embracing, they grappled. Rather than whispering sweet nothings into each other’s ears, they screamed at each other. It was all done out of love.

Just the same as Theia and Koutarou demonstrated their love for each other by fighting, Maki knew she needed to come up with her own way to express her feelings.

“Theia-san is amazing...”

But even then, she couldn’t help admiring Theia’s method. On top of being serious, Maki was incredibly introverted by nature. That made it especially difficult for her to tell other people how she felt, especially when sensitive matters like love were involved. It was a rare occasion indeed that she even dared to bring the matter up. In that sense, she and Harumi were in much the same boat, though in Maki’s case her reticence was due to seriousness rather than shyness.

Maki had no trouble being cheerful and having fun around her friends, but

her restraint would always kick in before things could go beyond that. For example, she considered herself good friends with Koutarou. On Valentine's Day, she'd teased him, joked around with him, and even given him chocolate she made herself... But past that point, her reserved nature slammed on the brakes. Anything beyond "just friends" set her head spinning with worry that she was just a burden to the people she loved.

Of course, this wasn't just limited to Koutarou. Plenty of her friends had reassured her that both she and her feelings were welcome, but Maki had trouble accepting those words at face value. After having been starved for affection for the better part of her life, it was hard for her to truly believe that she was loved. And her discerning, staid personality only exacerbated that.

Maki, however, knew it was a problem. She was aware of her flaws, and that awareness made her especially admiring of Theia's open and aggressive behavior when it came to relationships.

"If I had just one tenth of Theia-san's assertiveness..."

Maki let out a small sigh as she longingly watched Theia and Koutarou duke it out. She knew she could never be as direct as Theia—her image and personality wouldn't allow it. If Maki suddenly started acting like Theia, she knew it would shock everyone. That's why she figured the best she could hope for was one tenth of Theia's boldness. That alone should be enough to completely but realistically transform her personality.

"This is the best I can do for now..."

Maki looked down at herself as she gently touched her hairpiece to make sure it was still in place. She was wearing some new clothes she'd bought just the other day—an outfit in a deep indigo color decorated with lace and ribbon all over to make it cute. It matched the hairpiece she'd picked out just for today, too. All together, the ensemble suited Maki quite well. It emphasized her calm, mature aura at first glance, but also had a soft and cute side to it upon closer inspection.

And this outfit had special meaning to Maki. It was her way of trying to express herself. Since she didn't dare make a move herself, she thought that she might do better trying to get a certain someone's attention. She didn't care

whether he laughed at her or complimented her so long as he noticed her. As reserved as she was, this in and of itself was a last resort.



“Hahh, hahh... J-Just what do you think a princess is?”

“A good... hahh... sparring partner... hahh...”

However, so far, things weren’t going as Maki had hoped. The certain someone whose attention she was trying to attract was a little preoccupied right now. It seemed she’d have to be patient.

“Then I guess I might as well work...”

If she had to wait anyway, she should make herself productive. That was Maki’s train of thought, and so she again took up what she’d been working on until just a little while ago. Maki served as the treasurer of the Satomi knights, so she did things like collect receipts from their expenditures and keep track of the group’s ledger. Since Koutarou’s band of knights was small and, strictly speaking, wasn’t really a combat squad, their account book was rather thin. Nevertheless, Maki took great pride in her work. She wanted to be praised for doing an excellent job. This too was another way Maki subtly tried to show her love and devotion.

Maki pulled out the indigo, leather-bound notebook she used as the band’s ledger and flipped it open. She artfully glanced back and forth between the notebook and the neat stack of receipts sitting next to it as she punched numbers into a calculator, until...

“Huh?”

Maki’s work came to a grinding halt when she spotted something unusual in her notebook. Despite what little fighting they actually did, the Satomi knights were—on paper—a combat-ready squad in service of Princess Theiamillis. As such, they had a discretionary budget that didn’t strictly need to be accounted for officially. This was typically used to cover ventures like information gathering or other confidential, sensitive activities that would ideally have no paper trail. Of course, with that kind of freedom, there were times that funds were misappropriated and audits were necessary. But there had never been any such problems with the Satomi knights. Most of their expenditures were small and reasonable, and Maki kept good track of them—even from the discretionary budget.

“Theia-san... What are you spending all this money on, I wonder?”

While what the money was used for didn’t need to be recorded, the sums and transactions still did. The books would never balance otherwise. As Theia was the one holding most of the group’s capital, she was always the one to make any such transactions. She also did her due diligence in recording them faithfully in the ledger. But that was what tipped Maki off that something was strange. If Theia weren’t the only person who made entries in the account book, Maki might never have noticed it at all.

“Though, truth be told, Theia-san can spend the money on whatever she likes...”

The sums of money she was withdrawing wasn’t the issue, of course. It was her money to begin with. As the existence of the Satomi knights couldn’t be publicly revealed, she was funding them personally. As such, Maki felt it was only right that she be able to spend their money however she pleased. If the knights ended up in the red, she would be the one to come up with the difference anyway.

“But... now I’m curious. I’ll look into it next time.”

The whole situation, however, had piqued Maki’s interest. She wanted to know what Theia was using the discretionary budget for. She wanted to know the reason for her expenditures. Really, because she admired Theia so, Maki wanted to know her secret. And so she decided to go straight to the source.

Because of the possibility something sensitive might be involved, Maki waited for Theia to be alone before asking her about the money. And she waited patiently. Ruth was almost always by her side, and even when she wasn’t, Theia was constantly with Koutarou or the other girls. As a result, three days had gone by before Maki actually got a chance to talk to her.

“Theia-san, do you have a moment?”

It was a school day, and the lunch period had just started. Most of the class immediately sprang up out of their seats to go socialize or get food. And, luckily for Maki, Ruth was the assigned class helper today—she was already up and off getting materials for geography class later. Meanwhile, Koutarou was goofing

off with Kiriha, Kenji, and Sanae and Yurika had left to go to the restroom. That left only Theia unoccupied, which created the perfect opportunity for Maki to approach her.

“What is it?”

“I have a question about the Satomi knights’ funds.”

As a precaution, when she mentioned knights, Maki spoke in a soft voice so that only Theia could hear her. This wasn’t something they’d be able to explain to their classmates.

“Does the ledger not balance?”

“That’s not it... Please take a look at this.”

There, Maki opened her indigo notebook and held it up for Theia to see. She then indicated the transactions in question with the tip of her pen.

“There are several unexplained expenditures here, all recorded by you, Theia-san.”

“Erk...”

Theia had simply looked puzzled at first, but once Maki pointed out the recent transactions she’d been making, she went pale and began sweating.

“Might I ask what you’re using this money for?”

“I-It’s nothing special! A-And it’s no big deal, right?! They’re all small transactions!”

An awfully panicky Theia tried to act like nothing was amiss, but Maki wasn’t convinced.

“It’s true that the amount isn’t an issue...”

“Right?! I’m well aware of the rules!”

“However, it appears that you’re the only one making such expenditures... That being the case, I was wondering if you could tell me what they’re for. For reference.”

Maki wanted to know what Theia was using the money for. She wanted to know what Theia was trying to keep secret by using discretionary funds, and

why she was the only one doing it. Maki was sure that uncovering the answer would teach her something about Theia—maybe even something about her boldness.

“No, I can’t! I can’t tell you!”

However, Theia shook her head intensely, her golden hair fluttering behind her.

“Why not?”

“Why?! Besides, if I have to tell you, what was the point of using discretionary funds?!”

“That’s true...”

It was clear Theia had no intention of revealing the truth to Maki, though she was able to pick up a few clues based on Theia’s reaction.

It must be for something embarrassing...

Theia’s face was red and she was flailing her arms about. She was flustered. She was uncomfortable. Nervous, even. It seemed that, whatever she was hiding, her secret was something she couldn’t reveal.

“Besides, I’m the one who funds the budget in the first place! The financing shouldn’t trouble anyone, which I believe brings a definitive end to this discussion!”

Theia forcibly put an end to their discussion and ran out of the classroom. Maki simply watched her go.

It doesn’t look like I’ll be able to get anything else out of her. Now then, what to do...?

Though Theia had retreated, Maki still hadn’t given up. She stared at her indigo notebook while pondering her next move. If Theia wasn’t going to tell her, then Maki would simply have to find out the truth for herself.

Accordingly, she chose to discreetly follow Theia and see what she was up to. While logs in the ledger for discretionary funds never included what the expenditure was for, the date and the amount spent were. Knowing that, Maki figured that if she followed Theia around, she could later compare her

observations with what Theia recorded in the ledger. Between the two, she should be able to deduce what Theia was actually spending the money on. And as a former leader of Darkness Rainbow—and a powerful magical girl in her own right—Maki would have no trouble with a stealth operation of this scale thanks to a little help from her magic.

“Your Highness, what would you like for dinner?”

“Let’s see... It’s getting colder, so maybe hotpot. It’s been a while since we last had it.”

“I believe it would be better to go easy on the seasoning.”

“Yes, some nice, simple, warm comfort food would be good.”

“And what would you like in the hotpot, Your Highness?”

“If we use fish, I’m sure Yurika and Sanae will complain nonstop.”

“Teehee, I imagine so.”

“Then what about beef? Or maybe chicken?”

“That sounds lovely, Your Highness. I’ll choose some vegetables to go with it.”

“I’ll leave that to you... But I must say, Ruth, you’ve sure gotten used to Earth-style cooking.”

“I knew it would be a skill I needed to master for future use.”

“How prudent and reliable of you.”

“You can count on me, Your Highness.”

“But of course. I leave it all in your hands, Ruth.”

“Hey, Theia.”

“What is it?”

“I could use a shoulder rub.”

“Explain something to me, Koutarou... Why would you ask your lord to do such a thing for you?”

“Because Sanae and Yurika don’t know how to do it without hurting me.”

“Hahaha.”

“Heh... So, how about it? I don’t have to worry with you since you know a thing or two about fighting and physical limits, huh?”

“Hmm, I understand your dilemma... But even then, there’s got to be a better way to ask. I’m your princess, you know?”

“If you understand, then come on already. I’m on the verge of seriously considering going out and buying a massager.”

“Good grief... You’re still as rude as the day I met you.”

“You wouldn’t really be happy if I treated you like a princess all the time, right?”

“That’s true. I’ll take this as a sign you truly understand your master’s needs.”

“See? That’s exactly what I’m talking about.”

“Heh... Now, like this?”

“That’s perfect. You’re actually pretty good at this.”

“Your princess is good at everything, so I expect due respect.”

“I do respect you.”

“I know. I just wanted you to say it.”

“Hmm...”

“Is something the matter, Your Highness?”

“Oh, no... It’s nothing.”

“You know you don’t have to hide anything from me.”

“O-Of course not.”

“So, which one are you interested in, Your Highness?”

“This... tunic or whatever it’s called.”

“It is nice and frilly, isn’t it? It’s very cute.”

“You think so?”

“I do. I think it would suit you nicely.”

“You... don’t think anyone would laugh at me for wearing it?”

“No one in room 106 would ever seriously do that.”

“That’s true...”

“So will you be buying it?”

“H-Hold on. I also want to look at that one over there.”

“Please take your time choosing, Your Highness. Heehee...”

“Here. It’s your wife.”

“Wait... Did we have a golden piece like this?”

“It’s to replace the one that Yurika lost.”

“Huh...”

“Well, anyway...”

“Yeah, now I have a wife. That makes it your turn, Theia.”

“...”

“Hey, what’s wrong?”

“I-I-It’s nothing! I was just thinking about something! Where... Where are the dice? I’m going to roll now!”

“You’re acting weird. What’s up with you?”

“You’re just imagining things!”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah! More importantly, I’m rolling now... Ha!”

“Well, looks like you’re getting married too now.”

“Indeed. Ruth, please hand me a piece.”

“Here you are, Your Highness.”

“Now I have a husband.”

“Did we have a blue piece like that...?”

“It’s to replace another one that Yurika lost.”

“Huh...”

“Well, anyway...”

“What would you like to eat, Harumi?”

“It’s been a while since I had takoyaki, but six pieces is a bit too much for me.”

“Then how about this? We’ll get a set of eight, and I’ll eat whatever you can’t.”

“But... you’re a princess, Theiamillis-san. I can’t give you my leftovers.”

“You’re the only one who worries about such things, Harumi. But you shouldn’t. You’re a dear friend of mine, and there’s a time and a place for everything—including forgetting about status.”

“Then... I’d appreciate it, Theiamillis-san.”

“I’m happy to help.”

“But when would you prefer me to honor your status, Theiamillis-san?”

“In combat or while I’m making public speeches, perhaps.”

“I see... So when it’s cool?”

“Right?! You get it!”

“I’ve had a moment in the spotlight as princess myself, you know.”

“Indeed, you made a bold, splendid princess.”

“I am honored by your praise, Your Highness.”

“Ruth, please.”

“I suppose I have no choice... But just this once, all right?”

“Indeed! I shall claim that stuffed animal in a single try!”

“There’s no need to get so fired up over a crane game, Your Highness.”

“I want to put it next to that rabbit that Koutarou is proudly decorating the room with!”

“Heehee, when it comes to Master, you’re always fired up. Aren’t you, Your Highness?”

“I-If I were as cute as the other girls, then... Anyway, that’s why I can’t lose when it comes to games!”

“I think you’re cute as you are, Your Highness.”

“You only feel that way because you’re my childhood friend!”

“I don’t think that’s the case.”

“Maybe, maybe not... I can’t be sure.”

“Then, for the time being, let us return home with that stuffed animal.”

“Ruth...”

“This is what money is for. We’ll play not once, but as many times as it takes.”

“Well said! Let’s get to it! Victory shall be ours!”

Maki followed Theia around for days, using her magic to hide herself as she observed her mark’s actions and behaviors. Of course, after Maki confronted her about her unaccounted for expenditures, Theia was a little more self-conscious about her purchases and refrained from using any discretionary funds for a while. That made things something of an extended game of cat and mouse between the two girls, and it took three weeks before Maki finally caught Theia.

One afternoon, Maki set to analyzing all of the information she had gathered. She currently had two leads in front of her—the ledger of the Satomi knights and her observation notes on Theia from the past three weeks.

“Considering how embarrassed she was when I asked about it... maybe it’s something to make her grow taller or make her breasts larger? No, I can’t imagine she’d use Earth technology for that... And besides, if the result of

spending the money is something as obvious as a change in her appearance, there would be no real point in concealing what she's spending the money on. Hmm..."

Maki tried to imagine what was going through Theia's head as she looked at the evidence in front of her. With enough information, she should be able to unravel the mystery behind Theia's unaccounted expenditures.

"Wait, could it be—?!"

After comparing her notes and the ledger side by side, Maki realized that there was an entry in the ledger on the same day Theia went to a certain store. The transaction totals matched, meaning Theia must have used discretionary funds to pay for it.

"A solid lead!"

Maki did her best to calm herself as she waited patiently for the school bell to ring at the end of class. She was so close. She had real evidence this time; she even knew what Theia had bought. There was no way she could deny it now. All she had to do was confront Theia again, and there was no way she was going to let Theia run this time.

The moment Theia saw Maki approaching with her indigo notebook in hand, her expression stiffened and she immediately turned tail and made to flee. Unfortunately for her, however, Maki was prepared for this. Before Theia could even leap out of her seat, Maki had her by the arm.

"Theia-san."

"Erk..."

Theia knew she'd been caught and abandoned all hope of escape. Her shoulders drooped and she slowly turned towards Maki with a frightened look. Her usual confidence was nowhere to be seen.

"Come with me."

"..."

Maki tugged on Theia's arm and led her to the back of the classroom.

Knowing this conversation wasn't meant for the ears of their other classmates, Theia didn't resist.

"I'd like you to explain this time, Theia-san."

"I-I told you I have no intention of doing that."

Though she knew she'd been caught, Theia made a stubborn last stand when Maki confronted her about the subject at hand. She simply didn't want to talk about it, and would avoid a discussion at all costs if she could help it.

"I already know what you're spending the money on."

"You've already found out that much?!"

Theia's eyes shot wide open surprise. She knew that Maki was on to her, but she didn't know she'd been completely exposed. Maki then gently admonished her.

"I didn't want to corner you, Theia-san, but... I have to know the reason for these unaccounted expenditures."

"Um..."

Theia instinctively flinched. It was quite unlike her.

"Theia-san, why are you using discretionary funds to buy clothes and accessories? Seeing as you're the one funding the knights in the first place, I can't understand the reason the reason you'd resort to that."

As it turned out, Theia was spending discretionary funds on clothes and accessories. And Maki couldn't help finding that strange. Theia was personally funding the Satomi knights, so there was no question that she had the money to buy whatever she wanted to without having to go through the knights. If they were operational expenses meant to fund bribes or sabotage or the like, that would be one thing. But Maki couldn't conceive of a reason she'd need to use discretionary funds on fashion. It just seemed silly. And so the perplexed Maki had come after Theia personally. She wanted to know what was going on.

"Th-That's..."

Being interrogated by Maki, Theia's cheeks blushed crimson red in embarrassment. Even if it seemed silly to Maki, it was important to Theia.

Trying to explain that was hard for her, but it was clear Maki had already figured out the half of it. Realizing that, Theia finally caved.

Back in Forthorthe, Theia was largely unconcerned with how people saw her. The only thing that really mattered to her was demonstrating her strength. But coming to Earth and finding people she considered to be equals changed that. First it was just Koutarou, and then eventually the other invaders. And after making friends, Theia found herself starting to care what people thought of her. Not just as a leader, but also as a woman.

When comparing herself to the girls around her, Theia knew she was lacking a certain something. Her aggressive behavior and stately manner of dress were completely befitting of the leader she'd been raised to be, but she'd gotten so fixated on those aspects of her character that she'd completely overlooked something important—the cute factor.

But it was only natural things had turned out this way. Back home, Theia had so many enemies that her only way to survive was to establish herself as a powerful figure. Anything "cute" was construed as a sign of weakness, and Theia had eschewed it out of necessity. Yet that all changed when she came to Earth.

In the life she lived now, it was hard for her to see cuteness as weakness. She even desired it. Indeed, she'd started getting envious of the girls around her—particularly Sanae and Yurika, and especially Maki. The three of them were always dressed in adorable outfits and radiated a soft, girly energy. Sanae and Yurika loved cute things in general, and starting this year, Maki had gotten into fashion. She was even starting to pull ahead of the others in terms of girliness.

Seeing that, Theia had made up her mind to try and make herself cuter too. Even if she couldn't do anything about her personality, she had full control over the way she looked and dressed. That was why she'd been spending money on clothes and accessories.

Yet Theia was still a princess. She still had plenty of enemies, and she couldn't afford to even give off the illusion of weakness. She'd worked hard all her life to build her image as a strong princess, and she would be devastated if the

Forthorthian public came to learn that she dressed like a girly-girl in private. In other words, she needed to make sure no one ever found out.

And that would be difficult. Members of the royal family were public figures in Forthorthe. They were also expected to be transparent with their capital. Even their personal expenditures were a matter of public record—which meant that if Theia bought cute clothes on Earth, everyone back home would know about it the instant someone looked at her financial records. That would be all it took to ruin her image, and she wanted to avoid that.

And that, in turn, made confessing all this extraordinarily difficult. She was embarrassed and self-conscious, and ended up spilling her guts to Maki in a rather blunt fashion.

"...So I poured money into the band of knights in order to make purchases with discretionary funds... all so that way my image won't be compromised... I-I know it was stupid! But I had no alternative! If you want to laugh, then go right ahead!"

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

However, Theia's attitude didn't bother Maki at all. She knew exactly where Theia was coming from.

When she first met Theia, Maki hadn't cared much about her own appearance. In fact, she actively forsook fashion and makeup, believing them to be tools people used to conceal their true selves. But after Maki fell in love, she began to see things differently. She now cared about the way she looked and didn't see the problem with going a little out of her way to make herself cute.

As a leader of Darkness Rainbow, her primary concerns was protecting her position... and that included safeguarding her image. She needed the others to see her as cool and aloof. Dangerous, even. It took a lot of legwork to come up with an excuse adequate enough for her to dress up in cute clothes. And in that sense, she and Theia were in much the same boat.

"You mean... you're not going to laugh?"

Theia looked at Maki in confusion. Her reaction was unexpected.

"Of course not. I relate, honestly."

Maki understood how Theia felt all too well. She wouldn't dare laugh. She didn't even get mad. In fact, she was a little happy to learn that they shared similar secrets.

"Besides, that would be the pot calling the kettle black."

"What?"

"I've always admired how direct and bold you are, Theia-san. I'd have to laugh at myself if I laughed at you for wanting to transform yourself..."

They were two sides of the same coin. Theia was jealous of Maki's fashionable girliness, and Maki was jealous of Theia's intrepid boldness. They were both looking to the other for what they lacked, and Maki knew it would be hypocritical to laugh at Theia for that.

"You..."

"I admire how you go toe to toe with Satomi-kun every day, no holds barred."

"It's all I *can* do... I wish I were more like you."

"So, no, I'm not going to laugh at you... although I do find it funny that we've basically been chasing each other's tails."

"You're right. Heh, that is rather funny..."

"Heehee."

There, Theia and Maki had a good laugh together. They'd each been envious of the other, chasing each other in circles like a merry-go-round. In the end, it was rather amusing. And now that they knew better, they couldn't help laughing. Even if they didn't know how to proceed from here, they were happy —most of all because they'd both found a close confidant.

"I know we're laughing now, but... If possible, Maki, I'd like you to keep this between us."

"Heehee, I feel the same way."

"Your secret's safe with me."

"And yours with me... But instead of just keeping each other's secrets, why don't we make a deal?"

“A deal?”

“Something more fun than simply keeping this to ourselves.”

“Hmm... Interesting. Tell me more.”

In the end, the girls decided to work together towards a new goal. If they were going to keep chasing their dreams, it was better to go forward than in circles.

Though it had been cloudy that morning, the sky was crystal clear by the time school let out. The light of the setting sun illuminated everything, casting long shadows behind Maki and Theia as they walked along.

“So, what kind of clothes are you interested in, Theia-san?”

“Right now I’m into tunics. I like that floofy silhouette.”

“Now that you mention it, that does go a long way to making a soft, gentle impression.”

“That’s what I want. Something more sedate than my usual.”

“You are indeed quite lively. Spirited, I’d say.”

“Right? I want to come off as more womanly.”

“I get that. I used to be completely fixated on being serious.”

“Then maybe you should lighten up your look too.”

“Heehee, you’re not wrong. Actually, speaking of... If it’s womanly you’re going for, why not try a suit?”

“Wouldn’t that be pushing it too far? I’m loathe to admit it, but I have pretty childlike proportions.”

“Sometimes a little something unexpected is nice.”

Maki and Theia’s current destination was the line of fashionable boutiques by the station. This would be their first clothes shopping excursion together. Every time they found an interesting shop, they’d stop in and have a look around while talking about style. But, perhaps in typical fashion of such trips, there had been more looking and talking than buying so far. Neither one of them had

picked up a single thing despite all the shops they'd been to so far.

"Hmm... By the way Maki, what are you looking for?"

"Something the opposite of what you are."

"Oh?"

"Since I think I come across as too sedate already, I want something more... I don't know, energetic?"

"It's true you come across as serious. Honestly, I'd trade with you in a heartbeat."

"Haha, I would too."

"Heh... Well, if you want something more active-looking, I'd suggest a short skirt or shorts."

"How short are we talking about?"

"For skirts? Fifteen centimeters above the knee."

"Isn't that too short?"

"Keep in mind that you have a height advantage over me. If you don't do this right, you'll naturally take the look from active to cool."

"I see... So details like that can make the difference in someone's impression."

"Exactly. So you probably want to find a more casual pair of shoes too. If you walk around in a skirt with mules or sandals on, you're automatically back in cool territory."

Both girls had their eye on the prize—which was practically standing right in front of them in the form of a close friend. That sense of closeness made it feel attainable, but there was a fundamental roadblock in that they were individually working with *very* different material. It left them both spinning their wheels a little bit.

"It's so hard to choose..."

"At this rate, we're going to have to take drastic measures."

"I have an idea, Theia-san. What if we picked something both of us could

wear?”

“Both of us?”

“Yes. Rather than diving in on opposite ends of the pool, why don’t we try meeting in the middle?”

“But if we pick something we can both wear... You’ll still look cool and I’ll look like I’m trying too hard to be grown-up.”

“I’m not saying we dress the same way forever. I’m just suggesting we try it out to start. Besides, if we buy matching outfits, no one will question the change in style.”

“Yeah, maybe you’re right... That would be a good first step.”

“I think so. Besides, wouldn’t that be a fun way to commemorate this day?”

“Heh, I see... Proof we started on this journey together.”

Maki wanted to find an ideal starting ground for both of them. Rather than jumping straight into a new look, they’d get their feet wet first by mixing and matching their styles. It wasn’t their ultimate goal, but it was certainly a step in the right direction.

“But... mixing girly and active is going to be a little difficult, isn’t it?”

“Culottes might do the job.”

“That would work with booties.”

“See? It’s starting to pan out already.”

Once they settled on picking out matching outfits, everything seemed to fall into place. Since they were coordinating on something they could wear together, they were able to share insights with each other about their own styles and preferences. It helped them both reckon with their ambitions and shortcomings in a much more realistic way. And thanks to that, they were able to wrap up their shopping trip before the sun even finished setting.

Theia and Maki had made a date to hang out with some of their classmates the following day, and decided it was the perfect opportunity to show off their

new outfits. They got changed and put makeup on together before nervously making an appearance. They were confident in their look, but were still somewhat anxious to see how everyone would react. Fortunately, the response was positive. Theia and Maki smiled at each other and sighed in relief. There was only one hurdle left...

Koutarou hadn't shown up yet. Their classmates had all been complimentary, but the opinion Theia and Maki cared about most was Koutarou's. And as slow and dull as he was, he didn't even notice their new outfits until they reached the amusement park—long after they'd all met up at the station.

"Hey, now that I get a look at you two... Are you guys wearing the same outfit today, Theia, Aika-san?"

"You fool! *Now* you notice?!"

"Ahaha, we actually just bought these yesterday."

They'd waited so long for him to say something that Theia couldn't help being angry and Maki couldn't help laughing. It seemed their matching outfits didn't keep them from having opposite reactions.

"Wow, Kou. You're supposed to check out a girl's hair and outfit as soon as you see her."

"Unlike *some* people, I don't spend all day staring at girls!"

"You tell him, Koutarou! Attaboy!"

"Yeah, it'd be a little weird if Koutarou-kun suddenly started paying attention to girls like Mackenzie-kun does."

Secretly, their classmates had all been wondering when Koutarou was finally going to notice too. They were quietly waiting to see his reaction, and couldn't help ribbing him a little. Only a small handful of the other male classmates defended him.

"Good grief. Do you have any idea how long Maki and I have been waiting with bated breath?"

His harshest critic, however, was—as expected—Theia. With her arms crossed and her cheeks puffed out in indignation, she looked up at Koutarou like an

unhappy child. Her new outfit was both active and girly, but Theia's strong personality overrode all that.

Theia-san really is amazing...

Maki still admired that part of Theia. Without jeopardizing their relationship, she always went full-throttle with Koutarou. They were probably always walking a razor's edge, on the verge of breaking out into a genuine fight... Yet somehow that never happened. That was the strange, special balance of Theia's relationship with Koutarou, and it was something only they had.

"Maki, you say something too!"

"Wh-Wha—?!"

That was when Theia grabbed Maki's hand and forcibly pulled her over in front of Koutarou. Since she was planning on taking a backseat while Theia let Koutarou have it, this unexpected development took her rather by surprise. But now that Theia had put her on the spot, it would be weird not to say anything. Desperate, Maki racked her brain for the right words.

"I was also hoping you'd noticed, but perhaps we were being selfish in—"

"Stop right there, Maki! Do you wanna be this way for the rest of your life?! Well?!"

"No, you're right... S-Satomi-kun, you knucklehead!"

"That's more like it."

Maki's first reaction was demure, but with a little encouragement from Theia, she managed to change her tune. Her verbal abuse was wholesome and moderate compared to Theia's, but it was still an improvement as far as Theia was concerned.

"I'm sorry, you two. But it wasn't like I was trying to ignore you. It's just that I was late and kind of in a rush, so I didn't notice at first."

"Then hurry up and tell us what you think already."

"With the difference in your personalities and physiques, I'm impressed you managed to find something that looks good on you both."

“Th-Thank you, Satomi-kun.”

Of course, Maki had genuinely been a little upset that Koutarou hadn’t noticed sooner. But that didn’t last long. Her dissatisfied frown blossomed into an embarrassed smile as soon as Koutarou said she looked nice. She was glad she’d gone shopping with Theia yesterday and that she’d dared to venture out of her comfort zone. Theia, meanwhile, was still up in arms.



“Maki, don’t let him fool you!”

“But I’m happy he—”

“You’re too soft on Koutarou! Sink your teeth into him!”

“U-Um... Satomi-kun, tell me I look cute!”

“Yes, that’s much better!”

“Hey now...”

And so Maki continued to berate Koutarou at Theia’s urging.

I wonder what’s going on here...

It was quite clear Theia was leading Maki by the nose, but she didn’t seem troubled by it. If anything, she looked like she was having fun.

“Now tell him how you really feel! Tell him off properly!”

“You’re so serious, Satomi-kun!”

“Is that supposed to be telling him off...?”

“U-Um... maybe not entirely...”

Since Maki was so unaccustomed to being selfish with others, her attempts at harshness largely just came off as endearing. She didn’t sound like she meant a word she was saying, so Koutarou simply let her and Theia have their fun. In fact, he was having fun watching them. It wasn’t every day he got to see two cute girls goofing around out of their elements like this.

Once they were in the amusement park proper, Koutarou and the others headed straight for the new attraction that had only recently been completed. It was a virtual game where players used laser guns to shoot at zombies. Groups could play together while simultaneously competing to see who could get the most points, making it extremely popular with a younger crowd.

“All right, Maki. This is where we team up and make Koutarou and the others cry uncle.”

“But I want to be on Satomi-kun’s side...”

“You can be on his side whenever you want, Maki! But we don’t get that many chances to compete with him directly! This is where you should be going all out!”

“I see... That’s good advice.”

And so Maki and Theia decided to team up against Koutarou. In order to defeat him and Kenji, they’d have to work together. In truth, there was a particular reason Maki and Theia were dressed the same and cooperating like this. It was the deal they’d made the day Maki confronted Theia about her expenditures—that they would help each other out.

Theia would stop using the knights’ funds to buy clothes, and instead, Maki would gift her clothes. That way the ledger would be kept above board and Maki could give Theia all the fashion advice she wanted. Theia’s sense of style wasn’t all that bad, but she was still relatively inexperienced when it came to Earth fashion. In that regard, Maki made a powerful ally.

And in return, Theia would teach Maki how to be aggressive. Because Maki was introverted by nature, she found it difficult to assert herself. Especially around the people she cared about. But with Theia as her coach, she stood a good chance of being able to turn things around.

In short, the deal was an alliance of self-betterment. Maki would teach Theia how to be girly and Theia would teach Maki how to be assertive. With each other’s help, they could both become the people they wanted to be.

“I’ll play the vanguard and take out any enemies that look dangerous. You stay behind me and try and keep any enemies from getting close.”

“I understand. Let’s call out when we need to reload.”

“Got it! Now let’s go!”

“Yes, let’s do our best!”

And so they challenged the attraction together. Standing side by side at the entrance, they were smiling as brightly and confidently as ever. While their goals were different and the road would be long, they were both happy they’d found a friend to share the journey with.

Episode 4: The Great War in Very Near Space

One Saturday afternoon, Koutarou, Yurika, Maki, Theia, and Clan were playing a board game they'd pulled out from the wardrobe. Because not all of the invaders were available, this would be considered a non-point game as far as the contest for ownership of the apartment was concerned. Instead, they were simply playing around for fun. It was a nice day out, and the soft autumn sunlight streamed in the window, shining down on them as the game slowly progressed.

"It's your turn, Aika-san."

"O-Okay."

Urged on by Koutarou, Maki tentatively reached out for the game board's roulette wheel. She'd grown up without most of the merriment and amusement most children were accustomed to, so things like this still felt a little strange to her sometimes.

"Hup!"

She gave a cute little shout as she gave the wheel a good spin. In the game they were playing, the number the wheel landed on determined how far they could move in a haunted European-style mansion.

"Okay, it's four. Please move forward four spaces now, Maki-chan."

"One, two, three, and four."

"Let's see here... It says, 'Whilst you're exploring the dining room, you hear a noise coming from thin air. Draw an event card.' Oh, I wonder what's going to happen."

"Veltlion, the event cards."

"Here, Maki-san. Draw one."

"Okay."

Following the instructions listed for the space she landed on, Maki drew a

card. It would randomly determine the results of her turn.

“Um, it says, ‘A knight in armor suddenly attacks! Or so you thought... but it’s really just a stationary decoration in the room. Nothing actually happens,’” read Maki.

“Lucky,” commented Clan.

“Not necessarily. If it had been an enemy, she could’ve gotten some treasure,” argued Theia.

“Yurika, you’re on the ‘safety first’ side, aren’t you?” asked Maki.

“If you die, then it was all for nothing! Treasure and food are only useful if you’re still alive,” Yurika explained.

It seemed the girls were split on how to interpret the event Maki had drawn. And listening to them discuss it, Koutarou couldn’t help thinking their opinions on the matter suited their personalities perfectly. As he was musing over this, however, Maki began giggling.

“Heehee.”

“What is it, Aika-san?”

“Don’t you think the horror in this game is very subjective?”

“Yeah, I guess so.”

“When I imagined you attacking me... I just couldn’t help but find it funny.”

“Ah, that’s what you meant.”

When they heard “a knight in armor,” the first thing the girls of 106 thought of was, of course, Koutarou. That’s why, despite the fact that the situation was supposed to be scary, Maki immediately found herself smiling. There was already a serious lack in tension as they were playing a scary game in broad daylight, but this put the final nail in the coffin as far as the mood was concerned.

“What would you do then, Aika-san?”

“I’d probably scream out and thrown a bunch of things at you.”

“I can imagine that, yeah.”

“Then let the throwing commence!”

“Are you trying to kill me, Theia? Wait—”

“Open fire, men!”

“Yes, ma’am!”

Following Theia’s orders, the other three girls all began hurling things at Koutarou. None of them really wanted to hurt Koutarou or mess up the apartment, so they were reaching for clothes, cushions, towels, newspapers, and whatever else they could get their hands on that wouldn’t do much damage. The thing that looked like it would hurt was the plastic cup of instant noodles. Of course, seeing that thrown hurt Yurika the most.

How do I put it...? It’s so hard to get into words, but...

When they were playing around so mindfully and gently, Koutarou couldn’t bring himself to get angry about it. If anything, he wanted to respond in kind to their playfulness.

“Now you guys have done it!”

“Kyah!”

“Eep!”

“Yikes!”

“Oh no!”

Koutarou gathered up what had been thrown at him and threw it right back all at once. With how small the room was, the girls had nowhere to escape. In short order, they were showered with all kinds of odds and ends just like Koutarou had been. But even then, they were still smiling. Really, they’d been hoping Koutarou would counterattack, and all was going according to plan.

And so the game proceeded, albeit slowly thanks to the occasional derailment. Maki put up a good fight as a newbie to the game, and Yurika pulled through on sheer luck. In the end, things turned into something of a showdown between the two of them.

“Maki-chan, this is our final showdown!”

“After coming this far, I won’t lose now, Yurika!”

Despite their history, Maki and Yurika now had a great relationship. They were close enough that they could enjoy a little friendly completion to the fullest.

“Yurika’s only ever this bold when it doesn’t matter if she loses or not...”

Koutarou smiled as he watched their antics. He could tell just how much fun they were having together. And after what he knew they’d been through, it was a heartwarming sight.

“She’s timid when it really counts, after all.”

Clan smiled as well. But she wasn’t making light of things. Quite the opposite. She was getting the same warm and fuzzy feeling Koutarou was. As of late, she’d come to be somewhat more transparent with her feelings.

“What are you saying, Koutarou?” an astonished Theia asked. “You’re the one who’s always talking about how Yurika has strength in spades when it really matters.”

Yurika was weak and awkward in general—not to mention she had a habit of taking a spectacular nosedive into failure whenever there were punishments on the line for losing a game. But when things *really* counted, Yurika was always there in her best form. If someone’s life was at stake, for example, she might even be the one to lead the charge to save them. Koutarou knew just how strong she really was, but that scared him a little because he knew Yurika only ever brought her full strength to bear when things were really, really bad. In his opinion, days like today—where nothing but a little fun was on the line and Yurika could lose to her heart’s content—were better. Everything was peaceful.

“So I don’t want to hear a word from you about Yurika winning now,” continued Theia.

“Jeez, cut me a little slack.”

“Heh,” scoffed Clan. “I imagine Veltlion thinks of Yurika as a little sister, albeit the troublesome kind. And he would prefer things stay that way.”

“I won’t deny it.”

Koutarou wanted not just Yurika, but also Maki, Theia, and Clan to live peaceful lives. And like he said, he would no longer deny that. But all serious discussion came to an end when it was interrupted by a sudden growl from Koutarou’s stomach. They’d been playing games for so long now that it was easily past lunchtime.

“Oh?”

“Jeez. Mind your manners, Koutarou.”

“My bad.”

“There’s no point in demanding manners from a barbarian like Veltlion.”

“Satomi-kun, let’s have lunch once we’re done.”

“Yeah, that sounds good.”

“It’s a plan, then.”

As they were already entering the last stage of the game, they agreed to break for lunch once they were finished. One thing, however, remained undecided.

“But who’s gonna cook? Or should we order delivery?”

The missing members of the Corona House crew had all left that morning. They were all attending to some business or another, but without either Kiriha or Ruth around to cook like usual, the rest of them would have to come up with some other way to get food.

“Hey, how about the loser makes lunch?”

Just calling in lunch or deciding with a simple game of rock, paper, scissors would be boring, so Koutarou decided to have a little fun by suggesting they up the stakes for the grand finale of the game.

“Why would you say that now?! That’s something we should have determined at the start!”

At Koutarou’s suggestion, Theia suddenly erupted. With how much she prized victory, she was none too partial to the idea of changing the rules more than

halfway through the game.

“Are you kidding? The timing is critical. Right now, it’s gotta be either me, you, or Clan, right?”

Koutarou glanced over at Yurika as he spoke. She and Maki were vying for the top spot, with the other three players lagging behind them. Chances were pretty high it would be one of them in the kitchen on lunch duty. In other words, they wouldn’t have to worry about having to eat Yurika’s cooking.

“Oh... You’re right,” copped Theia.

“I don’t mind this plan either, personally,” agreed Clan.

They’d quickly caught on to what Koutarou meant. None of them were interested in eating Yurika’s so-called cooking either. It would probably be dangerous.

“It’s your turn next, Satomi-san.”

“All right.”

After reaching a consensus on lunch, everyone returned to the game. Things would wrap up roughly fifteen minutes later.

Maki managed to secure first place. She defended her lead until the end and reached the goal first. She was also carrying a ton of treasure, scoring her by far and away the most points.

Next was Theia. Once it was determined that the loser would be making lunch, she stepped up her game and clawed her way all the way up to second place. She couldn’t overtake Maki, but the turnaround she’d been able to achieve was nothing to be sneezed at. She was pleased with these results.

Third place then went to Clan. She was more careful and defensive than Theia, so she wasn’t able to make quite as much of a comeback in the endgame. But she was happy too. She just wanted to make sure she didn’t end up last.

Koutarou ended up in fourth. He’d gone all out in an attempt to beat Theia, but his high risk, high reward playstyle had blown up in his face. He ducked into the treasury in the basement of the mansion and ended up being defeated by

enemies, costing him most of his treasure. If he hadn't tried to go head to head with Theia, he might have been able to overtake Clan. But it was a losing gamble in the end, landing him just shy of last place.

And the dreaded title of loser went to none other than Yurika. Despite being loaded with treasure, she'd lost almost all of it by the end of the game. It was a spectacular enough failure that it impressed everyone but surprised no one. They all thought, "Yeah, that's so Yurika."

"W-Waaaaah..."

"Wow, Yurika... You really just can't keep it together, can you?"

"Augh, b-but if I'd just rolled high enough, then... Waaah!"

With teary eyes, Yurika acknowledged the reason for her own defeat. Just before the goal on the game board, there was a fork in the road that split the path in two—one branch led safely to the exit and the other took a risky detour through the treasury. Yurika was in first place when she reached the juncture, having managed to get a leg up on Maki through sheer luck. She'd had just enough spaces left to make it safely into the treasury, so decided to take that route, confident she couldn't possibly lose her lead with all the treasure she had on her. And it wasn't just her. Everyone thought at that point that she'd be the one to win the game.

However, that was simply the start of her downfall. After stopping in the treasury, Yurika never landed on a treasure space again. Instead, she was assailed by enemies practically nonstop. If she'd won against any of them, it would have landed her even more treasure. But Yurika's luck had run out. The enemies towards the end of the board were strong, and she just couldn't hack it against them. In a few short turns, she'd been robbed of almost everything. She was penniless by the time she crossed the finish line.

"In the very end, you got too greedy and lost it all..."

"You really are hapless. Maybe you're cursed?"

Clan and Theia felt a great deal of consternation over this result. They'd both done what they could to try and make sure Yurika didn't end up dead last, but they couldn't manage to keep her from diving headlong into failure.

“Well, uh... How about I go make lunch instead?”

Worried about what might happen if they let Yurika loose in the kitchen, Koutarou offered to make lunch himself. He’d finished second to last, after all.

“That might be for the best.”

“I have no objections.”

Theia and Clan were both okay with this plan. Koutarou wasn’t the best cook in the world, but he could at least make edible food. They had absolute faith in that.

“Yeah! I think that would be for the best too!”

Yurika, meanwhile, was just happy that she didn’t have to make lunch anymore. The smile on her face was so bright that it made her earlier sobbing look like crocodile tears. Yurika thought cooking was a pain, so she was ecstatic to get out of doing it. The discerning Maki, however, shot her a suspicious glance.

“Yurika... I mean, it’s no surprise that no one thinks you can cook, but are you really okay with that?”

“Whaaat?! Really?!”

When Maki pointed out what was really going on, Yurika froze. She hadn’t realized that everyone else had capitulated under the assumption that she couldn’t cook. She then puffed out her cheeks and turned to Koutarou.

“Satomi-san, I changed my mind! I’ll make lunch after all!”

“I mean, you can try. But you really can’t cook, can you?”

Harsh as his words might have sounded, it wasn’t like Koutarou was trying to be mean. It was just that he’d been living with sloppy Yurika for over a year and a half now, and in that time, he had never once seen her cook a proper meal. Moreover, her grades in home ec were remarkably bad. If it turned out that she was actually good at cooking, it would be nothing short of a miracle. Koutarou wasn’t willing to gamble on that, which was why he’d offer to take her place.

“I can too cook! I always helped make the food when it was just me and Nana-san!”

However, Yurika gave him an unexpected rebuttal. Back when she was working as Nana's cooperator, the two of them had lived together. In order to help out, she did her part with the housework and cooking.

"Y-You don't say..."

"You're awful, Satomi-san. Of course I can't cook as well as you can, but I'm still a girl. It's not like I can't cook at all."

"Well, I'm sorry."

"Nana-san even complimented me once! She said I was good at pouring the hot water!"

"Like I said, I'm sorry."

"I'll show you! I'm gonna go make lunch and you're gonna think it's delicious!"

Yurika was now full-on sulking. As a girl of age, she was offended that Koutarou had just assumed she didn't even have basic cooking skills. She wanted Koutarou to see her as a woman, and she couldn't stand the idea that he thought she was lacking in some way. That stirred up what little pride she had, giving her the motivation to march right into the kitchen and get to work.

"I wonder if we'll be okay..." muttered Clan.

"If Yurika is that confident, we'll probably be fine," assured Maki.

"We can only hope..." sighed Theia.

Maki was feeling fairly optimistic, but Clan and Theia not so much. They largely knew Yurika as their sloppy, careless, ill-starred compatriot—and once you have that image of someone, it's hard to shake. Moreover, they had a far different sense of taste than Maki, who'd been born in the slums and was raised living off of anything she could.

After Yurika entered the kitchen, things were surprisingly quiet for a spell. She didn't immediately come running to ask for help, so Koutarou and the others assumed that everything was fine. Maybe Yurika could actually cook after all. But sadly, their hopes were misplaced. Yurika had only gone silent because she was at an absolute loss. By the time Koutarou and the others realized what was

really going on, the damage was already done.

“You... You want me to eat this?”

“Uwaaaaah!”

Yurika broke down sobbing on the tea table. Suspicious smoke was rising from the black masses sitting on everyone’s plates.

“What is this black stuff?”

“Considering it’s fully carbonized, it was probably something plant-based.”

“Oh, I know! It’s yakisoba!”

“Ah, I see! So that’s why it’s kind of long and thick!”

“Uwaaaaaaaah!”

The black mass in question was indeed charred yakisoba. Of course, the “charred” part wasn’t intentional. Yurika knew her culinary skills were relatively basic, so she’d wanted to make something simple. It was a good idea in theory, but she’d cooked it too hot and used the wrong ingredients, then got distracted by what was going on in the inner room and ended up taking her eyes off the frying pan. The end result was the piles of black something or another currently sitting on the tea table, burned just like Yurika’s pride.

“I hate it! I hate that we live in a world where a girl’s worth is determined by her cooking! I hate whoever invented cooking!”

Yurika banged her fist on the table as she grieved. She was mortified over her poor showing. It was clearly her own fault for slacking off during home ec classes, but she couldn’t admit that. No, all she could do was cry and take her anger out on the table.

“W-Well, it’s fine, isn’t it? For a girl not to be able to cook, I mean.”

But even if everything about this was demonstrably Yurika’s fault, Koutarou couldn’t just sit there and watch her cry. With a forced smile, he did his best to console her. Hearing this, Yurika looked up at him skeptically.

“Then would you date a girl who can’t cook, Satomi-san? Would you marry a girl like that?”

At that, the other girls all turned to look at Koutarou too. Theia, Clan, and Maki weren't especially skilled when it came to cooking either, so they were interested to hear how Koutarou would respond and waited for his answer with bated breath.

"Of course. That's not what's really important. Besides, anyone can get better at cooking if they practice. If you want to learn it, then jump right in. But if there's something more important to you, I think it's better to focus on that."

Koutarou spelled out his feelings without hesitation, and the three of them all immediately looked relieved. With lighter expressions, they began pondering whether they should pursue cooking or not. Yurika's response alone was different, and she pressed Koutarou further.

"Okay, Satomi-san, imagine there being two girls with similar personalities and looks, and who you have similar relationships with."

"Go on."

"One of them can cook and one of them can't. Which one would you choose?"

"Well... the one who can, right?"

"Uwaaaaaaaah!"

"H-Hey, Yurika!"

"I'm screwed! Waaaaaaaah!"

Realizing that she was undoubtedly the worst cook in room 106, Yurika broke down in tears once more.

When Shizuka returned to room 106, the first thing she noticed was the strong, lingering odor of artificial seasoning. It wasn't an unfamiliar smell in room 106, however. Yurika frequently fixed instant noodles, and that's what Shizuka chalked the smell up to. Little did she know what she was walking into.

"What's going on here?! Why are you eating that stuff?!"

For some reason, everyone was eating instant noodles. They were all sitting around the tea table slurping them down somberly—except for Yurika, who was

crying as she ate. It gave off almost a surreal vibe.

“Well, you see, Yurika...”

Koutarou paused eating for a moment to explain the situation to Shizuka, but...

“Shizuka-san!”

That was when Yurika pounced on her.

“Y-Yurika-chan?!”

“Please! Please teach me how to cook!”

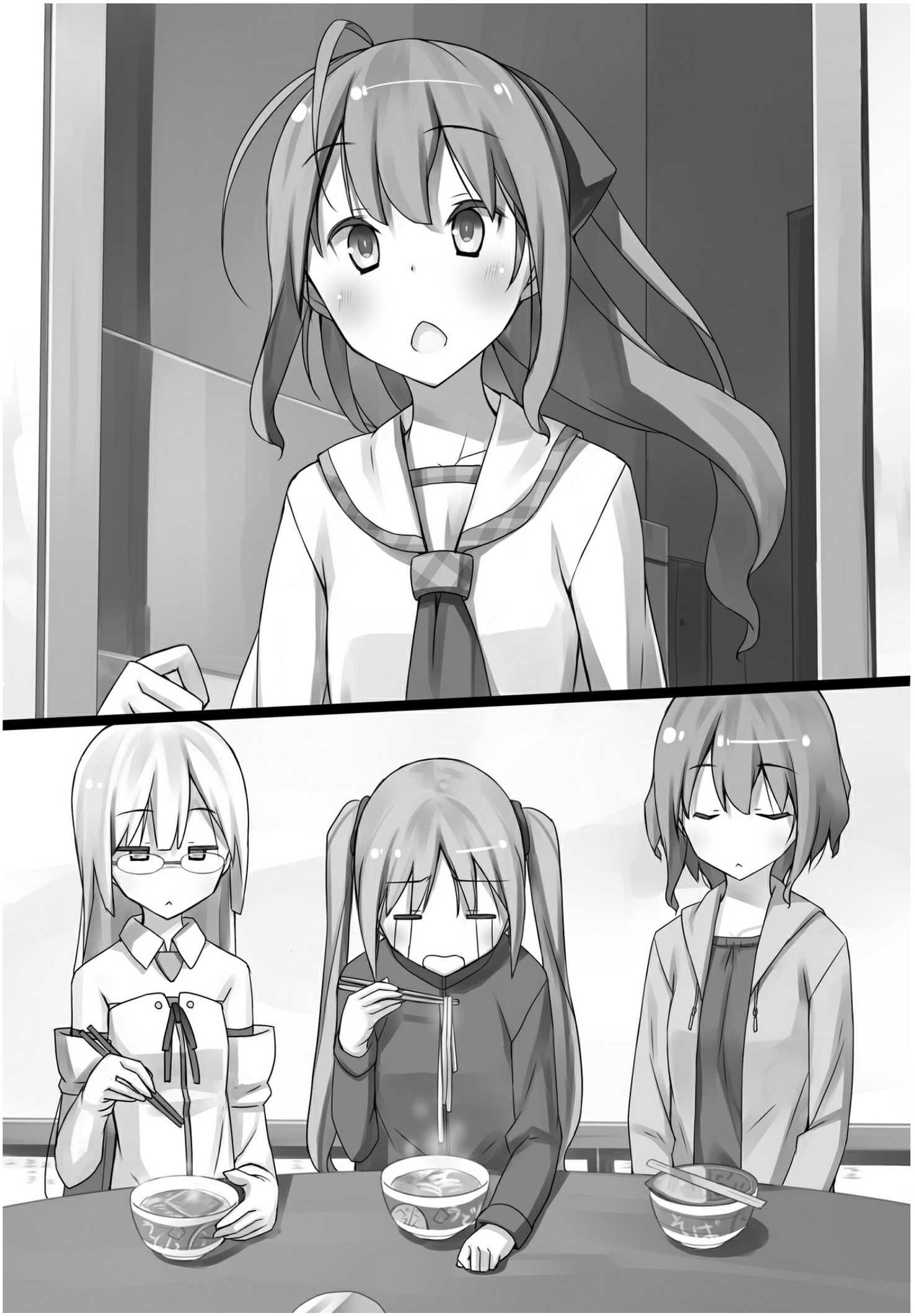
She clung to Shizuka, desperately and tearfully begging her for cooking lessons. In terms of pure skill, Kiriha was a better chef, but Shizuka was part of the home ec club at school. She had plenty of good, basic recipes under her belt and even knew a thing or two about teaching them. She’d be the ideal cooking instructor.

“Pretty please! Teach me how to cook so I don’t have to live my life in shame!”

“...Satomi-kun, what on earth happened here?”

“Actually...”

There, Koutarou filled in the perplexed Shizuka, Yurika clinging to her and begging all the while. By the time he got to the end of the story, the other invaders had returned home to the apartment as well. As a result, the population of the room swelled to ten. In order to alleviate the sense of crampedness, some of the girls used Clan’s invention to sit on the walls and ceiling. This strange sight was becoming common in room 106 as of late.



“...And that’s how today’s lunch ended up being instant noodles.”

“I see. You really are luckless, Yurika-chan.”

“Augh...”

“I understand how you feel, though.”

“Then please! Teach me how to cook!”

“Yeah, you bet. You can count on me.”

“Thank you, Shizuka-san! Thank yooouuuuu!”

Once she’d heard what was going on, Shizuka readily agreed to Yurika’s request. She sympathized and completely understood why Yurika wanted to be able to cook something the man she loved would enjoy... and how bad it must have felt to screw that up. Moreover, Shizuka was a genuine go-getter and had no complaints about putting herself in a situation where she might be privy to some premium gossip. All said and done, she was more than happy to help Yurika out. But that wasn’t to say she was without any ulterior motives.

“In return, would you participate in the cook-off with a dish you’ve learned?”

“The cook-off?”

“That’s right. The home ec club is going to be holding a cook-off during the cultural festival.”

Shizuka also wanted to help Yurika as a way to get her to participate in the home ec club’s cook-off. It would soon be October, and the cultural festival was right around the corner in November. The home ec club that Shizuka was part of participated every year.

Last year, they’d put together a recipe book that doubled as a report of their club activities. While discussing what to do this year, someone had thrown out the idea of hosting a cook-off. Thinking it would be fun to go all out for a change, the other members were almost instantly on board. There was just one problem. The home ec club was technically only a society like the cosclub and knitting society, so they didn’t have nearly enough participants to have a compelling event with just their members.

It was unfeasible to try and recruit enough new members to pad their ranks before the competition, so the home ec club had instead decided to rally volunteers for the event. To maximize their chances of getting enough bites, they'd also decided to expand the participation requirements. They'd even take volunteers from outside the school, and there were no restrictions on age, gender, et cetera. They wanted to get as many people involved as possible.

"Even if I practice lots and lots, would it really be okay for me to dive right into a cook-off...?"

Yurika was uneasy and deep in thought as she wiped away her tears, but that was when the smiling Sanae called out to her.

"You don't have to worry. I'm doing it too."

"You are too, Sanae-chan? Then... maybe I'll be okay..."

Hearing that Sanae would also be participating made Yurika feel better about it. If it was the kind of competition where even beginners were allowed to compete, then she wouldn't need to be as nervous. She knew for a fact that Sanae wasn't much better at cooking than she was, after all.

And if Sanae-chan is there, I won't be so embarrassed if I do poorly...

With a reassuring friend by her side, her thoughts about the competition slowly grew more and more positive. Moreover, surely it was only fair to help Shizuka out if she was going to teach her how to cook.

"You'll be fine! Just be brave."

"Yeah... I'll try."

Convinced by Sanae's confident smile, Yurika decided to participate in the cook-off alongside her. Having a friend on your level was always encouraging. They could fail together and Yurika wouldn't have to feel so bad. Misery loves company, right?

Little did Yurika know her line of thinking was fundamentally wrong. It was true that Sanae-chan was a terrible cook. Even if she had the time and opportunity to cook, she'd much rather be off doing something fun. But that wasn't true for Sanae-san. As a sickly girl, she'd rarely been able to leave the

house when her condition was at its worst. To keep herself amused, she'd learned all about housekeeping from her mother, Kanae—which had of course included cooking. Thanks to that, Sanae as she was now already had basic cooking skills, putting her leaps and bounds ahead of Yurika.

"Thank you, Yurika-chan! Let's work hard and get you cooking!"

Excited to have someone else signed up for the competition, Shizuka clasped Yurika's hands with a big smile on her face.

"Thank you so much, Shizuka-san!"

Yurika squeezed Shizuka's hands in return, blissfully agreeing to participate in the cook-off without any foresight into the fact that she'd inevitably take last place there too.

Yurika and Sanae weren't the only ones Shizuka recruited, either. As it turned out, she'd already gotten Kiriha, Ruth, and Harumi on board too. They'd been absent from the apartment that morning because they were attending a meeting about the cook-off.

"Since it was only the first meeting, all we decided on was a date for the event and a rough schedule for what needs to be done between now and then," explained Kiriha.

"Kiriha-san is amazing, you know? She calculated how many people and what kind of supplies we'd need when and where in an instant. It was a huge help because the home ec club only had rough estimates otherwise," added an admiring Shizuka.

She'd gotten Kiriha involved in the cook-off because she held her culinary skills in high regard, but Kiriha brought a lot more than just cooking to the table. With Kiriha now helping in planning the event, surely it would be a huge success.

"Well... compared to a surface invasion," said Koutarou, "I guess managing a contest is easy."

"So it is," replied Kiriha with a smile. "I always enjoy a little mental exercise, but I suppose getting the chance to do so under the circumstances is just proof

of how peaceful things are right now.”

Kiriha was enjoying herself. In an ideal world, she would only ever have to use her wits and intellect for carefree things like these. Putting her brain to use in battle wasn’t ideal for anyone. It wasn’t what she really wanted. No, she much preferred days like this where the most serious thing she had to worry about was the success of the cook-off.

“Oh, I know, Kasagi-san!”

As the conversation came to a natural lull, Harumi suddenly clapped her hands together and smiled. This got everyone’s attention, and they all turned to look at her.

“Why not have Theiamillis-san and the others participate too?” she asked.

“Us too?”

“What?”

“Even me?”

The three girls who had largely stayed out of the conversation thus far—Theia, Clan, and Maki—suddenly looked at each other in confusion. Eyes wide, they then turned back to Harumi.

“Since the six of us are already participating, why don’t all nine of us do it and have fun together? The more, the merrier, right? You need more participants anyway, right, Shizuka-san?”

“You’re right about that!”

Shizuka took Harumi’s idea and ran with it. Since she’d already gotten most of the Corona House crew involved, she figured she might as well go for broke and try and get everyone on board. She then turned to the three girls in question with a smile.

“So how about it, Theia-chan, Clan-san, Aika-san?”

“Cooking, huh? I’ve never done much of it...”

Theia had learned to cook as part of her formal education back home. She wasn’t totally unskilled, but such detail-oriented tasks weren’t exactly in her

wheelhouse. The fastidious Ruth, however, was a natural in the kitchen. Accordingly, Theia had always left meal prep to Ruth while her own skills went largely unused. It made her uncertain about whether or not she'd really have anything to bring to the contest.

"Don't you think you should, Your Highness?"

"Ruth..."

"It wouldn't be a bad idea to try your hand at Earth-style cooking at least once simply for the experience. It's a good opportunity to learn something about the culture and people of this planet."

Ruth tossed a sly glance Koutarou's way as she said that, giving Theia just the push she needed. She knew Ruth was right.

"Hmm, that's a fair point. It's also a good opportunity to demonstrate my strength to the Earthlings! Shizuka, sign me up! I'll be participating too!"

"You got it! What about you, Clan-san?"

"I'm not sure..."

Clan had never once cooked a meal her entire life. She'd been fully dedicated to science since an early age, and had always left everything she considered nonessential—like cooking—to her subordinates. Of course, she understood cooking from a technical perspective and was fully capable of pressing the "on" button on her automated cooking machine. But she had no confidence in her ability to actually *make* something. It was quite a quandary. And as she pondered what to do, Koutarou grinned.

"No way. Clan can't cook."

"Wh-Why would say that?!"

"If you could cook, then I wouldn't have had to suffer like that."

When Koutarou and Clan were stranded in past Forthorthe—and all the while on their journey home—Koutarou had been the one continuously taking care of her. He knew better than anyone that Clan was completely worthless when it came to housework. And cooking was out of the question.

"How rude! Even I can cook!"

“You don’t have to be so stubborn. You’re just digging the hole.”

“Cooking is simply culinary science! I’ll show you!”

“Try not to blow anything up, will you?”

“Ignore him, Shizuka! I will be participating in the contest as well!”

And so Clan agreed to take part in the cook-off, eager to prove Koutarou wrong. Her singular goal now was to cook something that Koutarou would be forced to acknowledge as good. And she got straight to work. Immediately after telling Shizuka to sign her up, she started running some calculations.

“You got it, Clan-san!”

Shizuka smiled at the sight and turned to Koutarou, discreetly giving him a thumbs up for his help in motivating Clan.

“Now, what about you, Aika-san?”

Last but not least, Shizuka turned to Maki. She was the only one who hadn’t had an immediate reaction to the idea of the contest.

“I don’t have any confidence in my cooking, honestly.”

“Really? But...”

There, Shizuka leaned in and whispered something in Maki’s ear. When she did, Maki’s expression changed entirely.

“Really?!”

“Yeah.”

“Then I’m participating! I’m definitely participating!”

Shizuka had whispered something of great significance to Maki. Something that prompted her to immediately agree to sign up for the contest. She was now fully motivated.

“Okay, then it’s decided! Everyone will take part in the cook-off together!”

Satisfied with the increase in participants, Shizuka flashed a big smile. Between the members of the home ec club and the girls from 106, they’d have about a dozen participants now. The girls seemed like they were getting excited

for it now too, so it was shaping up to be a heated competition.

“Give it your all, okay?”

Koutarou smiled and offered his encouragement as he watched over the girls. He didn’t want to get in the way of their fun, so he was more than content to enjoy the events of the cook-off as a spectator. He simply sat at the table, sipping on his tea as the chaos unfolded.

“Satomi-kun, why are you acting like this has nothing to do with you?” asked Shizuka.

“Huh?”

“You’re going to be the judge.”

“What?! This is the first I’m hearing about this!”

“I recommended you, and it was agreed upon with seven votes.”

Of the seven votes for Koutarou as judge, five of them came from Shizuka herself, Kiriha, Sanae, Harumi, and Ruth. Since the home ec club didn’t even have five members, those five votes alone were enough to constitute a majority.

“Why me?!”

“Because I thought you’d do it if I asked.”

“W-Well, you’re not wrong, but...”

As Shizuka had guessed, Koutarou had no intention of declining. He couldn’t refuse to help out with something the girls were so invested in. That didn’t stop him, however, from being surprised at his sudden nomination for presiding judge.

“Besides, we had our reasons.”

“Oh yeah?”

“You’re actually secretly popular with girls, Satomi-kun. I said you got seven votes, didn’t I? That means it was more than just the five of us that wanted you to do it.”

“What?! Wait, no... That can’t be.”

Koutarou's eyes were open wide in disbelief. He could scarcely believe what he was hearing.

"I'm sure you're not aware of it yourself, but... ever since the plays, you've gotten quite a reputation, I'll have you know. So if you're the judge for the cook-off, then I think we can rake in more participants and spectators."

That was really why Shizuka had recommended Koutarou. She was pinning her hopes on the school's Blue Knight to pull in a crowd. Her gut told her that if she could just get Koutarou to wear blue on the day of the cook-off, it would draw even more attention. However, there were a few parties who didn't think much of this idea—predominantly Theia.

"Say what you will, but Koutarou's never so much as gotten a love letter. He didn't even get any chocolates on Valentine's Day other than from us. Oh, and the one from the kindergarten children addressed to 'Baron Demon.' So don't you think you're setting your expectations of him a little too high?"

Theia had a good point. Even after the plays and his supposed rise in popularity, girls had never really approached him. He didn't receive any of the typical signs of affection. No love letters, no chocolates, no nothing. With that evidence against him, it was hard to believe he'd be able to pull in any participants or spectators at all.

"Listen, Satomi-kun comes off as a big, scary guy. It's hard for girls to approach him directly. Besides, he's always acting like an idiot."

Nevertheless, Shizuka was confident. When she'd gossip with girls from other classes during PE, Koutarou's name would come up from time to time. She was sure he had the potential to attract people, even if it wasn't obvious.

"Yeah, Koutarou's definitely not as easy to talk to as Glasses-kun," chimed in Sanae.

She then circled around and clung to his back—something she knew she wouldn't be able to do if he was as popular as, say, Kenji. So as far as she was concerned, it was a good thing Koutarou was unpopular and she wanted it to stay that way.

"I was actually planning on asking Mackenzie-kun to be a judge too."

“I see. So Mackenzie will be the big draw on the surface, but there will be people who are really secretly coming to see Koutarou.”

“Yup! So please help us out, Satomi-kun!”

“I don’t really mind, but...”

“All right! Thanks, Satomi-kun!”

He was still concerned about being able to meet Shizuka’s expectations, but he had no real reason to refuse. When he at last nodded at Shizuka, she gratefully put her hands together and bowed her head. And with that, it was sealed. All nine girls would be participating in the home ec club’s cook-off, and Koutarou would be serving as a judge.

The cultural festival would be held over the course of two days. In keeping with tradition, the final day would be national Culture Day, November 3rd. As it was now late September, the girls had just over a month to prepare. They each decided to use their time wisely.

Harumi’s plan was simple. While she could cook, it wasn’t a skill she practiced daily because she still lived at home with her parents who took care of her. Because of that, she wasn’t as skilled as Ruth, Kiriha, or Shizuka. Accordingly, she chose a dish she knew she could make well within the time constraints of the cook-off. She wanted to be able to turn out something with confidence. Something she knew that the judges could enjoy. That was her own, very Harumi-like strategy.

“What should I do? Maybe I should be a little adventurous... But that would only make things more difficult...”

Harumi was currently standing in a particular corner of the supermarket, deep in thought with her brow visibly furrowed. While she almost always seemed calm, she looked incredibly serious right now. She felt her girlish pride was on the line, so even she was starting to get fired up about the contest.

“Maybe I should give it a try after all... It’s better than not doing anything...”

Harumi was going to make Salisbury steak. It was a standard dish you could find in any recipe book and she had made it countless times before. But if she

cooked it following a recipe to a T, it wouldn't really feel like *her* cooking. That's why she wanted to add her own little twist to it, and that's what she was standing in the store contemplating.

"All right, let's start with practicing. Then I can decide where to go from there..."

Harumi was thinking of putting cheese in the patty to spice it up, but doing so would increase the difficulty of the dish. Adding cheese to the mix would affect the temperature at which she had to cook the patty. Moreover, depending on the amount and type of cheese she used, the time it took to melt would differ, adding a whole new level of variability to the cooking process. Melted cheese would make an exquisite filling, but if she cooked it too hot or too long, the patties might explode. It wouldn't look good, and the surprise filling would lose all its effect if the judges could see it before they cut into the dish.

All of these thoughts spun through Harumi's mind as she stood, lost deep in thought, in the cheese section of the supermarket. It made her realize that adding cheese to the Salisbury steak might actually be out of her skill range.

"If it's too difficult, I could use cheese sauce... Yeah, let's do that!"

And so instead, she came up with a simpler alternative. Rather than risking it all trying to make a more interesting version of the dish, she could make it like she was familiar with and then add her own personal touch at the end—cheese sauce. It was a simple, elegant solution. A very Harumi-esque compromise.

Ruth, meanwhile, had a different dilemma altogether. She was second only to Kiriha in terms of culinary skill, but she had a major disadvantage working against her—she was an alien. She was still learning about food and cooking on Earth. She was a quick learner, but still sometimes got thrown for a loop by things that were new and different to her.

"That being the case, it would be safest to stick with cooking something I've made before..."

Ruth was currently sitting in the classroom alone, poring over recipes. She'd brought up a list on her bracelet—a faithful record of everything she'd ever cooked.

“If I sort by frequency... it’s about as I expected.”

If she was going to cook something she was familiar with, the top candidates were curry, yakiniku, hand-rolled sushi, Salisbury steak, pasta, and omelet rice—all dishes that children loved. Since several residents of room 106 had childish tastes, it didn’t surprise Ruth any that those were the dishes she cooked most often.

“Now that I think about it, Harumi-sama mentioned that she was making Salisbury steak... Other contest-friendly dishes would be curry and pasta, or even omelet rice. Hmm... Maybe I’ll do curry...”

Data-oriented Ruth was leaning towards curry, the dish she’d made the most times since coming Earth. There was just one problem.

“Curry is a beloved family dish, but there’s always variation between households... That could be an issue.”

Ruth was smart enough to see the pitfall not accounted for by the data. As far as the computer was concerned, curry was curry. But the kind of curry everyone loved was the kind of curry they grew up with. In other words, it might be extraordinarily difficult to make a single kind of curry that would please all the judges. That could prove to be her downfall.

“All right, then let’s go with omelet rice instead!”

Compared to curry and pasta, omelet rice would be more straightforward in terms of expectations. It was a simple dish consisting of a thin omelet wrapped around chicken fried rice, decorated with ketchup on top—everyone knew that. While it wasn’t as popular as curry, Ruth figured omelet rice might actually score her higher points with the judges because it would be much easier to cater to all of their tastes.

“Omelet rice will make for a nicer presentation, too.”

Ruth had a secret weapon up her sleeve that she’d only be able to use with a dish like omelet rice—a miniature flag. Unlike curry and pasta, omelet rice could be dressed up in all sorts of cute, playful ways. And she just so happened to know that one of the judges was extremely partial to food made fun.

Harumi and Ruth were strategically planning on putting out well-loved dishes, but Kiriha was taking a different approach. Rather than competing with a single dish, she was planning on filling an entire tray. She'd start with rice and miso soup, and serve it with side dishes and vegetables to make it a complete meal. She was going for the full home cooking experience.

"Ane-san, why don't you use your special move, ho?"

"Or do you have an ace up your sleeve, ho?"

"No, I won't be doing anything special like that. I'm aiming for the ultimate ordinary here."

"The ultimate ordinary, ho?"

"I don't get it, ho!"

"I mean a meal you'd never get tired of even if you ate it every day. I want to make the ultimate version of everyday cuisine."

Kiriha wanted to make the very best version of something unexpected—ordinary food. She wanted to make something people never seemed to get tired of, but she wanted to make it in a way that took it to the next level. The "everyday" aspect of her plan was key, however. She didn't want to use any fancy cooking techniques or specialty kitchen gadgets, and she would only use commonly available ingredients. She wanted to make something with universal appeal. It would be mind-blowing in its simplicity and familiarity, sort of like the ultimate comfort food. She would take the ordinary and make it extraordinary.

"Psychological kitchen warfare, huh? The taste of mom's cooking is always best!"

"Yeah! Even curry and Salisbury steak would get old if you ate them every day, ho!"

"Indeed. And besides... it wouldn't be very mature of me to go all out at a time like this, would it?"

Kiriha smiled at the haniwas who were looking up at her in admiration. Part of the reason she was challenging herself to elevate the ordinary was so that the other girls stood a chance with staple dishes like Salisbury steak and curry. She

had by far and away the most cooking experience, so if Kiriha got serious and played her trump cards like the haniwas had suggested, she would likely dominate the competition. So in order to keep things fair and fun for everyone, she was challenging herself to do something extraordinary.

Of course, that's not all there is to it...

Desire flashed in Kiriha's eyes as she smiled. The truth was that there was a certain someone she wanted to make the ultimate ordinary dish for. She knew he'd have a soft spot for anything that tasted like what his mother used to make for him, and she wanted to be the one to give it to him. And to that end, she was going to put her heart into this. It was personal.

Sanae knew how to cook well enough—or, rather, Sanae-san did. When she began researching her dish for the contest, Sanae-chan got bored and left her body, dumping all of the work on Sanae-san. Even now, Sanae-san was out buying ingredients while Sanae-chan was just carefreely floating around nearby.

"Hey, Sanae-chan, you should think about this together with me."

"You're the one who said you wanted to participate, so you do the thinking."

"You don't have to be so mean..."

"You're not a kid anymore, so why don't you start working on becoming independent already?"

"What good would it do to become independent from myself?!"

Feeling lonely on her own, Sanae-san tried again and again to get Sanae-chan involved. Sanae-chan, however, didn't know the first thing about patience—she wouldn't exactly make a great partner in the kitchen. Moreover, Sanae-chan wasn't interested in meat or vegetables. Something less substantial had already caught her eye.

"More importantly, let's buy some cream puffs! Let's take some home for Koutarou and the others too!"

"'More importantly'? Can't you at least take this a little seriously...?"

"Look, you can think up anything I can, so give it your best shot."

“But...”

Hearing those cold words coming from her other half, Sanae-san’s shoulders drooped. Meanwhile, Sanae-chan was so taken by the sweets department that she flew from shelf to shelf with sparkling eyes. But nevertheless, Sanae-san wanted Sanae-chan’s cooperation, so she began thinking of how to get her help.

I’m probably the only one that had to start this far back...

Feeling a little defeated, Sanae-san started observing Sanae-chan. From what she could see, Sanae-chan was particularly interested in snacks and sweets. Currently, it seemed she couldn’t decide between cream puffs or eclairs.

“Huh? Now that I think about it...”

That was when Sanae-san came up with a groundbreaking idea. It would give her direction in her cook-off dish, and, hopefully, earn her Sanae-chan’s cooperation in making it.

“Hey, Sanae-chan!”

“Hmm? Are we going home already? Let’s get five each of cream puffs and eclairs and take those with us!”

It turned out Sanae-chan had had a brilliant idea of her own. She wanted to eat a cream puff herself and give Koutarou an eclair so she could taste both.

“Hold on. I’m thinking of making cream puffs or some other sweets for the cook-off.”

“Cream puffs?!”

All of a sudden, Sanae-chan—who had shown zero interest in the cook-off before now—whipped around and looked at Sanae-san with wide, starry eyes.

“You can *make* cream puffs?!”

“Yeah. It’s not as hard as you’d think.”

“I want to make some! Wait... can we really enter cream puffs in the cook-off?”

“Why not? Baking is a form of cooking too. Besides, I think we’ll get a pass

since there won't be as much competition."

Now that she'd finally gotten Sanae-chan's attention, Sanae-san went in for the kill. She spoke in a bright, confident voice, determined to get Sanae-chan on board.

"All right, then it's decided! We're making sweets for the cook-off!"

"Yeah, let's do our best!"

"Then let's buy cream puffs and eclairs for research and go home!"

"Heehee, okay!"

Was Sanae-san using Sanae-chan, or was Sanae-chan using Sanae-san? It hardly mattered. They'd finally identified a common interest and happily returned home with cream puffs and eclairs. From here on out, they'd be a united front when it came to the cook-off.

While Theia had agreed to participate in the cook-off, she'd only ever had basic cooking lessons. Moreover, they were in Forthorthe cuisine. Japanese-style cooking was still completely foreign to her. She knew how dishes were supposed to taste, but she had no idea how to make them. And so she turned to her childhood friend for help.

"The cultural gap is so wide that I'm hardly confident right now."

"I understand how you feel, Your Highness."

"So I want you to teach me an easy recipe that even I'll be able to make."

"Understood, Your Highness. I'll teach you some basic dishes."

"Please and thank you, Ruth. You're the only one I have to rely on."

Ruth happily obliged Theia and immediately began reviewing recipes with her. Taking Theia's skill level into account, Ruth pulled together a list of dishes she thought looked nice. Once she had the list printed out, Ruth placed the recipes on the table to show Theia.

"You know how to cook rice, right, Your Highness?"

"Yes, I've done that several times before."

“Then this is my number one recommendation.”

Ruth pointed to one dish in particular, and Theia read the name aloud.

“Cold shabu-shabu?”

“Yes. It’s made using boiled meat and raw vegetables.”

“So it’s like meat with salad on it?”

“That is more or less correct. As long as you are careful not to over boil it, you can avoid the worst results.”

“Then the rest would be up to how the sauce turns out, huh? Hmm... I think you’re right. This seems like something even I could make.”

Theia nodded approvingly. Even she could make a salad. As for the shabu-shabu part, she’d only need to choose a meat that would stand up well to boiling. The biggest question mark was the sauce, but she had over a month to practice that part. All in all, it was a recipe that would be hard even for a beginner to screw up, but one that would still present well.

“However, there are a few potential flaws,” cautioned Ruth.

“Like what?”

“If it’s cold on the day of the cook-off, the dish won’t be received as well.”

“Ah, it is a cold dish, after all.”

“It also might be perceived as too easy.”

“I see... To counteract that, maybe I could make a soup as well.”

“That’s a good idea. It would be nice to pick something that you can serve hot or cold based on the weather that day... How about some potato potage?”

Potato potage would also be a simple, easy to prepare dish. All Theia would have to do would be to lightly stir-fry some potatoes and throw them in a blender. But despite its easy prep, it would be a nice, hearty dish that would go great with cold shabu-shabu.

“Hmm, let’s go with that. All that would be left then is making some rice.”

“Yes. And if you have some time to spare, you could even add a twist to the

rice.”

“Like seasoning it?”

“Making rice balls might be a good idea as well.”

“Ah, yes. Thank you, Ruth. With your help, this is already shaping up to be a wonderful meal.”

“I’m always happy to help, Your Highness.”

“And I’m always grateful.”

“You flatter me.”

From there, the two friends continued discussing Theia’s cooking strategies for a while. Ruth was forgoing her own practice to help out Theia, but she didn’t seem to mind. Ruth’s glory would be Theia’s and vice versa. Even if they were entering the competition separately, they felt like they were in this together.

As Yurika was learning how to cook from Shizuka, they would be making the same dish for the cook-off. Yurika would learn from her while she practiced, which would make things easier for both of them.

“Yurika-chan, you’ll cut your hand like that. You have to hold it like this.”

“Like this?”

“Not like that. Like this.”

“You mean like this?”

“Come here. Take a good look at my left hand.”

“So you bend your fingers?”

“Yeah, that’s it.”

When it came to cooking, Yurika was a completely blank slate. She had no skills whatsoever, so Shizuka was teaching her everything from the ground up. Yurika wasn’t a quick learner by any stretch of the imagination, but under the circumstances, she was making up for that with sheer passion. Slowly but surely, Yurika was picking up the cooking skills she’d need to compete.

But... how did she survive when she was with Nana-san?

Shizuka was wondering how it was really possible that Yurika didn't know the first thing about being in the kitchen. She'd once lived with Nana and even claimed she'd helped out with meals and such... So how was it that Yurika knew nothing about housework, much less cooking? It was so baffling to Shizuka that she couldn't help asking Yurika about it.

"Say, Yurika-chan..."

"Yes?"

Yurika paused her chopping and set down the knife before turning to Shizuka. She'd already cut her finger because she wasn't paying enough attention to what she was doing once, and she wasn't anxious to repeat that mistake.

"When you were living with Nana-san, didn't you ever cook?"

"I was only ever boiling water, microwaving things, and stuff like that. Nana-san is a genius, after all."

"I see..."

"If I packed the fridge with ingredients, Nana-san could whip up a meal in the blink of an eye."

The division of labor in their household was simple—Yurika did the shopping and Nana did the cooking. Nana was prodigious in many ways, and cooking was just another skill she had under her belt. She worked so swiftly Yurika hardly had any time at all to sponge anything off of her.

"Geniuses really are incredible, huh?"

Shizuka flashed a dry smile. She could understand why Nana had been that way. It was probably just faster for her to cook herself than to take the time to teach Yurika how to cook. And with the spare time she had after that, she could teach Yurika magic instead. Considering their situation, it was the most logical and effective thing to do.

"I think so too. Especially Nana. She was always alone..."

"But you're not. So as for you, let's just proceed one step at a time, okay?"

“Yeah... Thank you for your help, Shizuka-san.”

After chatting for a moment, both girls got back to cooking. Since Yurika took things slowly, the pork cutlets wouldn’t be ready for some time yet. But neither of them were unhappy about that. As things stood, they were in the leisurely position of being able to take their time. It was a blessing.

Maki was keenly aware of her own cooking abilities, and knew from the start that there was no way she’d be one of the top contenders in the cook-off. But even so, going into the competition with the intent to lose was just too pessimistic. Instead, she set her sights on doing her personal best and began working towards that. That would be a victory unto itself.

“Satomi-kun, what kind of dish would you like to eat?” she asked Koutarou during a break at school.

In response, he sighed a little and held his head.

“Aika-san, you didn’t come over here to cheat, did you?”

Since Koutarou was a judge, asking his preferences would be a clear violation of competition etiquette. He couldn’t believe that’s what she was really doing.

“It’s fine, isn’t it? With my skills, I won’t be winning, but I’d still at least like to be able to please one of the judges.”

That was what Maki had decided would be her personal goal for the competition—to get one of the judges to say her dish was delicious. Experience played a huge part in cooking, and in that regard, it was similar to magic. So even if Maki wasn’t a bad cook, she knew she simply didn’t have the experience some of the other competitors did. She knew she wouldn’t be able to please all of the judges, but she was in hopes she could at least impress one of them. And if she pandered to just one judge in particular, it wasn’t really like it would affect the results of the cook-off. That’s why the usually honest, earnest Maki had come to Koutarou and set her mind to a little cheating.

“I hear what you’re saying, but I still can’t condone it.”

Normally, Koutarou would’ve turned Maki away, but like she said, it was pretty obvious who the top contenders would be already. And, sadly, she was

not one of them. In other words, she'd agreed to participate just to help the home ec club out and pad the numbers. Even though pandering to one of the judges would technically be cheating, it was just Maki's way of having a little fun with the competition. Koutarou couldn't bring himself to be all that mad at her.

"If I seriously wanted to cheat, I'd just use magic."

"That's fair... Okay, I'll work with you."

Koutarou was hesitant for a moment, but Maki again had a really good point. As a magical girl, if she really wanted to play dirty, she had all kinds of tricks at her disposal. But Maki would never do that. She didn't want to manipulate the contest results; she just wanted to cook something Koutarou would like.

"So, what kind of dish would you like to eat, Satomi-kun?" she asked again with a wide grin.

"Let me think..."

Urged on by Maki, Koutarou began pondering what he would most like to eat. The first things that came to mind were dishes he rarely got the chance to eat.

"Something like burgers or dogs. And big ones."

"You're fine with something like that?"

Maki was surprised. She hadn't expected an answer like that, but Koutarou leaned over and whispered to her...

"I'm getting three square meals a day as it is, so I never really have the opportunity to indulge in fast food anymore. Don't get me wrong—I'm really grateful for all the home cooking, but sometimes you just feel like a burger or something, you know?"

Koutarou's current diet consisted of nothing but lovingly made, home-cooked meals. As a result, he rarely ever ate fast food anymore. He'd still stop in a burger joint or something every now and then when he was out with the guys, and that was it. But it wasn't like he'd lost his taste for it, which was why he'd answered Maki the way he had.

"Ah, I see... Heehee."

When the lightbulb came on, Maki smiled. Really, Koutarou was just asking for an indulgent break from his healthy eating habits every now and then.

Now that I think about it, Satomi-kun likes cola, too.

He was mostly drinking healthier things as of late, but Maki knew Koutarou loved a good cola. Thinking about that, it made perfect sense he'd want to splurge on fast food from time to time too.

"That's a big help. Thanks, Satomi-kun."

"Do your best. I rarely get to eat junk anymore, so you don't have to get high quality meat or anything. Nothing fancy here."

"I know. You want something bad for you, right?"

"That's *exactly* what I want."

"Heehee, okay."

Now that she'd found a sense of direction, Maki was getting pumped for the cook-off. There would likely be few other participants that dared to take the junk food route, so Maki was quite sure she'd be scoring points with Koutarou in that regard. All she had left to do now was perfect cooking an indulgent, trashy treat he'd love to eat.

Polishing one's culinary skills before a cooking competition seemed like the only road to success. You'd have to actually cook something to win a cook-off, after all. However, of all the participants, there was a certain someone who forsook the obvious path and was getting ready in a different way. It was the second princess of the Holy Forthorthe Galactic Empire, Clariossa Daora Forthorthe. Really, you could say she had her sights set on something much bigger.

"Heh heh heh... It's preposterous to rely on cooking things by hand in the age of modern science!"

Indeed, Clan was trying to revolutionize cooking from the ground up with technology she'd invent herself. And not just any technology, either—nanotechnology. In order for it to work according to her theories, she'd need

two things. The first would be an automated cooking machine compatible with nanomachinery. The second would be nanomachines capable of interacting with taste buds to simulate taste. With those two things, she should be able to create the ultimate culinary experience with technology alone. It would be the dawn of a new era of cooking.

"Saying love makes good cooking is just unscientific! Me? I put my faith in science, and science and I will create the best dish anyone's ever eaten!"

Clan tapped away at her computer as she worked on the program for the nanomachines. Her fingers danced across the keys like a pianist on the ivories. In almost no time at all, she'd written tens of thousands of lines of code and counting. Her programming was beautiful too; it was the very embodiment of logic and efficiency. She was certainly living up to her reputation as a scientist.

"Let's start with curry—the first step on my journey to complete and utter domination!"

Currently, Clan's nanomachines were only programmed to recreate the flavor of curry rice. But once she perfected that and expanded their programming, they would be able to replicate all sorts of other gustatory data. If all went according to Clan's plan, it wouldn't be long at all before these microscopic machines busted the culinary world wide open. It would be revolutionary.

"Just you wait, Veltlion! You said I couldn't cook, but I'll make you eat those words!"

Little did Clan realize that her grand ambitions, however, also came from the heart. In her own strange, science-y way, she was pouring love into her cooking too. She'd just gotten too worked up to notice.

Just like the cook-off participants were having meetings about the competition, so too were the judges. To that end, Koutarou and Kenji made their way to the student council room one afternoon after school. They'd be meeting the other judges here, including the principal, a popular female teacher, the student council president, the school's star athlete, and more. They'd even brought in a CEO, a swordsmith, and other locals from outside the school. All in all, they'd recruited a diverse team of some of the most prominent

figures in the area.

“I’ve gathered you all here today to talk about the schedule and the progress of the cook-off...”

Presiding over the meeting was the president of the home ec club, who both looked and sounded stiff. Not only had she just recently been appointed president, she was speaking to a room full of important people, some of which were practically local celebrities. Being thrust into such a big job, it was only natural that she was nervous.

“If you have questions about any part of today’s meeting, please feel free to speak up. Now then, first off is...”

But nervous as she was, she swiftly got down to business. This was the only time they’d been able to arrange for everyone to meet, so she would have to make this quick. There was no time to waste.

The cook-off would be held on the second and final day of the cultural festival, the afternoon of November 3rd. At first the home ec club had only been planning on making it a small event, but after Kiriha’s intervention, it had turned into a much bigger affair. As things stood now, it was set to be the grand finale of the cultural festival.

Considering the time it would take to cook and judge, the cook-off was expected to take four hours. Taking the season into account, the evenings were starting to get quite chilly after the sun went down. Accordingly, the cook-off was scheduled to start at noon so that it could be over and done with before dark. The venues would be the gym and the home economics classroom. The opening ceremony and judging would take place in the gym, while the actual cooking would be done in the kitchen section of the home economics classroom. A large monitor would be temporarily installed in the gym to showcase the participants’ progress in real time. The judges would be observing them from their post on the gymnasium’s stage.

All told, the home ec club managed to recruit 24 participants for the cook-off both internally and from outside the school. The contestants ran the gamut as far as age, gender, and occupation were concerned. They even had a few

professional chefs in their ranks, meaning there were plenty of strong contenders. Lots of people had shown up to prove they were the best in town.

The rules for the cook-off were simple. Each participant would make a dish to be submitted for judging within a three-hour time limit. Ingredients would be provided, but bringing your own was also allowed on a case by case basis. Things were a little relaxed in the interest of fun.

As for the judging, there was a panel of ten judges that could each award up to ten points apiece, for a maximum total of 100 points per dish. The general scoring rubric was as follows: dishes of average taste and quality were five points, delicious dishes were worth seven, and anything unpleasant would be worth three. With that as a go-by, the individual judges would then award exact scores based on their own personal tastes. For example, if a dish tasted okay but had excellent presentation and aesthetics, it could be bumped up from a five to a seven in terms of scoring. That should keep everything fair and easy.

Judging would commence when everyone was done cooking or the time limit was up—whichever came first. That was the one strict rule of the otherwise laidback cook-off. With the post-festival celebrations waiting, they couldn't afford to go into overtime even if they wanted to.

Once the judging was over, the top six competitors would be brought up on the stage and congratulated. The top three would receive trophies, and the school was abuzz with speculation about who would be taking the biggest one home.

And so the president politely explained how the event would play out. Several questions came up along the way, but fortunately there were no major hitches and the meeting concluded uneventfully a little after 3PM. With some time to kill now, Koutarou and Kenji headed out to the shopping center by the station.

"So what did you need here, Kou?"

"I'm having a bad feeling about this, so I was thinking of investing in some insurance."

"Insurance?"

“Yup. This is the place.”

Koutarou had brought Kenji along to the biggest drugstore in the city. There was something specific he needed to buy.

“What? Did you hurt yourself or something?”

The first thing that popped into Kenji’s mind was that Koutarou might be injured. As active as he was, Koutarou ending up hurt was a relatively common occurrence. Maybe he just needed to refill his stash of ointments and bandages at home.

“Nah.”

“Then are you sick? No... I guess that never happens.”

Koutarou’s immune system was as robust as he was. He’d never seriously been sick. The worst he’d ever gotten was a cold.

“Of course not.”

“Then what are you buying? General purpose stuff?”

“Nope. This.”

Koutarou walked with Kenji over to the medicine shelves, filled with all manner of pills and tablets.

“Are you sure you’re not sick, Kou?”

“I’m sure I will be after the cook-off.”

“Huh?”

Unsure what Koutarou meant, Kenji’s eyes widened behind his glasses. Seeing this, Koutarou pulled a particular box from the shelf and presented it to him.

“And I’m sure you will be too. That’s why we’ll be needing this.”

“Stomach medicine? W-Wait a second... What are you saying?”

Kenji examined the box and read the label. Koutarou had handed him stomach medicine. The nice kind, even.

“You know that Theia and the others are participating, right?”

“Yeah. Kasagi-san asked them to.”

“Only about half of them actually know how to cook.”

“What about the other half?”

“They’re walking time bombs set to go off on November 3rd.”

“Whaaat?!”

The lightbulb finally came on for Kenji. Koutarou had come to buy stomach medicine in preparation for the fallout of said mass bombing. The frugal Koutarou was so sure of the severity of the attack that he hadn’t even hesitated to go for the more expensive name-brand medicine.

“I-Is it really gonna be that bad...?”

“That’s what it’s looking like. So make sure you’re ready on the big day, Mackenzie.”

“Kou, you...”

Kenji was surprised. Not because the girls might end up making something dangerous at the cook-off. No, there was something bigger going on here.

“Hey, Kou, you realized you just made a pretty explosive statement, right?”

“Explosive? Heh, yeah, I guess I did.”

Koutarou nodded. He had just said half the girls were walking time bombs, after all.

“No, I meant about your relationship with women.”

“I didn’t say anything about that, though.”

“Yeah, you totally did. You just said that only half of them can cook, which means you know how good they all are at cooking. If not, you wouldn’t have been able to make that kind of statement.”

“Well, yeah, I guess. I have known them for more than a year and a half now after all.”

“It means more than that, idiot. If you’re *that* familiar with their cooking, that means they’ve been cooking for you regularly.”

“And that’s an explosive statement?”

“Of course it is! Not even I got that lucky with any of my girlfriends.”

That was something only someone like Kenji with a wealth of dating experience could truly appreciate. In this day and age, it was difficult to get a true grasp of someone’s cooking skills, even when dating. There were plenty of ready-made dishes that only needed to be thrown in a pan, and there were even specialized kits and tools for making sweets with no experience required. And that was just the tip of the iceberg. Kenji even once had a girlfriend who bought cookies from the supermarket once and took them home to stick them in the oven and burn them just a little so she could act like they were homemade. In other words, he thought it was impossible to casually get a genuine feel for someone’s culinary abilities. There were some people who’d do anything they could think of to *pretend* to be able to cook.

“But you’re claiming you have intimate knowledge of all their cooking skills. In other words, you basically just copped to dating all of them.”

“No way, man. I’m not like you. That’s the kind of thing you get to know about somebody when you’ve been friends for long enough.”

Koutarou flatly denied Kenji without hesitation. Kenji might’ve had a point if they were talking about some girl Koutarou had just met, but that wasn’t the story with the invaders. They’d all started off on rocky terms, so they knew each others’ good and bad sides whether they liked it or not. Their relationship had changed gradually over a long period of time together, making Kenji’s speculation moot.

“Besides, Mackenzie, you know how good I am at cooking, right? This is no different.”

“If you say so...”

Kenji flashed a wry smile and nodded, but his mind was elsewhere.

Sounds like someone’s building a bridge over that moat around his heart...

If the girls that surrounded Koutarou had now gotten as close to him as Kenji had, it was safe to say Koutarou now had nine more genuine friends. And if they continued to follow the same path to Koutarou’s heart that Kenji had, their next move would be trying to prove to him that they’d always be there for him—just

like Kenji once had.

But even though they're following after me, that doesn't mean they're gonna follow through the same way I did. I bet you're none the wiser, Kou...

That would be the key difference in Koutarou and Kenji's relationship, and Koutarou's relationship with the girls. They would pick a very different way to prove to him they'd always be together. A way that would make their relationship all the more special. But for now, under the mask of friendship, they'd be able to get closer to Koutarou than anyone else.

"What are you laughing at, Mackenzie?"

"It's nothing. So, Kou, you buying that?"

"Of course. That's why we came here."

"Just one bottle, though?"

"Yeah, you're right. Let's get enough for all of the judges."

"Then another box it is."

In the end, Kenji chose to stay silent on the matter. Things would be more fun that way, and he considered it a little bit of revenge for constantly being called a playboy.

Morning finally dawned on November 3rd, and it was shaping up to be a day of impeccable weather. It wasn't excessively cold, the sun was shining bright, and the sky was a crystal clear blue. By noon, it was almost even a little warm.

"Now, everyone, it's the moment you've all been waiting for! It's time for the Kisshouharukaze High School cook-off!"

The voice of the former president of the home ec club echoed through the PA in the gym. She'd be acting as master of ceremonies for the afternoon. Koutarou was sitting at the far end of the line of judges, listening to her brief the crowd on how the event would go down.

"The cook-off will be a simple contest of skill between competitors both from our school and our town who are confident in their cooking."

The former president was standing just down the stage from Koutarou, holding a microphone. Her smooth voice and cool confidence were the result of a lot of practice.

“The dishes they serve will be judged on two important factors: Do they look good, and do they actually taste good? Will there be a dish that can make the mouths of our ten judges water? Or will they be going home hungry? The ones to decide will be our 24 contestants waiting for the signal to start back in the kitchen of the home economics classroom!”

The big monitor behind the former president displayed a live feed from the home ec classroom. It utilized the relay system the broadcasting club and the shopping street’s youth association had worked together to create.

Up on the monitor currently were the contestants—all 24 of them. The majority of them were students from the school, but there were some locals and other unfamiliar faces in the group. It included a variety of people from around town who really enjoyed cooking and, of course, Clan.

“Our contestants will be required to use the ingredients produced right here in Kisshouharukaze City—some of which we’ve provided and some of which our contestants have brought in themselves—to create a dish to be submitted for judging within the time limit. In the event that they don’t make it in time, they’ll automatically be disqualified. We have a three hour block, so factoring in the time it will take for judging, our contestants have a grand total of... two hours to cook! They’ll have to bring us their dishes within that time, and the timing will be a key element of the competition!”

After the camera filming the home economics classroom slowly panned across the room to show all of the participants, it stopped to focus on a corner of the room where all of the ingredients had been lovingly stacked up in a neat display. They’d been provided by the shopping street, highlighted by the note at the bottom of the screen that now flashed, “Special thanks to Kisshouharukaze shopping street!”

“Now, let’s meet our contestants! First off is the pride of the home ec club, the new president!”

Once the former president had thanked all the sponsors and gone through all

the other ceremonial song and dance, she moved on to introducing the individual participants. There were 24 of them, more than a third of which were from room 106. As such, it wasn't long before a familiar face popped up on the monitor.

"Contestant number 4, the resident strong arm of the home ec club, Kasagi Shizuka-chan!"

"Oh please, Senpai!"

"Despite having a black belt in karate, she also aims to be a master in the kitchen. She's a rare breed, striving for perfection in both martial and culinary arts! We're secretly hoping we'll see her split a pumpkin with her bare hands today."

"That's not going to happen!"

The first of the bunch to be introduced was Shizuka. While it wasn't much of an introduction, her back and forth with the former president gave Koutarou a glimpse into her relationship with the home ec club. He felt sure they probably had a lot of fun during club activities.

"Let's move on to the next contestant before she splits the camera first!"

"Maybe I really should chop it in half..."

Replacing the mumbling Shizuka on screen was a mature-looking girl with long, silky, black hair. It was Kiriha.

"And here we have contestant number 5, Kurano Kiriha-san!"

"Thank you for having me here today."

"Kurano-san is good friends with Shizuka-chan, who we just met, and signed up for the competition at Shizuka-chan's request. But don't underestimate her! According to an inside scoop we got from Shizuka-chan, Kurano-san here is an ace when it comes to domestic perfection. Shizuka-chan even said she'd make the perfect wife, so we're expecting to see some impressive cooking from her today."

"My... If you keep flattering me like that, you're going to make me blush."

"With that demure and elegant personality, even I'd like to marry her! She

might just have suitors lined up out of the door when this is all over!”

Kiriha continued to put up her perfect honor student act at school. Not a soul had seen through her yet, so at moments like this where she was the center of attention, she made especially sure to put her best face forward.

“Moving on, we have contestant number 6—Sakuraba Harumi-san!”

“U-Um, hello there. I’m Sakuraba Harumi. I’ll do my best today!”

Unlike Kiriha, Harumi was a nervous wreck. She was enjoying watching Kiriha’s introduction and was taken aback when the emcee suddenly switched to her. Her knees were shaking and her voice was quaking. She’d developed a thicker skin after acting in the school plays, but even so, she was still a painfully shy girl by nature. As a result, she ended up appearing like a humble and relatable girl rather than a princess in the interview.

“You may know Sakuraba-san as the heroine of the plays that the drama club put on last year. I know lots of you have had your eye on this rising star. Wouldn’t we all just like to be her knight in shining armor? It seems she’s drawn quite a crowd today too. So, Sakuraba-san, please give us a word for your fans in the audience.”

“Um... Well, I’m a little nervous, but I’ll be trying my hardest. I hope you’ll be cheering me on.”

By the end, Harumi made a valiant recovery as she finished her introduction with her usual charming, calm smile and a deep bow. It instantly sent a buzz through the audience. As it turned out, she really did have some fans in the audience.

“Thank you very much, Sakuraba-san. Next up is contestant number 7, Higashihongan Sanae-san!”

“That’s me, the future winner of the cook-off!”

The complete opposite of Harumi, Sanae opened with a bold declaration of victory. Or rather, Sanae-chan did. From what Koutarou could tell, she’d stepped up and let the introverted Sanae-san take a backseat.

“Wow, what confidence! Higashihongan-san actually comes from a venerable

family that runs a traditional shrine with a long history. She's been receiving rigorous domestic training since childhood, so that confidence of hers is undoubtedly more than just hot air. She might just be this contest's dark horse!"

"I'm the favorite, you hear? The favorite! Everyone, place your bets on me!"

"Ahahaha, please don't actually place any bets! The home ec club would like the day's events to be good, clean fun."

"Anyways, I'm going to win!"

"Thank you very much. That was the very confident Higashihongan Sanae-san, everyone."

Sanae-chan was her usual energetic self, so Sanae collectively wasn't showing the slightest hint of nervousness.

Sanae might actually take an unexpected win today...

Even the best chefs in the world could crack under the stress and pressure of a timed competition. But not Sanae. She was primed and ready to go, giving her a surprising advantage.

"Hey, Kou..."

After Sanae's introduction, Kenji—who was sitting next to Koutarou—nudged him with his elbow and leaned in a little so he could whisper to him.

"What?" Koutarou whispered back.

"This isn't sounding as dangerous as you said it'd be."

As far as Kenji could tell, it looked like Shizuka, Kiriha, and Harumi were all good cooks. He was pretty sure he'd seen them all bring their own homemade lunches to school, so that made sense. The only question mark was Sanae, but if what the emcee had said was true, she couldn't be that much of a disaster.

"They're front-loading it. It'll all be downhill from here."

Koutarou smiled wryly as the next contestant appeared on the monitor.

"Next we have some students from overseas! Since they're childhood friends, we'll introduce them together! Here we have Theiamillis-san and Ruthkania-

san!”

Indeed, the next contestants to be introduced were Theia and Ruth. Since the story of how they’d ended up at Harukaze High was the same, the former president of the home ec club decided to save some time and feature them together.

“I’m Theiamillis. Feel free to call me Theia.”

“And I’m Ruth. Thank you for having both me and Theia-sama here today.”

“They both transferred here last year and are excellent students. Theiamillis-san is an ace at several sports, and Ruthkania-san is a math wiz. Since the focus of today’s events will be on cooking, we’re hoping to catch a glimpse of a different side of them.”

Theia stood tall and proud, while Ruth carried herself in a much more modest fashion. The difference in their personalities was obvious.

“You... mean those two?” Kenji asked tentatively.

“The real danger is Theia. She grew up a pampered rich girl, so her specialty is eating rather than cooking.”

“Ah, gotcha. Theia-san does seem like the impatient type.”

Kenji had been around Theia long enough to know she could be brash. They’d been classmates for a year and a half now, after all. Her handwriting was big and manly. And when she swept the classroom, she was always pretty rough with the broom. It was hard to believe she’d be good at something like cooking, which inherently required a delicate touch.

“Right? Her cooking’s gonna be risky business, I guarantee it. Be prepared.”

“Gotcha.”

“Ruth will be just fine, but the real danger’s yet to come.”

Kenji gulped and glanced over at the monitor Koutarou was pointing to. While the two of them were talking, the people on screen had changed.

“And here’s our next contestant! The girl who needs no introduction—the sweetheart of the cosplay society, Nijino Yurika-san!”

“Hello, I’m Nijino Yurika. Uh, um... I’ll do my best to create something delicious.”

“Excellent! A round of applause for Yurika-chan, everybody!”

Since she was forced to participate (read: suffer) at almost every school event as part of the cosclub, Yurika was quite the icon around campus. In utter defiance of her hopes, her misfortune had actually made her popular.

“Nijino-san is participating too?!”

The moment Kenji saw Yurika on the monitor, his expression contorted in fear and worry. Of all the girls, he never dreamed Yurika would be participating in the cook-off. He knew good and well how clumsy she was.

“That’s right. And as judges, we’ve gotta eat whatever she makes.”

“N-No way!”

“I see you’re finally coming to grips with the seriousness of the situation, Mackenzie.”

“Kou, gimme some of that stomach medicine you got!”

“You should have just asked from the start.”

Koutarou passed Kenji three tablets under the table so that the audience couldn’t see. Kenji tried to take them right away, but Koutarou stopped him.

“You’re supposed to take them *after* you eat.”

“Thanks, man. I owe you one.”

Kenji carefully wrapped the tablets in a tissue and slipped them into his pocket for later. Those three tablets were his only lifelines now.

“We also have another contender from the cosclub with us today—Aika Maki! She’s an old friend of Yurika’s, so she often plays her dark counterpart when they cosplay. She’d be playing the part of Yurika’s rival again today, but this time in the kitchen! Let’s hear from her! Over to you, Aika-san!”

“Um, I’m not as good at cooking as everyone else, but I’ve set my sights on my own personal goal for the day. I’ll do my best.”

“Attagirl! What earnest spirit! It’ll be hard to see her as a bad guy when she

cosplays from now on!”

After listening to Maki’s introduction, Kenji nudged Koutarou again.

“Kou, what about Aika-san?”

“Aika-san knows she’s not the best cook. She probably won’t try and do anything crazy.”

“So even her worst won’t be that bad?”

“Yeah, I don’t think we have much to worry about with Aika-san. Her chocolates on Valentine’s Day were pretty good, actually.”

“I’m cool as long as whatever she makes is edible.”

After realizing that Yurika was participating in the cook-off, Kenji knew he might genuinely be in danger. He was now a little on edge, frightened of the horrors to come. By comparison, Maki really didn’t seem that bad.

Should I tell him or not...?

But Koutarou knew that potentially the most dangerous competitor of all had yet to be introduced. Kenji didn’t know her, either, so Koutarou debated about whether or not he should warn him.

“Now let’s meet our competitors from outside the school! First up is Clariossa-san, Theiamillis-san’s cousin who’s visiting here on vacation!”

“Nice to meet you all. My name is Clariossa. Today I’d like to showcase my own personal version of going all out, so please look forward to it.”

Indeed, the only competitor that could possibly be more dangerous than Yurika was Clan. She was completely inept when it came to housework, and no one knew that better than Koutarou thanks to the time they’d spent together in past Forthorthe. She was like Theia but worse; she’d always had other people to do things for her and had never bothered to learn how to do them herself. That included cooking and cleaning.

That alone was worrisome enough, but after agreeing to participate in the cook-off, Clan had spent the majority of the last month shut up in her laboratory. Worse yet, she refused to say what she was doing in there. Koutarou was worried about what that was going to mean for her cooking.

Oh well. Whether I tell him or not, it's not like there's anything we can do about it now... Guess I'll just keep quiet.

In the end, Koutarou didn't divulge his information on Clan. Right now he was just going off of intuition, and telling Kenji would only make him more nervous. Letting him continue thinking Yurika was the worst threat would be a kindness.

Once all 24 participants had been introduced, the emcee moved on to the judges. With Koutarou and Kenji sitting at the far end of the panel, they were the last to be introduced. Since Koutarou didn't have anything to keep himself occupied while everyone else had their time in the spotlight, he was on the verge of yawning by the time the emcee got to Kenji.

"And our ninth judge here is Matsudaira Kenji-kun, the drama club's handsome star! The second generation Blue Knight, even!"

"Eeek, Mackenzie-kun!"

"Lean in shoulder to shoulder with Satomi-kun!"

"All right, all right... Come on, Kou. Smile for the crowd."

"Kyaaah! That's so hot!"

All kinds of cheering and squealing erupted in the audience when the emcee introduced Kenji. He happily played along, sending the whole gym into an uproar. Now that he was playing the male lead in the new "The Blue Knight and the Silver Princess," his popularity had hit new heights.

"This is a whole other level..."

Koutarou was in awe. He'd always known Kenji was a hit with the girls, but after his flawless showing during the school play, it was like he had a bona fide fanclub now.

But it's a big help in a way.

Koutarou honestly didn't mind the attention Kenji was getting. The more people obsessed over him, the more they slowly seemed to put Koutarou's performance as the Blue Knight out of their minds. And since he personally didn't want to be known for his acting, this was a considerable relief.

"You don't get it, Kou."

“Huh?”

“There are plenty of girls just using me to get to you because you’re so hard to talk to.”

“That’s not true.”

“The girls that like you are always like that. They’ve always been like that.”

When Koutarou and Kenji were together, lots of girls would always call out to Kenji. A good number of them, however, only did so because they weren’t sure what to say to Koutarou. Kenji knew this firsthand because he’d asked out one such girl before only to find out she was really after Koutarou the entire time. It had happened more than once before, actually. That’s why he suspected some of the girls cheering for him were actually secret fans of Koutarou’s.

“That couldn’t be true nowadays.”

“We’ll see who’s right soon enough.”

While Koutarou wouldn’t humor him, Kenji was confident. He knew the tell-all moment would be when the emcee introduced Koutarou.

“Last but not least, our tenth judge! He was the original Blue Knight that you still heard tale of in the halls of Harukaze High—Satomi Koutarou-kun!”

When she did, the otherwise noisy gym immediately quieted down. As the female students fell silent, so too did all the others. They were probably puzzled by the situation.

“See? I told you. I’m not like you. Everyone’s already forgotten about me.”

“That’s strange. That shouldn’t—”

Just as Kenji was about to try and defend himself, the hushed gym erupted in a ruckus.

“Kyaaaaah!”

“Blue Knight-samaaaaa!”

Koutarou wasn’t as good looking or as well mannered as Kenji, but the screaming girls had never forgotten his touching farewell with the Silver Princess. He’d moved their hearts. Captured them, even. Even now, over a year

later, they were still talking about it.

“Go ahead and wave already, Kou.”

“Y-Yeah...”

Though confounded by all of this, Koutarou lifted his hand and waved like Kenji told him to. When he did, the ruckus in the gym only got louder. This was exactly what Shizuka had predicted and was hoping for, but Koutarou could scarcely believe it even though he was seeing it with his own two eyes.

“I understand how you feel, everyone, but please calm down! Our 24 contestants are the real star of the show here today!”

Thanks to the emcee’s intervention, the venue finally began to settle down. When all was quiet again, the monitor switched to displaying the 24 participants standing in a line along the kitchen counter. Some of the participants looked nervous, but all of them looked serious. Tension was in the air as they waited for the signal.

“Then I believe it’s about time we begin! Let’s get to the glorious first annual Kisshouharukaze High School Cook-off! Get cooking!”

Kenji and Koutarou’s popularity was certainly impressive, but the shouting and cheering that erupted with the cook-off kick-off were the loudest yet.

With the cook-off in motion, multiple cameras set up in the home economics classroom began capturing the contestants at work. The former home ec club president and a local gourmet would commentate on the live feed and explain what the contestants were doing. Basically, they would keep the crowd entertained and informed until it was time for the judging.

“Three people to keep your eye out for are the entrants from the home ec club. Everything from their quick veggie washing to their sharp knife skills speaks to their experience in the kitchen.”

“Did you hear that, contestants? That’s high praise from cohost Kashiwabara-sensei! Keep it up!”

The first contestants to be spotlighted were the three members from the

home ec club, which consisted of Shizuka, another second-year, and a first-year. Their ardent training every day had paid off. Just the sight of their quick work in the kitchen made it clear how skilled they were.

“Kashiwabara-sensei, are there any other participants that have caught your eye?”

“Which would you like to hear first: the good impressions or the bad ones?”

“Let’s start with the good ones.”

“Then I’d have to say contestant number 5 and... number 9 too, I think.”

“Number 5 is Kurano-san and number 9 is Ruthkania-san.”

“They both look like they know their way around the kitchen. Their work is both efficient and elegant. In terms of the skills were seeing in the kids, those two girls probably rival the members of the home ec club.”

“And what about compared to the adults?”

“I’d say the biggest threat is... contestant number 24, the owner of the shopping street chicken joint Bird Stop. He’s very immature for his age. If that old man gets serious, there’s no way you kids could beat him.”

“I’ve heard he’s here to reveal a new dish for his restaurant. If he wins, he says he’s planning on bowing out.”

“Ah, to bump the others up in the rankings. He sure is considerate.”

The big favorite to win was the owner of a local chicken place. Trailing behind him were the members of the home ec club, Kiriha, and Ruth. They also gave a neighborhood foodie high marks. The seven of them would likely round out the head of the pack.

“So, what about your bad impressions, Kashiwabara-sensei?”

“I’d have to say contestant number 10 by a long shot. And also number 8.”

“Number 10 is Yurika-chan and number 8 is Theiamillis-san. Yurika-chan was expected, but—”

“What’s that supposed to mean?!”

“What got your attention about Theiamillis-san?”

“Well, she’s admittedly a complete amateur. She looks like she’s struggling to remember something she was taught. Then there’s the way she holds a knife. It looks less like cooking, and more like some kind of military demonstration.”

“It’s true... It certainly looks like the cabbage she’s chopping would be screaming.”

“Still, her dish might not be all that bad.”

“You didn’t sound very confident of that a second ago.”

“Well, she’s chosen a smart thing to cook. She picked a beginner-friendly dish. If she’s got that kind of an eye for strategy, she might be able to pull through this.”

“In other words, she might have some kind of tactical edge. And what do you think of Yurika-chan?”

“She just doesn’t stand a chance.”

“Whaaaaat?! Why would you say something like that?!”

“For starters, she’s not focused on her cooking at all.”

“You’re right. It looks like she’s listening to us instead.”

“Ugh...”

“On top of that, she looks really tense. Can you see how her hands are trembling?”

“I sure can. She better be careful with a knife around those jittery fingers. Just watching her’s making *me* nervous.”

“I’m doing my best here!”

“Yeesh, let’s move on. I can feel my lifespan shortening just watching her.”

“I agree.”

“U-Ugh, that’s so mean...”

In the battle for last place, Yurika was currently in the lead by a wide margin. Her risky knife handling was keeping everyone else at a distance—literally. There was just something about her that screamed “there’s no way I’m

winning.” Theia was arguably no better off, but she’d chosen a smart dish to try and make up for some of her weak points. In the cohost’s opinion, she probably wouldn’t be the one placing dead last.

“And are there any other participants that stuck out to you?”

“Contestants number 7 and 12.”

“That would be Higashihongan Sanae-san and Clariossa-san.”

“Just what is going on with these two?”

“What do you mean?”

“For starters, that number 7 girl... What she’s doing is absurd. The way she’s holding her cooking chopsticks is outright strange, and the way she’s whisking... She looks like a child splashing around in water.”

“Now that you mention it... It does look like some childish mischief.”

“Her cooking also flies in the face of all convention. The order she mixed her ingredients, the spices she’s picked, the temperature of the oven... I don’t get it.”

“It’s certainly an unorthodox approach.”

Sanae’s two personalities were confusing the emcee and her older cohost. Sanae-san was the one taking the lead, though because of her introverted personality, she didn’t want to be the one in the spotlight. So as a compromise, she’d withdrawn and let Sanae-chan take over while she gave her instructions behind the curtain. Sanae-chan was working hard, but she didn’t have anywhere near the skill Sanae-san did. The result was an odd sight indeed. Everyone apart from Koutarou and the others from room 106 was surprised to see it.

“Then how about number 12, Clariossa-san?”

“What she’s doing isn’t cooking at all. I hate to say it, but I think it’s some kind of kitchen sorcery instead.”

“Huh?”

Indeed, the only competitor that puzzled the hosts even more than Sanae was

Clan.

“Just look at her. It looks like she’s about to peel the potatoes, right?”

“Yeah...”

“She pulled out a pot. Will she be tossing the skins in there, or will she be putting the peeled potatoes in there instead?”

“Neither.”

“Huh? Wait, what?! She didn’t even peel them! She just threw them in as is!”

“She didn’t even clean them.”

“And now it looks like she’s started shaking the pot for no reason!”

“That might make sense if she was making salty sweet powdered potatoes, but this is where it gets interesting...”

“Clariossa-san is now removing the lid and dumping her potatoes out on a cutting— Wait, whaaat?! What is going on?!”

“Oh my. Somehow or other, the potatoes are now both peeled and cubed.”

“What an unbelievable sight! I think you’re right! You could hardly call this cooking! It’s some kind of a trick or straight-up magic... Whatever it is, it’s in a whole other league! What an unexpected development!”

Only a small handful of people witnessing this unfold understood Clan’s seemingly eccentric actions. Koutarou was one of them.



That idiot! So that's what she was working on!

He knew one of Clan's inventions when he saw it. He had no way of knowing how it worked, but it went without saying that it was some kind of advanced Forthorthian science. It might have looked like any ordinary pot, but it was really cutting-edge technology.

"It seems like she's going to cook her whole dish with just that pot."

"What can I say? If I had that pot, I'd do the same thing."

"Same here. If this were an infomercial, I'd be buying ten."

So far, the cook-off was shaping up to be a wild ride. For better or for worse, nobody could look away. The excitement in the crowd was just building and building.

Surprisingly, the first one to finish her dish and present it for judging was Theia. While she may have been a little shaky in the kitchen, she'd chosen a simple and time-efficient dish to make. And in proud Theia fashion, she served trays with her dish on them to the judges. With Koutarou down at the end of the line, he was the last to get his.

"Oh, cold shabu-shabu and potato potage. There's something in the rice too. What is it?"

"It's diced chicken and root vegetables. The rice is seasoned, but it's a very Western seasoning."

"Hmm, you've put some thought into this."

"I know my own limits. Out of the options I had, this was the best one. Besides, the first meal of the day is always the most delicious."

Koutarou listened to Theia's very straightforward and Theia-esque explanation as he took a bite. Theia silently stared at him as he did. Her uneasy expression made her look like a child giving away a birthday present for the first time.

"How is it? It's good, right?"

“Yeah... Wait, I can’t answer that!”

“R-Right. Sorry.”

Theia wanted to know what Koutarou thought and instinctively asked him, but this was still only the beginning of the cook-off. The judges weren’t allowed to reveal their opinions yet.

“I have to finish eating it first, so be a good girl and wait for your official scores.”

“Y-Yes, I’ll go do that. Phew...”

Though she hadn’t gotten an answer, Theia felt somewhat relieved. When she thought about it, Koutarou’s face when he took his first bite wasn’t too bad. At the very least, he didn’t hate it. That alone was enough to feel like a victory for Theia.

The next contender to submit their dish for judging was Maki. The easy meal she’d chosen was a cinch to fix, but she hadn’t gotten as much of a chance as Theia had to practice.

“Oh, so you’ve made dogs and fries. Yeah, that’s it. This is what I wanted to dig into.”

“I even tried to season it like you like, Satomi-kun.”

Though Maki had entered the cook-off, her primary goal in the competition was to make a dish to please Koutarou. To that end, she’d spent a lot of time researching his tastes, which had inevitably cut into her actual practice time. As a result, she finished second even though she’d had by far the easiest meal to prepare.

“This is totally cheating, though.”

“But it’s fine, isn’t it? The other judges aren’t going to think much of my cooking, so I wanted to try and at least get full marks from one judge.”

Not only had Maki picked out a dish she’d known Koutarou would like, she’d cooked and seasoned it to his tastes. It was exactly what he would’ve made if he’d cooked it himself. It was grilled to perfection and coated with an extra

shake of salt and pepper. The cabbage stuffed into the bun next to the dog wasn't raw, but stir-fried in butter. The fries she'd made were served with a sprinkle of curry powder on them for a little kick. All in all it was a heavy meal, so it likely wouldn't be receiving a high score from any of the judges other than Koutarou. But that made perfect sense, considering it had been tailor-made for his unrefined palate.

"How many points I think this is worth is a secret."

"I know, but I'm sure you'll give me a good score."

Maki's wistful, innocent smile tugged at Koutarou's heart almost enough that he was willing to give her ten points on the spot. It would make her dish hard to judge impartially.

The third to submit their cooking was Ruth. Beginning with her, the dishes the contestants turned in would start getting more complex. Ruth had made omelet rice and vegetable soup, and when Koutarou saw it coming down the table, his eyes lit up.

"All right, it's omelet rice!" he cheered.

"Please calm down, Ma— Erm, I mean Satomi-sama. The food won't run away," said Ruth as she staked a miniature flag in his omelet.

"I can't wait to dig into your dish, Ruth-san. It looks delicious."

"My, my... Go right ahead, heehee."

"I'd be happy to!"

"Please enjoy."

The fluttering flag sticking out of it was a nice touch, but the omelet rice looked delicious all on its own. Koutarou knew it had to be good if Ruth had made it, and didn't hesitate to wolf it down at his usual pace.

"Yup, that was good."

"Satomi-sama, you're not supposed to divulge your opinion now."

"My bad."

Ruth had lightly stir-fried the rice with some tomato puree and chicken, then wrapped it up in a thin, buttery blanket of soft egg. She then drizzled a rich demi-glace over the entire thing, creating what could truly be called luxurious omelet rice.

The soup she made to go with it was a blend of fresh, flavorful chicken stock and fragrant mirepoix. Since the omelet rice was dense and rich, the delicate soup balanced it out nicely.

No matter how he cut it—or tasted it—Koutarou had no complaints about Ruth's cooking. But he couldn't tell her how he rated it just yet. There were still plenty of other dishes to be judged.

"If you don't stop there, you won't have enough room to eat anyone else's cooking."

"Yeah, you're right. That's too bad."

Koutarou saying that alone gave away his opinion of the dish. Ruth couldn't help smiling as she watched him scribble away on the scorecard.

Two other contestants finished after Ruth, and Shizuka was next after them. She presented a meal starring a traditional pork cutlet. She was trying to win the hearts of the male judges with a hearty meal, but it was clear the dish was delicious just based on its beautiful presentation. The home ec club's strong arm was really flexing her muscles today.

"Feel free to indulge in some extra sesame seeds on top. They'll change the aftertaste a little and make the dish more fragrant."

"Gourmet right down to the details."

"What can I say? I joined the home ec club because I wanted to learn to cook down to the details like that."

"That's fair."

As a finishing touch, Shizuka ground sesame seeds in front of the judges to sprinkle overtop the pork cutlet sauce. Not only did it kick the flavor level up a bit, it also added a certain degree of showmanship.

“I don’t think I’d have any choice but to give this high marks,” admitted Koutarou.

“Thanks, Satomi-kun,” replied Shizuka. “But how I really did today won’t be determined by just my score.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m talking about Yurika-chan. The real challenge will be seeing how close I got her to being able to replicate this.”

If Shizuka were really in the cook-off to win it, she likely would have chosen a different dish. She’d gone with pork cutlets because that was what she’d been practicing with Yurika. It had to be something simple enough that Yurika would stand a chance at making it, but Shizuka also wanted to push her into new territory. Pork cutlets were the perfect compromise. They were within Yurika’s skill range, and they would break her into learning how to deep-fry.

“I’ve done my best to beat the recipe into Yurika-chan over the past month, so keep your expectations high.”

Shizuka flashed a smile when she said that. A smile overflowing with hope and confidence in Yurika’s ability to put up a good fight.

“I see your first concern is always looking out for someone, Landlord-san.”

“Maybe it’s just in my nature. Also... I’m currently at my ideal weight, so you could say I’m really feeling myself,” said Shizuka, whispering the last part so no one other than Koutarou could hear it.

“Aren’t you going to fall behind if you end up putting everyone else first?”

“I’m sure I’ll be fine. Especially with you always keeping an eye on me, Satomi-kun.”

It was just like Koutarou said, but Shizuka was well aware that she put others ahead of herself. She felt like it was the only way she knew how to live. It was all she’d ever done, and she thought it was the right thing to do. Besides, she knew she would never really fall behind with Koutarou around to support her the way she supported everyone else.

“You’ll say something sweet to me later, right?”

“No, I won’t.”

“Then I guess I’ll just have to go pout in the corner.”

“Okay, okay!”

Shizuka firmly believed that this would be her own path to happiness.

Of the girls from room 106, Harumi was the fifth to appear. It couldn’t be said that she was fast or slow. She moved at the perfect pace for her personality, neither too reserved nor too assertive. That’s what Koutarou couldn’t help thinking as she served him her dish.

“Why are you smiling, Satomi-kun?”

“I was just thinking that you’re perfectly proper even at times like these.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

Harumi was indeed a proper and polite girl. Her manners were top tier, but when it came to dealing with someone like Koutarou who she’d known for a long time, she wasn’t quite as uptight. In a rare display, she puffed out her cheeks in dissatisfaction.

“I think it’s just part of who you are, Senpai.”

“Jeez, Satomi-kun. You really can be a meanie sometimes.”

“I think it’s just part of who I am.”

“Satomi-kun!”

Despite Harumi’s protesting, she looked as gentle and adorable as ever. She was trying to take a stand—she wanted to be taken seriously—but the sheer cuteness of it all undercut her. In fact, she was still politely serving Koutarou as she complained to him. The Salisbury steak she set down in front of Koutarou was masterfully stuffed with cheese, and looked almost as big as her puffed-up cheeks.

“This looks delicious.”

“Really?”

However, all it took was one word of praise from Koutarou and she instantly

went from pouting to smiling. Not only was it hard for her to assert herself, she'd never been very good at holding a grudge.

"Oh..."

Realizing that she was smiling when she was trying to be angry, Harumi forced her lips into a frown again. After Koutarou had already caught her smiling, however, it didn't have much effect on him this time.

"Come on, Senpai. I don't think you have to force yourself to be angry."

"Alaia-san said that it's a matter of pride!"

"Oh...? Then how about this?"

Unsure how to respond to Harumi's reaction, Koutarou decided to counterattack with a funny face. He pushed his cheeks together, and opened his eyes and mouth wide.

"Pfft!"

Seeing it, Harumi almost instantly burst into giggling. Based on her face, it was impossible to tell she'd ever been mad at all. She had a hard time staying angry, but it seemed she had no such resistance to laughter. Especially not when a good friend was involved.

"That's more like it, Senpai."

"Oh you, Satomi-kun..."

"I'll throw in an extra three points because you're cute."

"Please take this seriously, Satomi-kun."

Harumi raised a fist that didn't look like it could harm a fly and scolded Koutarou. It was starting to get hard to keep track of what kind of evaluation this was, but it was fun in its own way. Harumi walked away feeling quite satisfied.

The next one to submit their cooking was Kiriha, but Sanae was right behind her. It was more accurate to say it was Sanae-chan, however, as she'd left Sanae-san back in the kitchen to keep cooking.

“How are things going out here?” she asked.

“I think we’ve passed the halfway mark,” answered Koutarou.

“Hmm, then I guess it’s about time for me to present my dish too.”

“Then hurry up and get it out here.”

“Okaaay!”

With that, Sanae was gone as quickly as she came. She’d only poked her ghostly head out to see how the judging was going. Really, it was reconnaissance. She knew her dish would go over better in the latter part of the competition, so she was waiting for the right opportunity to present it. Unaware of this, Koutarou turned to Kiriha, who was currently setting her meal out for him.

“What did she make?”

“You’ll just have to wait and see.”

“I guess so, huh?”

“For now, I only want you looking at me.”

“Don’t make it sound so weird...”

“I meant it exactly the way it sounded.”

“Hey...”

“Heehee.”

Kiriha smiled as she set the final element—a bowl of rice—in front of Koutarou. She’d made a variety of commonplace dishes. There was a meat and potato stew, deep-fried tofu, boiled greens with dipping sauce, and finally rice and miso soup. There was nothing flashy or eye-catching. It was all food you’d expect to find on dinner tables everywhere.

“This is awfully plain for you.”

“Do I strike you as a plain woman, Satomi Koutarou?”

Kiriha reached out and gently pinched the back of Koutarou’s hand. It was her way of telling him she was unhappy.

“Since you’re hiding your true self at school, I figured you’d try and play that up here.”

“So what do you have to say about it knowing it’s coming from the real me?”

“It’s very much like you.”

“I’m happy to hear that. Now, please try it.”

Kiriha smiled and urged Koutarou to begin his judging. She wanted him to get a taste of everything while it was still warm.

“Whoa, what is this...? And this is just the start...”

Koutarou chose to start with the miso soup, but something seemed to strike him about it. He quickly set it down and began tasting the other dishes too.

“This is amazing. I don’t know what to say... other than this is real, honest-to-goodness home cooking at its best. It must’ve taken forever to perfect this.”

“You can tell?”

“I mean, I can’t say exactly what it is, but the taste... I see. So this is the personal challenge you decided to take on, Kiriha-san?”

“That’s right.”

There was nothing special about Kiriha’s cooking. She’d only used ingredients and utensils you could find in any kitchen. The real remarkable element in the equation was time. She’d clearly invested far more time than anyone could imagine in regular old home cooking. It was both perfectly simple and simply perfect.

Even the miso soup was divine. The broth was delicate. Just a sip of it tickled all of Koutarou’s taste buds with a hint of tuna. The soup was seasoned traditionally, but it certainly didn’t taste like any commercially available mix. Kiriha must have been through handfuls of brands before she found the ideal seasoning combination. Her goal—and the end result—was a flavor that complemented the broth without fighting it at all. It was a blend of seaweed and radish, but the radish had been prepared so that it wouldn’t be overpowering. It was so mind-blowingly high class that Koutarou had to doubt that it was even necessary to elevate miso soup like this.

“This is the most extraordinary version of ordinary food I’ve ever had, and that’s a compliment in every sense of the word.”

“Then I’ve succeeded.”

Koutarou couldn’t help praising Kiriha’s cooking. It was a wonderful everyday meal made in a wonderful Kiriha way. He was sure it was a feat only she could have accomplished.

“But why did you make something like this?”

“This meal is representative of how I want to spend the rest of my life. I’m pursuing this ordinary kind of happiness.”

“Yeah, I kinda get that...”

“It also affords a certain handicap in deference of Theia-dono and the others.”

“I see. You used this as a chance to make something that really meant something to you.”



“That’s right.”

Kiriha didn’t want anything flashy or over the top. She wanted the simple. She wanted what other people took for granted. And in that sense, her ideal life was represented in the meal she served Koutarou. She couldn’t be happier that he understood that.

Sanae showed not long after Kiriha exited the gym. Well over half of the contestants had been judged now, and there was less than an hour remaining of the cook-off. Sanae had been waiting for the right time to present her dish, and this seemed like it.

“Open wide, Koutarou! Eat your fill and praise me like crazy!”

“Hmm... So you made dessert, Sanae?”

“Eeheehee, I figured there’d be less competition with baked goods, and I thought you might be in the mood for something sweet right about now!”

Sanae was aiming to please the panel of judges by tickling their collective sweet tooth. A dessert amidst all of the other savory food being presented to them should really stand out. It should win her high marks and, as she’d said, mean she had few direct rivals overall considering it was unlikely anyone else had been so daring as to go the baking route. That was Sanae’s big plan to place in the top six.

“That’s surprisingly strategic for you, Sanae.”

“It’s high time you learn Sanae-chan’s true powers!”

“Whatever you say. Thanks for the food, though.”

“Eat until you’re full! Praise me until you get sick of it! And while you’re at it, increase my allowance!”

With Sanae expectantly staring him down, Koutarou picked up one of the sweets piled up on the plate and carried it to his mouth. She’d made a total of five different kinds: cream puffs, eclairs, chocolate mousse, raspberry tarts, and honey donuts. There were all petite to make them easier to eat, too. Really, Sanae had just made what she’d want to eat.

“Oh, this is surprisingly good.”

“Damn straight is it!”

“You must’ve put a lot of work into this.”

“Nopers. She knew how to make them all.”

“Ah, yeah. I heard she went through housewife training or something.”

“Well? Was it good?”

“I’m not allowed to say yet.”

“Hmm...”

Sanae didn’t hesitate to astral project so she could fly around behind Koutarou and cling to his back. If he wasn’t allowed to say it out loud, she would just ask his heart directly. Sanae was cheating in a very sophisticated way.

“Was it good?”

“Yeah, you did great.”

“Eeheehee! So which one did you like best?”

“The eclair, I guess. I think it’s got a more complex taste than the cream puff.”

“Me too, me too! The chocolate on top is just the best, isn’t it?”

Koutarou couldn’t lie to himself—or Sanae, for that matter—in his heart. He gave up on trying to play hardline and instead enjoyed chatting with Sanae in his head for a moment.

Since Shizuka and Yurika had been practicing for the cook-off together, Yurika naturally made the same dish she did the day of. Yet despite making the same thing, she didn’t submit hers for judging until an hour after Shizuka. That was red flag number one.

“So you’ve finally come, Yurika...”

“Sorry to keep you waiting.”

With less than half an hour left on the clock, there were several contestants rushing to get their dishes in for judging. Yurika had been one of them.

“Wow, at least it looks normal.”

To Koutarou’s surprise, Yurika’s pork cutlets actually looked like pork cutlets. While they were thicker-cut than Shizuka’s, they still looked okay. They weren’t visibly charred from being cooked too long or anything.

“Heehee. I made extras and put together the ones that turned out the best.”

Yurika’s success rate with pork cutlets was somewhere around 60 percent. Accordingly, her plan had been to make a time and a half what she’d need to serve all the judges—just in case. She’d spent long enough practicing together with Shizuka that she had an accurate grasp of her own abilities. And with that insight, the result wasn’t anywhere near the train wreck it could have been.

Now that I think about it, she does always pull through when she gets serious... which I guess means she got serious about cooking.

When it came to fighting or studying, Yurika was now the type of girl who saw things through to the end, and it seemed that side of her was branching out.

“I’m sorry, Yurika.”

“Huh? Why?”

“Forget it. It’s nothing. I’m gonna go ahead and eat now.”

“Yes. Please try it before it gets cold.”

Koutarou collected himself before picking up a piece of cutlet with his chopsticks. It was still freshly steaming, making it look like it had just come out of the fryer. It was even visibly cooked through all the way without any pink showing. It also had a relatively appetizing smell. By all appearances, Yurika had made real, edible food.

“Thank you for the food.”

“You’re welcome.”

Koutarou bit into the cutlet and was greeted immediately with the satisfying crunch of the crispy outer layer. Next he got a taste of the batter and sauce mixed together, and then a taste of the juicy pork itself.

“How is it?”

“Rejoice, Yurika. It’s a proper pork cutlet.”

“All right! Is it good?!”

Hearing her dish was properly made, Yurika slammed her hands into the table and eagerly leaned forward with sparkling eyes.

“If I tell you that now, it would defeat the point of having the judging.”

“Oh, r-right! I’m sorry...”

When Koutarou admonished her, she fell silent and withdrew. But seeing her look so apologetic, he felt a little bad.

“However, Yurika...”

“Y-Yes?”

“If you’d made this when you lost the game the other day... I wouldn’t have had any complaints.”

Yurika’s pork cutlet was no match for Shizuka’s. The pieces were unevenly cut and a little too brown like they’d been overfried. But nevertheless, it was an honest to god pork cutlet. And, more notably, better than what Koutarou thought he could make himself.

“Ah...”

Hearing that, Yurika’s face brightened up in a flash and she grinned from ear to ear as she pressed her hands to her chest. Tears were forming in the corners of her eyes.

“Thank you very much! Thank you so very much! It was worth all of the effort!”

Yurika wiped her eyes as she thanked Koutarou. She was truly happy. It finally felt like she was being acknowledged as a woman.

“...Is this really anything to cry about?”

“You wouldn’t get it, Satomi-san... Boys don’t understand...”

Her placement in the cook-off no longer mattered to Yurika. Just having Koutarou acknowledge her was enough to make it feel like she’d won bigtime. After all, she’d achieved the goal she’d been striving for over the past month.

Yurika repeatedly waved to Koutarou as she exited the gym, and he felt like something warm and fuzzy was nestling in his chest as he watched her go. It was a truly touching thing to see a good friend realize their dreams.

I was being too pessimistic about Yurika...

As it turned out, he might not need the stomach medicine after all. Yurika had proved him completely wrong. Maybe she wasn't the walking disaster she used to be. It was almost strange to think for Koutarou, considering he'd gotten used to thinking of her as his worthless, freeloading roommate.

Maybe I secretly wanted her to stay that way...

Koutarou stared at the clock in the gym while thinking that. There were only ten minutes remaining, meaning the cook-off was almost over.

"Ohohoho... It's finally time for the star to take the stage!"

That was when the final participant, Clan, entered the gym with a boisterous laugh. The moment she appeared with her dish, the warm and fuzzy feeling Koutarou had been indulging in was suddenly gone.

"God... I forgot you were left."

"That's how you greet me? But yes, here I am to claim victory."

"You were making that food with some weird technique. Is it actually edible?"

Koutarou shot Clan a doubtful glance. She'd prepared her dish in an exceedingly novel way—with just a pot she'd shake to perform different functions. The pot in question was without a doubt made using some kind of advanced technology, but there was no way of knowing yet if it could produce anything fit for human consumption.

"Of course! It's a scientist's duty to examine her inventions to make sure they're safe!"

"You sure about that?"

"I've tried it several times myself and can say with certainty this food is safe!"

"All right. I'm trusting you."

“Just shut up and eat, Veltlion!”

Clan practically slammed a deep plate down in front of Koutarou. The left side of it was filled with fluffy white rice and the right was swimming in a thick, brown sauce.

“...Curry?”

“Not just any curry! It’s the most delicious curry in the world!”

Clan was clearly proud of what she’d done. She boldly threw her head back and crossed her arms. But Koutarou couldn’t figure out where all this confidence was coming from.

“No matter how I look at it, it’s just a regular old make-at-home curry.”

Clan had declared that it was the most delicious curry in the world, but it certainly didn’t look like it. Rather than something you’d find at a restaurant, it just appeared to be the prepackaged kind of potato and onion curry you could buy at any store.

“Less chatting, more eating!”

“Okay, okay. Don’t shout.”

He knew Clan wouldn’t be satisfied until he tried it, so Koutarou picked up the spoon and scooped up a mouthful of curry and rice.

“Now eat up, Veltlion! And grovel before me!”

“You’re as maniacal as ever, I see— Mmmmm?!”

He was about to accuse her of exaggerating, but the moment he put the curry in his mouth, he realized she wasn’t. Her dish may have looked like plain curry, but it certainly didn’t taste like it. The difference was so jarring that it bewildered him.

“Clan, what’s with this curry?!”

“Ohohohoho! You’re getting a taste test of a new culinary revolution! The day cooks bow down to the power of science has come!”

“What did you do?!”

“It’s simple. The nanomachines sprinkled onto the curry are absorbing and

completely blocking out its natural flavor. Then, when they enter your mouth, they're feeding you gustatory data to make your tongue and brain believe you're eating the most delicious curry in the world!"

Clan had two inventions working for her. The first, her pot, she used to create a simple curry with automated cooking technology. Her second invention was the nanomachines, which she sprinkled on the curry and programmed to change its flavor.

"That's cheating!"

"Hardly! This is a specialized form of cooking that utilizes zero percent of the original ingredients' actual taste!"

In other words, the curry she'd made was simply there for bulk and texture. Clan had the flavor of the most exquisite curry in the world on the programming equivalent of speed dial. She could conjure it up with just the press of a button. Not even the most seasoned chefs in the world could match that. It was now obvious why Clan was so full of herself.

"Besides, there's no rule that forbids the use of—"

However, that was when an unexpected bang rang out.

"Wh-Wh-Whoa! What's wrong, Kou?!"

"HUEH?!"

A few short minutes after eating Clan's curry, Koutarou literally spewed fire from his mouth and collapsed to the floor.

Koutarou barfing flames wasn't explicitly Clan's fault. Really, it was a freak accident caused by several unfortunate coincidences overlapping.

For starters, Koutarou already had nanomachines inside of his body. Ruth had administered them as part of his medical treatment after several of their fiercer battles to help him recover. They not only promoted healing and kept an eye on his general health, they also actively worked to prevent the invasion of foreign bodies. Things like viruses and germs that entered his system were swiftly eliminated.

And that was exactly what had backfired. The seasoning nanomachines stuck to Koutarou's tongue feeding false information to his brain were deemed a threat and attacked accordingly. Of course, Clan's own nanomachines were programmed to defend themselves if need be, so they put up a fight in return. As a result, a nano-war broke out in Koutarou's mouth—the outcome of which was an explosion.

When Koutarou came to, Clan and Ruth explained what had happened to him. The nanomachines had reacted to each other unexpectedly, and no one in particular was to blame.

"...And that's the size of it."

"I'm sorry. I completely overlooked the possibility you might already have nanomachines inside you."

"No, it's my fault, Clan-sama. I never told you."

"Hai shee... Sho thas whah happhened hin mah mouf."

While it was relatively small in scale, there'd still been an explosion in Koutarou's mouth. His lips and tongue were burned enough that he was having trouble speaking as the medical nanomachines worked to heal him.

"Sanae, please translate."

"Aye, aye! He said, 'I see... So that's what happened in my mouth.'"

Fortunately, with Sanae on his back, at least one person would understand him. Since her clinging to him was a daily occurrence, he wasn't at all embarrassed by it.

"Now he wants to know what happened with the cook-off."

The girls had brought Koutarou back to room 106 while he was unconscious, so he had no idea how the contest had ended. Apparently it had happened without him. As a representative of the home ec club, Shizuka explained.

"Well, first off... Because of the commotion with Satomi-kun, we ran out of time for judging and Clan-san had to be disqualified."

"It only made sense under the circumstances. I'm also the one who carried you back here."

“Koutarou says, ‘I’m not gonna say thank you.’”

“I know that. You don’t need to be mean.”

Koutarou’s sudden collapse on stage was publicly attributed to a dizzy spell. Fortunately, no one at the cook-off would even begin to suspect nanomachines were the real cause, so they swallowed the cover story rather easily. The whole ordeal caused quite a commotion, however. And with Koutarou, the tenth judge, out of commission, there was no longer a full panel to score her dish. Essentially, the moment Koutarou collapsed, Clan being dropped from the competition was a foregone conclusion.

“Don’t worry, Glasses. Koutarou isn’t really angry. He’s only pretending to be ’cause you’re so cute.”

“V-Veltlion?!”

“Oh, I wasn’t supposed to say that part? Sorry, Koutarou. Eeheehee.”

“A-Ahem... W-Well, it’s true that I’m partially to blame for the incident. It would be childish of me to scold you.”

Clan blushed slightly and her mood improved as the atmosphere of the room lightened. The truth was that all of the girls were dying to know how Koutarou was doing. Sensing their energy, Shizuka flashed a smile and got back to explaining what had happened to him.

“Your scorecard was mostly filled out otherwise, so it was submitted for final scoring and the contest played out from there.”

“‘I see’“

“The new president of the home ec club came in first. The runner up was that restaurant guy. And in third was... Ruth-san!”

“‘It certainly was delicious, that omelet rice. The flag was a nice touch, too. Anyways, congratulations, Ruth-san,’ he says.”

“Thank you very much, Master! I’m so happy right now!”

The rankings were mostly as expected. Kiriha had challenged herself to something so subtle that it was underrated, and Ruth ended up outdoing her.

“So that’s how it all went down in the end.”

“He says, ‘Thank you very much, Landlord-san.’”

“You’re welcome.”

After getting the full story, Koutarou was satisfied. He quietly took a sip of the tea sitting on the table in front of him, which had been left to cool so it wouldn’t singe his already burned mouth. That was when Kiriha spoke up.

“Could I have a word, Koutarou?”

There was something she wanted to ask Koutarou, so she’d been patiently waiting for Shizuka to finish.

“He says go ahead.”

“The truth is that when you collapsed, I saw your scorecard. You gave all of our dishes seven points, and I want to know your reasoning for that.”

The judges had been given a baseline for scoring the dishes. Delicious ones were worth seven points, normal ones were five, and bad ones were three. From there, the judges could add or subtract points at there discretion, meaning the final score from any judge would be between zero and ten points.

But Koutarou’s scorecard revealed that he’d ranked all the girls as delicious sevens. Even though he didn’t get to finish the judging, he’d already penciled in a seven for Clan too. It was strange. Looking at it objectively, there was no question that Theia, Maki, and Yurika had all served five-point dishes. Yet nevertheless, Koutarou had given them sevens just like everyone else. Kiriha was curious as to why.

“Koutarou is refusing to answer.”

Koutarou had a clear answer for Kiriha’s question, but he didn’t want someone else—in this case, his mouthpiece Sanae—to say it for him. As a teenage boy, he’d rather say nothing at all than that.

“Satomi-kun, I think explaining would be best to avoid any misunderstandings.”

Hearing Koutarou refuse to answer, Harumi turned and smiled at him. She had more or less caught on to him. In response, Koutarou flashed a wry smile

and nodded at Sanae, giving her permission to tell everyone after all.

“‘Deliciousness isn’t determined by taste alone.’”

After losing his mother and growing up with a single, working father, Koutarou often ate his meals by himself. When he ate alone, nothing ever tasted good to him. There wasn’t really flavor in his life again until he met Kenji, and the same was just as true for the invaders. That’s why he’d given each of them a score of seven. In his eyes, it was the only thing to do.

“Koutarou...”

The words Sanae shared on Koutarou’s behalf were actually something Kiriha had said to him eleven years ago. Hearing them again now, she understood their meaning better than anyone. It was being with good company and people you loved that made food good. No, it wasn’t just food. They made life delicious.

“Since I got to hear what I wanted to know... I think it’s about time for dinner.”

They’d all gotten a chance to compete with each other today as well as spend some brief one-on-one time with Koutarou as a judge, but now it was time for them to all enjoy a meal together.

“Now that I think about it, we all made food, but we didn’t get to eat any.”

“Dinner, huh...? Satomi-kun, how is your mouth?”

“‘It’s okay, Landlord-san.’”

“Maki-chan, do you think Satomi-san’s mouth will heal by dinner?”

“Stop talking and help me heal him too, Yurika!”

“Okay, okay. I’ll help.”

“Clan-sama, could you prepare some painkillers just in case?”

“I think I had some strong ones back in my laboratory.”

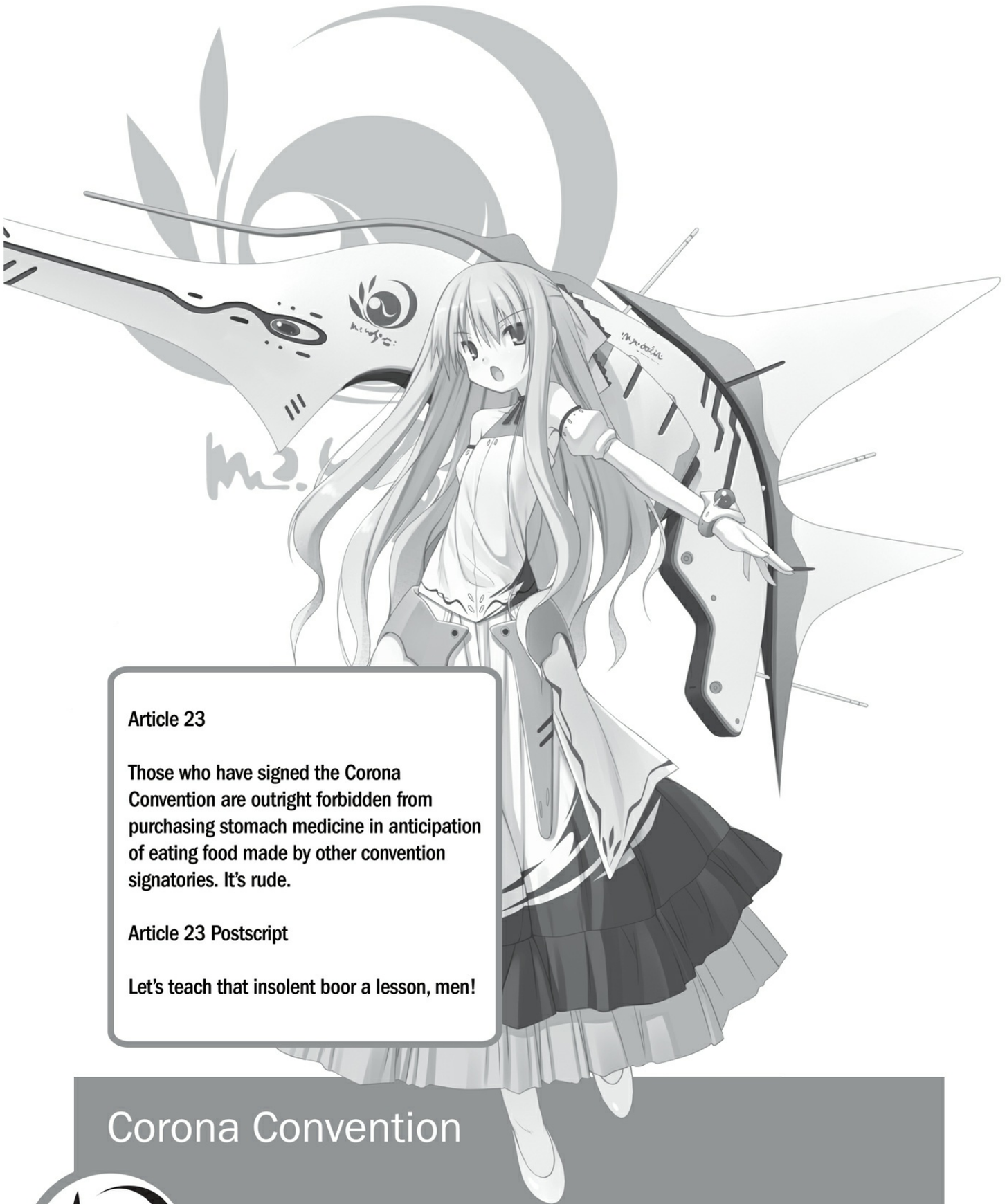
And so the cook-off ended with Koutarou and the others returning to their normal, everyday lives. They were peaceful, happy days.

“By the way, Satomi-san, what are you drinking?”

“He says it’s stomach medicine. It looks like Koutarou he doesn’t trust our cooking.”

“Whaaaaaaaat?!”

And those days brought them together. Everything was a little better in good company. Everything meant a little extra something. The sun was warmer, food was tastier, manga was more interesting, and so on and so on. Yes, those were happy days indeed.



Article 23

Those who have signed the Corona Convention are outright forbidden from purchasing stomach medicine in anticipation of eating food made by other convention signatories. It's rude.

Article 23 Postscript

Let's teach that insolent boor a lesson, men!

Corona Convention

New! November 4th, 2010

Afterword

Long time no see everyone. It's the author, Takehaya. This marks the release of volume 20. Strictly speaking, it's the twenty-third volume if you include all the side stories and extra content from the DVD release and whatnot. Anyway, thank you very much everyone.

Half of this volume consists of short stories from *Invaders of the Rokujouma?! Hercules!*, and the other half is all-new material. Unlike recent entries in the series, this volume is especially peaceful.

Truth be told, there's always something on my mind when I'm working with this series. I'm constantly worried that the readers might get bored along the way, so I gradually change up the contents as the volumes progress. I use *Doraemon* as a reference for this. You get your standard fun in with the main character early, then you might have some heartfelt segments with grandma, and once everyone's used to the characters, there's the long dramatic piece. This looks like a proper composition at first glance, but there's actually one really big potential problem with it. Depending on which part of the story a reader falls in love with, it might end up taking a not-so-desirable turn.

Specifically, since we'll be entering the endgame of the main story soon, there are going to be a lot of serious developments. There's also going to be lots of fighting. I know there are those of you who enjoy those elements, but it's not necessarily everyone's cup of tea. I'm sure that the readers who have supported the series from the beginning are still looking forward to the *Doraemon*-esque lightheartedness, but I'm also sure there are some readers who figured the story would ultimately end up developing in this direction.

So in short, I would like to write fun volumes like this every now and then, but that creates a new problem... which is maintaining consistency between the Folsaria arc and the Forthorthe arc. As you may remember from the end of volume 19, Koutarou and company already have their next big set of problems on the horizon, so it's hard to imagine they have any downtime at this point.

So, rather than trying to incorporate volumes like these into the main story, I wanted to squeeze them in between various parts of the main story. That's where the idea for the "Read it! HJ Bunko" stories came from. That site works well with the short stories that I wanted to write, and now they can be released like this.

So from now on, as we advance into the Forthorthe arc, volumes like this—a few shorter stories from *Hercules!* and some meatier original content—will be wedged in here and there. I'll work hard to make sure everyone's still getting the parts of the story they're currently enjoying, so please continue to support me.

Now, in the next volume, volume 21, the Forthorthe arc will finally kick off. I'm actually wondering if I should add a subtitle to this or not. If I do, it would be called "The Golden Princess and the Blue Knight." The Golden Princess who played a supporting role two thousand years ago would be taking the lead this time around. As the situation develops into something similar to what happened millennia in the past, a new adventure unfolds. I hope you're looking forward to it.

That's about all the room I have, so I'll finish things off with my usual acknowledgements. I would like warmly thank everyone at the editorial department for their hard work in publishing this many volumes; Poco-san for always drawing me cute illustrations; and last but not least, you readers who have supported me for all this time.

Let us meet again in the afterword of volume 21.

July, 2015

Takehaya

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Invaders of the Rokujouma!? Volume 20

by Takehaya

Translated by Warnis Edited by Morgan Dreher

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