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Takehaya
Illust: Poco



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# Invaders of the Rokujouma!?

# Chapter 1: Badgirl Begins

Inside of the girl known as Kiriha was a struggle between two desires. There was a constant push and pull between wanting to be spoiled by the person she loved, and wanting to give him a hard time. Being as scrupulous as she was, however, she knew when and where to act on which desire. Mostly, her behavior depended on whether or not anyone else was around. Kiriha was a relatively private person. But at times like this when it was just the two of them, she used her feminine powers to their fullest and let herself rely on him.

“We won,” Kiriha said and smiled as she looked up at Koutarou.

Leaving the movie theater, the two of them were walking down the street with their arms linked. They were close enough and Kiriha was tall enough that she could feel his breath.

“Who did against what?”

“We did against the movie.”

“...I don’t get it.”

“You and I were in a fated relationship before the protagonist and the heroine.”

“Don’t be so competitive about strange things like that.”

“So you don’t deny it then?”

“...”

“I love you,” she said spiritedly.

She then brought her body even closer, as if hugging Koutarou’s arm. It was the gesture of a girl on the verge of womanhood, but there was also a childlike transparency about her.

*Kii-chan really is inside of Kiriha-san...*

It was that transparency that reminded Koutarou of a young girl he met long ago—and it was in those memories that Koutarou could also feel the fated

relationship Kiriha spoke of.

“What’s the matter? You’re spacing out.”

Seeing Koutarou lost in thought, Kiriha’s smile faded into worry as she looked up at him again. She reached out and touched his cheek.

“I was just feeling a little nostalgic.”

Since it wasn’t anything worth hiding, Koutarou answered honestly. He then gently patted Kiriha on the head.

“...I see.”

Guessing what he really meant, Kiriha closed her eyes and let him do as he pleased. She now had what had eluded her in the past, and she was prepared to accept everything that came with it.

“But I am happy that plenty of time has passed.”

“What do you mean?” Koutarou gently whispered to Kiriha as if she were a young girl.

“Kii’s small body couldn’t fully embrace you...” With a little bit of momentum, Kiriha practically jumped on Koutarou as she threw her arms around him. “Like this!”

“H-Hey...”

Koutarou stumbled back a few steps back as he caught Kiriha. She was expressing what she’d felt as a young girl with her now adult body. It was a rather effective means of attack on Koutarou, and it shook him up quite a bit.

As they approached Corona House, Kiriha very naturally let go of Koutarou. This was her normal routine. Kiriha didn’t want to be doted on by Koutarou in front of others, especially not the other residents of room 106. She didn’t think that she alone should be happy, and she still wanted to keep her sweet, nostalgic memories of being with Koutarou to herself. And so she just acted like her usual self when they came across someone they knew when they were a little closer to home.

“How was the movie, you two?”

Koutarou and Kiriha had run into Harumi on her way home from the hospital near the station. Although the hospital wasn't too far from where she lived, she could spend time with her many friends if she visited room 106. And getting home from there was easy since she could instantly return home using the Blue Knight's transfer gate. Over time, "going home" to Harumi grew to mean returning to room 106 first.

"I think it was a solemn, good story."

"It was good. I can see why you liked it, Sakuraba-senpai."

Koutarou and Kiriha had gone to see a movie today on Harumi's recommendation. She had seen it in the theater with her classmates the other day and put in a good word to Koutarou and the others. But since it was a serious film and the others were busy, only Koutarou and Kiriha ended up going.

"I see. I'm glad you liked it."

Harumi smiled. She was happy they'd enjoyed her suggestion. Seeing Harumi's reaction, Koutarou grinned too.

"But Kiriha-san said her life was more eventful."

As payback for Kiriha always teasing him, Koutarou brought up a personal part of their earlier conversation. It was intended to be an easy jab at Kiriha, but even then, she was one step ahead of him.

"What can I say? We spent such a passionate time together..."

Kiriha blushed a little and looked down at the ground shyly. Standing there holding her hands to her chest and sighing softly, she looked especially feminine. That is, aside from the dirty look she shot Koutarou out of the corner of her eye.

"Wh-Wh-Whaaat?!"

Based on the way Kiriha reacted, Harumi got the wrong idea about their "passionate time together." Her face turned red all the way to her ears and she had to look away. This put Koutarou in an awkward position.

"Hey! Stop vindictively making stuff up!"

“I haven’t made anything up, you bad boy.”

Kiriha drew closer to Koutarou and stroked his chest with her finger. She was acting like a woman hurt by her lover’s words.

“You implied something completely different!”

It was true that Kiriha hadn’t actually lied about anything. She just intentionally presented what she said in a way that would invite misinterpretation. It was only natural that Harumi got the impression she meant something else entirely.

“Heeheehee...”

Seeing Koutarou’s panic, Harumi realized that Kiriha was teasing Koutarou, and most likely her as well. She smiled, both relieved and embarrassed.

“Goodness, don’t surprise me like that, you two.”

“It’s because Koutarou was teasing me.”

Before Harumi knew it, Kiriha was back to normal and had let go of Koutarou. She changed so fast, anyone not used to it would have been taken aback.

“Are you saying it’s my fault?!”

“Heehee... Hahaha!”

Koutarou and Harumi had been dancing in Kiriha’s palm the entire time. It made Harumi realized the incredible difference between them.

“It’s your punishment for making light of my feelings.”

“I avoided doing just that!”

“Ah... How men wound women with their callous logic...”

“I’m the one who should be upset here!”

Harumi had realized the true nature of their relationship, but Kiriha was still running circles around Koutarou. So much so that Harumi herself was impressed.

*Is this the poise of a grown woman? Or is this what you call a bad girl? Either way, she has something I don’t.*

Harumi started to secretly admire Kiriha's maturity... or perhaps it was wickedness.

After returning to room 106, Koutarou and the others spent some time peacefully drinking tea. When the clock struck six, Koutarou stood up.

"Guess it's about time to take a bath."

Kiriha usually started making dinner at six, before the other girls started returning home. Koutarou normally used the convenient timing to take his bath.

"Koutarou, do you want me to wash your back?"

"No thank you!"

Koutarou rather casually refused Kiriha's offer and headed for the bathroom alone. Kiriha watched him go with a grin. But not Harumi. She was staring at Kiriha in amazement.

"Um, Kiriha-san..."

"Yes?"

"Well, I've been wondering, but... what would you have done if Satomi-kun had said yes?" Harumi asked hesitantly as she set her teacup down on the table.

What Kiriha had said was something very risky to say to a boy of age.

"Hmm... For starters, rejoice," Kiriha answered with a small smile, putting her cup down as well.

Harumi's eyes shot wide open.

"You would rejoice?"

"Yes, considering the kind of man Koutarou is. He wouldn't agree to such a thing unless he was prepared to accept my everything."

"I see... That would mean that Satomi-kun's problems have been resolved."

Harumi nodded. She understood what Kiriha meant. While Koutarou was very responsible, he tended to keep people at a distance. But if he were to get into the bath with someone else, that would mean that he'd stopped trying to maintain that distance.

“Nobody knows what it’s actually going to take to get him to come out of his shell, so I have to try what I can to help. Especially the methods that only I can use.”

“Now that you mention it, that might be true.”

Using feminine wiles was difficult for the other girls. It was something Shizuka and Ruth could only barely pull off. Kiriha practically monopolized the field. There was a chance that her method might break through the wall around Koutarou’s heart, so it was a good thing that she was trying.

“I suppose you have nothing to lose,” Harumi continued.

“Yes, that’s right.”

Kiriha smiled as she picked up her teacup again to take another sip. Her teasing Koutarou was for his sake as well as her own. In this case, she might get to fulfill her desire to join the person she loved in the bath and wash his back. Even if he said no, she was still getting him to think about it and experiencing his raw, emotional reactions. It was essentially a win-win for Kiriha, so there was no reason for her not to try.

“But it’s not going so well. Perhaps Koutarou is too serious... or perhaps I’m not using enough firepower... There has been some change in him, though.”

“Heehee, being strong-willed brings its own problems, doesn’t it?”

“That’s part of his appeal though, which makes it even more troublesome.”

“Yeah, I know what you mean”

Finally understanding Kiriha’s way of thinking, Harumi started to think she was right. Just teasing Koutarou for the sake of teasing might have been a problem, but behind it was deep love and good will. If anything, Harumi felt like she should be rooting for Kiriha.

“There’s something else I’d like to ask, Kiriha-san.”

“Hmm? What’s that?” Kiriha nodded and urged her on.

Harumi took a deep breath and said rather seriously, “...Can you teach me how to be a bad girl?”

“What?!”

Even the ever-calm Kiriha was surprised by Harumi’s sudden request. She could barely believe the words that had just come out of Harumi’s mouth. The only part that even remotely sounded like Harumi was “can you teach me.” The rest was a bolt out of the blue.

“Please, Kiriha-san! I want to be able to tease Satomi-kun like you do!”

Harumi stared at Kiriha earnestly. She was serious.

After looking Harumi up and down, Kiriha emphatically declared, “It’s not possible. Just give up.”

In Kiriha’s eyes, Harumi didn’t have any potential to be a bad girl. Even if people had a spectrum to their personalities, this was completely out of Harumi’s league. There wasn’t a single trace of a bad girl in her. She was the kind of girl that wore her good intentions on her sleeve. Newborn puppies can’t hunt down prey.

Just the fact that Harumi was being so polite and sincere about asking was a bad sign for her bad girl prospects. It was only natural for Kiriha to think it was impossible.

“Please! I know I’m not suited for it, but I want to be able to use my feminine appeal on Satomi-kun at least once!”

Harumi knew the truth. But she still wanted to try. She wanted to tease the boy she loved. Any girl would.

“Besides, it’s for Satomi-kun’s sake too!”

“Hmm...”

Like Kiriha had said, in order to move the heart of a boy who couldn’t fully accept others, a woman’s appeal might be necessary at times. If she did it now, Harumi’s desires could help Koutarou, but it wouldn’t make a difference once his problems were resolved. Now was the only time it would be for the best of both of them. Harumi was dead set on this.

*With that much spirit, she might just pull it off...*

While Kiriha’s initial reaction was that it would be an impossible feat, the fire

in Harumi's eyes started to make her think otherwise. After pondering things for a while, Kiriha nodded at Harumi.

"Okay, let's give it a try."

"Really?!"

"However, I can't guarantee any results."

"I know! That's fine!"

"As long as you have that resolve, you should be fine. Let's see what you can do."

"I'm looking forward to working with you!"

And so Kiriha agreed to teaching Harumi how to be a bad girl in order to use her womanly appeal to her advantage. It would be a long, hard road. But Harumi believed she was hardworking enough to make it. Really, that was the kind of attitude that was going to make this whole thing more difficult, but Harumi was none the wiser.

In Kiriha's eyes, Harumi had no hope as a bad girl. Absolutely none. She was virtually overflowing with benevolence and compassion. That and her gentle, clean-cut appearance were really working against her bad girl image. If anything, they had opposite effect. It wouldn't have been too difficult to mistake her for an affectionate mother or a holy woman. That was why Kiriha believed it was impossible to make a bad girl out of Harumi, both in mind and body. But just because it was impossible didn't mean she would give up. Kiriha decided to start with Harumi's appearance.

"Is this... a script and a costume?"

Harumi and Kiriha were now sitting across the tea table from one another. On top of the tea table were a book and a set of clothes. Kiriha had spent the past few days preparing for this session. This was the result.

"That's right. It's near impossible to actually change your character, so I thought I might have you act out a character instead. Your part is 'Bad Girl Harumi.'"

Kiriha figured that even if she couldn't convert Harumi into a bona fide bad

girl, she could at least get her to act the part. Harumi had some experience acting, so this might be the easiest way to get her to study the role and put it to good use. Fortunately, Kiriha knew Koutarou well enough that she was able to include several believable scenarios in her script, right down to the questions he might ask.

Kiriha had come up with several plans ever since Harumi asked to become her apprentice. She was certain this one had the highest probability of working.

“I see... This certainly might make things easier for me.”

Harumi nodded as she flipped the pages of her script. She didn’t want to become a bad girl in the truest sense. She would go back to her usual self once she was satisfied. That’s why it was easier for her to accept a method that let her make a clear distinction between her and her act.

“If you can change the outside, you don’t have to change the inside..”

“But I think keeping up appearances is a bit backwards...”

Harumi was nervous. Even in acting, the ideal was to become one with your character. However, Kiriha’s proposal completely ignored that.

“Bad girls don’t show their true feelings to begin with, so there is nothing wrong with the methodology.”

“I suppose that’s fair.”

However, Harumi was quickly convinced by Kiriha. Bad girls hid their true feelings while leading men around by the nose. In other words, they were just keeping up appearances. In effect, Kiriha’s proposal would lead to Harumi becoming a bad girl in both mind and body.

*Besides, Kiriha-san’s true feelings are love for Satomi-kun...*

Kiriha leading Koutarou by the nose was an everyday occurrence, but Harumi knew how she really felt. Kiriha normally hid her true feelings around others, but Harumi caught a glimpse of them from time to time. Harumi felt the same way. And because Kiriha was so observant, Harumi didn’t overlook the possibility that Kiriha knew how she felt too. And because the bad girl Harumi wanted to become was Kiriha herself, she could accept what she said.

The outfit Kiriha had prepared was revealing and provocative. Completely contrary to Harumi's usual image, it was black with flashy decorations like fur and embroidery. She even brought gold accessories to catch the eye and complement the outfit. It was a very fitting outfit for a bad girl.

"I-Isn't this a little too extreme?!"

Harumi's face was bright red. She was even squirming as she reluctantly pushed her arm through the sleeve. It was bad enough that she was uncomfortable even letting Kiriha see her in it.

"It's on the conservative side."

But Kiriha just shook her head. And she was right. The outfit was only extreme compared to how Harumi normally dressed—simple, serious, and neat.

"But even my underwear can be... Th-This just doesn't feel right!"

"It's not like you're showing it directly. Only flashes can be seen through the gaps in the clothing. That's the kind of thing that tickles a man's heart."

"Even if it's not directly, I'll still die of embarrassment!"

"But you'll reveal them in the end anyway, right? Just resolve yourself to it."

"But not now! And even then it'll just be normal underwear!"

Harumi was so strait-laced that she couldn't possibly bring herself to go out in such an outfit. She felt as good as naked. What if the children saw her like this?

"You'll just have to endure it."

"I can't!"

"That outfit will make up for the parts you can't pull off. Or would you rather improve your technique?"

"I... I... I..."

Kiriha's levelheadedness gradually brought Harumi back to her senses. Harumi was aware that her technique was lacking, and since she was the one asking her help, she couldn't refuse. Eventually Harumi took a deep breath and stopped fidgeting.

"Hahh..."

“Did you calm down?”

“Yes, s-somehow...”

“Besides, getting used to it is part of the practice.”

“It might just kill me first.”

With her face still bright red, Harumi stared down at her outfit. She couldn’t help but feel self-conscious about letting Koutarou see her like this. That would be hard enough, but if Koutarou started to think she was some weird woman, she might have a heart attack on the spot. Harumi began losing her nerve again, thinking she may have been too rash.

“The die has already been cast. Steel yourself, Harumi.”

“O-Okay. I’ll do my best.”

Kiriha immediately moved to quash the timidity that was showing in Harumi’s expression. If she quit here, it would be all over. All of Kiriha’s preparations would be for nothing. Harumi knew Kiriha was doing this for her, and she didn’t want things to come to that. In the end, she pumped herself up again.



With Harumi’s outfit in order, Kiriha moved on to her first lesson. The most

basic of the basics would be how she carried herself.

“...So standing straight up like normal won’t work.”

“Then what should I do?”

“First, push one of your shoulders forward.”

“So it looks like I’m leaning, right?”

“On top of that, don’t leave your hands together.”

“No?”

“We want something asymmetrical. It has the most visual impact.”

“This is pretty difficult...”

Harumi listened to Kiriha’s detailed instructions. As she did, her typical honor student posture became more feminine and confident.

“Like this?”

“Yes, something like that... but...”

Just adjusting her way of standing should be enough to give off some sex appeal. But Kiriha tilted her head in confusion. For some reason, she still didn’t see any in Harumi.

*Her posture is much better... but why doesn’t it look like it?*

Harumi had done everything that Kiriha had asked. She should be perfectly seductive now, but she still only gave off a friendly vibe. She was more likely to attract kindergartners than teenage boys.

“...All right, let me teach you some expressions.”

Kiriha gave up on her body for now and decided to move on to her face. The impression someone gave off didn’t just depend on their posture. She wouldn’t be able to give Harumi a proper assessment until they tried everything.

“Please do.”

“First, turn your face the same way as your body.”

“Since I’m leaning, I shouldn’t be looking straight forward, but in the same direction, right?”

“That’s right. A little bit of an angle helps you look the part.”

“I understand. Something like this?”

“That’s good. Now look down some...”

Kiriha gave instructions and Harumi adjusted herself accordingly. The instructions got more and more complicated, but Harumi didn’t complain. She simply listened and obeyed. A few minutes later, Kiriha had sculpted the ideal flirtatious glance.

“That should about do it.”

Snap!

When things were just right, Kiriha pulled out her cellphone and took a picture... which sent Harumi into a panic.

“P-Please don’t take any pictures!”

“If I don’t, you won’t know how you look, right? You can’t see the right angle in a mirror.”

“...Delete it later, okay?”

“I will. Trust me.”

“Okay...”

Kiriha always kept her promises. She would erase the picture after she was bored of looking at it. But first, she showed it to Harumi.

“This is how you look.”

“My... That is very different from usual.”

Harumi rarely took pictures of herself, but she did from time to time with her friends when they were out sightseeing. She looked a lot sexier now than she did in those pictures. She was satisfied with the difference.

*But... the impact is still weak... Why?*

In contrast, Kiriha tilted her head in confusion again. Harumi had the perfect sexy pose, but something still felt off.

“Karama, Korama, compare her image to mine using optic data.”

“Got it, ho!”

“Leave it to us, ho!”

“Oh no! The haniwas are here too?!”

“We are, ho!”

“We have been the whole time, ho!”

“Oh no, oh no, oh no!”

With the surprise appearance of the haniwas, Harumi’s bad girl vibe was gone in an instant. However, since the haniwas had been watching from the start, they used the footage they already had to compare her and Kiriha.

“Disregarding her size and figure, she is almost a perfect match to you, Ane-san! Ho!”

“It could be reasonably said that there is no visible difference between her pose and yours! Ho!”

“Hmm...”

Hearing the haniwas’ report, Kiriha began thinking. Harumi’s lack of feminine impact wasn’t because of her pose then.

“Haniwas, make sure you delete that data, okay?!”

“We’ll delete the recorded data, ho! We’ll protect your privacy, ho!”

“But we can’t erase our memories, ho! Sorry, ho!”

“I guess I can’t ask you to erase that...”

But as she looked at the flustered Harumi, she realized exactly what was missing.

“It’s her eyes...”

The problem was Harumi’s eyes. She seemed to lack the ability to convey strong emotions with them. Hers were naturally calm and gentle. That was why she always came off as friendly.

“Please don’t show anyone else your memories, okay?”

“It’s okay, ho! Only we can see it, ho!”

“But it’ll be archived during overhauls, ho!”

“It’s going to get duplicated?!”

“Harumi, could you look over here a minute.”

“Huh? Oh, yes!”

Harumi interrupted her discussion with the haniwas and turned towards Kiriha. Her big, tranquil eyes seemed to be asking, “What’s the matter?”

She was a failure as a bad girl.

“Could you glare at me?”

“Glare?”

“That’s right. It seems that you’re lacking in aggressiveness. Because of that, you lack impact, even if you’re dressed like a bad girl.”

“Aggressiveness...”

“You could call it provocativeness or prurience. You’re not being very tempting.”

A bad girl needed to grab their target’s attention just by standing there. But the passive Harumi didn’t have that kind of appeal. That showed in her eyes. They made her look kind and caring, like she wanted to help the people around her. She needed more provoking eyes, like Theia’s. It was because of that that she wasn’t giving the right impression.

“Um... Like this?”

Harumi glared at Kiriha as she was told. She furrowed her brow and narrowed her eyes in order to look more aggressive.

“Only the shape is right... Let’s see, try thinking of me as your enemy when you glare at me.”

“My enemy...”

That word took Harumi back... Back to over two thousand years ago when Alaia faced off against her enemy, Violbarum Maxfern. Thinking of enemies, he was the worst one she could think of.

“...”

Harumi tried telling herself that the person before her wasn’t Kiriha, but Maxfern—the man that had tried to kill Koutarou. Suddenly, the atmosphere around Harumi started to drastically change.

“Harumi, that’s a bit different...”

However, the results weren’t what Kiriha had expected. The dignified aura of a princess rose to the surface, which wasn’t quite the same as a woman’s charm. Harumi had clearly chosen the wrong person to think of.

“I don’t know who you were thinking of, but make it someone you’re more likely to forgive.”

“An enemy I can forgive...”

The evil magical girls were what came to mind next. In contrast to Maxfern, Crimson and Purple were enemies she could forgive. However, the dark outfits of the evil magical girls conjured memories of a totally different enemy...

*”Fuhahahaha, too bad, youngsters! I will make this cute girl my wife!”*

He was an officer of the evil underground people that wore pitch black, thorny armor—Baron Demon. He was the enemy that Harumi could most easily forgive.

*What would have happened if Harukazeman hadn’t shown up? I would have been taken away, and then in the church...*

Harumi recalled the events of over a year ago and stared at Kiriha, imagining that she was Baron Demon.

“...”

“...Harumi, you’re far too forgiving with that enemy. Can’t you make it someone more normal?”

“I’m so sorry! I’ll pick a different enemy!”

Harumi hurriedly chased the thoughts of Baron Demon out of her mind and racked her brain for a better enemy.

*Th-This is hard...*

Kiriha put her hand on her head as she watched Harumi. At this rate, it was going to take years to teach her how to be a bad girl. As expected, Harumi just wasn’t cut out for it.

A month had passed since Kiriha first began teaching Harumi the ways of the bad girl. By now, while hollow, Harumi's act was starting to shape up. There was something alluring to the way she moved, and she was getting better with the scripted questions and answers. And that was why Kiriha thought it was about time to get some hands-on training for her.

"Hands-on training?"

"That's right. You'll be getting some training in the field, so to speak."

Kiriha was planning on having Harumi practice on Koutarou and point out any errors as she observed. Her acting was getting better with no one around, so it seemed like a good time to start with an audience. That said, Harumi didn't want to train with a large number of people, so she figured she'd start with Koutarou.

"But is it really okay to start with Satomi-kun right away?"

"There's nothing to worry about. If things start getting complicated, you can just confess that you're training your bad girl act."

"Can I really say that?!"

Harumi's eyes opened wide in surprise. She was worried that Koutarou would laugh at her if she told him the truth.

"You just don't have to tell him your motive."

"Oh? Really?"

"Indeed. You want to hide your motive, not your acting, right? Besides, your motive is hard to imagine. You'll be fine."

If she told him she was doing something like that, Koutarou would probably think she was going to be in another play. There was no way he'd guess that she just wanted to be able to floor the man she loved with her feminine wiles for once, or that she was really trying to find a way to break down the wall around his heart. As long as Harumi didn't bring it up herself, he would never know.

"Anyway, I think you've learned all you can acting on your own. That said, practicing with boys you don't know is—"

“I can’t do that! Absolutely not!”

Harumi rapidly shook her head. She wanted to tease Koutarou because she loved him. She was only doing it because she wanted to show Koutarou everything she had to offer as a woman. She wasn’t interested in doing that with a stranger. That’s why she absolutely couldn’t practice on other boys.

“That’s why you have no choice but to practice on Koutarou. At first you won’t do anything but observe, but from there you’ll gradually step it up to get a reaction. Bring out the acting you’ve learned in waves to keep him from catching on.”

“O-Okay. I’ll give it a try.”

Harumi gulped hard before making a serious face and nodding. She was far from confident, but it was true that nothing more would come from practicing alone. The time had come to get out there and fight. Harumi woke up her hibernating aggressiveness and steeled her resolve to give Koutarou a try.

Since she would do nothing but observe to start, things would be just like normal. Even so, she couldn’t help but feel nervous as she headed towards Koutarou with her bad girl routine. Her expression was stiff and her limbs moved awkwardly. She looked like an ungreased tin soldier.

“Huh, Sakuraba-senpai, do you have muscle pains?”

That was what Koutarou immediately assumed when he saw her enter the room so strangely. Hearing those words, Harumi trembled.

*Muscle pains...? That’s right, that was one of the questions!*

In the script that Kiriha had prepared for Harumi, there was an entry with muscle pains as a keyword. It was flagged as an important entry because it was an easy way to get in some physical contact.

*“That’s right. Could you give me a massage, Satomi-kun?”*

According to the script, she was supposed to flash some cleavage and provocatively look up at Koutarou when she answered. The goal was to get his mind to wander in a dirty direction even at perfectly innocent suggestion.

*This is... This is too much, Kiriha-san! I can’t do it all of a sudden!*

However, Harumi couldn't pull that off. She didn't have the courage for that yet. Instead, just thinking about it made Harumi even more nervous and her expression became even stiffer.

"...Are you sure you're okay, Sakuraba-senpai?"

Koutarou's reaction went in the complete opposite direction of the script. Harumi was clearly behaving oddly, so he started to worry that it was something serious or that she might be under the weather because of her health. Koutarou swiftly stood up and approached Harumi.

"I-I'm fine— Eeek!"

But now Harumi was almost at her breaking point. Koutarou had walked over and put his big, manly hand on her forehead.

"It doesn't seem like you have a fever."

"I'm really fine!"

Harumi's voice trembled. She was completely flustered at this point, but there was a plan for a situation like this. She was supposed to embrace Koutarou and whisper into his ear, "Of course I'm feverish... I love you." But her desire for Koutarou not to worry about her was too strong. She just simply repeated that she was fine. The fact that she couldn't follow the script only unnerved her even more. She was hopelessly in a downward spiral.

"Hold on."

"Kyaah!"

Completely unaware of Harumi's feelings, Koutarou didn't hesitate to pick her up. He thought it would be best to get her lying down as quickly as possible.

*Huh? Wait, I... Why is this happening?!*

Harumi was extremely confused. She felt pressured since she was unable to do what she had wanted, but being held like this, she also felt like entrusting herself to Koutarou. There was no way she wouldn't feel warm and happy, embraced by the body heat of the man she loved.

"Just stay here for a moment."

“Satomi-kun, um...”

“It’s fine, it’s fine.”

Koutarou set Harumi down in a corner of the room and then headed towards the wardrobe where he got out his futon. He was going to lay her down on that.

“Ah, aaahh, aauuugh...”

However, Harumi completely misunderstood. She didn’t think Koutarou was getting out the futon so she could rest.

*H-Huh?! Are we going to...?! Huuuh?! Th-This is going too fast, Satomi-kun! I’m still not mentally prepared, and we haven’t made any plans for the future, and, and, and...!*

Harumi was imagining something much bolder. But because of that, she was unable to say anything meaningful.

*But I feel like it would be very rude to say no... Besides, I’m sure this took a lot of courage for Satomi-kun, so maybe this is fine?!*

When Koutarou picked her up again, she firmly made up her mind that this was it. She had no intention of resisting. Somewhere deep down, she knew that this day would come.

“Senpai, just rest here for a while, okay?”

“Huh...?”

Contrary to what Harumi thought would happen, Koutarou simply laid her down to rest in the futon and swiftly withdrew. It wasn’t what she had imagined at all.

“Satomi-kun, what is...?”

“You’ve been pushing yourself lately... so at least rest awhile until Clan and Ruth-san come back.”

“Could... this be...”

That was when Harumi finally understood. Koutarou had put out the futon for her because he was worried about her health. The bold things Harumi was thinking hadn’t even crossed his mind.

“Waaait, nooooo! I... I... I was imagining something totally different!”

“H-Huh? Sakuraba-senpai...?”

Ignoring the confused Koutarou, Harumi buried herself in the futon in an attempt to escape his gaze. She wanted to dig through the floor and bury herself in the ground. She honestly thought she would die of embarrassment if her eyes met Koutarou’s right now.

Observing the end results of the commotion, Kiriha’s shoulders slumped Not even she had expected this outcome, and it left her a little dumbfounded.

“Impossible... How did it turn out like this? There should have been several chances to take advantage of him.”

If Kiriha had been in Harumi’s situation, she would have found an opportunity to tease him two, maybe four times. And she had taught Harumi how to make good use of those chances with her script.

“The big brother didn’t do anything, yet he was the one with Harumi-chan wrapped around his finger, ho!”

“How mysterious, ho! Ane-go’s education completely backfired, ho!”

Somehow Harumi had failed at every turn. It wasn’t that she didn’t have the opportunity—it was more like she self-destructed without even doing anything. It was an utter defeat that even the haniwas, who knew the least about human relations, could see.

“I guess... Harumi is just absolutely unfit for this...”




It was almost a relief, but it was at least now clear that Harumi was not cut

out to be a bad girl. When faced with Koutarou, she couldn't contain the good will overflowing from within her. She wanted to do nice things for him. She wanted him to be happy. Those feelings always surfaced, and betrayed themselves in the way she acted. When she tried to suppress them, it just made her extremely nervous. This was a problem that needed to be addressed before she could even consider becoming a bad girl.

"What do we do now, Ane-san? Ho!"

"I'd feel bad just giving up on her, ho!"

"We've learned that a frontal assault won't work, so we'll just have to use our last resort."

"Our last resort, ho?"

"Do we have one of those, ho?"

"Yes, but it will require a big change in perception first."

Even in a situation this grim, Kiriha still had one final plan. Being prepared with several solutions to a problem was her secret for success. The haniwas were worried, but she still looked full of confidence.

Before turning to the last resort, Kiriha decided to reeducate Harumi and try the hands-on training for a second time. Her plan would have to be carefully executed. But sadly, the results weren't good, so it was decided that the last resort was their only chance. Harumi was far less suited to be a bad girl than Kiriha had even imagined. This was the last trick she had up her sleeve.

Upon hearing from Kiriha that she could act like normal around Koutarou again, Harumi felt truly relieved. Harumi herself knew that wasn't cut out for being a bad girl. She also knew that acting meant a constant, concerted effort to attract Koutarou's attention. While it might have been simple for Kiriha, it was a tall order for Harumi. And so when she learned that she could carry on with club activities like normal, a smile naturally appeared on Harumi's face.

"Sakuraba-senpai, why are you smiling?"

Koutarou stopped moving his knitting needles and looked over at Harumi. Her smile intrigued him since nothing special had happened.

“Oh, it’s nothing... I was just thinking that you shouldn’t do things you’re not used to.”

Harumi stopped knitting as well and smiled even brighter. Since she didn’t need to act like a bad girl anymore, her reaction was unforced.

“Ah, I know what you mean.”

“Really, Satomi-kun?”

“I felt that way about knitting.”

Koutarou smiled as well and showed Harumi his knitting. While he might be able to knit now, it had been very hard when he started out.

“Now that you mention it, you did look rather stiff at first.”

“I put too much strength into it, so I’d get muscle pains in my arms or blisters on my fingers. It was hard work.”

“Heehee... You do tend to put too much force into it when you’re not used to it, don’t you?”

“Thinking back on it, I wonder what I was doing.”

They both smiled now. As they did, Harumi felt something similar about trying to become a bad girl.

“But Sakuraba-senpai, if it’s something you really want to do, you should stick with it even if you’re not used to it.”

“Huh?”

“Just like me and knitting.”

“You’re right... I’ll give it a try when the time comes.”

Knitting was necessary for Koutarou to sort out his feelings. He’d picked up something new and worked so hard on it because he truly wanted to, even when it was difficult. That’s why he believed that if Harumi found something she needed in her life too, she should keep it up.

*Do I really want to become a bad girl...?* Harumi asked herself.

As she did, she realized that her true desire wasn’t necessarily becoming a

bad girl. She just wanted the casual happiness she was feeling now. She could tease Koutarou in her own way, and the same was true for breaking down the wall around his heart. There had to be a method out there that would suit her. She now realized that training so hard to be a bad girl wasn't just a waste of time—it was a mistake.

"You'll get the muscle pains first though."

"Ah, yes, I'll be ready for that."

But in reality, Kiriha's education of how to become a bad girl was showing results in an unexpected area.

*Muscle pains, huh? A bad girl would have something bold to say about that, but I could never...*

The reeducation Kiriha had given Harumi hadn't shown any direct results. That was true even now. However, it had brought about a small change in Harumi. Sensing that change, Koutarou felt a mysterious emotion.

*Nothing's changed, but Sakuraba-senpai has been making my heart race lately for some reason...*

Harumi no longer had any intention of using the techniques she learned from Kiriha, but when certain situations or keywords popped up, she recalled her training. It made Harumi more conscious of her womanhood, and emphasized her feminine charm indirectly. Although, as she realized that, she was still a little embarrassed.

It certainly wasn't anything she was doing on purpose, but Koutarou couldn't help noticing. Sometimes he wasn't sure how to respond when Harumi's charm would practically surprise attack him. Ultimately, Kiriha's lessons had worked in a roundabout way.

*Wait, a bad girl... That's right, there was something I had to say!*

Her train of thought reminded Harumi of something important. There was actually something she wanted to ask Koutarou.

"By the way, Satomi-kun, there's something I'd like to try, so can you please help me?"

“I don’t mind. What is it?”

Harumi was smiling and her cheeks were slightly flushed. There was a certain charm about her. Koutarou never had any intention of refusing, but when he looked at her now, he found himself unwittingly nodding his head.

“The truth is... I want to become a bad girl.”

“A bad girl? *You* do?!”

Koutarou dropped his knitting needles in surprise. Seeing his reaction, Harumi’s smile changed somewhat. She smiled now out of true, unadulterated happiness.

“Ahaha, the truth is that I want to learn how to act like a bad girl... so I was wondering if you could help me practice.”

“Acting? Ah, so that’s what you meant. I don’t mind helping at all.”

When hearing that Harumi wanted to learn how to act like a bad girl, he did indeed assume that she was talking about a play. Since they had practiced together during the previous plays, he didn’t have anything against helping her out.

“Let’s work hard together.”

“Thank you, Satomi-kun!”

Koutarou gladly accepted Harumi’s request. He was enthusiastic about turning her into a splendid bad girl, completely unaware that not even Kiriha had been able to do so.

After getting a report from Harumi over the phone, Kiriha let out a big sigh and put her cellphone down on the tea table. She then picked up the teacup next to it and took a sip. She had been anxiously awaiting that call in room 106 for a while, and now she finally felt a weight of her shoulders.

“How did it go, ho?”

“Did Harumi-chan pull it off, ho?”

“Koutarou promised to make Harumi a bad girl. It seems like it worked.”

Kiriha’s last resort was to have Koutarou work together with Harumi to turn

her into a bad girl. Part of being a bad girl was asking for the impossible. And since making Harumi a bad girl was impossible, asking Koutarou to help her with it fit the bill. In other words, it was a circuitous way of getting Harumi to act like a bad girl.

“You’re a genius, Ane-san! Ho!”

“A real bad girl! Ho!”

“Jeez, I was a little worried there...”

But Kiriha was satisfied with the outcome. There were as many ways to act like a bad girl as there were girls in the world. Harumi just had her own way of doing it. Since Harumi had Koutarou wrapped around her finger by the end, it could be said that her bad girl transformation was a success. Although, it was still not clear if Harumi herself was aware of that.

“But Ane-san, why did you help Harumi-chan, ho?”

“Didn’t you want to be with the big brother—with Koutarou, ho? Are you sure you should’ve helped your rival, ho?”

The haniwas were confused by Kiriha’s actions. Helping a girl who loved the same boy didn’t exactly seem like a smart move. To the haniwas, it looked like she was shooting herself in the foot.

“There are things more important than connecting with Koutarou. Because of that, I need Harumi’s power. Even more than ever.”

Kiriha answered without any hesitation. Her eyes were filled with deep love and kindness that were equal to Harumi’s.

“You really love the big brother, ho! Nobody would normally go that far, ho!”

“Ane-go is good at pretending to be a bad girl, but she really isn’t suited for it either, ho!”

“That will be our secret.”

“Understood, ho!”

“Our lips are sealed, ho!”

Though she might not act like it, Kiriha could only truly live earnestly. The

haniwas looked at their master and secretly made a certain decision.

“Ho, ho!”

“Ho, ho! Ho!”

That decision was to one day reveal everything to Koutarou. That was their slight revolt against their awkward master. Really, in other words, Korama and Karama learned from their bad girl master and were going to become bad haniwas.

# Chapter 2: Sleepless in Harukaze

To Clan, being a scientist was as important as being royalty. In the past, she had only ever thought of using the technology she developed for herself. She believed that it was one of the strengths of royalty, and something that should be shown off. But as a result of traveling to Earth, the past, and the experiences she'd had as a result, she began thinking of using her technology to use for the good of the world. She had begun to believe that was the correct way to behave as a royalty, and as a scientist.

The Powered Assistance Field, or PAF, was born as a result of that. The PAF was a reinforced exoskeleton without a physical form—a power suit made using barriers. For example, when trying to lift an object, the energy field around the user's body would alter its shape in conjunction with the user's movements, and lend its strengths accordingly. But with everything that was normally done with machinery being done through energy, the energy consumption was heavy and it brought about many technical difficulties. Similarly, a mechanical reinforced exoskeleton was stronger and lasted longer. However, when it was used for medical or welfare purposes, it was more than enough. It could also be turned off when not necessary.

"...And so why are you adding a martial arts function?"

Today, Koutarou and Shizuka had come to an unpopular park on the outskirts of town at Clan's request. They were testing a new function she had developed for PAF. However, Koutarou was puzzled by that new function, as martial arts seemed to deviate from the PAF's original purpose.

"Martial arts is a means, not an end," Clan clarified.

"What do you mean?" Shizuka asked, similarly confused.

Clan smiled and began explaining, "I think the PAF's function to assist in regular life is almost complete. But don't you think there accidents are a part of regular life too?"

"You mean the PAF is going to create accidents? Your nanomachines did

explode, after all...” Koutarou pondered out loud.

“Don’t be such a bully! I’m talking about traffic accidents or falling objects and things like that!”

“Ah, that’s what you meant.”

The true purpose of Clan’s test was improve the PAF’s usefulness against accidents. As part of its development, a martial arts function was being implemented.

“You really are such a... One day I really will kill you!”

“Now, now, calm down... Go on, Clan-san.”

“Hah... Well, the people who need PAFs are those who are in poor health, or people like the elderly people who aren’t good at moving fast, right? That’s why I want to add a function that lets them respond quickly to accidents.”

“I see! So that’s where martial arts come in!”

“That’s right.”

That was where Shizuka’s expression lit up. She had figured out what Clan was thinking. Seeing that, Clan smiled in return. However, Koutarou still didn’t get it. He just cocked his head to the side.

“So what does that mean?”

“Satomi-kun, don’t you think fighting is like having accidents come at you non-stop? So knowing martial arts will help you respond to accidents too, right, Clan-san?”

“Yes. In short, I want to create a measure that will swiftly respond to emergencies automatically. A very simple example of such an emergency would be an actual fight.”

“Hmm...”

Koutarou now understood what Clan wanted to say. As the PAF was a device engineered to focus on movement, it only needed to worry about its user’s movements. But in order to evade accidents, it would need to pay attention to its surroundings too. There were a lot of issues that needed to be addressed in

order to make such a change, including to what extent it should gather information from around it, and how the system effectively would effectively process that. To resolve those problems, Clan would need a lot of data on accidents, and she was planning on using martial arts as a way to collect it.

*Clan really is amazing...*

Koutarou was amazed by Clan's way of thinking. This way she could put herself in the shoes of the user and fully devote herself to developing this new function. Koutarou didn't know any other engineers, so he wasn't exactly sure to what extent, but he was certain that this was something she excelled at.

"So Landlord-san and I only need to beat you up?"

"I don't like that phrasing, but that's just about correct."

"Got it! Leave it to me. All right, now I'm feeling pumped up!"

"...You definitely won't die a pretty death."

However, Koutarou couldn't just genuinely praise Clan. Their relationship up until now prevented that. But he really was feeling motivated. He was going to go along with her experiments until she was satisfied.

As it was a function intended for emergencies, the PAF's martial arts function wasn't linked with the user's input or capabilities. Clan was just standing still while a newly sprouted red arm and leg were fighting against Koutarou on their own.

"Yeah, this is much easier to see than the yellow one."

"It does look like it would be easy to fight."

"Whoops, that one was close..."

"Then I'll make it this color for emergencies."

They were currently determining what color the limbs would be in situations where they needed to manifest. As the barriers a PAF created were colorless and transparent, it was impossible to tell if there were on just by looking. That was why they were going for a colored, visible version for the emergency function.

“But won’t this cause a panic if you use it on Earth, Clan-san?” Shizuka asked.

It would be a different case in Forthorthe where barriers were commonplace, but if someone suddenly had extra limbs on Earth, there would be hysteria.

“You’re right... In Harumi’s case, I’ll project a virtual image only she can see.”

“That would make it look like a paranormal phenomenon,” Koutarou added.

Something invisible suddenly sweeping away danger would make it look supernatural to anyone watching.

“It’s better than Harumi dying.”

“Well, that’s certainly true.”

However, this would just be for emergencies, so neither Koutarou nor Clan really minded it too much. If her friend was in danger, Yurika would most likely use magic, even in front of other people, and Sanae would use her psychic powers. It wasn’t much different from that.

*Regardless of what she might say, Clan really does care about Sakuraba-senpai...*

With that on his mind, Koutarou continued fighting against the PAF. Sensing that Clan’s objective was also for Harumi’s sake, he felt even more cooperative. While he was too embarrassed to tell Clan directly, he would gladly help her as much as she liked when she was like this.

*What is this feeling...? I sort of feel restless deep down inside.*

But Koutarou’s feelings were conveyed to Clan nonetheless. However, since Koutarou hadn’t said it directly, and Clan was still lacking in experience when it came to interpersonal relationships, she could only vaguely feel it. Still, that vague feeling affected her quite a bit.

*Even though nothing special is happening...*

While the PAF Clan was wearing was locked in a fierce fight with Koutarou, she was just standing there. She stared her opponent—or, rather, the PAF’s opponent. Koutarou seemed to be enjoying himself. It was a similar atmosphere to when everyone would play games together. Moreover, Koutarou was totally focused on Clan and her suit, but his eyes seemed to be gentler than usual.

*If only he'd look at me like this normally...*

She didn't know what Koutarou was thinking, but even she could tell his eyes were locked on her. She was happy about that. Her heart was pounding and she was feeling restless for some reason, but she couldn't help wishing that this would continue forever.

"Okay, that's three minutes!" Shizuka called.

"Looks like it's over, Clan."

"Ah..."

However, that happy time didn't last for long. There was a limit to Koutarou's stamina, so they had agreed ahead of time to only go for three minutes. And just as Clan had wished for it to last forever, it abruptly ended.

Having fought for three solid minutes without a break, Koutarou was visibly exhausted. He was out of breath and his face was flushed. He was so beat that he laid down on the ground with his arms and legs spread out, staring up at the sky. It looked like it would take a while for him to recover.

"It looks like you really got into it, Satomi-kun. Heehee."

"Y-Yeah..." Clan stammered.

Shizuka and Clan looked at Koutarou. While they were doing the same thing, their expressions were completely different. Shizuka looked pleasantly amused, while Clan looked lonely and embarrassed.

"What's the matter, Clan-san?"

Noticing Clan's expression, Shizuka peered at her face. As she did, Clan vigorously shook her head, causing her long hair to flutter.

"Ah, n-no, it's nothing."

Clan hurriedly tried to look normal by getting on her bracelet and analyzing the data. But it only made her more suspicious. She looked very unnatural, typical of someone trying to cover something up.

"Hmm, well, if you say so..."

Shizuka stared at Clan for a while, but didn't say anything more about it.

Instead, she decided to ask her about something else.

“By the way, Clan-san, do you have any interest in learning martial arts yourself?”

Clan had secretly been worrying about what Shizuka would say, but fortunately, the topic shifted away from what she was afraid of. She let out a sigh of relief and smiled at Shizuka.

“I have no intention of doing so.”

“Why not?”

“I’m not suited for it. I’ve always hated being physically active.”

“What a waste. You certainly know enough about it, so I’m sure you’d become strong if you tried it.”

Martial arts and cooking both required knowledge and skill. Without both of them, one would eventually reach a limit. In Clan’s case, she already had the knowledge. After beating some skill into her, Clan would be able to use martial arts. Shizuka felt like it was a waste that Clan was missing that opportunity.

“I think it’s a matter of the right person for the right job.”

But Clan had no intention of picking it up. She didn’t like moving around too much, and she already had her research. She had plenty of other ways to protect herself. Because of that, Clan didn’t think she needed martial arts.

“Well, if Clan becomes a strong martial artist, I’ll lose my position.”

Having finally caught his breath, Koutarou got back up and joined in on the conversation. He was on Clan’s side.

“It would certainly make more sense to focus on Veltlion than trying to make me stronger.”

It would be more efficient for Clan to use the time she’d spend learning martial arts on enhancing Koutarou’s equipment instead. Clan and Koutarou could at least agree on that.

“Well, if you bring Satomi-kun up...”

Shizuka smiled wryly. She wanted Clan to try budō, including the mental

aspect of it, rather than just focusing explicitly on fighting. Sadly, they didn't seem to get that.

*But still, I feel like Clan is working on this research with the same spirit that a martial artist would approach their training, so I guess things might be okay as they are...*

If efficiently defeating your enemies was the nature of martial arts, then improving yourself was the nature of budō. From that point of view, Clan wasn't really effectively using science. She was limiting its use to helping people. In that sense, Clan was already working on her own way of budō, so Shizuka chose not to press that part of the issue any further.

But Shizuka actually had another reason for wanting Clan to pick up budō. This one was more girlish in nature.

"But you're out of shape, so I think it would be healthy for you to pick it up, Clan-san!"

"That's none of your business!"

"Ah, the poor citizens of Forthorthe are going to have a fat empress for—"

"Don't bring that up again!"

But from the looks of it, it seemed to be enough, so Shizuka didn't push it too much either.

With Koutarou back up on his feet, he and Shizuka got to work on finding problems with the experiment. As they watched the recorded footage, they discussed how to resolve any problems they found by acting out potential solutions. They were essentially analyzing the experiment and working out remedial measures. It was a critical step in development.

"...But wouldn't it be better to sweep away with the left hand like this to defend, Satomi-kun?"

Swoosh!

"That's true, but that's just because you're so fast, Landlord-san. I think it would be better to aim for reliability in the case of emergencies a PAF would encounter."

“Like this?”

Swoosh!

“Yeah, I think it’s better with the right.”

“I see. We don’t know what kind of state the PAF will be in during emergencies, after all.”

Clan was recording the two of them on camera. She would use this recording as reference as she reworked the defensive algorithm, so she was intensely staring at them through the lens. But after doing that for a while, Clan noticed something. And that something started to wear down her interest in the discussion.

*They seem to be enjoying themselves...*

Clan had noticed the mood as they talked, exchanging ideas and blows. The genuinely looked like they were having fun. And what grabbed Clan’s interest the most were their eyes.

*Those eyes... They’re the same as before...*

She had seen the looks that Koutarou and Shizuka were giving each other. They were looks of enjoyment and kindness. It was the same way Koutarou looked at her when he was fighting her PAF. Being as active as he was, Clan imagined that Koutarou had the most fun when he was doing things like this.

*If I were to learn martial arts, would Veltlion look at me with those eyes all the time, I wonder...?*

Eventually she got envious of Shizuka. Koutarou only looked at her that way for three minutes, but Shizuka got those looks daily. It didn’t take long for Clan to want the same treatment. And that turned into the spark that made Clan change her mind.

“Veltlion, Shizuka!” And so she made her bold request after the two had finished their discussion. “Could you teach me martial arts?!”

Doing so required a great deal of courage from Clan. She was aware that what she was saying wasn’t like her. But she couldn’t hold it in. She wanted Koutarou to look at her that way again.

“What is this all of a sudden? You said you didn’t want to just earlier.”

Koutarou’s eyes opened wide in surprise. As expected, it didn’t seem very Clan-like to him. Clan’s lack of stamina was worthy of special mention, and her running out of strength in the middle of a hike was an everyday occurrence.

“I’ve changed my mind! If I can do it myself, development will be easier too!”

“Hmm...?”

“U-Uhh...” Clan stammered.

Even after Clan explained herself, it didn’t click with Koutarou, so he began suspecting that there was a different reason for it. This clearly distressed Clan, so Shizuka decided to give her a helping hand.

“Now, now, Satomi-kun. You were saying that Clan-san was out of shape too, so isn’t this a good chance?”

“That’s true.”

Shizuka had a vague sense of Clan’s real intentions. She was a girl too. She could understand Clan’s delicate feelings. And thanks to her words, Koutarou could accept Clan’s change of heart. Everything else aside, he agreed that it would be better for Clan to get some exercise.

“...”

“Let’s do our best, Clan-san.”

“Y-Yes. Um, thank... you...”

“Heehee.”

Clan realized that Shizuka was helping her out. Not wanting to be thought of as ungrateful, she desperately held her embarrassment back and thanked Shizuka.

Koutarou would be in charge of directly teaching Clan martial arts while Shizuka observed from a distance, pointing out any flaws. They decided that would be the most effective method of instruction for her.

“Don’t just punch with your hands. You’ll only get the power of your arm behind your punch that way.”

“I know that, but once I do it...”

“Hahaha, I guess that’s just how it is for you, huh?”

Koutarou’s instructions focused more on the body and its movements than on the reason behind all of it. For a complete beginner, it was a rather rough teaching style. But in Clan’s case, she had already completed a mechanical analysis of martial arts, so she could keep up with his instructions without any problem. She actually had a rather high affinity for his teaching.

“Moving your body is hard, just like I thought.”

“Only masters can move their bodies just they way they want. Don’t sweat it too much.”

“...”

In fact, the problematic part for her was rather that Koutarou wasn’t bullying her like he normally did. Under ordinary circumstances, he would be quick to tease her whenever she failed at something. But for some reason, he wasn’t doing that right now. That confused Clan.

“What?”

“Ah, no... It’s nothing... L-Like this?”

“Yeah, that’s looking better.”

“Ah...”

Koutarou wasn’t teasing Clan because he understood that she was motivated. Even he knew that he shouldn’t tease people when they were being sincere. But Clan was still confused because she didn’t understand Koutarou’s feelings.

*But... it certainly doesn’t feel bad... All right!*

Normally, Koutarou would praise Clan, even if he was bullying her, like when she had started development on the PAF. That was sort of how he felt now. She didn’t know why it had turned out like this, but she wanted it to continue. That’s why Clan earnestly kept up with her practice.

Clan was obediently doing what she was told. Of course, being a beginner, she couldn’t exactly do things correctly. But in her case, since she understood the

mechanics of martial arts, the problem wasn't that she wasn't being serious, but rather that her body wasn't keeping up with her. And since she was so ardently working, Koutarou had to admire her some.

"That Clan sure is working unexpectedly hard. Before, she would have given up by now."

"Clan-san can put herself to it when she needs to."

"I wonder if that means that she's matured too."

When Clan had been with Koutarou in the past in Forthorthe, she had been lacking in stamina and grit. She could only walk for a short while and would require a piggyback from Koutarou from time to time. Compared to that, Clan had made considerable progress. Her forehead was drenched in sweat, but she was practicing her form like Koutarou had told her.

"Perhaps it has less to do with her maturity and more to do with her maiden heart."

Shizuka, who was watching Clan with Koutarou, understood some of how she felt. Koutarou, on the other hand, was oblivious. Shizuka just smiled at him as if to acknowledge there was nothing that could be done about it.

"Her maiden heart? I don't think she's that kind of cutesy character."

"Heehee, you'll understand if you spar with me, Satomi-kun!"

"Sparring? Why?"

"Let's just do it. Here I come!"

"Whoa!"

Shizuka felt bad for Clan because Koutarou was so thickheaded, so she struck at him with a smile. But it was a different smile now. She enjoyed sparring with Koutarou, and she was feeling a little mischievous.

"L-Landlord-san, could you hold back a little?!"

"N-o-p-e!"

"Uwaaah!"

With a refreshing smile still on her lips, Shizuka unleashed a flurry of attacks.

*As expected from Landlord-san! I can just barely keep up!*

Koutarou desperately blocked and dodged her attacks. Since they were in the middle of instructing Clan, Shizuka wasn't using the Fire Dragon Emperor's powers. But even then, Koutarou was stuck on the defensive. The effort Shizuka had put into her daily training certainly wasn't half-assed. And while the fight was hard, it was very fun. They had very few chances to go all out in their day to day lives.

"Heehee! Look, Satomi-kun!"

"Huh?"

But Shizuka suddenly eased up on her attacks for some reason. She shifted her glance to the side. Since she let up some, Koutarou was able to follow her line of sight. She was looking over at Clan, who was working on her form.

"..."

Clan had stopped moving. She was standing with her fist out in front of her and she was simply staring at Koutarou and Shizuka.

*What's up with Clan...?*

Clan's eyes behind her glasses had an impatient look to them. It was a look that Koutarou hadn't seen before.

"You still don't get it? Okay... then how about this?"

"Wah!"

Striking when Koutarou was distracted by Clan, Shizuka tackled him. But it was a rather strange tackle. She jumped at Koutarou from the front and threw her arms around his neck. It was as if she was jumping into the arms of her lover.

"Wh-What are you doing?!"

In that moment, Clan's eyes opened as wide as they could. The impatient look in her eyes then grew even stronger as she stared at them so closely together. Her hands moved aimlessly in the air and her mouth opened repeatedly, but no words came out.

“Landlord-san, what are you trying to do?!”

Like Clan, Koutarou was also surprised. But in his case, he was mostly surprised that Shizuka had suddenly embraced him.

“Surely you have to get it now, right?”

“Huh?”

Shizuka tossed a sidelong glance at Clan again. And once more, Koutarou followed her glance. There he saw Clan frozen stiff with the same impatient look.

“...Ah...”

Clan realized that Koutarou and Shizuka were looking at her and hurriedly looked away. She then continued practicing her form in an attempt to hide what she had been doing. Her face was beet red.

“She...”

“You get it now, right? Clan-san wants you to care for her, but she’s just as stubborn as Theia-chan is.”

“That Clan is...”

Koutarou finally understood what Shizuka was trying to say. Right now, Clan looked like a child who wanted to call out to her friend, but couldn’t. That could be considered a huge step forward for Clan, who used to lock herself up in her laboratory and push other people away.

“So she’s trying to change like me...”

“I think so. But in Clan-san’s case, she’s trying to change her girlish part, so the circumstances are different.”

Shizuka pushed herself away a little from Koutarou and smiled at him. Without saying a word, her lips read, “So you finally get it.”

“I see. I mean, she is a girl...”

“Hey, I am too, you know, Satomi-kun!”

“Uwah! What now?!”

While Koutarou did finally understand, Shizuka tackled him again for just continuing to stare at Clan.



With Clan beginning to seriously practice martial arts, she decided she now needed some proper sportswear to do so in. She didn't currently have anything like that. The easiest clothes she had to move around in were the workwear she used during research. But as they were made with safety in mind, they were made out of sturdy material, so they were still somewhat stiff and wouldn't work as well as real athletic wear.

Koutarou, Shizuka, and Clan decided that they would go buy proper clothes for her together.

"We don't have to go this far..."

However, Clan was reluctant. If she bought new clothes, that would be a substantial change, and it would mark the start of something she had been avoiding. That was embarrassing for her.

"Everything starts with looking the part. This is good opportunity," Koutarou urged.

"Save your reservations until after you've seen the clothes. Just looking is free," Shizuka added.

They were practically dragging Clan along. If they were going to do it, they should do it properly. That was the consensus between the two athletic ones of the group.

"But... I don't think this suits me at all..."

"You'll change your mind once you actually get into it. It's perfectly natural to be a little uneasy about trying something new."

"Landlord-san is right. You'll get the hang of it as you do it. Just like with science."

"Well, that's true..."

Clan glanced at Koutarou out of the corner of her eye. She wanted him to look at her, but she didn't want him to see anything he didn't like. It wasn't just that she was anxious about starting something new. Her maiden heart made it even more complicated, though she couldn't tell him that. Clan was in an embarrassing position.

“...Are you sure you don’t just want to ogle over baseball equipment at the sports store?”

All Clan could do was throw out some wry comment as a form of resistance. She was still looking at him, but resentfully.

“I can’t say that has nothing to do with it.”

“You barefaced liar. The truth is that you only think of me as an extra, right?”

“I wouldn’t dare. Princess Clariossa is always my top priority.”

“Whenever you say things like that, you always mean the opposite of what you say!”

“Quit your grumbling and let’s go. The sale ends today.”

“I can already imagine what you’ll be carrying home.”

Of course, Koutarou wasn’t going to let Clan bash him for no reason, so he lashed out with his own wry comments. Thanks to that, Clan’s timidity disappeared, though she herself didn’t seem to notice.

*These two really get along well. It’s just...*

Shizuka watched over the two with a smile. They were both stubborn and refused to be fully honest with one another. She felt like it was her job to ease the friction between them.

When they entered the sporting goods store, Koutarou flew straight to the baseball corner. Clan and Shizuka were left to go to the sportswear section on their own.

“See? He says I’m his top priority and then runs off for baseball stuff the first chance he gets!”

Clan was angry at being left behind. She was secretly hoping to get to pick out her outfit with Koutarou.

“Now, now, just calm down. I’m sure that’s not the only reason.”

“Of course it is. Just look at that happy face.”

Clan was even more angry than usual because she’d gotten her hopes up, and not even Shizuka could quell the flames. Instead, she decided to try and defend

Koutarou.

“That man—”

“Clan-san, take a look around.”

“—doesn’t care about... Huh?”

“This place doesn’t just have sportswear, but underwear too, right?”

The women’s wear section did have undergarments on display. Due to recent advances in sportswear, they had underwear made with highly breathable materials, materials that stayed cool to the touch, and more. And with various designs and colors, it had become a big market.

“You might not be that aware since you let Satomi-kun do your laundry, but normally boys have a hard time around women’s underwear.”

The high-performance underwear was on display with the regular sportswear. It made it a difficult place for boys of a certain age to shop.

“Ah...”

With Shizuka’s explanation, Clan finally took a good look around. Almost half of what was on display was underwear, and most of the other customers in the store were women. Only then did Clan finally realized how hard it must be for boys to come here.

“The truth is that he could have just left the shopping to me, but he came with us all the way to the store. That’s pretty considerate for a guy. Of course, I’m sure Mackenzie-kun wouldn’t have had any trouble waltzing in here and picking something out.”

“Th-That doesn’t matter. More importantly, let’s focus on the sportswear.”

Clan ignored what Shizuka was saying and went over to the display.

*You really lose out by being stubborn...* Shizuka said to herself.

But even so, the stingy tone in Clan’s voice disappeared. Shizuka smiled and browsed along with her.

Regardless of how devoted she was to her research, Clan was still a girl. Her top priority in picking something out for herself was that it had to look good.

Next, it should be easy to wear. That's why the first thing she picked up was a cute style in a rich pink color.

*Considering my height and figure, would this kind of design should be okay?*

Clan held it up to herself as she looked in a nearby mirror trying to figure that out. The pink outfit suited her skin tone and her hair quite well. The color that wasn't too strong, but showed off her delicate figure. The cute design made her look even more gorgeous. It suited her so well that, despite it being the first one she touched, she had no qualms about deciding on it.

"Oh, that looks really good."

"Y-You think so?"

"Yes! I'm confident that everyone will think it's cute too."

"Cute... everyone will...?"

Clan blushed a little and looked down at herself. She was a little relieved that she hadn't been totally off base.

*I wonder if "everyone" includes Veltlion too...*

But then a new anxiety budded in Clan's chest. She realized that everyone had different aesthetics.

*Would he laugh and say that it's not like me...?*

To Clan, the outfit in her hands was practically love at first sight. But she was still anxious that the person she wanted to compliment her most might not like it. It was so just different from what she normally wore.

"Maybe there's something more simple..."

"You're going to pick something else? I think that one really suits you though."

"I don't want to get laughed at for wearing something too different from normal..."

In the end, Clan put it back on the hanger and started looking for something else. Rather than going with something cute, she wanted something more fitting for princess. That way he surely wouldn't laugh at her. Unlike when she

decided to take up martial arts, there was no strong impetus forcing her hand now, so her pessimism had a firm hold on her thoughts.

*This isn't good...* Shizuka worried.

She could vaguely imagine how Clan was feeling. As Clan put the first look back, Shizuka glanced over at the baseball corner for a second.

*In that case... Okay!*

If she left her to her own devices, this wasn't going to end well. Shizuka made up her mind and left Clan behind to track down the source of her problem.

Even though he was no longer in a baseball club, Koutarou still loved the sport. From time to time, he would go play baseball with friends during the weekends. That's why, in order to be ready at a moment's notice, he never neglected his baseball equipment. Today he was planning on replacing his worn out shoes, and was currently standing at a shelf displaying all kinds of shoes.

"Hmm... That's just at the limit of my budget... What should I pick?"

The shoes that Koutarou wanted were priced at the upper limit of his calculated budget. Since that kind of price tag would max him out, he couldn't get them without thoroughly considering his decision. If he simply replaced the worn down spikes on his shoes, he could afford to buy wax for his glove or spare underwear too. Koutarou was deciding if he should spend his budget on new shoes or keeping up his current gear.

"Are you going to buy those shoes?"

That was when a voice called out to Koutarou from behind. As he turned around, he spotted Shizuka. She walked up to him and took a look at the shoes he was staring at.

"Landlord-san, I'm actually wondering what to do. They would take roughly all of my budget."

"Aha, you're only going to spend the money from your part-time job, aren't you?"

"Well, I can't act cool if I use my old man's or Theia's money."

Koutarou currently had enough money to buy several dozen of the pairs of

the shoes in front of him. That money came from the allowance his father sent him and the knight's salary he got from Theia. However, Koutarou wouldn't spend that on his hobby.

His father sent him that allowance for him to live off of. Koutarou would only use it on rent and school expenses. It was a matter of pride. He didn't want to be a burden to his father. Really, he wanted to spend that money in a way he could be proud of.

It was a similar story with the money he received from Theia. Koutarou had become her vassal, but it wasn't because she paid him. To him, spending that money on himself would feel a bit hypocritical. Because of that, he put all of the salary he got from Theia into savings. He would only use when several of the residents of room 106 needed it. He'd go into it when they all went out together or if they were buying high quality meat for sukiyaki and things like that, but otherwise he didn't touch it.

That meant the only money Koutarou kept for his hobbies and fun was the money he got from his part-time job excavating the ruins. And that was why he couldn't make the decision to blow his whole budget lightly.

*Heehee, we both know you want to buy those shoes... Boys have their own problems, I guess, but right now we need to focus on the girl problems...*

While Shizuka was smiling wryly on the inside, she decided to tell Koutarou why she'd come to bug him.

"By the way, Satomi-kun, sorry for bothering while you're thinking, but there's something I'd like to talk about. Do you mind?"

"Nah, go ahead."

Koutarou chased the shoes out of his mind and turned to look at Shizuka. It wasn't like he was in a hurry to make a decision.

"Actually, it's about Clan-san's outfit..."

Shizuka's sounded unusually serious, so Koutarou didn't mind putting off his own shopping.

"Clan's outfit?"

“Yeah. Clan-san wants to buy a cute one, but she’s afraid she’ll be laughed at if she wears it, so she’s going to buy a plain one.”

“She’s worried about something like that...?”

Hearing Shizuka’s concerns, Koutarou looked towards the women’s wear section. There were some clothes in the way, but he could still see Clan’s lower half as she walked to and fro. It was clear that she was wondering what to do.

“I’m sure it’s because of that one time.”

“That one time?”

“Remember during the cook-off... You laughed and said that she couldn’t cook. I think she’s still hung up on that.”

In the past, Koutarou had used Clan’s pride against her to get her to join the cook-off, and Shizuka believed that had made her more pessimistic.

“So because of me, she...”

Koutarou remembered the incident well. He also thought that Shizuka might be right, considering how sensitive Clan was.

“No, it’s not just you. It was my fault too. She also has bad luck.”

The details, how it happened, and the outcome were all bad. Shizuka desperately wanted participants for the cook-off. Koutarou teased Clan because he knew that and wanted to get her to participate. Even if he laughed, he thought there wouldn’t be any problems as long as Clan made something decent. In the end, he thought he’d just apologize and she would get to boast about being able to cook after all. However, the plan was a massive failure and caused a war between nanomachines. As a result, Clan developed a fear of trying new things. Shizuka’s wish and Koutarou’s methods and finally Clan’s bad luck had facilitated that misfortune.

Clan was only able to start with martial arts because she had a strong motive, and the ability to use developing her PAF as an excuse. However, she didn’t have the kind of push when it came to buying a cute clothes. It was only natural that she would hesitate.

“That’s why I want to do something. Do you have any good ideas, Satomi-

kun?”

“Let’s see... Let me think...”

Shizuka didn’t want to leave things as they were. She felt a little responsible. Koutarou felt the same way. He’d played a part in how she ended up like this too. And so they put their heads together to try and come up with a solution.

“For starters, we want Clan to buy what she really wants.”

“But Satomi-kun, just getting her to buy it won’t be enough. She’ll be anxious until she finally wears it and you complement her.”

“That said, even if I tell her to buy the cute one, it’ll just sound fishy, won’t it?”

“Yeah, Clan-san would probably suspect something. If only there were some way to make it necessary...”

But there didn’t seem to be an easy answer. Trying to make up for the harm they’d caused proved to be a rather difficult task.

*As expected, we’ll need some kind of compensation. I guess there’s no other way.*

That was when Koutarou made up his mind. He decided that he would pay for Clan’s outfit himself as compensation for what he’d done wrong.

“Landlord-san, could you tell Clan to just buy what she wants?”

“I don’t mind, but we’ll need a reason.”

“If you buy the same thing, Clan shouldn’t worry too much about it.”

If Shizuka liked the same thing and they bought it together, she would get upset if Koutarou laughed at Clan. That would mean Koutarou couldn’t laugh at either of them. That’s what he wanted Shizuka to encourage Clan to think. However, his plan had one critical flaw.

“But Satomi-kun, I don’t have that kind of money with me. It’s not going to work.”

As a landlord, Shizuka had an income, but in order not to spend too much money, she gave herself an allowance. She agreed with Koutarou’s idea, but she

didn’t have the funds to carry it out.

“Please use this money to buy something for you and Clan-san.”

That was when Koutarou handed his wallet to Shizuka. Since he had come to buy baseball equipment, he had more than enough to buy clothes for both Shizuka and Clan.

“But weren’t you going to use this to buy shoes?”

Of course, Shizuka didn’t simply accept his wallet. It was a considerable amount of money to high school students like them.

“There are times when a man has to take responsibility.”

“Then I’ll repay you for my—”

“It’s a present, so it’d be strange for me to take money from just one of you.”

“That might be true, but...”

Koutarou giving both of them present should be enough of an excuse to get Clan to accept. And since it was a present, it made sense for him to buy the same thing for both of them. It would be weird to lend money to Shizuka for a present to her.

“Besides... shouldn’t good things happen to you too sometimes, Landlord-san? You’re always caring for others.”

The present to Clan was meant as an apology, but he also wanted to give Shizuka a present. Having no parents of her own, Shizuka rarely ever got any. Moreover, she was always caring for the people around her. During the cook-off it was Yurika and this time it was Clan. His gift to her would be a sign of gratitude and praise for her hard work.

“...Satomi-kun...”

Shizuka’s eyes opened wide. She hadn’t even considered that Koutarou might feel that way.

*I’m sure he doesn’t get it at all. He doesn’t know how I’ll feel when he says that... what I’ll do... I’ll definitely cling to him... because there’s no one else like Satomi-kun...*

Shizuka was so happy she could cry. But instead, she put her hands to her chest and desperately resisted her tears. This was a time to be happy.

“...It’s going to cost you, Satomi-kun.”

“I’m prepared for it.”

As Shizuka smiled at Koutarou, she couldn’t help but think that Koutarou really had no idea that what he had just bought with those words was far more valuable than some clothes.

Clan wore her outfit for the first time the day after she got it. Strictly speaking, she had tried it on several times in her room already , but this was the first time she wore it out.

“Oh, it really does look good on you!” Shizuka called out to Clan.

Shizuka was also wearing her new outfit too, but in order to let Clan stand out, she was wearing a jacket over hers. That was her own way of apologizing.

“Y-You think so?”

“Yeah. The way you’ve put up your hair really suits you too. You look cute and energetic.”

“Is that so...? I’m glad...”

Shizuka’s encouragement made Clan feel a little better. She had actually been worrying over what to do with her hair ever since she bought the outfit. After trying out all kinds of hairstyles while she was trying it on, this was the one she finally decided on. But since Clan still didn’t have much confidence in her look, Shizuka’s words really helped.

“I’m not just saying it either. I think you really look cute.”

Like she said, Shizuka truly believed Clan looked cute. She was cute to begin with, but she was always wearing a dress, a lab coat, or her work clothes, so she looked more colorful than normal now. Shizuka could tell it was a smashing success.

“Thank you, Shizuka. I’m really glad to hear you say that.”

Clan smiled too As a girl, she couldn’t help her affinity for cute clothes. She

was really quite happy to have accomplished looking cute, even though she was just wearing sportswear. On top of that, Clan was also grateful that Shizuka had gone with her to buy it. She was still a little embarrassed.

“I’m sure Satomi-kun will think so too.”



“I hope so...”

Once Koutarou's name came up, Clan's expression clouded over a little. She couldn't just ignore her partner's opinion after everything they'd been through in the past. It was all the joy and sorrow they'd experienced together that made their relationship something special—something beyond being a man and a woman. Would he think she was cute after all of that? Wouldn't he just laugh at her and say it didn't suit her? Clan couldn't help being anxious.

"You don't have to worry. We're wearing the same outfit, so he can't tease you like usual."

"Even if he doesn't say it, if he still thinks it, it's all the same..."

Not even Shizuka's encouragement brightened Clan's expression now. If anything, she looked more and more anxious. As a scientist it was her duty to prepare for the worst case scenario, but that really worked against her as a girl.

*Maybe I should tell her...*

Sensing that things couldn't go on like this, Shizuka decided to reveal the secret.

"Clan-san, want me to tell you something good?"

"Huh?"

"I was actually keeping it from you, but... Satomi-kun was the reason I told you to get that outfit. "

"Veltlion?!"

Behind her glasses, Clan's eyes shot open wide. Since she hadn't even considered that possibility, what Shizuka was saying sounded unbelievable.

"Wh-What do you mean?!" she stammered.

"Actually, it seems that Satomi-kun regrets making fun of you before the cook-off."

"What he said then..."

Clan recalled it clearly... as well as her failure shortly thereafter. Her current state was affected, at least in part, by what had happened then. She was afraid of having to go through he same thing again.

“But because Satomi-kun is a boy, and because of your relationship, he can’t apologize to your face. That’s why he used giving me a present as an excuse to give you a present to as an apology. Boys sure are difficult.”

“So that’s... This is Veltlion’s apology... I see...”

Clan reflexively looked down at herself. This was Koutarou’s apology for saying she wasn’t girlish. And in order to make her more girlish, he’d given her this outfit as a present. That realization slowly sunk in and melted away her apprehension.

“B-But it’s too late to apologize now! He’s very mistaken if he thinks he can fool me with just a single present after toying with my heart!”

With her unease gone, Clan’s normal energeticness returned. Her pessimism vanished. She practically turned into a different person. Seeing Clan like that, Shizuka smiled.

“It sure is difficult for boys too with things like this... Heehee...”

While Clan was audibly criticizing Koutarou, she looked much more lively. She looked over her outfit again, smoothing it out and brushing it off here and there. She didn’t forget to check her hair either. That made it clear what Clan truly felt, but she definitely wouldn’t admit it. In the end, she and Koutarou were well-matched. Neither of them were honest. Shizuka couldn’t help but smile when she realized it.

Clan and Shizuka were already at the park where they would be praticing martial arts, but Koutarou had yet to appear. More precisely, he was alredy there, but wouldn’t come out.

“Satomi-kun, why are you hiding?”

“Landlord-san... I’m surprised you knew where I was.”

“I can sense the presence of other large creatures nearby, you know.”

Shizuka was confused that Koutarou still hadn’t showed up, so she left Clan to do some warm-up exercises while she looked around. Her keen senses had detected Koutarou hiding in the shadows.

“Is it that hard to come out?”

Shizuka smiled with a grin that wordlessly said, “You’re hopeless.” Koutarou shrugged his shoulders at Shizuka.

“I wouldn’t say that. It’s just... I don’t know what to say.”

Koutarou wasn’t really hiding. He was just trying to think of the right words for Clan.

“Just say what you really feel.”

“When I’m facing Clan, everything I try to say comes out twisted.”

Koutarou smiled wryly as he answered Shizuka. It was easy to be honest with her, but it was an ordeal with Clan. Koutarou was aware that it was a bad habit of his, so he was trying to think out something genuine ahead of time to keep it from happening today.

“Is that because Clan-san is cute when she’s angry? Or because you’re depending too much on her?”

“...You’re pretty harsh, Landlord-san.”

Shizuka wasn’t going to settle for Koutarou’s vague answer, and mercilessly went after his true intentions. And her words landed a critical hit on Koutarou with the precision of a martial arts master.

“Which one is it?”

Shizuka looked and sounded gentle, but both her face and her voice made it crystal clear she wasn’t backing down. Koutarou had no way of resisting her like that, so he resolved himself to be honest.

“Well... probably both.”

“In other words, you think Clan-san is cute. And you want to apologize for your actions during the cook-off. But because you feel like you’ll say something else when you see her, you’re over here putting it off.”

“You really are harsh, Landlord-san. But yeah, that’s about the gist of it.”

If this were a martial arts showdown, it would be an instant defeat. Koutarou had no choice but to raise the white flag and give up.

“Heeheehee, it’s good to see you so obedient.”

Satisfied with what she'd gotten out of Koutarou, Shizuka pulled something out of her jacket pocket and spoke into it.

"...So there you have it, Clan-san."

"Landlord-san, is that...?!"

"Bingo! It's exactly what you're thinking."

Shizuka was holding a bracelet like the ones Theia and Clan had. Communications were open, and it had been relaying the conversation between Koutarou and Shizuka to someone. That someone was of course Clan, who was supposed to be warming up.

"Um... Veltlion, um..."

"Y-Yeah..."

Clan's voice came in over the bracelet. Hearing that, Koutarou instinctively turned towards the park. In the center of it was Clan looking back at him. Her face was red and she seemed very concerned with her hair and clothes. It was very different from how she usually carried herself. She was very girlish and charming right now.

"I don't mind if you say anything, but... can you come a little closer?"

"Okay, I'll be right there. But I'll say what I should."

"Right... I'll be waiting..."

With those words, Clan hung up. Koutarou understood that the rest would have to be said face to face. Having made up his mind, Koutarou stepped out from the shadows. Clan was waiting in the middle of the park with her heart pounding. He couldn't keep her waiting any longer. And so he started to walk over to her.

"All right. Mission complete. Seriously, the two of them are such a handful..."

Satisfied with Koutarou going over to Clan, Shizuka put the bracelet back in her pocket. She looked truly happy. Koutarou noticed that and flashed a small smile.

"In the end, you're always looking out for others, Landlord-san."

“I can’t be happy if I’m the only one having fun. Maybe it’s because I’m a landlord?”

Shizuka smiled as well. She believed it was only natural, so there was a beauty shining through her smile. However, that worried Koutarou.

“You’ll only lose out like that.”

“I don’t want to hear that from you, Satomi-kun!”

Shizuka counterattacked with a teasing remark. To her, Koutarou lost out even more than she did, so hearing that kind of advice from him was just insulting.

“Landlord-san...”

But seeing that smile, Koutarou couldn’t help feeling that he was no match for her. At the same time, he felt like she still had a way to go to be truly happy.

“Besides, if someone thinks I’m unhappy, they should do something about it themselves.”

Shizuka gave Koutarou a provocative look. “It looks like I’m unhappy. Are you just going to leave me be?” That’s what her eyes seemed to be asking him.

“I’m sure good things will happen to me too. Don’t you think, Satomi-kun?”

“I do.”

“See? Then there’s no problem.”

“Landlord-san, you’re...”

“Hmm?”

“...No, it’s nothing. Let’s go, Clan is waiting.”

“Yeah, we’ve got a lot on our plates.”

“Yup.”

And so Koutarou and Shizuka ran up to Clan. Nothing unusual would happen after that. They would talk, practice martial arts, perhaps even quarrel. But good things were sure to come. There was no doubt in any of their hearts about that.

# Chapter 3: Beauty Becomes Her

Certain occasions excepted, Elfaria always carried herself in a graceful and smart manner. However, with her eccentric personality, she didn't demand the same from others, nor did she demand to be treated like an empress. In fact, she preferred casual situations over being treated like royalty.

"Theia-mama, we have sweet chestnuts. Do you want some?" Sanae asked.

"What are sweet chestnuts?"

"Um, they're like sweet nuts that have been toasted... I think," Maki answered.

"That sounds fun. Please let me try some."

"Okay, hang on a sec."

With too much free time on her hands, Elfaria had come to visit room 106 where she found Sanae and Yurika watching a recorded anime, and Maki staring into her account book. The three girls welcomed Elfaria's surprise visit and had gotten out tea and snacks. Unfortunately, none of them had the proper manners expected when dealing with someone of the upper class, and only Maki really knew how to speak to her superiors. It was an understatement to say that their treatment of Elfaria was lacking, but because of her quirks, she wasn't irritated or offended in the slightest. Rather, she was pleased that she was being treated as their friend's mother.

"Auuugh... Hrmm..."

"Yurika, want me to take over making the tea?"

"Really?! Please do, Maki-chan!"

"You prepare a tray for the sweets and a towel to wipe our hands with."

"Okay, got it!"

Elfaria happily watched over the three girls working together to fix the refreshments. Luckily, things were proceeding well enough. Manners aside, they were barely above the passing grade as girls of age.

But once everything was ready, all four of them sat down around the table and began chatting. It was a leisurely Saturday afternoon—anime and bookkeeping could wait until later. The three girls were much more interested in their unusual guest, Elfaria.

Crack!

“So why are you here today, Theia-mama?” Sanae got straight to the point as she cracked open the chestnut in her hands.

Even if she was lacking in etiquette, Sanae knew who Elfaria was and what position she held. Sanae wanted to make sure her visit wasn’t over something urgent. Seeing the worried expression on Sanae’s face, Elfaria gently smiled at her.

“I don’t have any specific business... I suppose you could say I’m here to see how Theia is doing. It’s Saturday today, so there’s no rush for anything, right?”

“Hmm, I see... Hom!”

Hearing that, Sanae threw the freshly peeled chestnut into her mouth and smiled too. It was partly a sign of relief, but it was also because the chestnut tasted good.

Crack!

“Oh, they crack open easier than I thought,” Elfaria commented in mild surprise.

“But if you’re clumsy, that happens...” Sanae said, indicating Yurika.

“Waaah... I broke the nut again...”

“Here, Yurika. Eat this,” Maki offered.

“Thank youuu...”

“My, my... Heehee,” Elfaria giggled.

After observing Sanae, Elfaria cracked open her nut and—still mimicking Sanae—popped it in her mouth. When she did, the delicate sweetness and unique flavor spread across her tongue.

“Oh, this is quite delicious.”

“Right?”

“They’re also pleasantly fragrant.”

“Eat up! We can always get more later!”

“Thank you, Sanae-san.”

Sanae was overjoyed that Elfaria liked the same thing she did. It was almost like Elfaria was complimenting her and not the food. In high spirits, she urged Elfaria to have more. Seeing her like that, Elfaria was reminded of a much younger Theia.

*They grow up so fast...*

Theia rarely behaved like a child now; she had matured into a splendid princess. Really, it made Elfaria feel a little lonely, but she was still able to catch a glimpse of a more childlike Theia on occasion in room 106. It very well may have been part of the reason she decided to pay them a weekend visit.

“Now that you mention it, where did Theia-chan and the others go?” asked Yurika.

After finally getting a whole nut in her mouth, Yurika stopped crying.

Crack!

But her shoulders drooped once more as she crushed the next nut along with the shell yet again. Maki flipped open her notebook as she smiled wryly at Yurika.

“Today... Theia-san and Ruth-san are visiting the drama club.”

“Huh? I thought Theia was done with plays,” rejoined Sanae.

“It seems she’s giving them some advice. She is the original playwright, after all.”

“Oh, that makes sense.”

“Could you mean ‘The Blue Knight and the Silver Princess’?!”

Elfaria’s eyes lit up. She had already heard Theia had written a play about the legend of the Blue Knight, but as a Forthorthian, it was a big deal to her.

“Yes. Last year there was a scriptwriting competition, and Theia-chan’s story about the Blue Knight won,” Yurika explained.

“Heehee! That girl knows more than anyone about the legend of the Blue Knight, after all... Although, strictly speaking, that might have been an unfair way of winning.”

Elfaria smirked. Theia’s victory had been in large part due to the people of Earth being unfamiliar with the story of the Blue Knight. If the competition had taken place in Forthorthe, it might have played out quite differently. But still, she was proud that Theia had won. Ultimately, her sour grin sweetened into the smile of a proud mother.

“Ooohh...”

Yurika was charmed by Elfaria’s smile. She had exquisite, womanly features, refreshing eyes, and softly curved lips. Even to other women, Elfaria was quite beautiful. She looked to be in her mid-twenties, despite the surprising fact that she was a mother. That’s right. Elfaria was Theia’s mother. Not her sister.

“What’s the matter, Yurika-san?” Elfaria asked when she noticed Yurika’s odd behavior.

“Ah, u-um...” Yurika snapped out of it. Flustered, she waved her hands and explained herself, “Um... I was just thinking that it’s amazing how beautiful you are, Elfaria-san...”

“Ah, I think so too! Theia-mama looks so young and beautiful!”

“I agree. I want to hear all your secrets on how stay looking like that,” Maki added.

Sanae’s mother also looked young for her age, but she didn’t compare to Elfaria. Sanae couldn’t help being curious about her secret. Maki simply wanted to stay beautiful. But their reasons aside, all three girls were interested in Elfaria’s methods.

“Heehee... Really, it’s less about me and more about Forthorthe. Our technology is quite advanced.”

Since Elfaria could understand the girls’ curiosity, she told them the truth.

Keeping a secret like that seemed unfair.

“Do you mean plastic surgery?” Sanae asked.

It was a logical conclusion as an earthling. Where Sanae was from, the best way to retain a youthful appearance was cosmetic surgery. She was also oblivious to the fact that what she was asking could be considered quite disrespectful. But Elfaria didn’t get angry. She just smiled and shook her head.

“No, not that. Think of it this way. I’m the empress, so I can’t fall ill, right?”

“Yeah. You can’t have your leader out of commission.”

“That’s why the people around me do their best to take care of me. This is part of that result.”

Including the colonized planets, the Holy Forthorthe Galactic Empire boasted a population of tens of billions. Having the empress at the center of such an empire fall ill would only invite tragedy, so Elfaria’s health was always a top priority. Her retinue did everything in their power to care for her health, and subsequently, her youthful, stunning appearance was a side effect of trying to keep the nation stable.

“Since Forthorthe is so advanced, that effect might be even more pronounced,” Maki commented.

Her presumption was correct. There was no denying the connection between youth and health. There was also a clear difference between the technology of Earth and Forthorthe. It only made sense that Forthorthe had more sophisticated anti-aging techniques. Elfaria didn’t just look young—she literally was.



“Being important sure must be hard... Can you even play hooky with people

watching after you like that?”

“You can’t. People see through your lies almost immediately.”

Elfaria had an animated personality. That in conjunction with her youthful energy often stirred up the urge to go out and play whenever she was in her office. But because of Forthorthe’s advanced science, she couldn’t lie her way out of anything with the medical staff. She hardly had any rest from her royal duties.

“I dunno if I’d make it without being able to play hooky.”

“You sure make Satomi-kun look after you, Yurika,” Maki replied.

“Yeah, I can always count on him.”

“You don’t have any intention of becoming independent, do you?” Sanae shot her a sidelong glance.

Elfaria intensely watched the three girls cheerfully chatting away. The scene reminded her of when she was able to live as she pleased. It was such a precious age.

“What’s the matter, Theia-mama?”

“It’s nothing. I’m just a little envious of you girls. Right now you’re experiencing something I had to leave behind a long time ago.”

Elfaria’s words were sincere, but they were tinged with something dark. Sensitive to the feelings of others, Sanae could clearly sense her loneliness. It wasn’t something she could just ignore.

“Then let’s go even further.”

“Huh?”

Elfaria’s eyes opened wide. She knew that Sanae was trying to be considerate, but she didn’t know what she was getting at.

“Let’s make you look even younger and raise a fuss. You have plenty of free time since you’re here, right?”

“Sanae-san...”

Elfaria was deeply touched. Sanae’s suggestion made her very happy, but it

presented a big problem.

“Thank you, Sanae-san. But... there’s a limit even to Forthorthe’s technology. It will be difficult for me to become even younger.”

No matter how lovely of an idea it was, there was practically no way of making it a reality. And despite the way she looked, there was no helping her mental age.

Elfaria had already given up.

“Hoho, we can’t have you underestimating us, Theia-mama!”

Sanae, on the other hand, remained confident. Elfaria had a good point, but it just so happened that Sanae had the means to overcome the problem.

“With the power of us three magical girls, rejuvenating you by a couple of years will be a piece of cake!”

Sanae had psychic powers, while Maki and Yurika had magic. If the three of them worked together, even if they couldn’t keep someone eternally young, Sanae was sure that they could reclaim whatever Elfaria had left behind in the past.

However, as an archwizard of the Magical Kingdom of Folsaria, Yurika had a duty to prevent such personal uses of magic. That’s why she had no choice but to object to Sanae’s idea.

“You can’t, Sanae-chan! Magic shouldn’t be used lightly!”

Rainbow Heart’s commandments were absolute. If Yurika used magic for herself without proper grounds, she would be fired and left with a mountain of debts. That was a possibility she had to avoid at all costs.

“Then it’ll just be me and Maki.”

“That’s not what I meant!”

“But Yurika, this might not be as personal of a use as you think,” interjected Maki.

Maki had a compromise to offer between Sanae and Yurika. From her point of view, they still might be able to get Yurika on board.

“Huh? What do you mean, Maki-chan?”

“Well, it’s almost certain that Darkness Rainbow will make a move in Forthorthe.”

After the showdown in Folsaria, the agents of Darkness Rainbow had vanished. Considering that Maya and Elexis had vanished too, it was likely that they had gone to Forthorthe. In other words, chances were incredibly high that Darkness Rainbow would be involved in future incidents in Forthorthe. By extension, that meant that Elfaria was potentially in magical danger.

“In order to keep her safe, we’ll need to stay by her side and protect her with magic, right?”

“That’s... I think that’s probably true,” Yurika conceded.

If an attack from Darkness Rainbow was looming, Elfaria would need magical protection. Even Yurika could appreciate that.

“But we can’t always be with her, right?”

“That’s probably true too.”

The only ones with enough mana to oppose Darkness Rainbow were the seven archwizards of Rainbow Heart. And since they need as many magical girls as possible to protect Earth and Folsaria, only one or two at most would be sent to Elfaria’s aid. They would be stuck guarding her non-stop. It would be risky business.

“So don’t you think it would be a good idea to rejuvenate Elfaria-san and enhance her physical strength?”

Rejuvenation wouldn’t just mean regaining her beauty. It would also mean restoring her youthful strength and vigor, and thereby reduce any potential danger she might be in by increasing her ability to defend herself. Elfaria would become faster and tougher, as well as have more stamina. Combined with some standard defensive spells, it would make the lack of manpower far less of an issue.

“That’s...”

But Yurika was still hesitating. There was indeed logic to what Maki was

saying. With the threat of Darkness Rainbow on the horizon, rejuvenating Elfaria might not be considered a personal use of magic. Even so, it felt duplicitous to her and she was unable to commit. Yurika was normally rather negligent, but she couldn't look the other way when it came to her duties as a magical girl. Unexpectedly enough, it was Sanae that convinced her to change her mind.

"Hey, Yurika, Rainbow Heart was originally a group of magicians from Forthorthe, right?"

"Yeah, that's right."

"Then why can't you use magic on the empress?"

"Uh..."

Folsaria and Rainbow Heart descended from the court magicians of Forthorthe. In other words, protecting the empress and fulfilling her wishes should still be part of their mission. It was only in separating from Forthorthe that they restricted themselves with their commandments in order to keep themselves from doing anything unnecessary. Therefore, morally speaking, there was nothing improper about using magic to protect Elfaria even now.

"Okay. If the goal is to restore her vitality rather than her youth, I guess it's fine."

Yurika figured it would be fine if Elfaria became younger as a result of measures to protect her.

"Good, good. That's more like it."

Sanae was satisfied with Yurika's decision. She smiled and repeatedly nodded with unwarranted confidence. However, Elfaria's impression was slightly different as she watched all of this unfold.

"I have no intention of making you obey Forthorthe."

Rainbow Heart was under Forthorthe's rule over two thousand years ago—which was still a couple of hundred years ago in Rainbow Heart's perception of time. Demanding that they work for the empress now was surely going too far. Elfaria couldn't see it any other way.

“The truth is that I just want Theia-chan’s mother to be healthy. But I need a proper reason or I’ll get in trouble.”

“You Rainbow Heart girls are really inconvenient when it comes to things like this...” Maki sighed.

“Whatever! Let’s begin the great Theia-mama rejuvenation plan!” Sanae shouted.

In the end, the girls were all motivated by their affection for Elfaria. Elfaria couldn’t reject such earnest goodwill. She smiled modestly and chased the unpleasant thoughts from her mind as she decided to spend a little time with these young girls.

The plan to rejuvenate Elfaria had two stages, one using psychic power and one using magic. They decided to start with magic since it would take some time to prepare.

The mana required to rejuvenate someone increased exponentially the more years there were to revert. Correcting the genetic wear and tear of a single year was a simple enough affair, but refreshing someone by ten years would take far more than just ten times the mana. There was also a limit to Yurika and Maki’s mana reserves. Moreover, they couldn’t use major spells that required sacrifices, so their magic naturally fell on the smaller scale of things.

Everything considered, Yurika and Maki decided to use a catalyst from a plant or mineral—something comparatively easy to acquire. Enough of the right kind of catalyst would make the spell easier to maintain, meaning they could keep it up indefinitely. In exchange, the effect would weaken and Elfaria would only rejuvenate by two or three years. But since they still had Sanae’s psychic powers, they didn’t need to reach their goal with just magic.

“It says here that they grow wild on the side of this mountain.”

Sanae, Yurika, Maki, and Elfaria had come to the Magical Kingdom of Folsaria. Since they had visited several times before to help stabilize the country, they could freely use the magical passage that connected Kisshouharukaze City and Folsaria. After coming out on the other side, Yurika was guiding the party. Their goal was the petals of a particular plant, the only spell component that they didn’t already have stored.

“Hey, Yurika,” Sanae prodded.

“What?”

“You’re not lost, are you?”

“I’m not talented enough to get lost immediately after reaching the hillside.”

“That makes sense.”

According to the document Yurika was carrying, their destination was about an hour down the winding mountain path. But following the attached map, Yurika and the others didn’t reach their destination until two hours after setting out.

“Yurika, I won’t get angry, so just answer honestly...”

“What?”

“You got lost, didn’t you?”

“O-O-Of course not! We made it, didn’t we?!”

“...I don’t know...”

“L-Look, we have to get these petals!”

The area they’d reached was full of short trees bearing pure white petals. It gave it the stunning effect of a snowy field.

“Maki-san, are these the petals that we need?”

“Yes. These petals, or rather the leaves of this plant, are used as a catalyst for the rejuvenation spell. Its called—”

“Rubustori?” Elfaria interjected.

“You know of it?” Maki’s eyes opened wide. She hadn’t imagined that Elfaria would know the name of the plant.

“Yes. They grow in the Mastir territory as well.”

“These exist... in Forthorthe too...?”

“There’s a traditional tea brewed with these leaves.”

The Rubustori tree was once believed to be extinct in Forthorthe. That was up

until twenty years ago when a single surviving tree was discovered. Now they were cultivated throughout the land. And since Rubustori tea was what the legendary princess Alaia drank, it was a very popular species.

“They work as a catalyst because of their medicinal properties, so drinking it as tea makes sense, but... this is a surprise.”

“Yes... I’m surprised too.”

Maki looked out over the area where the Rubustori trees were growing. Seeing Elfaria among them, Maki felt like she had some special connection to them.

“Is something the matter, Elfaria-san?”

“No, nothing in particular.” Elfaria shook her head with a smile. “It just feels a little mysterious. This has helped me realize that Folsaria really is a land of Forthorthe’s descendants...”

Sariachal Castle and its surroundings were forcibly separated from Forthorthe long ago. There were no records of Rubustori trees being planted in that area, so someone living there must done it afterward. As Maxfern’s group consisted of magicians and alchemists, it seemed a likely possibility that one of them might have held on to the seeds of a plant with such medicinal qualities.

“I see... So these petals are from our true home...”

These weren’t trees that had sprouted by chance. They had been brought here from Forthorthe. Maki could clearly feel that.

“True home?”

“That is what we call Forthorthe.”

“...Maki-san, do the people of Folsaria wish to return to Forthorthe?”

True home. Those sounded like the words of a homesick people. Those who had found themselves in Folsaria certainly must have wished to return home, but did those feelings hold true even now? That was what Elfaria really wanted to know.

“There are many that feel that way. But at the same time, there are many more who think of this place as their home. I believe it would be safe to say that

while they wish to return home, they are home.”

The Magical Kingdom of Folsaria was small and it was a harsh environment to live in. Some of that was alleviated through the use of magic, so magical ability and wealth greatly impacted the citizens’ lifestyles. There were plenty of people who wanted to escape that kind of life. The conflicts were never-ending. That was how Maki had felt, so she was certain of it.

However, it had already been centuries since the founding of Folsaria, and it was true that the citizens considered this place their home. It might be inhospitable, but it was hard to leave behind.

“Then we must make plans for both ways to work,” said Elfaria.

Some wanted to return to their true home. Some didn’t. Some wanted to go elsewhere and see what there was to see. Each citizen had come their own conclusion. Elfaria wanted a way to grant all of those wishes. She wanted to take responsibility for where they found themselves now.

“...I appreciate your consideration.”

Seeing Elfaria like this reaffirmed for Maki that this must be the true nature of an empress. She compulsively bowed her head.

“Heehee... Maki-san, I heard that you were an evil magical girl, but you don’t look like one at all.”

“Huh...?”

“I can’t help feeling like you’re the magician Caris that appears in the legend of the Blue Knight.”

The female magician in the legend of the Blue Knight was a subordinate of Grevanas, but she changed her ways after meeting the Blue Knight and Alaia. Ultimately she became one of the heroes who saved the country. Caris was loved by the citizens of Forthorthe even now. And to Elfaria, Maki looked just like her.

“Your words are wasted on me.”

Maki couldn’t forget the things she’d done. She believed a time would come when she would have to face her sins. But even so, she was truly happy to hear

Elfaria's kind words. She felt like she was being forgiven.

"Your path may be steep one, but it is not—"

"Kyaaaaah!"

"Are you okay, Yurika?!"

"Owowow... I-I'm okay, but I can't get out of here by myself."

"Hang on. I'll call for Maki and Theia-mama!"

"Heehee, and over there is another magician that reminds me of Caris."

"...Sadly."

"Heeheehee..."

"Pffft."

Before they knew it, the serious tone of their conversation vanished into thin air. Maki and Elfaria laughed with each other before heading to the hole Yurika had fallen in to help pull her out.

The plan was for the girls to use their abilities to complement each other in order to achieve their goal. Hypothetically, if the magical girls' rejuvenation spell worked like Western medicine in that it would specifically target healing the body, then Sanae's psychic powers were like Eastern medicine, designed to bring out Elfaria's inner vitality. The techniques would work with each other, rather than interfering with each other.

"Okay, let's see who of the three of us can last the longest," said Sanae.

"I'm not good with heat..." whined Yurika.

"I actually might be fine with it," said Maki.

"Don't force yourself, okay, Theia-mama?"

"Heehee, despite how I look, I have a pretty good constitution."

Sanae had taken the group to a bathhouse along the major road. After using the sauna and a hot bath to stimulate circulation, Sanae was going to give Elfaria her psychic massage and pour spiritual energy into her. Doing so should invigorate her.

“Do you hate losing as much as Theia does, Theia-mama?”

“I just keep going until I win.”

“Okay, challenge accepted! Onward march to the sauna!”

As they entered, the air heated to nearly a hundred degrees quickly warmed up their bodies.

“This isn’t so bad. I think I can handle this...” sighed Yurika.

“Elfaria-san, are there saunas in Forthorthe too?” asked Maki.

“There are. The only real difference is that you pour oil from herbs on the fire instead.”

“The first one to get out has to buy the others coffee milk!” Sanae shouted playfully.

At the season slowly turned to autumn, the temperature in the evenings was steadily dropping. The girls had all gotten chilly as they walked to the bathhouse, so the sauna felt pleasantly warm at first. However, that composure didn’t last for long. Within a minute, they were all warmed to the core and beginning to sweat. But it only went downhill from there.

“...I-It’s so warm... Staying in here any longer is impossible...”

“You can leave, you know. You’ll just have to buy the rest of us coffee milk.”

“...That’s impossible too...”

“Then hold it in a little longer, Yurika. You’re an archwizard of Rainbow Heart, aren’t you?”

“...Maki-chan, being an archwizard doesn’t make a difference at a time like this...”

“My, my... Heehee.”

“...Y-You still look fine, Elfaria-san...”

“Compared to you, anyone would look fine...” Sanae looked at Yurika skeptically.

“I have a good poker face thanks to my line of work,” Elfaria explained.

Yurika was already starting to break. Sanae was also getting hot, but she'd likely last a while longer. Maki was capable of enduring quite a lot, so she didn't seem much different than normal. But Elfaria was even less fazed than she was. Apart from sweating, she looked like her usual self.

"...U-Um, do I really have to buy coffee milk...?"

"Of course you do. That's the kind of game this is."

"...Can't we compromise? Would you take one of my side dishes at dinner instead...?"

"That would depend on the dinner... Hmm..."

"I recall Kiriha-san mentioning that she would make sukiyaki or stir-fried vegetables today, and with Elfaria-san visiting, she'll probably make sukiyaki," said Maki.

"Then I'll accept your conditions if you take the spring onion and I get the meat."

"Th-That's just too cruel! Anything but that!"

"Well, you're going to have to endure something. Either the sweat, paying for coffee milk, or going without meat."

"What an ultimatum. Good luck, Yurika-san," said Elfaria.

"Okay..."

Yurika was practically on the verge of giving up, but she put up an unexpectedly good fight despite her complaints. She held out for almost ten minutes, although she still gave up in the end. Ultimately unable to stand the heat or the thought of going without meat, she decided she'd rather buy the coffee milk.

After getting out of the sauna, the four ladies washed up in the showers before heading to the large bath. The water was lukewarm, but it felt just right after coming out of the hot sauna. In fact, it was almost the ideal temperature for soaking and chatting.

"Hhhnngh... The coffee milk..."

“Just give up. You lost.”

“You did put up a good fight, Yurika.”

Of course, unable to take the heat, Yurika had been the first one to leave the sauna. Following her was Sanae, who didn’t do well with sitting still. Next was Maki, but if anything, she gave up the win out of concern for Elfaria. Elfaria was the last to leave the sauna, and she played it cool even as she got out. She’d told the girls she had a good poker face, but this was taking it to the next level.

“You’re as gutsy as Theia, Theia-mama!”

“Isn’t it the other way? Theia-chan takes after her mother.”

“Heehee, I do indeed think Theia inherited my spirit.”



At the mention of Theia, Elfaria’s mood changed. As a parent, she couldn’t

help but dote on her daughter. She smiled like an affectionate parent, but the very next moment, her smile clouded over ever so slightly.

“Although... I think that might make things even harder for her. She always puts up a good fight even when things get tough, but that just makes things tougher on her.”

If Theia had been a little weaker, Elfaria might not have sent her to Earth to protect her from the military. But as things had worked out, she was able to send her off because Theia was strong, both mentally and physically. Of course, that wasn’t all. Their relationship played a big part in it as well.

“To be honest, I wanted to let her do as she pleased like a normal girl... I always regretted that she couldn’t.”

Theia’s station and her strength of character both caused her misfortune. It created a distance between the princess and her mother. If things had been different—if Theia had depended on her mother like a normal child—surely they would have been closer.

“It’s okay. Theia has made a lot of friends here. Like us, or the drama club she’s been helping today,” said Sanae.

“And Ruth-san is with her too,” added Yurika.

“When it’s just us, Theia-san can say some pretty childish things. She’s probably not as unhappy as you may think, Elfaria-san.” Maki spoke up too.

“...Thank you, girls.” Elfaria smiled as she wiped away her eyes.

Seeing her like that, the other three were reminded of how beautiful she was. It wasn’t just her appearance. Her overflowing sweetness and light was what made her so beautiful. It was to the point that they were envious of Theia for having such a mother.

“I’m jealous of Theia. Maybe I should get my mama to dote on me more too.”

“My mom isn’t that beautiful. And she’s lazy. But... I want to see her again...”

“A mother, huh?”

Each of them spoke in a slightly lower voice as their expressions clouded over. Elfaria took in the sight. When Sanae was a ghost, she had been unable to see

her parents. Ever since Yurika met Nana, she had been living away from home. Being an orphan, Maki didn't even know what her parents looked like. Elfaria realized that all three girls had very special feelings about their families.

*In particular, Maki-san and Yurika-san are...*

Gripped by a strong urge, Elfaria wrapped an arm each around the nearby Yurika and Maki and embraced them.

"H-Huh?"

"Elfaria-san...?"

Both Yurika and Maki were puzzled by the situation. They weren't sure what was going through her head, but being held like this by Elfaria made them feel at ease. Even Maki, who had never known the warmth of a parent, began to understand what having a mother was like.

"Oh, it's nothing. Nothing at all, heehee..."

With her arms around Yurika and Maki, Elfaria giggled. There was certainly a reason for what she was currently doing, but the meaning might be lost if she tried to explain it. Some things are just better left unsaid.

"It's nothing, but... do you mind if I do this to you two from time to time?"

"I, uh... N-No..."

"I don't really mind... Rather the opposite..."

And so Elfaria's feelings were conveyed to Yurika and Maki, as well as the real reason for not explaining herself. In kind, the two girls timidly reached out and embraced Elfaria back. It was a sign of how they felt for her right now.

"Eheheh... You're so cool it's unfair, Theia-mama. I'm gonna get my mama to dote on me later..."

Only Sanae was left out. However, she understood why, so she didn't complain in the slightest. She couldn't help feeling that she'd do anything for Elfaria's sake when she was like this. As Sanae's goodwill bubbled up, her spiritual energy steadily increased.

With Sanae, Yurika, and Maki all especially motivated, the rejuvenation spell

and the psychic restoration both proved extremely effective considering they hadn't used a sacrifice. Their combined efforts had achieved results close to the limit of what was possible using their methods. Elfaria was visibly rejuvenated by a few years.

"This is looking good! You'd pass for a twenty year old!"

"We did it! We did it, Elfaria-san!"

"A huge success!"

The girls stood around Elfaria and rejoiced at their success. And it wasn't just the normally energetic Sanae and Yurika, either. Even Maki, who was normally more subdued, had her emotions on full display. To the three of them, Elfaria was no longer just a friend's mother.

"So this is what I was like before..."

Elfaria was also surprised. The tone and luster of her skin were considerably improved. While it wasn't quite the complexion of a teenager, she could easily pass for being in her early twenties. But the change wasn't only skin-deep. There was a core transformation that affected both her entire body as well as her mind. Her movements were sharper than before. Even her organs should be functioning better. Yurika and Maki's magic had cured the ailing parts of her body, and Sanae's psychic massage had stimulated her vigor.

"You certainly don't look like you have a teenage child, Theia-mama!"

"Thank you, Sanae-san. And you girls too, Maki-san and Yurika-san."

"If we temporarily seal your memories, it's even possible to return your mental age to how young your body is now."

"But then I would forget about you. I would never think anything like this was possible."

"All right then."

"Wow, you're even more beautiful now that you're younger!"

The biggest change of all was the impression Elfaria gave off. Elfaria had always been beautiful, but this was different. Her vitality from within was making her glow. Her beauty had gotten more aggressive, and she now had an

air about her similar to Theia's.

"Of course, she'll be uglier when it wears off."

"There's always a balance to take into account. I was a little worried about that."

"It looks like we have nothing to fear. Although, her clothes might not suit her anymore..."

"Heehee, it certainly feels that way."

Elfaria laughed as she looked down at herself. Since she now gave off a much more active impression, her adult clothes didn't quite match her image. Theia's clothes would certainly be better, or perhaps the special clothes she had hidden in her closet.

"All right, it's time for the final touches! Everyone, let's coordinate an outfit for Theia-mama!"

"Yeah!"

Sanae, Yurika, and Maki were going to see this makeover through to the end.

"Let's go, Elfaria-san."

"Hurry, hurry, before everyone gets back home."

"My, my, you girls..."

The three of them pushed Elfaria through the gate leading to the Blue Knight. It was getting late and the residents of room 106 would be back soon, so they needed to finish up quickly.

Returning home from his part-time job, an unusual voice greeted Koutarou.

"Welcome back, Layous-sama."

It was Elfaria's voice coming from the inner room. As he had only just gotten inside the front door, he still couldn't see her. But even without seeing her, he had known her long enough to distinguish her voice with ease.

"Elle? Did you come to visit?"

"Yes, it's been a while since I saw your face."

Koutarou took off his shoes and walked towards the inner room the same way he always did. However, his eyes shot open wide when he saw what was inside.

“E-Elle?!”

“Yes, Layous-sama. It’s been a while.”

Elfaria was all alone in the inner room. She was sitting on a pillow by the tea table. It was a common enough sight in the room, but Koutarou was sure he must be dreaming. Elfaria’s appearance was far different from the last time he saw her. She looked almost like she did when Koutarou first met her twenty years in the past.

“Wh-What’s with that look?!”

Koutarou was confused. He even tried pinching his own cheek. After making sure that he wasn’t actually dreaming, he carefully looked her over. He thought she might be using some special makeup or some kind of trick, but that didn’t seem to be the case. In fact, it couldn’t be. Even the outline of her face and her profile looked younger. The same was true for her figure. Elfaria had unmistakably gotten younger. That impression was made even stronger as she was wearing the same outfit she had in the past. The only thing Koutarou could think was that she must have walked right out of one of his memories.

“Actually, Yurika-san, Maki-san, and Sanae-san rejuvenated me.”

Elfaria glanced at the wardrobe behind Koutarou. The three girls were hiding in there and quietly watching Koutarou and Elfaria. As a form of consideration, they wanted to let the two of them be alone.

“Rejuvenated you? You mean with magic and psychic powers?!”

“Yes. That said, it apparently isn’t perfect and the effect will lessen over time.”

Elfaria smiled, a little embarrassed, as she explained the reality of the situation. Perhaps she was just starting to feel how she looked, but the emotions of a younger Elfaria were coming flooding back. She thought to herself that this was how she felt with Koutarou back then. Those were feelings she never wanted to forget.

“Besides, I’m not exactly like I was back then. Don’t I look a little older?”

“Stupid. Small details like that are totally lost on a guy. Don’t treat me like one of you girls.”

Strictly speaking, Elfaria’s physical age was somewhat older now than she had first met Koutarou. But to a man like Koutarou, that was practically a technicality. If she had the same overall impression, he felt like she was the same. That set him apart in how he saw her.

“Oh, you’re calling me a girl?”

“It’s just a saying. Jeez... You always interpret things in your favor.”

“What can I say? It’s a girl thing, heehee...”

Elfaria narrowed her eyes and flashed a lovely smile. It was indeed the smile of a girl, or at least a girl at heart. Somewhat embarrassed, Koutarou turned away. The way he was acting made Elfaria feel a little mischievous.

“So, Layous-sama, what would you say was different about me?”

“U-Um, well...”

When asked that question, Koutarou had no choice but to look at Elfaria again. She gave him the same smile she had twenty years ago.

“I mean... Y-You’re just as beautiful as before, so it’s that bright and energetic side. Also... I feel nostalgic when I look at you.”

“Me too.”

Elfaria held the hem of her skirt and spun around in place. No matter what angle he looked at her from, she looked just like he remembered.

“...”

After finishing her spin and facing Koutarou again, she found him silently staring at her. But for some reason, the somewhat embarrassed, nostalgic feelings from before seemed to be gone. Instead, he looked at her wistfully.

“What’s the matter, Layous-sama?” she asked curiously.

“Hm? Ah, it’s nothing.”

“That’s not what your face says. Why don’t you tell me what it is?”

“And here I thought I was being nice keeping my mouth shut.”

“I want to hear it. You only ever badmouth the people you truly cannot forgive, and those who are especially close to you, Layous-sama.”

“I guess I don’t have a choice...”

Koutarou gave in to Elfaria’s smile. He held his head as he decided to tell her the truth. And all the while, he was really mostly thinking that he was no match for her.

“I think you give off a bright, energetic aura now.”

“And you feel badly about that?”

“Close, but no cigar. Since you’ve gotten brighter and more energetic, you... Well...”

“Well, what?”

“Well... your usual warm and gentle aura is gone.”

Really, that part of Elfaria hadn’t changed at all. It was just her change in appearance that had altered Koutarou’s impression of her. It saddened him a little.

“Warm... and gentle...?”

“Th-That’s all!”

Now embarrassed again, Koutarou turned his back to Elfaria once more. Admitting that he missed Elfaria’s warmth and gentleness was almost like a confession. It was an awkward situation for a teenage boy.

“Layous-sama...”

Only she had aged. That had always bothered her. But now, Koutarou’s words made her realize that getting older wasn’t all bad. Even he could see the good side to it.

“Then the next time I’m rejuvenated, I’ll make sure I don’t become this young.”

“...Do whatever you like.”

“Oh, I will.”

And just like that, Elfaria stopped worrying about it. Not just for her sake, but for Koutarou’s as well.

*Besides, when I’m like this, I’m too young to embrace those girls...*

And most of all, it was for the sake of the three girls still hiding in the wardrobe.

# Chapter 4: Behind the School Excursion

When considering Satomi Koutarou as boyfriend material, he had two primary flaws. But those two faults were enough to make him unpopular with the girls in his class. While they didn't despise him, he wasn't exactly someone they were interested in dating.

The first flaw was largely a superficial problem. Though Koutarou had the soul of a gentleman, he didn't act like it around his close friends. They'd have stupid conversations and were prone to roughhousing. And when it came to his best friend, Kenji, they'd even fight from time to time. The other boys didn't have too much trouble relating, but the girls saw it quite differently. He just came off as aggressive to them. His large build only enhanced that impression. When a girl considered his dating potential, that was ultimately enough to give her pause. In other words, he seemed too scary to be a good boyfriend.

His second flaw only became apparent after getting past the first. There were a few girls that had been in school with Koutarou long enough to realize that he wasn't really a scary guy, but they started to notice something else. Koutarou seemed to instinctively push people away and avoid getting close with others. It was a pretty thick line in the sand as far as relationships were concerned. And that impression was only exacerbated when people learned about his family situation.

And so Koutarou was unpopular with his classmates of the female persuasion who were scared of him on the surface, or thought that he would reject them deep down. However, right now, that situation was changing. Starting this year, Koutarou's vibe was a little different. Unlike before, he was starting to show an inclination to accept others.

The girls who liked Koutarou believed it was because of the plays he had been in. Surely after getting involved with so many people, his heart must have opened up a little bit. In reality, it was because of the invasion of room 106, but they weren't too far off base. And on top of that, with the recognition he received over the plays, the amount of girls interested in Koutarou had dramatically increased.

In short, Koutarou's circumstances had begun to change him, both inside and out. While the few girls that had noticed this thought it was their big chance, it brought about a whole new set of worries. What if someone else confessed to him first?

However, these girls would need courage to confess their feelings to Koutarou themselves. And they would need the right opportunity to do it. A special occasion, something out of the ordinary, would be ideal.

At Kisshouharukaze High School, the second-year students had a school excursion in the fall semester. It was a two day, three night sightseeing trip. Of course, as it was a school organized event, half of that would be sightseeing spots related to their studies. But even then, the students were happy to go on an outing without their parents.

"Sensei, do bananas count as snacks?"

"No, they don't... That said, you're high school students now, so there's no limit on your snack budget. Bring as much as you'd like!"

"Okay, sensei!"

After explaining what to watch out for during homeroom, the back and forth between the teacher in charge and a student sent the classroom into a laughing fit. Even normally unfunny jokes made the class laugh today. They were in high spirits now that the school excursion was close. They would be leaving tomorrow, and student excitement was reaching its peak.

"Satomi-san, Satomi-san."

Yurika, sitting next to Koutarou, tugged on the sleeve of his uniform as he was laughing together with his classmates. When he turned her way, she was looking at him with a very serious expression.

She leaned over, still quite serious, and whispered in his ear, "Do bananas count as snacks?"

"Sensei already said they don't."

When it came to snacks, Kisshouharukaze High School had no limit on how much students could bring. However, Yurika had a personal limit. She would get

500 yen a day, for a total of 1,500 yen during their three day stay.

“Then how about banana chips?”

“Banana chips are...”

“If bananas are fine, they should be too.”

“No, they would count as snacks.”

Unfortunately for Yurika, the school trip was coming up at about the same time she’d used up her money. Even though she’d known about it in advance, she wasn’t able to keep herself from buying limited edition comics and related merchandise. As a result, Yurika would be reliant on Koutarou for her funds on the excursion. And he had a strict handle over how that money was used. He wouldn’t let any of it go to waste.

“Why not?! Banana chips are perfectly good bananas!”

“If I accept banana chips, you’re going to ask about chocolate bananas, aren’t you? I’m onto you.”

“Aww...”

But Yurika wouldn’t relent. In an attempt to escape Koutarou’s watchful eyes, she racked her brain for another loophole. As of right now, however, it was to no avail.

Kenji was watching Koutarou and Yurika’s back and forth from some distance away. While he couldn’t hear what they were saying, he could tell how close they were. And knowing what kind of person Koutarou was, Kenji felt that was a good sign.

“Hey, Matsudaira-kun,” someone called out to him.

“Hmm?”

“...Are those two going out?”

The voice belonged to the girl who sat at the desk next to his. Her name was Kashiwagi Shiori. If Kenji remembered correctly, they had gone to the same middle school, but he wasn’t sure if they had gone to the same elementary school or not. She was a bright, cheerful, and cute girl, so she had left an

impression on him.

“It doesn’t really look like it,” Kenji replied.

“Really? They sure look like it to me when they act like that...”

Shiori had her doubts about the distance between Koutarou and Yurika. They were sharing secrets and bumping shoulders, but the looks on their faces, the banter, and the physical contact did make them look much closer than just classmates. To Shiori they looked more like childhood friends, or, if she were to be extra bold, boyfriend and girlfriend.

“If you ask me, I’d suspect Theia-chan more than anyone.”

“Yeah, I’d noticed that too.”

Both of them looked over at Theia. She had been stealing peeks at Koutarou and Yurika from her seat for a while now. It was clear that it was bothering her. Unlike Koutarou and Yurika, Koutarou and Theia would practically fight every day. The fact that their relationship wasn’t getting any worse seemed to be reason enough to be suspicious.

“But it’s not like he’s skilled enough to go out with two girls at the same time, you know,” said Kenji.

“Yeah... I think that to myself frequently,” Shiori replied.

When Shiori was done talking with Kenji, she looked down and seemed to get lost in thought. After watching her for a while, Kenji reached a conclusion of his own.

*It looks like Kashiwagi-san likes Kou... and not just on a superficial level...*

Compared to last year, Koutarou was certainly getting more attention from the girls. The biggest reason for that was his part as the Blue Knight during last year’s plays. However, Kenji didn’t get the sense that Shiori’s feelings were that shallow. Her feelings had most likely budded after learning about Koutarou’s childhood and why he had turned out the way he did. Since Shiori had been with them since middle school, Kenji believed that was probably the real reason.

*You know, Kou, this is all because you’re so slow to decide. Everyone else is in*

*a rush. At this rate, you're only gonna make it hard on yourself...*

Kenji knew what Koutarou was feeling for a certain set of girls, which included Yurika and Theia. And that he couldn't make up his mind. Because of that, he was surprisingly close with all of them... To the point that girls outside of that circle began to get suspicious. Kenji was worried what would happen if Koutarou continued to ignore that. But Koutarou, who was currently in the middle of lecturing Yurika, didn't seem to have even realized what was happening.

With the school excursion just around the corner, they needed to buy necessities for the trip, so Koutarou and the others visited the familiar mall on their way back home.

"Koutarou, Koutarou, give me my allowance!" Sanae practically shouted.

She held her hands out in front of Koutarou with a wide smile. She was still getting an allowance from Koutarou, something that had carried over from when she was a ghost. While it wasn't that much money, she made good use of it by saving it for important times like these.



“Hang on. Let’s see...”

Koutarou looked at the notes he had on his cellphone. There were plenty of files, one of which was titled ‘Sanae.’ Koutarou fiddled with his phone to bring it up.

“There’s the remainder of last month’s... and adding this month’s allowance on to that is... 3,420 yen.”

“Come on, come on!” Sanae impatiently moved her hands to rush Koutarou.

“Okay, okay. Well, here’s 3,000 yen to start.”

“All right! Then I’m off!”

After Koutarou placed the money in her hands, Sanae snatched it up and ran off. She looked just like a child.

“Be careful, okay?”

“Okay!”

And it was exactly because Sanae was like this that he couldn’t stop giving her an allowance. Sanae had returned to being human, and she also got an allowance from her parents. But Koutarou wanted to keep giving her some money for a while longer if it meant that he got to see such an innocent and adorable sight.

*In the end, I’m just like Theia...*

That was the same reason why Theia continued to pay Koutarou a salary. She loved the relationship that gesture created. As Koutarou realized that, he smiled wryly to himself.

“...”

Maki had been watching Koutarou and Sanae. When Sanae disappeared around a corner at the mall, she looked down at her own palms. After staring at them for a while, she looked up at Koutarou’s face.

“What’s the matter, Aika-san?”

Noticing her behavior, Koutarou asked her what was on her mind. In response, Maki’s face turned red and she held her now tightly gripped hands in front of her chest.

“Ah, u-um...”

“Yeah?”

“...W-Well...”

With her face still red, Maki looked down at the ground, presented her hands to Koutarou, and slowly opened them.

“Um...”

Maki embarrassedly waved her hands. Watching her, Koutarou recalled Sanae from just a few moments ago.

*Now that I think about it, I did make a promise with Aika-san...*

In honor of Maki’s position as the treasurer of Satomi’s band of knights, she was supposed to receive a salary. But Maki strove to live a normal life and instead kept her salary as a credit. Whenever she needed something, she would just ask Koutarou for money, withdrawing against her balance. And right now, Maki was mimicking Sanae and requesting her allowance.

“How much?”

“Um, the same as Sanae-san.”

“You can take more, you know?”

Maki’s circumstances were different from Sanae, who purely received an allowance. She had the right to get a few digits higher.

“Just the same, please...”

But Maki didn’t want that. The truth was that she wanted a pure allowance too, but knew saying that might trouble Koutarou. That’s why she went about it in a roundabout way and just asked for the same amount as Sanae.

“I see. Then... Here.”

“Thank you, Satomi-kun. I’ll use it with care.”

Getting 3,000 yen from Koutarou, Maki flashed a truly happy smile. However, she didn’t seem to show any interest in going off shopping. She simply put the money in her wallet and stayed by Koutarou’s side, smiling.

*What can I say? She's almost there. Just a little bit more...*

Maki had a serious personality to begin with, but perhaps because of her guilt over her past, she found herself unable to take the last step to do what she really wanted. Because of that, she was still often reserved and couldn't bring herself to fully rely on other people.

"You don't have to use it with care."

"Satomi-kun?"

So in order to get her to take that last step, Koutarou reached out to her. People didn't change that easily. Koutarou knew that well from personal experience. That's why it fell on friends to help out. Koutarou grabbed ahold of Maki's hand and began running.

"Let's go waste some money too!"

"Oh... Y-Yeah!"

Being pulled along by Koutarou, Maki started running as well. She sped up so she wouldn't fall behind him, even though she was faintly aware that she should be the one running in front of him. It didn't look like she'd be able to do that anytime soon, but squeezing Koutarou's hand now seemed like a good start.

"Heehee, this is worth a lot of points, Satomi-kun!"

Shizuka saw off Koutarou and Maki in high spirits and spryly followed after the two of them. Since she worried for Maki on a daily basis, she was happy with this outcome.

"And would those be Maki's points, or yours?" asked Kiriha as she walked up next to Shizuka.

Her expression was just as bright, and she too had a spring in her step.

"Both!"

"Heh, I know how you feel."

Both Shizuka and Kiriha were constantly concerned about the problems Maki was keeping to herself. Because of that, despite the boy they liked getting along

well with someone else, they were both in a good mood.

As the next day dawned, it was finally time for the school excursion. Koutarou and the girls of room 106 were getting ready to depart, but not all of them would be going. Specifically Harumi, who wasn't a second-year, and Clan, who wasn't even enrolled at their school.

"You're telling me to stay behind while everyone else goes out to have fun?" Clan demanded.

"What do you want me to do? It's a school event," Koutarou replied.

"Clan, if you're lonely, just say so," Theia snarked.

"Theiamillis-san, I am not lonely! I am just frustrated at a knight who would leave a princess behind to go play!"

"So Clan, what kind of souvenir would you like?" Koutarou asked, changing the subject.

"Nothing, thank you!"

At every mention of the trip, Clan's mood got worse and worse. She was already lonely knowing she'd have to wait for their return all alone. She was also unhappy that everyone was getting all fired up without her. The fact that Koutarou, the man she considered her partner, was in such high spirits only spurred her feelings further. The best way to describe it was perhaps a little sister getting jealous over her siblings' school trip.

"Please calm down, Clan-san. I'm going to stay behind too," urged Harumi.

Right now, she was Clan's only ally. As a third-year, she wouldn't be going on the excursion either. That's why she was left behind alongside Clan, and she was planning on using the time to get a checkup.

"You're being too sensible, Harumi!"

"But if you're not a good girl, you won't get any souvenirs."

"So you've already been bribed, huh?"

"Satomi-kun, I want a chocolate cake as a souvenir."

"Sakuraba-senpai wants chocolate cake. Got it. And you, Clan?"

“I said nothing, thank you! Hmph!”

Stubborn as she was, Clan was unable to accept Koutarou’s goodwill and turned away from him. As she did, she looked at the window and the sun shining through it. It was giving off a soft, autumn light, but that beautiful light didn’t reach Clan’s gloomy heart. She just stood there with her cheeks puffed up in dissatisfaction.

After seeing off Koutarou and the others, the two remaining girls moved to the Hazy Moon, Clan’s spaceship that was in orbit around Earth. They were using the onboard medical checkup device. As Clan had calibrated it herself, it’s performance was guaranteed.

“Thank you as always, Clan-san.”

Harumi was very grateful for Clan. Because of her, Harumi was receiving treatment far more advanced than what was available on Earth. That was especially reassuring to Harumi with her weak constitution. From inside the checkup device, she smiled appreciatively at Clan, who was standing next to it.

“I’m sorry, Harumi. I’m sure this could save a lot of people.”

Despite Harumi’s gratitude, Clan was apologizing. With her technology, she was surely capable of saving lives. For example, all of the children Harumi knew in the hospital. But as Forthorthe and Earth had no official diplomatic relations, Clan had to be extra careful in how she used her technology. Of course, she wished she could save everyone, but she didn’t have the power or time for that.

In a situation where there were no clear rules about who to save and who not to save, it was very difficult to draw the line. That’s why Clan made her own guidelines on how the technology should be used. She decided to use the same strictures she had set forth in the past world. She could save someone she happened to meet, but she couldn’t actively look for people to save.

Under those principles, Clan could help Harumi. Harumi just so happened to come into her life. However, she couldn’t intentionally go to the hospital to help the children. That was the rule she’d resorted to. She wasn’t some omnipotent goddess with infinite resources and unlimited time. By following her guidelines, Clan made sure she wasn’t valuing certain lives over others.

“Nobody can blame you, Clan-san. I could use magic to save those children too, but I’m not. I’m the same as you.”

Even Harumi could cure the children of their illnesses with Signaltin’s powers, but she didn’t for the same reason Clan didn’t. It was something very similar to Rainbow Heart’s commandments. She couldn’t just use her powers freely, even if it was to save people. With great power comes great responsibility.

“All we can do is pray that we run into the children in a way that makes it possible to save them.”

“You’re right... Those are our limits as humans...”

If the children’s suffering directly involved Clan or Harumi, they could step in and save them. But all they could do now was hope that the children were that lucky.

Beep!

“The diagnosis is complete. Enough with the gloomy thoughts for now.”

“Well, that might be the start of another gloomy set of thought altogether...”

“Ahaha, it’s okay. It’s all green this time.”

Harumi’s checkup had two stages. The first was a scan with the checkup device. Depending on the results, they’d move on to stage two: more specific, thorough tests. From time to time, Harumi would get a yellow light—a caution—and move on to the second phase. However, the lights were all green this time, meaning that there were no abnormalities.

Meanwhile, Koutarou and the others had come to a science museum built on reclaimed land. To get all the way there from Kisshouharukaze City, they had gone from bus to plane to bus again. As the airport was also built on reclaimed land, it wasn’t that far from the museum and they arrived early in the afternoon.

Grrrowl...

Shortly after getting off the bus on the museum grounds, Koutarou’s stomach rumbled. Ruth, who happened to be next to him, giggled.

“Is your stomach empty already, Satomi-sama?”

When around classmates, Ruth couldn't call Koutarou her master, so how she addressed him was situational.

"Looks like the in-flight meal wasn't enough."

Koutarou rubbed his stomach while smiling half-heartedly. To keep on schedule, lunch had been served on the plane. However, the simple meal didn't seem to be enough for Koutarou, who was still a growing boy. His stomach demanded more fuel.

"Then have this."

Ruth reached into her purse and pulled out a plastic bag with a slice of baumkuchen inside.

"Yeah, thanks."

Koutarou accepted with a smile. It looked like the perfect snack.

"But if you're going to eat, please hurry. Food and drink are prohibited inside the building."

"All right. Thank you for the food!"

After gauging the distance to the building, Koutarou opened the bag and threw pieces of cake in his mouth, one after another. Ruth watched over him with a smile. What would have taken her several minutes to eat, Koutarou wolfed down in a flash.

"Have this too, Satomi-sama."

Waiting for Koutarou to finish eating, Ruth followed up by handing him a small water bottle.

"Thank you."

The baumkuchen had left his mouth quite dry, so water was exactly what he wanted now. He took the bottle without hesitation and guzzled it down.

"That was delicious."

"Please leave the bag and bottle to me."

Ruth reached her hands out to Koutarou. She was going to take the trash and dispose of it later, but that kind of babying made even Koutarou a little uneasy.

“I can throw them away myself.”

He was fine with accepting a snack and some water, but letting Ruth take care of the trash would feel weird. She wasn’t his servant.

“If I let my master hold the trash, it will ruin the image of the knights. If you care about me, please hand them over.”

“Ugh...”

With a smile, Ruth hit Koutarou where it hurt and blocked off any escape. He knew very well how much Ruth cared for the knights and her concept of knighthood. If she resorted to using that against him, he had no other choice.

“...Thank you.”

“Of course. Please leave it to me.”

Ruth accepted the trash from Koutarou and tucked it in her purse. For some reason, she looked rather happy. As someone who did housework as a hobby, she didn’t hate this kind of thing. But there was another reason she was enjoying herself.



*I am sorry for lying, Master. The truth is that I just want to do everything for*

*the man I love...*

What she said about the image of the knights was just an excuse. Ruth simply wanted to be of use and take care of the man she had feelings for. But admitting to that would only trouble Koutarou. On the other hand, if she said nothing at all, she'd look like a servant. That's why she'd brought up the knights and forced his hand by claiming to protect his honor. She was acting on her own desires, but also out of consideration.

"Ruth-san, you..."

"Yes?"

"No, it's nothing."

"Is that so?"

Koutarou didn't understand Ruth's feelings. He simply wondered why she would enjoy doing something like that.

"Oh, Ruth-san, let's stock back up on the snacks I ate or something at this stall later."

"I still have plenty more, so it's okay."

"Come on, it'll be fine."

"...Satomi-sama?"

However, while Koutarou didn't quite get it, he knew that it wasn't something he could take for granted and decided to show his gratitude in his own way.

The science museum that Koutarou and the others had come to was composed of a permanent exhibit and a project exhibit. The permanent exhibit was a display on the development of science alongside the history of man, serving as an overall commentary on the progress of science.

The project exhibit, on the other hand, had more detailed content. It was an in depth display on a specific topic, such as space, ships, or the like. Of course, as the name might imply, the project on display was temporary and changed every few months. Visitors could enjoy something different every time they came. The current exhibit was on the history of games. It was a fun display that even teenagers like Koutarou and the others could enjoy.

“Mackenzie, how do you play with this?” Koutarou asked.

“Um, you move up, down, left, and right with these four buttons. And use this button to fire missiles.”

“What a pain. Just make it a single controller...”

“Apparently the D-pad wasn’t invented until twenty years later.”

“So the people of the past were satisfied with this annoying way of playing?”

Unlike modern, integrated game consoles, the games of the past required their own unique hardware. Because of that, the consoles were all completely different depending on the game. The exhibit even included an oscilloscope, a device used to pattern electrical signals. It was covered in buttons. These specialized games and devices fell out of favor as technology continued to advance, but their wide variety in the early years of gaming was a huge draw for the exhibit.

“Boys sure are interested in this kind of stuff...”

Shizuka was happily watching over Koutarou and Kenji, glued to one of the game consoles. As part of a newer generation of girls, Shizuka didn’t hate games either. But these consoles were strangely mechanical and utterly lacking any cuteness factor. The screens were also simple, and just like the design of the consoles, lacking in cuteness. As a result, there wasn’t a whole lot of girly appeal. That was the reason why Shizuka wasn’t actively participating.

“And Theia-dono too,” Kiriha added.

“She’s a special exception.” Shizuka shrugged at Kiriha’s remark.

But Kiriha was right. The boys weren’t the only ones hovering over the consoles. Theia was right there with them, currently in the middle of making a huge commotion.

“Bwahahaha! Koutarou, you’re a hundred years too primitive to beat me in games!”

“Damn you! I’ll teach you that hand-eye coordination isn’t all there is to games! Mackenzie!”

“Yeah!”

“That’s dirty, Koutarou! Your partner is too strong!”

“Wahahaha! Behold the power of charisma!”

“I don’t think that’s it, Kou...”

At a Forthorthian university, Theia had majored in computer history, or more specifically, the history of games. While they came from different planets, Theia was really in her element at this exhibit. She was attached to all of the games, and her hatred of losing only spurred her competitive streak. Theia was, without a doubt, the one enjoying the project display the most.

“Theia, do you want me to join you?” Sanae offered.

“Please do! I need your strength!”

“Aye aye, captain!”

“Hey, that’s dirty! Calling in Sanae like that!” Koutarou booed.

“Heh heh... Behold the power of charisma!” Theia mocked.

“Kou, is Higashihongan-san good at games too?”

“She’s not good at games in particular, but she’s special. If we let our guard down, she’ll blow right past us! Why don’t you play seriously for once, Mackenzie?!”

“You got it! This is starting to get interesting!”

They were all acting like friends who had gone out to play together. They weren’t worried about the time or anything else, and everyone was thoroughly enjoying being on a trip away from home. Because of that, Koutarou and the others playing games looked like they were having more fun than usual. Or, at least, they looked more childish than usual. It was only natural for the girls watching over them to find it endearing.

Having finished the examination sooner than expected, Harumi and Clan were enjoying teatime in the luxurious lounge of Clan’s Hazy Moon. Clan had been conducting Harumi’s checkups for a while now, and this post-examination teatime had become something of a routine.

“By the way, Harumi, what exactly is a school excursion?”

And after all the time they'd spent together, Clan considered Harumi a good friend. Excluding Koutarou and Kiriha, Harumi was the one she was closest to. Thanks to that, Clan could ask Harumi things she had trouble asking others.

"Did you not have them in Forthorthe?"

"We might have had them, but I never went to school."

"So that's the kind of thing happens when you're too smart... Whoops."

Pondering how to answer Clan's question, Harumi crossed her arms and began thinking. She'd never really thought of how to try and explain a school excursion to someone before, so she had to organize her thoughts.

"Um... A school excursion is a school event where you travel to a place for an educational and social experience."

"Educational and social experience?"

Something about Harumi's answer was clearly lost on Clan. She tilted her head in confusion.

"Like appreciating the opera or visiting a candy factory. Something like that."

"I see, so it's not somewhere you go to just to play around."

"Well, for us students, I think it is just like going on any other trip."

"Could it be that the educational part is just a front?"

"I suppose that's true for most of the students. Heehee..."

Harumi cheerfully laughed as she took a sip of her tea. She'd made it herself, and was quite satisfied with it.

"By the way, what kind of excursion did you go on, Harumi?"

Having formed a rough idea of what a school excursion was, Clan wanted a concrete example. Of course, what she was really interested in was Koutarou and the others who had already left on their trip.

"When my class went, we focused on shrines and temples. You could have called it a tour of the old capital."

"How refined."

“It was so refined that there were plenty of students who were unhappy about it. But on the second day we went to a big amusement park, so it all worked out in the end.”

“Hmm...”

Clan listened to Harumi while sipping her drink. The tea was superb, but Clan didn’t seem to register that.

“And... when everyone goes on a trip, the mood is a little different... And, um, well...”

Harumi, who had been speaking without any trouble thus far, suddenly stammered as if she was at a loss for words. She looked down and blushed.

“Th-There are more people who confess to the person they like than usual.”

When Harumi squeezed those words out with a whisper, Clan’s eyes shot open wide.

“C-Confess?!”

“Um, yes...”

“Oh, um...”

Harumi wasn’t the only one looking down and blushing now. They were both extremely sensitive when it came to talk of love, and they both had someone they wanted to confess to. It was no surprise that they were imagining the same dreamy, hopeful thing. And as a result, both Clan and Harumi fell silent for a long minute.

“Th-Then...”

The one to break the silence was Clan. After collecting herself some, her desire to know what it meant to confess during a school excursion temporarily surpassed her embarrassment.

“Did you... confess or get confessed to too, Harumi?”

With her face still turned down, Clan peered up out of the corner of her eye at Harumi. As if trying to escape that glance, Harumi turned her head to the side a little.

“The person I, um... wanted to c-confess to... didn’t come to the trip, so I...”

“Ah, I see.”

“But I was confessed to... twice.”

“Wh-What did you do?”

“Um... I politely turned them down. Because, um...”

“Ah, r-right! Ahahaha!”

“Heeheehee...”

The two girls began laughing. However, it wasn’t because they were happy. Rather, it was simply a desire to clear away the heavy, looming cloud that had gathered over them. But curiosity won out. When the laughter died down, Clan opened her mouth again.

“Then, around now... they’re...?”

“Timing and atmosphere play a big part, so it’s usually after something fun happens, or in the evening...”

“Kii and Theiamillis-san will probably be taken by surprise.”

“I think so.”

Kiriha and Theia were very popular, even with people outside of their class. And it wasn’t just with the boys, either. There were likely many students who would use this chance to confess.

“Then... Veltlion too?”

“Um...”

That was the question that interested Clan the most. The same was true for Harumi, and she instinctively held her breath.

“S-Satomi-kun has gotten... popular since the plays... so that might happen, yeah...”

“Th-That’s...”

Harumi and Clan were reduced to whispers again. Just imagining that Koutarou was being confessed to somewhere without their knowledge made

both Harumi and Clan feel incredibly uneasy. Based on Koutarou's personality and upbringing, the chances of him receiving a confession were pretty low, but they couldn't let their guard down.

"To think the school excursion is really such a shameless event..."

"That's not all there is to it. Some people just take heart on a trip like that..."

"I mean, it's not like I don't understand that feeling."

"Same..."

The two girls fell silent again. They both knew what it felt like to fall in love... and how painful it was to not be brave enough to confess. They could understand why you'd make the move when emotions were running high. And that sentiment was exactly why they felt so uneasy now.

"Harumi, how about we go all out... and secretly check in on things?"

"Huh?"

"I mean, rather than just patiently waiting here, feeling so..."

Unable to bear the anxiety, Clan wanted to take action. Now that she had learned the reality of the school excursion, she couldn't possibly sit still any longer. However, she was too shy to go alone, so she wanted Harumi to come with her. She was proposing that they cross this precarious bridge together.

"That might be true, but..." Harumi hesitated.

"It's a holiday for you too," Clan tried to persuade her.

"But..."

Clan's proposal was actually very attractive to Harumi. The only problem was the moral quandary of peeping. Harumi wanted to believe that a good woman would just have faith and wait patiently.

"Harumi, nothing will come of just waiting around. Sometimes you have to be the one to take action."

But Clan's words helped her make up her mind. Harumi had really always thought of herself as too passive, so she couldn't ignore what Clan was saying. Harumi nodded to her.

“I understand. Let’s just take a little look.”

“That’s right. Just a little, teensy-weensy look.”

And so Clan and Harumi decided to follow after Koutarou and the others. While it was quite obvious that this would be more than just “a little look,” repeating those magical words seemed to alleviate some of their guilt.

To a girl in love, the school excursion was a gold mine of opportunity. There would be no shortage of situations and excuses to casually strike up a conversation with someone outside of her normal social circle. And talking to someone she ordinarily never did was a relatively low risk endeavor, considering that they didn't usually see each other during their daily school lives.

That's why to Kashiwagi Shiori, this school excursion was her big chance. Koutarou, the boy she was interested in, barely acknowledged her existence. He only thought of her as a classmate. The school trip would help her overcome that hurdle. She would finally be able to break the ice with him.

"I have to talk to Satomi-kun this time..."

Unfortunately, things hadn't gone as she'd hoped so far. She'd had a perfectly good opening to talk to Koutarou while the class was looking at the permanent exhibit, but she just couldn't muster enough courage in time. Before she knew it, everyone was moving on to the project exhibit. And that was bad.

Almost everyone, including Koutarou, was looking forward to the exhibit on the history of video games. Because of that, Koutarou and the others were so focused on the games that it was next to impossible to talk to him. If they were on friendlier terms, Shiori could have just joined in with them, but that was difficult for her.

"At the next museum then..."

And so Shiori decided to wait for the next chance. They would stay at the science museum for most of the afternoon, and then move on to a museum on the history of Edo that evening. Surely Koutarou wouldn't be as engrossed by Japanese history as he was by video games.

"Mackenzie, why are they making such a fuss?"

"Are you really that out of the loop, Kou? Historical stuff has really been booming for a while now. Games and anime with beautified generals are all the rage."

"Hmm... Why not, I guess?"

“I mean, even if the real deal was some bald guy, he’ll still be popular as long as the pictures are good. It’s like a form of fantasy.”

“Yeah, but that’s been the case with portraits for ages. Isn’t it just that the quality of the pictures that has changed with the passing of eras?”

“That’s awfully perceptive for you, Kou. I’ve never thought of it that way.”

Shiori’s hunch was spot on. Koutarou and the other boys all seemed to calm down as they entered the next museum. If anything, it was the girls who were getting excited this time. Thanks to the recent explosion of historical fiction, squealing girls flooded each exhibit. It exactly the kind of situation Shiori was waiting for. Now, with the other girls in the class distracted, all that was left was waiting for Koutarou to be alone.

“So according to what you’re saying, all that’s really changed are aesthetics and what girls like?” Kenji asked.

“Yeah, see, in the past, these portrait *were* the beautified version.”

“So if Yamaoka-sensei went back in the time to the Warring States period, he’d be super popular, huh?”

“...What was that about me?”

“Oh crap!”

“Why don’t you come over here, Matsudaira? This is a good opportunity, so let’s have a little chat!”

“W-Wait!”

“That’s all on you. Have fun!” Koutarou waved.

“You’re heartless!”

“You reap what you sow, man.”

Fortunately, Shiori didn’t have to wait long. Kenji, who had been walking around with Koutarou, managed to enrage a teacher and was pulled aside. It didn’t look like he’d be back any time soon either. However, she couldn’t let her guard down yet. It wasn’t just Kenji she had to worry about. Koutarou was constantly surrounded by people these days. If she left him be, someone else

would show up. Shiori needed to act quickly.

"I have be courageous! This is the first step! I'll never get anywhere if I don't take it!"

Whap whap whap.

Shiori slapped her cheeks to pump herself up. While Koutarou had never noticed, Shiori had been watching him since elementary school. Like the other girls who misunderstood him, she kept her distance from him when they were younger. It wasn't until middle school that she had fallen for him, but even then, that meant she'd had her eye on him for years. And if she didn't do anything now, watching him was all she'd ever be able to do. In order to avoid that, she had to take action.

*I have to tell him! Today! No matter what!*

Shiori took a step towards Koutarou. Even though that was all, it was proof she was desperate. A girl confessing to the boy she liked required a great deal of determination. And Shiori was determined.

Each time she took a step closer to Koutarou, her heart beat a little faster. Her now pounding pulse made it difficult to think clearly, but doubts and fears plagued her mind. Her anxiety was severe, but she didn't stop. In fact, it was knowing that she couldn't go on like this that steadily drove her forward. Before long, Shiori had reached Koutarou.

And with a trembling voice, she asked, "U-Um, Satomi-kun, do you have a minute?"

They were words she had wanted to say for years but had never been able to. In the heat of the moment, they came to her so naturally because she had practiced them over and over, time and time again.

And it just so happened that Harumi and Clan caught up to Koutarou as Shiori approached him. Neither of them knew what was going on, but since a girl they didn't know was talking to Koutarou, they decided not to call out to him. Not to mention that they were scared of being scolded by Koutarou for showing up.

"What is it, Kashiwagi?"

“So you do know my name...”

“Well, we’re in the same class.”

“R-Right...”

“So what is it?”

“Ah, well...”

Harumi and Clan approached carefully so that Koutarou wouldn’t notice them. They didn’t want to interrupt Koutarou and Shiori, after all.

“What do you think they’re talking about?” Clan wondered out loud.

“There’s no way we could hear them from here,” Harumi answered.

“Then let’s listen in with this.”

Clan pulled some kind of a device out from her bag and pointed it towards Koutarou and Shiori. It was a parabolic microphone, which allowed the user to pick up sounds from a distance. Having guessed its function from its shape, Harumi furrowed her brow.

“Are we going to eavesdrop with that? I feel sorry for Satomi-kun...”

“Why are we here, Harumi?”

“That’s... Phew... Okay, let’s do it.”

Harumi and Clan had come because they were worried that someone might confess to Koutarou, or worse, that such a confession might move his heart. In order to alleviate that worry, they were going to have to spy on him. Harumi was normally adamantly against behaving in such a way, but desperate times called for desperate measures.

“Satomi-kun, can we take a look at the exhibit together?” Shiori asked.

“You don’t need my permission for that. It’s not like this is my house.”

“That’s... If you’re really fine with it, then it’s...”

“Of course I’m fine with it.”

“Does this mean... that girl...” Harumi muttered, almost at a loss for words.

“Looks like our hunch was spot on,” said Clan.

Using the parabolic microphone, they could clearly hear Koutarou and Shiori's discussion. It was obvious that Shiori was trying her best to get close to Koutarou, but nevertheless, he was completely oblivious. The meaning of her words and what she was really asking were lost on Koutarou, but not on Clan and Harumi.

"What do we do, Clan-san? At this rate, Satomi-kun will..."

"Veltlion and that girl? Th-That couldn't... B-But..."

The vague unease they had felt before now felt more like a lead weight in their stomachs—heavy and oppressive. They were both well aware that Koutarou's problem couldn't be so easily overcome, but who was to say that the girl who stood before him now wouldn't be the one to do it? Even if nothing happened this time, what would happen if it was resolved later? There was a possible future where Koutarou was no longer part of their lives. Once they realized that, dread and panic fell upon Clan and Harumi like nothing they had ever felt before. However...

"Hello, Layou— I mean Koutarou-sama."

"Huh?! Elle, why the hell are you here?!"

"What a coincidence, meeting you here..."

"Don't lie to me!"

"Do you know each other, Satomi-kun?" Shiori asked.

"Yeah, this is Theia's—"

"Older sister. Thank you for always looking out for Theia."

Elfaria appeared out of nowhere and interrupted Koutarou and Shiori before anything decisive happened.

"Th-Thank god..." Harumi stammered.

"I have to thank you this time, Elfaria-san..." Clan sighed in relief.

Both girls sat down on the spot as they felt the strength drain from their legs. With Elfaria's appearance, their ruin—or at least their perceived ruin—had been thwarted. Normally Elfaria only brought trouble with her, but this time

Clan practically felt like hugging and thanking her.

“What happened?” Kiriha suddenly asked.

“Well, Satomi-kun— Huh?!”

“K-Kii! Why are you here?!”

“Well, I’m in the middle of looking at this display, of course.”

Now that Kiriha had met up with Harumi and Clan, Shiori’s chances of being alone with Koutarou would drop considerably for a while. However, Harumi and Clan had a difference of opinion in how they felt about that.

In the end, Harumi and Clan decided to join up with Koutarou and the others. They could both use their powers to disguise themselves or turn invisible and fly away if they got caught sneaking around with the class. But as long as they were wearing uniforms, it would be easy to blend in. Granted, that wasn’t the case for a certain someone.

“...So there you have it. Hurry up and go home, Elle.”

“I don’t want to.”

“Do you even know who you are?!”

“I am Theia-chan’s older sister, Elle-chama!”

“Stop playing around! If something were to happen to you, your billions of citizens would be at a loss!”

Elfaria was the empress of the Holy Forthorthe Galactic Empire. In order for her to sightsee freely, she needed Koutarou and the rest to guard her. As she only had a vague grasp of Japanese traffic rules, she might even get in an accident. Such a beautiful woman was also at risk of inviting danger just by walking around the city. Mere muggers were scary, let alone the assassins her political adversaries might send after her. Being the head of an empire that controlled half a galaxy meant that absolutely no harm could befall her.

“Then what about Theia and Clan-san? They’re in the same position.”

“They know enough about Earth, and they can protect themselves! They don’t need strict guarding like you do!”

“But I’ll never get used to Earth too if you keep turning me away, Layous-sama.”

“Show some respect for the situation you’re in! Don’t you know you’re an empress in danger? Once everything is over, I’ll let you goof off as much as you like!”

“You won’t go back on that, will you, Layous-sama?”

Elfaria, who had been putting up a fight, backed down for some reason. But her expression was strangely happy. It made Koutarou a little nervous, but he decided that getting Elfaria to return home was more important.

“I won’t.”

“You can’t, okay?”

“I get it, so just go home.”

“You’ll regret it if you’re lying. You hear me?”

“Just go home!”

“Okaaay! Farewell!”

Elfaria turned her back to Koutarou as if running away. As she left, she glanced at Yurika. The truth was that it wasn’t a coincidence Elfaria had shown up. In exchange for two boxes of noodle cups, Yurika had given Elfaria their schedule and promised to contact her if anything interesting happened. In other words, Elfaria was only leaving because she was sure that she wouldn’t miss out on any of the fun. Once she got back, Elfaria would probably happily be changing the position of the transfer gate.

“What an ill omen...” said Clan.

“It does seem like she’s up to no good...” said Harumi.

Koutarou was suspicious too, but upon hearing their whispers, he gave Clan and Harumi a stern look.

“You two are the ones up to no good. Think about what you’ve done.”

“I-I’m sorry, Satomi-kun.”

“My bad! G-Getting left behind just got a little lonely! That’s all!”

Neither of them confessed the truth. Instead of telling him that they had come because they were worried that some other girl might confess to him, they told him they had come because they felt lonely at home without everyone else. It wasn't exactly something they could admit.

"Well, as long as you realize what you did..."

Harumi laughed nervously.

"W-We're sorry!" Clan assured him.

Fortunately, Koutarou didn't push the matter any further. The truth was that he'd felt guilty about leaving just the two of them behind in the first place. He wouldn't admonish them any more than he had to. Instead of being genuinely mad, he was actually a little relieved.

"Phew... At least we have a little room to breathe now."

Having escaped any further interrogation, Clan let out a sigh. Harumi, on the other hand, was smiling.

"Isn't this great, Clan-san?"

"You are awfully happy for someone who just got scolded."

It was true. Harumi looked particularly cheerful despite their situation. Clan tilted her head in confusion. As she did, Harumi revealed her reason.

"This is actually the first time that Satomi-kun has gotten angry at me like this."

Harumi was his senior, and normally very well behaved. She hardly ever did anything that would make Koutarou mad. She had broken the rules this time out of worry for Koutarou, but it had inadvertently granted a long-held wish of hers.

"That's a strange thing to be happy about."

"Clan-san, doing bad things is fun, isn't it?"

"You know, I think I'm done with it..."

Harumi was enjoying herself, but Clan just shrugged her shoulders in awe. Although they had opposite reactions to the situation they found themselves in,

they'd successfully managed to blend in with the school excursion.

The museum was open until 8 PM, but the school group left at 7 in order to stay on schedule. The hotel where they would be staying was near the coast, which meant getting back on the bus and taking the freeway for a while. As it was already autumn, the air by the beach in the evening was chilly. Winter was slowly approaching.

"Mackenzie, look at this! I got a bunch of meat!"

"Roast beef is something you're supposed to enjoy in thin slices, you know?"

Dinner was served in the form of a buffet at the hotel once they arrived. The students could have as much as they wanted of whatever they wanted. Koutarou, of course, had piled his plate high with the roast beef the hotel was known for. And despite how long he'd known Koutarou, Kenji was still flabbergasted.

"It don't care what you think. I just want to eat meat to my heart's content."

"That's right. Meat is life," added Yurika, who'd taken a seat next to Koutarou.

She was just like him. Except, instead of just getting roast beef, she had picked up all kinds of meat.

"Eat some vegetables too," Koutarou said.

"Whaaat?! Why?! We're on the same team!"

"Look, I got some vegetables. We're not on the same team when you only got meat."

"But I don't want to. Not when we've come to an expensive looking hotel!"

"Expensive or not, eat your vegetables."

While Koutarou didn't mind eating in massive quantities, he wouldn't allow an unbalanced diet. He pushed half of his salad onto Yurika's plate.

"B-B-B-But... Auuugh..."

With her dinner now covered in salad, Yurika begrudgingly began eating with tears in her eyes. She knew that there was no point in resisting when Koutarou was like this.

“Stupid. You should put a little more thought into how you go about doing things,” interjected Sanae.

Seated across from Yurika, Sanae was smiling wryly at her. Unlike Koutarou and Yurika, Sanae had a plate full of cake and was happily eating away.

“You’re one to talk, Sanae. You should— Ah, I see. That should be fine. Good girl, Sanae.”

“Heeheehee!”

Koutarou was about to scold Sanae, but he’d ended up praising her instead. That was because he’d realized that while she was only eating cakes, she was drinking a vegetable smoothie with them. And because she was getting her vegetables one way or another, Koutarou had nothing to complain about.

That was ultimately thanks to Sanae-san inside of her. Sanae-chan only wanted to eat cake, but Sanae-san had warned her about that. The vegetable smoothie was a compromise of sorts. Looking at it from an overall perspective, Sanae had matured.

“Hey, Kou.”

Eating his own roast beef, Kenji called out to Koutarou after watching him interacting with the girls.

“Hmm?”

Having just taken a bite himself, Koutarou looked up at Kenji as he continued to chew.

“I’m always thinking this, but... you act like a mom.”

“Yhou think sho?” Koutarou asked, his mouth still full.

“You’re always taking care of Nijino-san and Higashihongan-san. It’s funny to me every time.”

“This is no laughing mhatter. Theesh two whould be up to no goohd in no time if I left them to their ohwn devhices.”

“I guess it’s a good thing, so keep taking care of them.”

“Mmhmm, as longh as they shtand out like they do.”

As their conversation reached a lull, Koutarou returned to eating. Watching over him, Kenji couldn't help thinking about how much Koutarou had changed over the last year. But it was a good thing. Having friends and actively being involved with other people was a huge step forward. Kenji smiled to himself as he began eating again as well. It was a great dinner.

After everyone had eaten, it was time for baths and then bed. But as Kisshouharukaze High School valued independence in its students, "lights out" wasn't strictly enforced. There was a line for the large baths, so being stringent about bedtime would only make things more difficult.

By the time Koutarou and Kenji headed to the bath, it was already 1 AM. At this hour, they practically had the place to themselves.

"The bath sure feels great after playing around all day."

After getting in, Koutarou stretched himself out to soak. Both he and Kenji were tired after their long day of playing cards, table tennis, and other games, not mention various events as part of the school excursion. This was their chance to take a break and really relax.

"You sure are tough, Kou. How do you still have any energy?"

Kenji looked at Koutarou as he wiped away the fog that had formed on his glasses. With his glasses off, he couldn't see Koutarou's face, but he could easily imagine the kind of expression he'd be making at a time like this.

"Why are you talking like some old man?"

"It's been a while since we were last in a sports club. You're the strange one for still being so energetic," Kenji laughed.

After starting high school and moving out on his own, Koutarou had stopped seriously playing baseball. Kenji had been recruited into the drama club because of his good looks as a first-year too. One would think that these two boys who used to boast about their muscles and their stamina didn't have much left to brag about. However, Koutarou was still keeping up his strength. None the wiser, it was only natural for Kenji to laugh.

"It's because I'm still working out while you're doing all that pansy stuff," Koutarou teased.

He was sparring regularly with Ruth and Clan. Thanks to that, he was able to maintain his physique. Of course, his baseballs skills were definitely rusty.

“Are you saying acting is for pansies?”

“Acting is fine. I know the pain of trying to get into a role.”

“Yeah, that was awful...”

“The problem is your private life.”

“Yeah, yeah, I know— Wait, Kou...” Kenji looked up at Koutarou in the middle of his sentence like he’d just noticed something. “What’s up with those scars?”

Really, Kenji had spotted the scars all over Koutarou’s body. Koutarou was always a rough boy and had his fair share of scars to show for it, but he had collected quite a few more after everything that had happened since starting high school. Kenji had never seen them before.

*Ah crap, I let my guard down...*

In order not to stand out during pool sessions in gym class, Koutarou usually used magic to hide his scars. He just hadn’t made the preparations this time. Really, he’d forgotten that bathing while on the school trip would basically be the same thing.

“Haha... I mean, I’ve always looked like this, right?”

“No, I don’t think you’ve always had that many scars.”

Koutarou tried to play it off, but Kenji wouldn’t be fooled that easily. Koutarou didn’t have much of a choice other than to be honest.

“I don’t think there are really that many new ones, but you know...”

“Did something happen?”

“Yeah. Just some stuff after getting involved with them.”

“Did you have to put your body on the line for something?”

“Something like that. Don’t ask too many questions, okay?”

“Yeah, yeah. I won’t ask about anything stupid.”

“When it comes to women, you sure act smart.”

“That’s going too far, Kou.”

“Hahaha, sorry.”

Revealing some of the truth seemed to do the trick. Kenji didn’t press Koutarou for any more details. Knowing how Koutarou used to be, Kenji didn’t want to focus on the past too much. Instead, his thoughts turned to the future.

“But honestly, Kou, it’s about time to choose.”

“Hmm? Choose what?”

“Don’t act stupid. I’m talking about which one of those girls you’re gonna go out with. Surely you’ve made up your mind by now, right?”

Before Kenji knew it, there were nine girls hanging around Koutarou. Kenji believed that Koutarou would put his body on the line for some of them, but that also indicated that those girls had feelings for Koutarou too. Kenji was of the opinion that Koutarou should commit to one of the girls and make that relationship clear, for everyone’s sake.

“No, not yet. They’re all such good girls, it’s hard to choose.” Koutarou shook his head.

Kenji was sloppy when it came to relationships, but he was the man Koutarou could count on the most when it mattered. That’s why he didn’t feel the need to hide anything from him when it came to his feelings.

“Okay, let’s try it this way. Who are you the most fine without? Work backwards one girl at a time, and then just go with who’s left.”

If choosing outright was too hard, it made sense to use the process of elimination. By discounting the girls he cared the least about, the last girl standing had to be the one who was most important to him.

“That’s...”

But this was the first time Koutarou had ever tried to think about his relationships in terms of necessity. He was unable to hide how stunned he was at Kenji’s question.

*Someone I don’t need...?*

Koutarou recalled the faces of the nine girls. Each face came with many memories. And all of those memories were priceless to him.

“...I don’t know. I’ve never thought about it like that.”

In the end, Koutarou couldn’t come to a conclusion. Or, rather, he came to the conclusion that there wasn’t a single one of them that he didn’t need. To Koutarou, the thought of parting with any of those nine girls was just too saddening. And so the method of elimination proved ineffective for Koutarou.

“You’re really going to have a hard time ahead of you at this rate, Kou.”

Kenji had always worried for Koutarou, and that included worrying about his love life. But now that the problem was starting to affect people even outside of Koutarou’s social circle, Kenji was more worried than ever. He felt badly for the girls Koutarou was troubling and didn’t even realize, and he was concerned that it might come back to Koutarou and the people he was close with in a bad way. Kenji wanted Koutarou to understand what he was potentially risking.

“They really are all great people. They’ve been through a lot, but they’re all still standing on their own two feet and smiling. There’s not a single one of them that I don’t need. They need each other, too.”

“Kou, I get how you feel, but even so...”

“I’m not arrogant enough to think that they have to be with me just because I can’t choose. But any future where they do stay with me is fine by me!”

Koutarou was well aware that if he didn’t make a move, it put the nine girls in a sticky situation. He even knew that he was risking losing them to someone else by doing that. It would be conceited to expect someone to stay in love with him when he didn’t reciprocate those feelings. But despite knowing that, Koutarou still couldn’t decide. It was too late for that. They were all already deeply embedded in his daily life. He had been completely invaded by these girls. Trying to cut one of them out of his life would jeopardize his sense of normalcy, and Koutarou didn’t have the courage to do that himself.

Meanwhile, a similar discussion was taking place in the women’s bath. As the girls of Corona House were surrounded by their classmates, they weren’t talking about the details of their love lives, but the other girls were all talking about

their crushes.

“So then what? You confessed, right?” Theia asked.

“I was about to... but then a junior in the girls’ soccer club walked by,” said Irie.

“So what? You couldn’t confess?” Sanae asked.

“Sanae-chan, you could be a little more gentle...” said Shizuka.

“Thank you, Shizuka. But she’s right. I was unable confess after all and went home. I lost heart and couldn’t go through with it.”

The current center of attention was a member of the soccer club with a short haircut. She was a lively girl, but her normally energetic attitude took a back seat as she reported on the outcome in embarrassment.

“I know how you feel. When you steel yourself to start your homework and get interrupted partway through, it takes a lot of courage to start again,” Yurika offered.

“I’d feel bad about comparing love and homework.”

“But both love and homework are important. You’re too stiff, Maki-chan!”

The close-knit, friendly atmosphere had inspired a good round of girl talk in the women’s bath. After one of the girls divulged her story, the others would talk about it and share their opinions. The girl from the soccer team was the fourth one to go so far.

“So... what do you want to do now, Irie-san?” Harumi asked.

“That’s right. Making that clear first will lead to solving the problem,” Clan added.

After joining in at the museum, Harumi and Clan had spent the rest of the days as stowaways with the class. They’d used a little magic to disguise themselves, so both girls had a different hair color and style than usual. They weren’t impressive disguises, but in the large bath with so many other students, they were able to blend in without trouble.

“I want to confess... but I’m worried I’ll lose my nerve again,” Irie admitted.

“Do you want me to tell him for you?” Shizuka offered.

“Shizuka-sama, confessing for others is not an effective method. I believe it would be best to confess on your own,” Ruth interjected.

“I see... This stuff is pretty hard.”

“What do you think I should do, Kurano-san?”

Kiriha had a reputation for being the go-to person with difficult problems like this. As someone who understood the subtleties of the heart, she had presented adequate solutions to most of the other girls’ dilemmas already.

“If you’re worried about losing your nerve while you’re confessing, why not break it up into several parts?”

Kiriha hid her true self and acted like an honor student around her classmates. That was the mask she wore when giving advice like this.

“Split it into several parts?”

“Yes. First you write a love letter. By doing that, he already knows how you feel and you only need to be courageous for a moment.”

“I see! That’s Kurano-san for you! I’ll go with that!”

“But you should stay away confessing via text message.”

“Hmm, why is that?”

“A text message will come across as impersonal. And if you use emojis to try to alleviate that, it will just make it seem as though you’re not serious.”

“Ah... That’s true.”

“And the most important thing is that you deliver the letter in person. You have to think about how he feels too. If you mail it or leave it in his locker, it doesn’t have the same effect. He might even think it’s a prank.”

“So my confession might seem half-hearted?”

“Yes. Earnestly handing over the letter will tell him what you mean for sure.”

“So in the end, how I say it is important too... Okay, I’ll personally write and deliver a letter.”

“I will pray for your success.”

“Yay! Thank you, Kurano-san!”

Irie grasped Kiriha’s hand as she thanked her. There were tears in her eyes. A confession really was an important event, and the girls were all taking each other’s stories to heart. Most of the girls were hoping to confess to someone or another, and Kiriha had offered to pray for each of them so far.

The next girl would change that.

“Um, can I go next?”

Timidly raising her hand was a classmate by the name of Kashiwagi Shiori. Shiori speaking up put Clan and Harumi immediately on tenterhooks.

“Harumi, that girl is...”

“Yes, she was trying to confess to...”

They remembered Shiori’s face. She was the girl that was with Koutarou when they caught up to him at the museum. She hadn’t actually confessed to him, but it was obvious that she was trying her best to get close to him. That meant the crush she was about to bring up had to be Koutarou. Clan and Harumi feared what might come out of her mouth next.

“I... have had someone I’ve liked for a long time...”

Shiori shyly began talking about her crush, but she didn’t name the boy she was interested in. She was going to ask for advice without revealing his identity. Clan and Harumi were on the edge of their seats as they listened.

“But at first, I hated him.”

“Why?” Yurika innocently asked.

She had no idea who Shiori was talking about, so she was just treating this like any other case that had been brought to the love jury.

“He was violent and unsociable... He was scary.”

“Then you should have just left him be,” Sanae chimed in.

Sanae was the same. She could feel love emanating from Shiori, but she didn’t know who it was directed towards. And so she didn’t react any differently than

normal.

“That’s what I thought too... so I didn’t talk to him for the first few years.”

“Which means you’ve known this person for quite a while then?” Ruth asked.

Ruth was starting to realize how deep Shiori’s feelings must run to have cared for the same person for that long, but she had no idea who the object of her affection was either.

“We’ve been in the same class since elementary school, but I’m sure he doesn’t remember me.”

Shiori laughed bitterly at herself. She knew she should have acted sooner, and that feeling now distilled into potent regret.

“I think the turning point was when he started playing baseball.”

At the mention of baseball, Kiriha suddenly looked up with a startled expression and stared at Shiori.

*It couldn’t be...*

“People said something had happened with his family and that’s why he pushed people away... but after picking up baseball, he seemed to find a way to connect with others. From there, he changed little by little. Now he’s quite popular and has a best friend he’s close with...”

At this point in her explanation, each of the Corona House girls had realized who Shiori was talking about. They were all rendered speechless by the surprise.

“Because I was always nearby, watching, I fell in love with him before I knew it... Then I started to think that I actually might be able to help him, but I haven’t been able to do anything because I didn’t have the courage...”

“Sh-Shiori, is the person you’re talking about...”

As expected, the first one who couldn’t stay quiet any longer was Theia. As impatient as she was, she wanted a clear answer. And even though she was the first to speak up, there were another eight girls anxiously awaiting the same answer.

“Koutarou?”

“Yeah. So you guys knew about his past too? Actually, I suspected that might be the case...”

Shiori’s eyes opened wide for a moment, but she soon blushed and nodded. She knew that Theia and some of the other girls had gotten close to Koutarou lately. That’s why she figured it wasn’t all that strange for them to know.

“Just so we’re clear... is Satomi-kun going out with anyone?”

This was really what Shiori had wanted to ask about. She knew that Koutarou got along well with Theia and the others, but she didn’t know if any of them had taken the next step with him. She had to know for sure.

“He... shouldn’t be going out with anyone...”

Anxiety washed over Theia and the eight other girls, but there was no denying the truth. Koutarou didn’t have a girlfriend.

“I see... All right!” Shiori sighed with relief and flashed a look of renewed determination.

“Wh-What?” Yurika sheepishly stammered after seeing her reaction.

“I’m going to confess to Satomi-kun during this field trip!” she answered boldly.

If Theia and the others who were currently the closest to Koutarou didn’t know about one, there was no way that Koutarou actually had a girlfriend. And that meant that nobody would get their feelings hurt if she confessed. Shiori no longer had any reason to hesitate.

“Whaaaaaaaat?!”

Up until now, the invaders had never really considered that anyone apart from them would fall in love with Koutarou. There may be a fleeting crush here and there, sure. Koutarou had definitely gotten some fans because of the plays. But they hadn’t expected that someone who had truly fallen for Koutarou might enter the picture. Shiori’s sudden declaration shook the invaders to their cores.

On the second day of the school excursion, the class would be going to a famous amusement park. Since the trip wasn’t entirely about learning and

yesterday had been educational, the teachers had scheduled an entire day for something fun. And now the students were all packed back into the bus, ready for a memorable day at the park.

"...What will happen if Satomi-kun accepts that girl's confession?" Maki muttered to herself in the back of the bus.

Her voice was quiet, but it reached the other invaders who were sitting nearby. Hearing those words, they all fell silent with serious expressions. While everyone else around them was in high spirits eagerly anticipating getting to the amusement park, the same couldn't be said for the Corona House girls. With the sudden appearance of Shiori and her shocking declaration, the girls were in no state to enjoy the park.

"Th-That won't happen! This is Koutarou we're talking about! He wouldn't fall for a girl that easily!" Sanae practically shouted.

She desperately tried to break through the heavy and oppressive atmosphere that had crept over them all. However, even she didn't fully believe what she was saying herself. It was clear that Shiori understood Koutarou pretty well from their talk last night. And with her psychic powers, Sanae knew that the feelings Shiori had for Koutarou were genuine. Denying that she might be able to move his heart would mean denying that any of them might be able to. And so despite Sanae's insistence, her words sounded hollow.

"I want to believe that... but Kashiwagi-san knows about a side of Satomi-kun that we don't. Who knows what kind of effect that will have?" Shizuka pointed out what the girls feared the most.

The invaders had already been with Koutarou for over a year, and they prided themselves on knowing Koutarou better than anyone else. The only exception was Kenji. And even though the girls could get a little jealous of him, they never considered him a threat.

But now Shiori had appeared. She wasn't as close with Koutarou as the girls from room 106 were, but she had known him for far longer. She'd been watching over him since elementary school. In that sense, she was the girl who knew Koutarou best. That made the other girls all the more anxious.

"But isn't it hard to believe that Veltlion would accept a girl that he barely

knows?”

The girls knew that Koutarou still tried to keep his distance from other people. Clan believed that meant that they didn’t have anything to worry about for the foreseeable future. At least, that’s what she wanted to believe.

“So if it isn’t sudden, does that Satomi-sama might accept? There’s still over a year until we graduate.”

Ruth had no objections with Clan’s conclusion, but saw a potential problem. Even if Shiori and Koutarou only became friends now, that might blossom into something over the coming year.

“In that time, Koutarou and Shiori might even become close enough to brawl... Without that, it’s hard to tell...” Theia muttered and clenched her fist.

The fact that they still had over a year of high school left only made them worry more. After all, their relationship with Koutarou had formed over the course of a year.

“I never even imagined this could happen... That some other girl might sweep in while we’re at a standstill...” Harumi whispered.

Her words pointed out the essence of the girls’ problem. They had only been focusing on themselves and Koutarou. They figured everything would turn out fine as long as they spent their time and energy on helping Koutarou heal. Shiori seemed to appear out of nowhere because the girls were suffering from a form of tunnel vision. A bolt from the blue, so to speak.

“But, Sakuraba-senpai, in this case aren’t we the ones who swept in on her...?”

Excluding time travel and other caveats, Shiori was the one who fell in love with Koutarou first, just as Yurika said. Even from Koutarou’s perspective, the invaders had all appeared long after Shiori was already a part of his life.

“Logically speaking, that would be the case. We only met Koutarou last year, and each one of us has fallen in love since. And now that we’ve realized that we’re not the only girls in his life, we’re panicking and—” Kiriha attempted to summarize what Harumi and Yurika had said, but she suddenly stopped in the middle of it.

*Wait... Why am I getting the feeling that something's not right?*

As Kiriha spoke, she felt a sense of incongruity. Logically, she understood what they were saying. In fact, she felt the same way. But as she looked at the bigger picture, she felt like something was amiss. However, unable to put her finger on it, she was just left feeling confused. How could there be anything wrong with such rational statements?

"What's the matter, Kiriha?"

Finding it strange for Kiriha to stop so suddenly, Theia looked at her scrutinizingly. Seeing that, Kiriha put the thought out of her mind and flashed a small smile.

"Oh, nothing. It was probably just my imagination."

She still couldn't identify the source of this strange feeling, but continuing to puzzle over it now wouldn't guarantee an answer. And so Kiriha decided to put her mind to the problem in front of them instead.

"Anyway, now that we know we aren't the only girls interested in Koutarou, it would be foolish not to do anything," Kiriha said, getting the discussion back on track.

"So what do we do then?"

"It's unlikely we'll need to act immediately. Let's see what Shiori does next."

There girls didn't need to worry about Koutarou being moved by Shiori's sudden attack. The trials and tribulations of room 106 were proof of that. Taking their time to study their opponent's moves seemed the most strategically sound tactic for now. So the girls decided to observe Shiori, their first ever rival for Koutarou's heart.

The amusement park wasn't too far from the hotel, but the congestion around such a popular destination meant they got held up in traffic for half an hour or so. Fortunately, the teachers had taken that possibility into account, and the class arrived about ten minutes before the park opened.

"This place really is top-notch. They're setting up the perfect atmosphere even before we get in."

“Kou, even if that’s how you feel, you shouldn’t really say it out loud.”

“Why not?”

“The girls are here for the full experience. Pointing things out like that is a little immersion-breaking.”

“Okay, um... As expected from the land of dreams!”

“That’s more like it.”

Koutarou and Kenji stood next to each other, looking up at the main gate to the amusement park. The brick structure was a grand sight in and of itself, setting the stage for the rest of the park. Even the train that circled the edge of the park looked like something out of a fantasy. It was like they had entered a dream world the moment they stepped off the bus.

“So what’s it going to be today, Mackenzie?”

They’d spent most of yesterday walking around together, so Koutarou decided he’d ask Kenji if he wanted to tag along today too—even though he already had an idea of the answer he’d get.

“I have something to do today.”

“Figured as much.”

As expected, Kenji had other plans. He’d promised some girl he’d walk around the park with her, leaving Koutarou all alone in the fantastical kingdom of dreams.

“This is a good opportunity, so why don’t you find a date too?”

“Easier said than done...”

The first ones to come to mind were the girls of room 106, but there would be trouble if he only invited one of them to go with him. Unable to choose between them, Koutarou was left with a dilemma.

“Then why don’t we go together, Satomi-kun?”

When Koutarou turned to see who had called out to him, he saw Shiori, the girl he’d talked with a little the day before. She was standing with a few other boys—more of their classmates.

*This might work...*

If he couldn't choose one of the girls from room 106, bonding with his classmates didn't seem like a bad idea. After all, the school excursion would feel a little incomplete if he didn't make memories with any of his peers.

"Thanks, Kashiwagi. I think I'll do just that."

"Yeah! Let's enjoy ourselves today!"

And so Koutarou decided to go around the amusement park with his classmates. That choice came naturally to him, but Kenji—who was watching from nearby—started to wonder what else it might mean.

*Kashiwagi-san might unexpectedly win over Kou...*

Koutarou did indeed treasure the nine girls he'd gotten so close with. But because he treasured them so, he couldn't choose between them. With Kashiwagi Shiori stepping in at just the right time, Koutarou might reflexively choose her instead. Kenji had plenty of romantic experience, and he'd seen stranger scenarios develop into relationships. He believed that it was certainly possible that Koutarou and Shiori might end up together.

But even more worried than Kenji were the girls of room 106, who were currently sneaking after Koutarou and Shiori. They hid in the shadows, sometimes using advanced technology or magic to follow several dozen meters behind Koutarou. At that distance, Clan's parabolic microphone could easily pick up what Koutarou and Shiori were talking about.

"So next is that roller coaster one."

"You're fine with heights, right, Satomi-kun?"

"Yeah... but how do you know that?"

"Because you were at the top of the pyramid during the sports festival in middle school."

"Huh, were we in the same class back then?"

"That's awful! We've always been in the same class!"

"Oh."

“Jeez, how rude...”

“Sorry, sorry.”

Koutarou and Shiori had a playful banter going on between them and seemed to be enjoying themselves. They might even come off as more than just classmates to someone who didn’t know better. Shiori’s desire to get closer to Koutarou was pushing their interactions in that direction.

“It looks like they’re getting along really well.”

In the shoujo manga that Yurika liked to read, the kind of back and forth that Koutarou and Shiori were having was a sign that their relationship was progressing. It made Yurika even more nervous.

“I think so too. Shiori is sending out love rays, and Koutarou is doing his best to be friendly with her.”

Sanae backed up Yurika’s observation. With her spirit sight, she could see that Shiori was ardently pouring her heart into her feelings for Koutarou. She’d caught a glimpse of it before, but this proved how serious she was about him. It didn’t seem like Koutarou had any feelings for her beyond being a classmate, but he was trying to be nice to her since she’d invited him along. There was no doubt that he wanted to get along with her.

“If Shiori-sama continues to appeal to him this, then maybe Satomi-sama will...”

“I don’t really want to think about it... What do you think, Kiriha?” Theia said, interrupting Ruth.

“Shiori declared that she would confess during the school excursion. I think it’s a little too soon for that... but I can’t imagine how Koutarou will react either. Moreover, the confession will likely change the future course of their relationship.”

The girls believed they had a strong bond with Koutarou, so they didn’t think it would be easy for Shiori to steal his heart. Nevertheless, they were also aware that they were currently at a standstill. The couldn’t deny the possibility that Shiori might bond with Koutarou, given her confession and a little time.

“If Satomi-kun really does go out with Kashiwagi-san... What exactly would happen...?”

Up until now, Shizuka had been able to vaguely imagine her future. She believed that no matter who Koutarou chose, everyone would continue to live their happy, boisterous lives together. But the Shiori dilemma had shaken her. Shizuka couldn’t even imagine what the future would look like if Koutarou chose Shiori. The same was more or less true for the other girls as well.

“If Satomi-kun says that he won’t choose us, then I will probably...”

If Koutarou chose Shiori, Maki might be the most troubled one of all. She had no place to call home. But they say home is where the heart is, and Maki’s heart was with Koutarou. She felt like it was being crushed just imagining Koutarou choosing Shiori.

“That said, it’s not like we can get in the way of Veltlion’s relationship with that girl... Something that cruel would be unforgivable...”

The girls had followed Shiori in order to figure out their next move, but they were stumped for the moment. As Clan implied, Koutarou and Shiori’s relationship was ultimately between them. How it panned out would be up to them, not Clan and the others. If the girls tried to interfere, it would be spiteful and unfair. They couldn’t allow that.

“I guess all we can do is wait and believe...” Harumi said, letting out a heavy sigh.

Since they couldn’t try and stop Shiori, all they could do was pray that Koutarou would choose them. They all slowly came to that realization for themselves.

“If you girls just roll over like that, that girl is going to steal Layous-sama from you.”

“Mother?!”

Elfaria, who had come out of concern for the girls, had a very different take on the situation. According to her, the was still a lot they needed to do.

Last night, Elfaria had heard all about Shiori from her informant, Yurika. She

had explained that the girls of room 106 were pondering what to do about their new rival. Worried, Elfaria had come to check on them.

“But mother, there’s nothing we can do in this situation!”

“That might be true in this case. All you can do is watch over them for the time being.”

Elfaria agreed with the girls about not interfering, especially if Shiori was serious. She didn’t want them doing anything they’d regret. The plan Elfaria had come up with was for after they left this place.

“But what you need to do from now on is display your feelings even more than ever. Just like what the girl is desperately doing right now.”

Even if Shiori opened up to Koutarou on this trip, considering his personality, it was unlike that Koutarou would make any sort of rash decision. Shiori still had plenty of time to catch up to the girls of room 106. But if Shiori was chasing after them, they only needed to run faster in order to stay ahead of her. While they couldn’t do anything to trip her up, nothing stopped them from using her techniques to get ahead.

“But, Your Majesty, even if we do that, there’s still the problem of how Satomi-kun feels. I wouldn’t want to do something too unreasonable,” said Harumi.

If possible, she wanted to do as Elfaria said. But considering Koutarou still couldn’t fully believe in people deep down inside, emphasizing her feelings might end up driving him into a corner instead. Harumi wanted to avoid that. So did the other girls.

“You really are such gentle girls. And you really treasure Layous-sama.”

Elfaria gently smiled at the eighteen eyes looking at her—nine pairs, each just the way hers used to look. They were bright yet wistful.

“I understand very well how you feel. He needs happiness more than anyone else.”

“Then—”

“But, Harumi, you girls are mistaken about one thing.”

Elfaria just shook her head when Harumi attempted to push the matter further. All nine pairs of eyes opened wide.

“Mistaken? About what?”

“Basically, you’re underestimating his progress. It’s probably because you’re too close to Layous-sama to appreciate it.”

The difference between yesterday and today was subtle. And the girls spent so much time with Koutarou, they might not have even noticed him changing at all. But Elfaria was different. She could clearly see how different Koutarou was from when she first met him in Forthorthe twenty years in the past. And in the few months she had been here, she only saw Koutarou from time to time. Each time, something was a little different. She had a different perspective from everyone else. The same was true for Shiori.

“The current Layous-sama isn’t trying to push you away as much as you think,” Elfaria assured them.

The ones who had caused that change in him were, without a doubt, the nine girls standing before her. They were slowly healing his heart and brining him out of his shell.

“So believe in him and take the plunge. You’re more important to Layous-sama than you realize. He needs you...”

And that’s why Elfaria believed that if the girls wanted a stronger bond with Koutarou, he wouldn’t reject them. They were special to him.

The amusement park that Koutarou and the others were visiting spanned an area vast enough to include a large artificial lake, as well as a ferry ride. The boat looked grand and luxurious, but it wasn't really all that big. It was no different from your typical sightseeing ferry. And while it didn't take very long to circle the lake, it was incredibly relaxed experience compared to the other rides, so it was popular with people who wanted a change of pace or to take it easy. It was exactly what Shiori was hoping for—somewhere quiet where she wouldn't be interrupted.

"Huh, where'd everyone go?"

As Koutarou reached the ferry's upper deck, he only saw Shiori. There were other passengers, but she was the only classmate he recognized.

"They're all on the rear deck. Look over there."

Shiori pointed out the rest of their group. As Koutarou looked over, he spotted their classmates on the deck below them.

"Ah, there they are. Let's go, Kashiwagi."

Koutarou figured there had just been some sort of misunderstanding, so he immediately turned away from Shiori and started heading for everyone else.

"Wait, Satomi-kun."

However, Shiori stopped him by grabbing his right hand and pulling him towards her.

"Hmm? What is it?"

Koutarou turned around and looked at Shiori. As he did, she clasped both of her hands around his.

"Everyone moved to the other deck because I asked them to."

"What do you mean?"

"Actually... there is something I want to talk to you about..."

Shiori lightly closed her eyes. Her flush cheeks and the way she was firmly grasping her hands close to her chest allowed Koutarou to vaguely guess what she wanted to say. It made him feel stiff and tense.

“Um... I...”

Shiori shyly opened her eyes and meekly started speaking. These were the words she’d wanted to say for years, but was never been able to bring herself to speak.

“You might not remember, but... we’ve been in the same class since elementary school... and I’ve always been watching you.”

“...I see.”

Sadly, the only memories of Shiori in Koutarou’s mind were from middle and high school. He couldn’t remember anything earlier that, but he chose not to say so. He knew it would sound cold.

“That’s how I know about your mom, and that a lot happened with your dad... And I understand that you don’t want to get close to anyone.”

Shiori had learned a lot about Koutarou’s rough life through watching him and listening to people talk. She surmised that, deep down, he couldn’t fully place his trust in people.

“Once I realized that you were struggling to be kind to others, I couldn’t take my eyes off of you... But I didn’t know how I should talk to you. I didn’t have the courage...”

While it was true that Koutarou couldn’t completely put his faith in other people, he continued to try to accept them. After butting heads, he was finally able to accept Kenji. It was that solemn determination that attracted Shiori.

“But we’re soon going to be third-years... We probably won’t see each other after graduation... so I decided to tell you, even if it’s selfish of me. I didn’t want to regret not doing anything!”

Bwooooomp!

The ship’s horn blared. It was the signal that the ferry had reached the halfway point of its journey. Shiori didn’t have much time left. Spurred on by the boat horn, she revealed the feelings she kept inside.

“I’ve always liked you! Please go out with me!”

“Kashiwagi...”

She'd finally been able to say it. She told Koutarou how she really felt. It wasn't just a passing crush; she truly and deeply cared for him. Shiori knew about his circumstances, but she still reached out to him. She had the determination to overcome any problems together. Those were the feelings in her heart as she confessed. It wasn't something Koutarou could take lightly.

"Thank you, Kashiwagi. I'm happy that you feel that way."

"Satomi-kun!"

"But... I can't go out with you. I'm sorry."

It was honestly painful for Koutarou to reject Shiori's serious and earnest feelings. But it was what he had to do. Just casually agreeing to date her would only end with her getting hurt.

"Why... Why not?"

Hearing Koutarou's answer, tears started streaming down Shiori's cheeks. Her voice was hoarse like she was doing her best to keep herself from crying, which was only natural. She was very serious about this. And so Koutarou confessed how he truly felt too.

"There are already some girls that I'm interested in."

"Interested in...?"

"Yeah. I only met them after starting high school, but... they've made me who I am now. I still don't clearly understand it all, but I think the person most important to me is probably one of them. That's why I can't go out with you."

To Koutarou, the girls of room 106 really were special. They had helped him get to where he was today. They were practically part of his identity. Because of that, he couldn't choose a different girl. Koutarou's special someone had to be among those nine.

"I think... I can love myself the way I am now. Forgetting the girls who made me feel that way would be too hard."

"You mean Theia-chan and the others, right?"

Shiori had a hunch about who Koutarou was talking about. She'd been keeping a close eye on him since they entered high school, and there weren't

many people who fit the bill. Logically speaking, it had to be Theia and the others who were always around him.

“That’s right. A lot has happened with them.” Koutarou firmly nodded. He couldn’t lie to Shiori when she was being so honest. “I don’t think I could choose anyone apart from them. Then again, chances are good that I’ll be rejected or they’ll give up on me...”



The nine girls had all shown affection for Koutarou in their own ways. But

there was no guarantee their feelings would remain unchanged until Koutarou discovered his own feelings. Koutarou was prepared for that as well.

“If you were me, would you give up?”

“...No. That’s why I will stay here.”

“I’m really sorry, Kashiwagi. It’s not that I dislike you.”

“I know... I understand...”

Shiori understood how Koutarou felt. She understood that it took time to uncover your own feelings, and that it was impossible to give up even when it got hard. That was how Shiori had made her way here. It was also why she had no choice but to accept what he was saying. She nodded as large tears tumbled off her cheeks, falling to the ground.

Theia and the others were by the ferry terminal, waiting for Koutarou and Shiori to get back. They weren’t spying on them right now. When Shiori began her confession, they turned off the microphone and camera on the reconnaissance craft they had been using to observe the boat. They all agreed that eavesdropping on her confession would be in poor taste.

“I wonder how it went...” Yurika muttered.

Really, she was just saying what was on everyone else’s minds. The last ten minutes without the camera feed had been grueling. All they could do now was anxiously await the outcome. It felt like waiting for their hearts to be ripped out.

“Do you think they’ll be boyfriend/girlfriend, start with being friends, or just end it with an ‘I’m sorry.’ How they handle this will change everything...” Shizuka wondered out loud as she leaned on the hedge surrounding the lake and let out a small sigh.

The girls of Corona House believed that Koutarou cherished them and that nothing would change in the near future, regardless of how Koutarou answered Shiori. However, she was still a mysterious threat. She knew a side of Koutarou that they didn’t. Chances were high that from today on, they’d have to keep their guards up. Worry met apprehension, and their unease and impatience only grew stronger.

“But regardless of the outcome, it doesn’t change what we’re going to do with Veltlion,” said Clan. Wanting to clear the air of the negative feelings that were building up, she spoke like she was trying to encourage herself and the other girls.

After being admonished by Elfaria, the girls had already decided on their next move. They were going to take her advice and wear their hearts on their sleeves from now on. Regardless of what happened between Koutarou and Shiori, that policy would stay in place. After all, if someone was chasing them, they had to keep pace or run even faster. They would have to push forwards with their own feelings. There was no time to be discouraged.

Bwooooomp!

The ferry’s horn rang out as it approached. The girls all turned to watch as the boat came in to dock. Koutarou and Shiori would be getting off any minute now. The girls all waited in silence, patiently watching for them.

“Look, there’s Koutarou!” Sanae called.

She was the first one to spot Koutarou and Shiori. In terms of eyesight, Theia’s vision was much sharper, but when it came to finding people, Sanae’s ability to see auras gave her an advantage. She pointed Koutarou out to the other girls and they all continued to watch from a distance.

“Shiori-sama seems to be with him. The reconnaisance craft is picking them up again.”

“Ruth, we don’t need the reconnaisance craft anymore. No more tricks from this point on.”

Koutarou and Shiori stepped off the boat and walked down the pier together. After getting past the terminal gate, they stopped.

“It looks like they’re talking about something... Ah...” There was a hint of surprise in Maki’s voice.

Shiori bowed deeply to Koutarou, then turned her back to him and ran off. Koutarou stood there, watching her go.

“Looks like it was no good, Shiori-san...” Harumi sighed sadly. She had realized

what had happened just from watching them now.

The other girls felt badly for her as well. They had considered Shiori a threat, but they still couldn't rejoice over her getting her heart broken. They knew how sad it must be. In fact, they had thought of her as a threat because it was that sadness they were all afraid of.

"Did Koutarou choose us... or did he..." Kiriha mumbled.

The danger had passed for now, but Kiriha was not necessarily optimistic. While it looked like Shiori had been rejected, they still didn't know why.

*No, wait... I see. So this is why something felt amiss...*

Seeing what had happened, Kiriha finally realized what was causing the sense of incongruity she felt before. It was the way she and the other girls had gone about things in the first place. It was their way of thinking.

*Why did we feel threatened by Shiori? It's as if the only ones who have feelings for Koutarou are us and Shiori...*

Each of the nine girls here loved Koutarou. Which meant that, as with Shiori, they were all rivals in love. But it didn't feel like it. A clear line had been drawn.

*Why do we think that way? Because we're best friends who have spent so much time together? That is probably part of it. With the fierce battles we've survived, being comrades-in-arms is probably also part of it. But is that really all?*

It was a strange situation. The girls of room 106 didn't feel threatened by each other like they did by Shiori. There was no doubt that they had developed a strong bond over the time they spent together, but Kiriha felt reluctant to accept that that was what created the clear division between the girls of room 106 and Shiori.

*Isn't there some other reason? A special reason that would allow us accept each other...*

All nine girls loved Koutarou, and they all had accepted one another. Just based on probability, this was an extremely unlikely situation. And yet, despite all odds, here they were. Kiriha began suspecting that there must be a reason

for it.

“...riha. Kiriha, why did you fall silent all of a sudden?”

Kiriha snapped out of it as someone started shaking her shoulders. She looked up, and a confused Sanae stared right back at her.

“...Oh, nothing. It was probably just my imagination.”

In the end, Kiriha abandoned her train of thought.

*I must just be overthinking it. In fact, it was probably impossible to try and decipher how we ended up in this situation in the first place. Considering that even a time slip is part of our relationship, it’s inevitable that probability has been biased in our favor. So this is either truly a coincidence, or perhaps even fate...*

Searching for reason in a string of coincidences was one of mankind’s bad habits. Anything could happen in spite of statistical odds. Let’s say a rabbit being chased by a fox bumps into a stump and falls over dead. If that happened a second time, it would be a mistake to assume that the stump had the power to attract and kill rabbits. No matter how long the fox waited around the stump, a third rabbit would never come.

“Hmm, okay. Whatever you say. But more importantly, Koutarou is coming this way!”

“Sanae, let’s go greet him!”

“Yeah! ...But he might be angry.”

“We’ll cross that bridge when we get there.”

“Okay!”

There was also another reason Kiriha abandoned her line of questioning. She didn’t want to believe that her meeting Sanae, who she was now holding hands with, or any of the other seven girls was due to anything short of fate.

Day three of the school excursion, the final day, was planned for a trip to a local ranch atop a plateau. The ranch was maintained as a sightseeing spot, so it was more like a park than an actual ranch. There were animals to see, stalls set up for visitors to get a glimpse of ranch life and experience it for themselves, a

factory to tour, and even a restaurant and souvenir shop to visit. There were all kinds of things to see and do that interested Koutarou and the others.

“Koutarou, isn’t there somewhere you can try hunting sheep?”

“There’s nothing violent like that here!”

Only one person, Theia, was unengaged. Leaning on the wooden fence surrounding the sheep pastures, she puffed up her cheeks in dissatisfaction. The place was interesting in its own right, but it was too dull and peaceful for Theia. It was a poor match for her energetic and gung-ho personality.

“Eating the sheep you capture yourself would be more fun though.”

“Look at this heavenly place! Do you really want to turn these pastures into some hellscape?”

“Yeah!”

“Even if you ask all cutesy-like, there’s nothing like that here!”

“I guess I don’t have a choice... In that case, Koutarou, you may accompany me for something more violent later on.”

“Fine, fine... Just hold it in for now.”

“Okay!”

But in reality, Theia wasn’t as unhappy as she seemed, and she wasn’t serious about hunting sheep. She just knew that Koutarou would cater to her that way. After getting a promise out of him, Theia was quite satisfied for the moment.

“Master. Your Highness. So this is where you were...”

“Koutarou! Theia! Let’s go over there next! There’s ice cream!”

Just as Theia’s mood had improved, Ruth and Sanae appeared. After scuttling over to Koutarou, Sanae spread out a pamphlet to show him.

“It says you can try making ice cream by hand! Let’s all go together!”

“I made reservations a little while ago and just got word that it’s our turn.”

There was a station set up on the grounds where visitors could make ice cream using milk from the ranch cows. It seemed like the girl who loved cooking

and the girl who loves sweets just couldn't help themselves.

"With everyone?"

"Yeah! It's more fun that way!"

"I made a reservation for ten."

"Won't we end up with way too much ice cream?"

"Even better! We'll just have to eat it all!"

"If we can't finish it all, we can just store it on the Blue Knight."

"I guess that works. All right, let's go."

Since there didn't seem to be any problems, Koutarou decided to join and make ice cream too. Sanae, who had been smiling all along, moved closer to him.

"Koutarou, Koutarou!"

"Yeah, yeah..."

She climbed up on Koutarou's back in the usual fashion, as if claiming her territory.

"It's over there."

"Got it."

With Sanae on his back, Koutarou began walking in the direction she pointed. Theia and Ruth followed not too far behind.

Ruth smiled as she glanced at the two of them. She leaned over and whispered into Theia's ear, "It looks like we're off to a late start."

"That's fine. He made a promise to play with me later."

"Splendid."

As Ruth and Theia smiled to each other, Koutarou and Sanae met up with the other girls. They were all waiting at the booth.

"You're late, Satomi-kun. We were about to start without you."

Shizuka welcomed them with a smile. She may have been targeting Koutarou,

but it was just an opportunity to start up a conversation. Knowing that, he responded lightheartedly.

“I’m sorry, Landlord-san. Sanae was heavier than I thought.”

“You liar. You were happy to carry me.”

“Now I’m jealous. Satomi-kun, give me a piggyback ride sometime too.”

“Only on a day when you’re light.”

“That’s terrible! I’ve been nothing but light lately!”

“That’s a lie. You were crying in the bathroom yesterday because you gained half a kilogram,” Sanae squealed.

“Ugh, Sanae-chan! Jeez...”

“Heeheehee!”

Sanae got off Koutarou’s back and began chatting with Shizuka. He watched them for a while, but couldn’t help noticing the strange face Yurika was making.

“What is it, Yurika?”

“Um, Satomi-san, how much ice cream do you have to eat for it to count as a meal?”

“Don’t skimp on your food budget by replacing dinner with ice cream.”

“But there’s no expiration date on ice cream, right? I should make the most of it!”

Yurika was always thinking about food and money. She was planning on making a meal out of the ice cream she was going to make. It seemed like the prudent, economical thing to do. Who knows what tomorrow might bring? It might be poverty and hunger. Yurika made it a point to always be prepared.

“Wait, Yurika! Even if you suddenly end up penniless tomorrow, I’ll cover your food expenses equivalent to the ice cream you make here. So don’t you dare waste a fun event like this on miserable thoughts like starving!”

To Koutarou, Yurika’s way of thinking was too pessimistic and sad.

*Yurika might be the same as me. She can’t fully trust others when it comes to*

*things like this...*

If he left her be, Yurika would go in a bad direction. Koutarou couldn't just overlook that. He was ready to put an end to it.

"Really?!"

Yurika's eyes lit up at his offer. She folded her hands in front of her chest like she was praying and sidled up next to Koutarou.

"I've loved you since we first met, Satomi-san!"

She grabbed his hand and shook it up and down. She looked like she'd just found her savior.

"By the way, Yurika, just because I promised to help you out, don't even think of trying to save your ice cream for later, okay?"

"Whaaat?! I can't?!" Yurika froze on the spot.

"Of course you can't! If you leave any behind, I'm going to eat all of it!"

"That's just too cruel! Please show some mercy, Satomi-saaaaan!"

Yurika clung to Koutarou and begged, but he thoroughly refused her. Really, it was a sign that he would always be willing to help her out, but Yurika didn't seem to realize that.

Once the group actually got to making ice cream, the ones who were good at cooking practically ran the show. Fortunately, making ice cream was a relatively simple process and there was very little chance of failing. By having those who were good at it pair up with those who weren't, everyone's ice cream gradually approached completion.

"Satomi-kun."

"Here."

Koutarou and Maki were working together. Koutarou's culinary skills were strictly mediocre, so he was paired up with Maki, who was a decent cook.

"All that's left is—"

"Leave it to me. I'm good with heavy labor."

Koutarou and Maki cooking was a strange sight. They exchanged very few words. As they often seemed to think alike, they were strangely able to intuit what the other might need or want. As a result, things were proceeding quite smoothly. It was a stark contrast to Sanae and Theia, who were currently making a big fuss. But with their teamwork and skill, Koutarou and Maki were the first ones to move on to the final stage of stirring the ingredients while they were still cold.

“By the way, do you like chocolate, Aika-san?”

From this point on was just stirring, so Koutarou began talking to Maki as he moved the mixer around.

“...Why do you ask?” Maki looked back at him in confusion.

“Well, this is chocolate ice cream. You went for this right away. You gave me chocolate for Valentine’s too, right? So I was wondering if you like chocolate.”

“That’s...” Maki blushed and cast her eyes down, then timidly answered him. “It’s not that I like it... But I learned you do... So I...”

“Me?”

“Yes... I wanted you to eat it...”

During Valentine’s day, Maki learned that Koutarou liked chocolate. That’s why she didn’t hesitate to pick it when it came to flavoring the ice cream.

“We’re making it together, so I’d eat any flavor.”

“Us making it together was only an afterthought...”

“Well, yeah. I guess we’ll just have to do out best together anyway.”

“...Please.”

Koutarou now silently stirred the mixture. What Maki had said was equivalent to a confession. Even Koutarou realized that. And now that they were both embarrassed, they needed a little breather.

The ice cream each of the five pairs made was delicious, but the best of the bunch had to be the yogurt flavor Harumi and Clan made.

“I have a bad feeling just hearing that Clan made it,” said Koutarou.

“You won’t be able to say that once you taste it.”

Normally, Koutarou teasing Clan like this would enrage her, but not this time. She was confident in her ice cream and wore a fearless smile.

“I know.”

“Huh...?”

But when Koutarou casually agreed with her, she suddenly blushed and lost her composure. She could feel her heart beating faster.

“You made it with Sakuraba-senpai, so of course it’ll be good.”

“Tch! J-Just shut up and eat it!”

“Mmm...”

Getting upset in the end, Clan shoved the ice cream cone in her hand straight into his mouth. But not even that was enough to make her feel better.

“Why is this man always only mean to me? Jeez!”

Clan stomped her feet in frustration. The tears in her eyes indicated how mortified she really was. Harumi couldn’t help noticing.

“Satomi-kun likes you, Clan-san. And he believes that you’ll forgive him no matter what he says. If not, he wouldn’t be so mean all the time.”

Bullying was a sign of affection. And Koutarou was teasing Clan because she didn’t understand that. Just the same as he wasn’t teasing Harumi because she did. Harumi had seen right through Koutarou.

“That’s not true! He’s just being rude!”

But even with Harumi reassuring her, Clan wasn’t calming down. As someone who really knew how to hold a grudge, her anger was just beginning to smolder.

“Heehee... Satomi-kun is greedy, so you smiling isn’t enough for him. He wants to see all of your adorable sides. Right, Satomi-kun?”

“Waugh?!”

Koutarou nearly choked on the ice cream he was eating when he heard what Harumi said. His reaction told Clan there was some truth to Harumi’s words.

He tried to respond, but all he could do was cough.

“...I-I’ll have you report on the taste later!”

But if what Harumi said was true, that meant Clan had another problem on her hands. Her entire face flushed red and she turned to leave as if she was running away. She left behind Koutarou, who was beating his chest, and Harumi, who was smiling.

“Ack, ugh... Ahem... Please give me a break, Sakuraba-senpai.”

After safely swallowing the ice cream, Koutarou slumped his shoulders. Harumi was more or less telling the truth, but it was a very painful truth for Koutarou.

“Teehee, I’m an aspiring bad girl after all.”

Having successfully teased Koutarou, Harumi was quite content. She was bad at teasing people, so explaining why Koutarou was mean to Clan was her only chance to give him a hard time.

“I need to have a word with Kiriha-san later...”

Koutarou looked disgruntled. He’d realized who the mastermind was.

“Oh, did you figure it out already?”

“Of course!”

An Aikido-style bad girl act, using the other party’s bullying against them. It was hard to think Harumi would come up with something like that on her own. It seemed far more likely that Kiriha had taught her.

With everyone’s ice cream finished, they were planning on having a communal taste test. There was a high chance that Koutarou would tease Clan. It would give Harumi the chance to expose Koutarou’s true intentions, meaning that she could play the bad girl without feeling guilty, as well as soothe Clan’s anger.

“...And so you’ve come to me.”

As Kiriha spoke, she presented some of the ice cream she had made to Koutarou. He wordlessly ate it. It was vanilla flavored. Since Yurika was Kiriha’s

partner, it wasn't the best ice cream, but it was still rather good.

"I surrender."

"Very good."

Koutarou gave in, both to Kiriha's ice cream and her plan. She had him wrapped around her finger, so he had no choice but to raise the white flag.

"So this'll be the third time we've ridden the ferris wheel together, huh?"

Since he knew why Kiriha had summoned him, he couldn't get angry. He was powerless against the smiling Kiriha, standing eagerly before the ferris wheel.

"There's no roller coaster here, so I have to settle for second best."

Koutarou and the others split up into pairs to ride the ferris wheel, so Koutarou and Kiriha had a gondola to themselves. Because of everything she had wanted to ride together with Koutarou eleven years ago, she had come up with all kinds of plans.

"So you can read me like a book, huh? I'm no match for you, Kiriha-san."

"That's not true. There are times when even I'm uncertain."

"Are you talking about Kashiwagi?"

"Kashiwagi? Did something happen between you two?"

"...No, never mind."

"I see."

Koutarou figured that Kiriha's uncertainty was referring to the situation with Kashiwagi Shiori. Pretending like she didn't know what he was talking about was just her way of being considerate. Koutarou didn't really think that Kiriha hadn't noticed. But either way, there wasn't a need to dwell on Shiori. Koutarou was confident that he had dealt with the situation properly and that he didn't need to tell Kiriha about it. It would be better to shift the conversation towards something Kiriha actually wanted to talk about.

"By the way, Kiriha-san, where should we go next?"

"What's the matter, Koutarou? You're being awfully kind today." Kiriha smiled happily. She was glad to hear Koutarou's gentle words. "Could it be that you did

something bad? Are you trying to make up for it?”

“Ahaha, almost the opposite. It’s what I don’t do that bothers me. I’ve realized that I haven’t done enough with all of you. I want to do more.”

She was sensitive and perceptive, so Kiriha would find out sooner or later even if he didn’t tell her. That’s why he honestly revealed his feelings.

“Even though I was hesitating, I should have at least made my feelings a little more clear.”

Even if he couldn’t choose one of the nine girls, he should at least show them his sincerity. He should show them how special they were to him. That way, they wouldn’t ever have to feel uneasy. That was what Shiori’s confession had made Koutarou realize.

As he stared at the blue sky through the window, Koutarou recalled the sight of Shiori desperately trying to earn his affection. Even if he could only muster a fraction of her sincerity and determination, that would be enough. He just wanted to be able to show the girls how he felt too.

“...”

But Kiriha was strangely silent at his remark. Curious, Koutarou turned to look at her. She was crying, but he couldn’t figure out the reason from looking at her. All he could tell was that they didn’t seem to be tears of sadness.

“Why are you crying?”

“...Forgive me. I’m... not sure myself. It’s just... my heart is overflowing with emotions, but... there’s no clear answer...”

“But it’s not because you’re sad?”

“That’s right. But that’s all I’m sure of...”

“I see. Then I’m relieved.”

“Hnngh... I can’t control my feelings. Is it okay if I just cry like this for a moment?”

Kiriha clasped her left hand to her chest and silently wept. It was rare to see Kiriha display this much emotion. But there was no need to worry. Kiriha wasn’t

hurt or sad.

“Do what you need to. I’ll be right here, eating ice cream.”

Koutarou took the ice cream out of Kiriha’s right hand. With Kiriha crying, she wasn’t in any state to eat it. And at this rate, it would all melt. That would be a waste, and Koutarou had nothing better to do.

“Koutarou...”

“Yeah?”

“We all love you.”

“I see. Actually, it’s mutual.”

“Mm...”

After that, Kiriha cried for a while. As Koutarou watched over her, he wondered if the other eight girls would cry too if he said the same thing to them. He hoped they would, because the truth was that he wanted to cry himself. It was just that his pride as a man didn’t allow it. Kiriha would just have to cry on her own. But even after Koutarou polished off the ice cream and was eating the cone, she still hadn’t stopped.

Kenji happened to pass by the ferris wheel just as Koutarou and Kiriha got out of the gondola. After coming through the gate, Koutarou and the others seemed to be making a fuss for some reason. While he was too far away to hear what it was about, he could tell that it was something big from how they were acting.

“Koutarou, tell me that you love me to my face too!” Sanae shouted.

“What?! Right now?!”

“We were eavesdropping!”

“What?! Did you set me up, Kiriha-san?!”

“No, it was all me! I set this up of my own accord! Serves you right! Ohohoho!” Clan laughed.

“Damn you, Clan! Don’t get full of yourself!”

“I listened in as well, Layous-sama.”

“Elle?! Why the hell are you here?!”

Kenji could see them scuffling and hear them shouting, but it didn’t seem too serious. For causing such a commotion, there was a bright, playful atmosphere to it all. For better or worse, Kenji didn’t feel like he could butt in on that.

“It really is hard to get in there, isn’t it?”

As Kenji was watching Koutarou and the others, he heard someone else say almost exactly what he was thinking. Surprised, he turned to look and see where the voice had come from. It was Shiori. Like Kenji, she’d just happened to be passing by at the right time.

“Kashiwagi-san, do you mean you confessed to Kou, knowing what would happen?”



Koutarou had told Kenji about Shiori. That’s why he’d picked up on the hidden

meaning behind her words. He was surprised that she was still able to confess knowing that she'd get shot down.

"Yeah. I didn't want to give up without trying."

Having watched Koutarou for years, Shiori knew what the outcome would be. Koutarou's heart belonged to those nine girls from the very beginning. But even so, she was unable to hide her feelings any longer. She decided to confess because she felt like she would always regret it if she didn't.

"I think I just got off to a late start," Shiori laughed self-mockingly. She knew everything—including the reason why things turned out the way they did. "I should have done something before Satomi-kun started changing, just as we entered high school. I should have been the one to change him. The cowardice that kept me from doing that is where I went wrong."

After the opening ceremony, things got more lively around Koutarou with the appearance of Theia and the other girls. Rather than being frightened, Shiori should have taken action right then. It was because she hadn't that her feelings never reached Koutarou. That was all.

"But if those girls weren't around, you might have been able to save Kou."

If Theia and the others hadn't transferred to their school, Shiori would have eventually taken action. Maybe then would she have been able to help Koutarou. That was how Kenji saw it.

"Heh, it's almost like you're Satomi-kun's mom, Matsudaira-kun."

"Give me a break. That's disgusting..."

"Ahahaha!"

Shiori's laughter was unexpectedly bright. She had spilled her heart to Koutarou, been turned down, and spent the night crying. Perhaps because things had been so straightforward, she was able to recover quite quickly. Sensing that, a certain bad habit of Kenji's kicked in.

"More importantly, why don't you go out with me?"

"Is that really something you should say to a girl who just got her heart broken?"

Shiori gave Kenji a cold glance as if to say she was disappointed. But Kenji was used to that. Unfazed, he just shrugged.

“I guess the girls who fall for Kou are all good girls.”

“Jeez, you’re terrible, Matsudaira-kun. Heehee...”

Shiori had a refreshing smile. It was truly beautiful. A little captivated by it, Kenji began seriously plotting how to get her to go out with him... All the while thinking that he had finally met his ideal woman.

# Afterword

Long time no see, everyone. It’s Takehaya.

This volume consists of three short stories from *Invaders of the Rokujouma!? Hercules!* published on HJ Bunko’s site, “Read It! HJ Bunko,” and half a volume’s worth of new material. The truth is that if six parts of *Hercules!* don’t get released, they’ll just keep stacking up. But my danger sense also told me that at least half of this should be a newly written story, which is how it ended up like this.

As for the new content, “Behind the School Excursion,” it was something that I was due to write, but it wasn’t enough to fill an entire book. Moreover, while it was something that needed to be done to progress the story, Koutarou and the others are currently in Forthorthe. In other words, it was a tricky situation. I wanted to add it on to a different story, but it would be difficult to do in the middle of the Forthorthe arc. And so, in spite of everything, we decided to release it alongside some *Hercules!* stories where the timeline is unclear.

It was poor timing for those of you who are waiting for the continuation of the Forthorthe arc, so we also decided to increase the release pace for volumes 23 and 24, getting them out in three months rather than the usual four. So in total, there will be a volume and a half’s worth of new content in six months in order to prevent major delays. While it’s hard to say for certain because of the

complex intertwining of various elements, work is currently progressing in that direction. Once I'm done writing this afterword, I'll be moving on to the plot for volume 24... one month earlier than usual! That's something only made possible by a lack of work (haha). I believe that's enough shop talk, so let's get back to the stories.

The first story, "Badgirl Begins," is about Harumi becoming Kiriha's protégé in an attempt to become a bad girl. I believe the highlights are why Harumi wants to become a bad girl in the first place, and whether or not Kiriha can actually pull it off.

Next is "Sleepless in Harukaze," a story involving Clan, Shizuka, and martial arts. The highlights are Clan and Koutarou's tangled feelings, as well as Shizuka's intervention.

The third short story is a little different. It's like a new series with three main characters and a guest appearance. The title is "Beauty Becomes Her" and it features Sanae, Yurika, and Maki. The story unfolds around their surprise guest, Elfaria.

And finally there's "Behind the School Excursion." This serves as a turning point for Koutarou, but the same can be said for the invaders. The story is focused on the last step before their relationship reaches a new level. It's a rather important episode that's part side story and part main story.

Also, BOOK☆WALKER has another special edition bundle of a drama CD with the digital edition. This time it should be the first half of volume 8.5. Fortunately, the sales for the previous two have been good, so they've decided to see it through until the end. What a relief. Once the details have been decided, it will be announced on HJ Bunko's main site.

I think delivering a drama CD alongside a digital edition will be a valuable weapon for future digital editions. It seems like there are quite a few people who were reluctant to touch digital editions because of the lack of specials, and those who collected the digital editions would still buy physical copies of the volumes that came with specials. I think by making things more convenient for those fans, digital editions will be more popular. I hope they will continue to deliver until the final drama CD for that reason.

By the way, currently on *Hercules!,* we're going back to basics. The invaders confront each other in the new "VS" series. The latest episode is a confrontation between Sanae and Theia. The next episode should come out about a week after this volume is published. For those who are interested, please check out the "Read It! HJ Bunko" website.

I have some leeway in the afterword this time, so I'll go ahead and introduce the next volume, volume 24. We last left off with Koutarou and the others safely managing to group up, but standing in their way is the imperial army under Bandarion's control. After the incident with the virus weapon, support for Elfaria's faction hasn't dropped. Rather, it's actually increasing all over the solar system. Concerned about a rebellion, the army has one hand tied. But even then, the imperial army is still a considerable threat. How will Koutarou and the others deal with such a powerful enemy?

The next volume will be more tense than normal. In other words, the next volume will be completely different from this one. Since the readers are all following different elements of the story, I can't really leave anything out. I'll do my best so that you can enjoy various kinds of content in the future as well.

It's about time, so I'll end things here. But first, I would like to give my heartfelt thanks to everyone at the editorial department who's giving it their all; to Poco-san who manages to draw illustrations despite my many specifications; and lastly, to all of the readers who picked up this book.

June, 2016

Takehaya