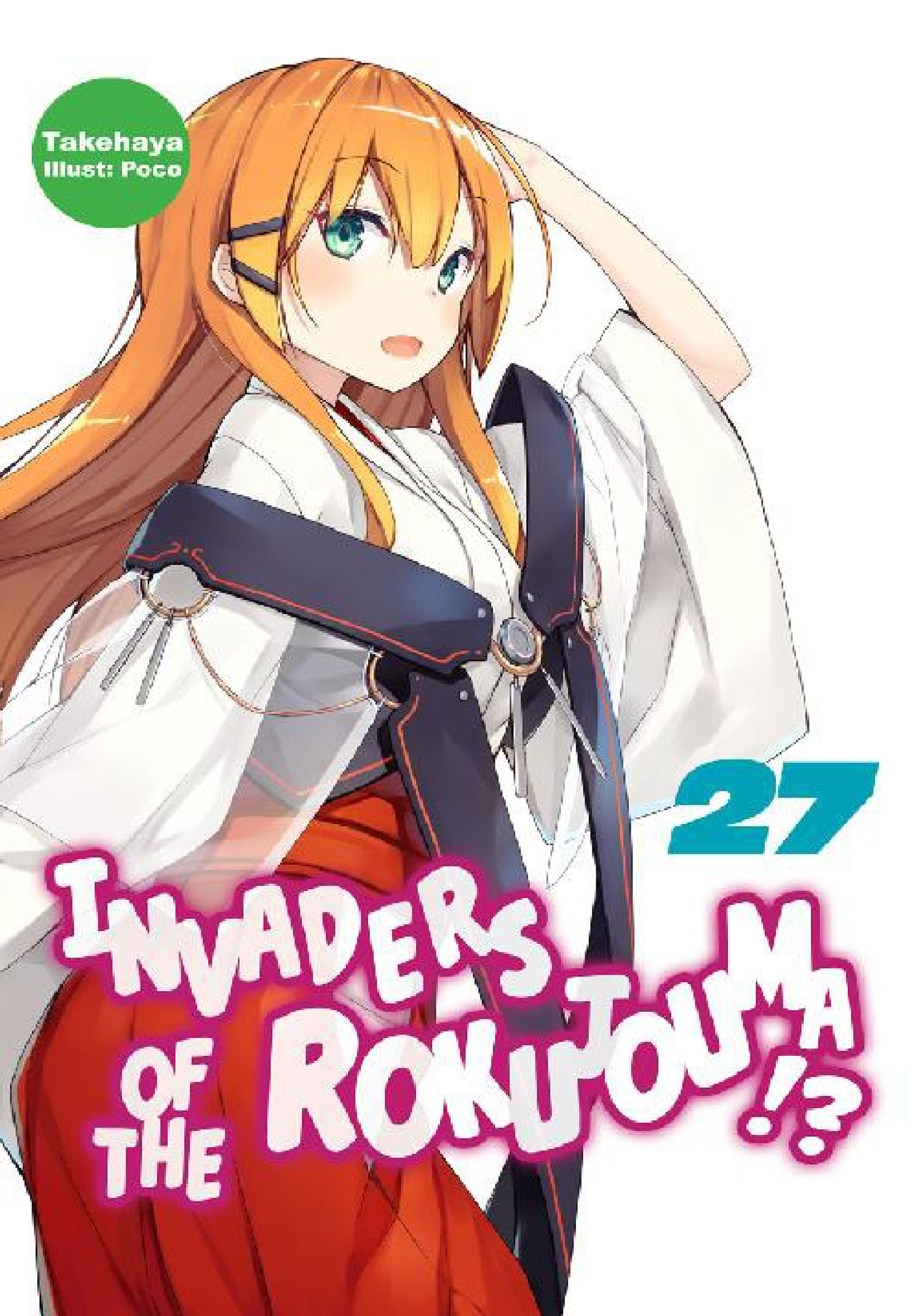

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# Episode 1: Unexpectedly Clear Danger

Nana, who had been seriously injured in the past, used artificial limbs. They were a marvelous invention born from the science, spiritual energy technology, and magic the girls of room 106 had access to, and they were so convincing that they were indistinguishable from flesh and blood body parts. That helped alleviate some of the strangeness of using them for Nana, and helped her feel like she like she'd really recovered. One could say that she was back to normal as a normal girl.

Due to their complex design, however, there were plenty of issues that needed to be worked out when Nana first got them. Side effects on her health, mechanical troubles with the physical limbs themselves, problems with their programming, the rate at which they consumed spiritual energy and mana, et cetera. It made using them something of a work in progress, and there were constantly things that needed to be checked on or adjusted on the fly. These things improved over time, but after something strenuous like a serious battle, Nana always came in for a checkup and maintenance.

"Nana, I'm surprised you were able to run and jump around in this condition. At some point, your projected senses fell out of a synch with your real ones."

"Heh, I guess that's where my experience as a former magician comes in. It's common for your senses to get thrown off while using magic."

"It is my understanding that you've been through some rather outrageous battles in the past..."

"But it's not just on me. This new body is really well made."

"I'll take that as a compliment."

"It is a compliment. I'm really thankful to everyone."

For her checkups, Nana went to see Clan in the laboratory of the Hazy Moon. She was well versed in a number of specialized technologies, making her the perfect choice for performing diagnostics and maintenance. And because of that, the two girls saw each other a lot and they'd gotten quite close over their

frequent appointments together. The same was true for Harumi, who was often in the laboratory with them.

“It looks like there’s been a lot of strain on your ankle and elbow since the last battle too. The magic’s gotten a little weaker,” she said.

“That’s probably because of how I fight. I’m still trying to do the same things I used to even though I’m older now,” Nana replied.

“But you’re still really young, Nana-san.”

“Heh, yeah. I just mean that I’m past the age I should be acting like a magical girl.”

Harumi was born with a weak constitution and came to see Clan for her own checkups, but she intentionally scheduled them so she and Nana would be there at the same time. Since she could use magic, she could help inspect the parts of Nana’s body that were magical. It was killing two birds with one stone, but as a result, Harumi and Nana naturally grew closer too.

Normally the checkups were just Nana, Clan, and Harumi, but today they were joined by one more. It was Theia, arguably the healthiest looking girl out of all the Corona House crew.

“Nana, I took your guns apart and cleaned them. I replaced a few worn-out parts and switched the barrels for newer, higher-performance ones. I also modified the center of gravity a little. They should handle better now.”

“Thank you very much, Princess Theiamillis. I’m sorry for taking up your time.”

“Don’t worry about it. I’m used to handling guns, and I’ve always been interested in magical weapons like this.”

While Theia wasn’t ordinarily there for Nana’s maintenance, she was in charge of maintenance for Nana’s weapons. Clan was capable of servicing standard weapons, but Theia was the only one who could handle weapons that had been specially customized. Being skilled at fighting, she had a much more in depth understanding of weaponry than anyone else.

“They definitely feel nicer in the hand. I see you adjusted the sights too.”

Nana smiled at Theia as she checked over her guns. Theia’s maintenance on

them was superb, and she'd adjusted everything that had been bothering Nana about them. Theia stood out somewhat for her awkwardness in everyday life, but her skill with firearms was unparalleled.

"I hope they meet your expectations. There's nothing I can do about spiritual energy or magic, however, so you'd do well to talk to Kiriha and Maki later too."

"Yes, thank you very much."

Nana's checkups along with regular maintenance on her artificial limbs and weapons were all important jobs that affected her general well-being. They were an indispensable part of making sure Nana could live her life like a normal girl. But it didn't just benefit Nana. Clan, Harumi, and Theia all got a rewarding sense of satisfaction from their role in helping her.

When Nana became a magical girl, she was the youngest ever to do so. She was in a league of her own. It came with great prestige, but it was isolating. She had very few comrades-in-arms, and even fewer people she could call friends. Being appointed archwizard shortly thereafter thanks to her achievements didn't help much either. She ended up working on most missions alone, narrowing her circle of acquaintances even further. The only people Nana truly felt close to were Kanae and Yurika.

"Looking at the results of Nana's checkup and the analysis of her artificial limbs, there's a slight problem," Clan said with a stern face.

"What kind of problem?" Theia asked.

"We've gathered data to make Nana's movements more natural, but there are still areas that are lacking. You see, there are certain parts of your body and ways you just don't normally move."

"I see… So you're saying some of her movements in those areas are jerkier than the rest."

"Everyone, the tea is ready."

"Thank you, Harumi."

"What do we have for snacks?"

“I brought the yokan that Satomi-kun hid in the back of the top shelf. Heehee.”

When Nana was with these girls, she recalled feelings she’d only rarely had a chance to experience before. She felt a sense of fellowship and belonging. She couldn’t help thinking that this is what it would be like to have a group of friends. Kanae was her ally and Yurika was her student, so this was really the first time Nana had gotten a chance to hang out with girls her age when it wasn’t out of some kind of necessity or obligation.

*That said, I’ve got a few years on them… Maybe it’s a good thing I look as young as I do.*

Nana smiled bitterly. She’d always been so focused on her work that she’d never really been bothered by her childish appearance. If anything, it was convenient. Looking as young as she did, people rarely ever suspected her when she was on a mission. But now it was helping her blend in in a different way, and she found herself grateful for how she looked.

“Won’t Satomi-san get angry?” Nana asked.

“It’s okay. I asked him if we could have them,” Harumi replied.

“…Of course he’d say yes to you, Harumi,” Clan said, shaking her head slightly.

“That’s just like her,” Theia said with a smirk.

Nana and the three girls all laughed. Sitting together, having tea and laughing with each other, they really did look like friends of the same age. It was special to Nana, and she wished they could always be like this.

“Actually, there’s one more problem,” Clan said after a while.

“What now? You look so serious,” Theia said, somewhat concerned.

“Is it serious?” Harumi asked.

Theia and Harumi both looked worriedly at Clan. In response, she nodded and began explaining.

“It’s about what to do about the size of Nana’s bust, hips, and waist.”

Nana’s artificial limbs had been made to fit her injured body, but she lost a lot

of weight while she was injured. Ultimately, Nana was much more petite now than she would have been if she'd never been injured in the first place, and it showed in her figure. Clan and the others were hesitant to make any adjustments to her body while they were still gathering data on her movements and how her nerves worked, but now that they had some data to go off of, that wasn't an issue anymore. That's why Clan believed that now was the time to strike.

"That is a serious problem," Theia said with a nod.

"It's something we can't overlook as women," Harumi agreed.

Theia and Harumi were right on board with Clan. As girls, they really felt for Nana on this one. They all wanted to help Nana be as cute as possible.

"So, Nana… what kind of requests do you have for your appearance? Do you want us to go based on the picture that Yurika has? Or perhaps take into account some growth after that?" Clan asked.

"Um..."

Nana furrowed her still youthful brow and started thinking. Should she recover her former appearance, try to envision what she would likely look like now if it weren't for her injuries, or perhaps even go with something closer to her ideal self? As things were now, her figure didn't even have the dimension it did when she was training Yurika years ago. It wouldn't change all that much, but just emphasizing her bust and waist some would be closer to the way she originally looked. Realistically, that would be the best middle ground.

"I think I want to stay like this for a little longer."

But Nana decided on something completely different. She didn't want to change her appearance at all, which surprised Harumi and the others.

"Are you sure?!"

"Don't you want to go back to what you used to look like?!"

"You don't have to be modest about it or us helping! It's a trifling matter after everything you've done for us!"

To the three of them, helping Nana get back to the way things used to be was

their number one priority. They had done everything they could so that she could be a completely normal girl again, so they were shocked at her saying she wanted to stay the way she was.

“I look more childish this way, right? Honestly, I didn’t have much of a childhood, so... I thought maybe I could try reliving my childhood like this.”

Nana’s intentions were clear. She was forced to grow up at a very young age because of her talents and her work, so she was denied the normal kind of childhood most people had. That’s why she wanted to keep the youthful appearance she had now. If she suddenly matured, she felt like she’d be missing an opportunity.

“I see... In that case, I agree.”

“Reliving your childhood, huh? If we need someone childish, maybe we should consult Koutarou...”

“Veltlion isn’t childish. He *is* a child.”

Nana could return to looking like an adult whenever she wanted, so she wanted to make the best of her current appearance for the time being. And that was enough of a reason to convince the other girls.

“Thank you, everyone,” said Nana. “I’ll be counting on you when I am ready to change how I look.”

Nana actually had one more reason for wanting to stay the way she was. And that was because it was keeping her close to the three girls before her now. In other words, Nana wanted to keep her relationship with them the way it was.

“All right, then what we really need now is to supplement the data we have,” said Clan.

“There’s no doubt that being able to move more naturally will help, regardless of how you look,” added Theia.

“What does Nana-san have to do, exactly?” asked Harumi.

“You can think of it as rehabilitation after a fracture. All she has to do is move the parts of her body she hasn’t been able to well, and by repeating those motions, her body will learn to do them better. Technically speaking, the

system will be collecting data on the signals her nerves are sending and incorporating it into its database," explained Clan.

Nana giggled a little to herself. The girls would become adults one day too. When that happened, all she had to do was match them. They were her first friends since Yurika and Kanae, and Nana wished to stay good friends with them in the future too. Just like they were now.

Nana's artificial limbs took cues from her aura and her nerves, then processed those signals and interpreted them into movements. As such, the more a motion was repeated, the more natural it became. It was just like how babies learn to move.

But it wasn't perfect. There was scarce data on less common motions, and that lack of data made them jerky and awkward. As it was only an issue with less commonly performed motions, it didn't come up all that often. But when it did, it made both Nana and anyone else who saw it uncomfortable. It simply felt and looked unnatural. So Nana's new goal was to supplement the database to normalize all her motions and keep that from happening.

It really would have been an easy problem to overlook, but to Harumi, Theia, and Clan who wanted Nana to be a completely normal girl despite her handicap, it was extremely important. They wanted to help her with everything they could, this included.

"Okay, now try holding the knitting needles like this."

"Um… Like this?"

"That's right. You're doing great."

"Heh, all I'm doing is holding them."

Nana's first step in her rehabilitation, for lack of a better term, was precise tasks with her hands. Helping her out now was Harumi, whose plan it was to teach Nana how to knit in order to get her to use her fingers in ways she normally didn't.

"Theiamillis-san, you're holding your fingers the wrong way."

“So what? Like this, then?”

Nana wasn’t the only one participating in Harumi’s knitting lessons, however. Theia and Clan were also present. But they weren’t just tagging along for the ride. Both of them had been interested in knitting for some time. And so the four of them were in the middle of small knitting party as they sat around the tea table in room 106.

“Hmm, it still kind of looks off to me.”

“You’re doing the same thing, Clan.”

“That’s strange… Maybe I’m doing it wrong too?”

However, Theia was bad at working with her hands if it didn’t involve guns, and Clan had always scorned creative tasks for science and research. They were both off to a rough start.

“Look, Nana-san. Those two over there are struggling just with holding the knitting needles.”

“Heh, I guess I do have a slight lead.”

“Keep up the good work. Let’s go ahead and try the next step while we wait for them.”

“Sure.”

To Harumi, Nana was an excellent student. She absorbed everything that Harumi taught her like a sponge. It seemed like she’d have the hang of it before long. She already understood the basics and she was quick and precise with her handiwork. Even with her lack of experience and the lack of data she had on these kinds of motions, she was doing extremely well.

*I’m glad Satomi-kun wasn’t like this...*

As Harumi watched Nana pick up technique after technique, she couldn’t help thinking about her first student: Koutarou. While he was rather decent at knitting now, it had taken him a long time to get there. He was terrible when he first started out. Unlike Nana, he was clumsy and slow to learn. But that was actually what made it so rewarding to teach him. And in the time that had taken, Harumi had been able to get much closer with him. In the end, she was

happy he wasn't good at it.

*How strange... I guess this is what happens when you're good at everything...*

Harumi then realized what was actually working against Nana. Harumi had only gotten to spend so much time with Koutarou because he was clumsy and slow. They'd grown closer over his learning experience, but if Nana was good at everything she tried, she would never be able to experience that with anyone. Her relationship with Yurika made that much more sense when she thought about it. Yurika was the one that was clumsy and slow and would have desperately needed Nana's help.

*In that case, I should be more...*

And so Harumi began rethinking how to interact with Nana. Just because Nana picked up on knitting right away didn't mean she wanted to be given special treatment. It was something Harumi never would have considered in the past, and her realizing it now was proof she had matured too.

"You're doing great, Nana-san."

"Thank you."

"So let's try practicing it a different way."

"Ah… okay."

Harumi moved behind Nana and wrapped her arms around her as if she was hugging her. As Nana was smaller than the delicate Harumi, she fit perfectly in her arms. Harumi then showed her how to move her hands with her own, just as she had done with Koutarou.

*I… remember Kanae-san doing this for me...*

While staring at Harumi's hands, Nana recalled distant memories from over ten years ago. Kanae, who was Nana's ally, had treated her like her own daughter. She'd gotten more hugs from her than she could ever count, and she could clearly remember that warm sensation even now. Harumi was probably just trying to teach her how to knit, but with her arms around her, she couldn't help thinking about it. It was a strange way to feel for someone younger than her, but Nana felt at ease in Harumi's embrace.

Learning to knit was an excellent exercise, but it was an incredibly repetitive task. Since it largely used the same groups of nerves over and over, once Nana got the hang of it, the group decided to take a break for lunch before switching to another exercise for the time being. Not overdoing it on any one thing was also an important part of rehabilitation.

Theia, Clan, and Nana were still sitting at the table while Harumi was in the kitchen making food for them all. Out of the four girls, Harumi was the only one who could cook.

“It’s a good thing Harumi was here,” Theia said with a laugh as she looked over towards the kitchen.

Theia personally had no culinary skills. At best, she might be able to follow a recipe and make something edible.

“I’m glad she’s here too. I didn’t want to have to break into Yurika’s hoard of instant noodles.”

Clan nodded her head in agreement. She was even worse off than Theia in terms of cooking skills. She was more likely to make a bomb in the kitchen than food. And ever since the catastrophe at the cook-off, she didn’t even want to stand in the kitchen.

“So Yurika-chan is still crazy for instant noodles, huh?”

Nana was in a slightly different position. Being blessed with so many talents, she could of course make a decent meal as long as she had the ingredients. But being as efficient as she was, she really only made simple dishes. Her cooking lacked soul.

“Supposedly she always stocks up on them out of instinct. Something about being poor...”

“Is she planning on always having Veltlion care for her? Just what is she thinking...?”

Whunk!

“Wait, she buys them by the box?”

And so for their own reasons, none of the three girls could be considered good cooks. As such, lunch was naturally entrusted to Harumi.

“Well… I guess we can’t really make too much fun of Yurika.”

“None of us can cook either...”

Both Theia and Clan sounded a little dispirited as their gazes shifted towards Harumi working away in the kitchen. They could see her from where they were sitting, and it was quite clear she was in her element.

“Now that you mention it, Harumi-san is good at a lot of things, isn’t she?”

Nana also turned to look towards the kitchen. She wasn’t really surprised that Harumi had a talent for cooking. While her repertoire wasn’t as extensive as Kiriha’s or Ruth’s due to her lack of experience, she had a thoughtful touch when it came to cooking and always ended up making splendid dishes. The girls were no doubt in for a delicious lunch.

“Yes, Harumi might not be good at physically intense tasks because of her weak constitution, but she can do everything else well.”

“Compared to us three, I feel like Harumi-san’s got us beat when it comes to everyday skills like this.”

“…Well, we can’t discount the possibility that we’re just bad at things.”

When it came to special skills, Harumi wasn’t the best at anything. Not intelligence, magic, housework, or fighting. There was nothing extraordinary about her in that sense, but she was an amazing person overall. Out of everyone, Harumi would be the best person to go to if someone needed help with multiple problems.

“No… let’s not look away from the truth,” Theia said solemnly.

“I’m not looking away,” Clan said almost indignantly.

“No, you definitely are,” Theia replied.

“Princess Theiamillis, what do you mean?” Nana asked.

“We’re not inferior to Harumi as people... We’re inferior to her as women,” Theia answered.

While it was something hard to admit, nothing would come from denying it. Theia, Clan, and Nana weren't lacking anything as people. They were lacking as women. It was an unexpectedly clear danger that had been lurking in the shadows all along. They were no match for Harumi.

Having finished lunch, the four girls continued with Nana's rehabilitation as planned. The afternoon schedule was primarily focused around exercise. Theia was in charge this time around. When it came to being active, she was in a league of her own.

"Can you reach out with your left hand and touch your right toes?"

"I think I can."

"When you do that, you use muscles in your side that you don't ordinarily. So try doing the same with your right hand too."

"Okay, I'll give it a try."

They started off easy with sitting stretches that were close to warm-up exercises. Their goal was to get Nana to move in specific ways to put her nerves to work and let her artificial limbs collect data on them, so simple, purposeful stretches were a good start.

"Good. You try it too, Clan," instructed Theia.

"Owowowow!" Clan yelped.

Nana could do what Theia asked without trouble, but that wasn't the case for out-of-shape Clan. Because of that, Theia took it upon herself to personally assist her. She was currently pushing on her back to try and help her reach her toes.

"Come on! You can do it!"

"No— Ow! I said I can't! Ow! I can't reach!"

Clan spent most of her days locked away in her lab, and her physical fitness reflected that. She was as stiff as a board. Theia was only lightly pushing on her compared to what she could do, but Clan was still nearly screaming. And she'd barely reached past her knees at that.

“Pathetic. This is what you get for staying cooped up all the time.”

“At least I know how to use my head outside of a fight, Theiamillis-san.”

“I can see where you’re going with that, and I don’t like it… Why don’t we at least agree not to poke at each other’s weak points?”

“Fine. We have a deal.”

There’d be no end to it if they were nagging each other over their flaws, so they quickly agreed to stop quarrelling and get back to exercising. In the past, this would have escalated into a fierce argument, but both of them had matured enough to recognize that nothing would come from that. But there was one more reason why Theia and Clan wanted to avoid fighting, and that was Harumi.

“Hmph! Hmm! Mmmmm!”

Harumi was stretching as best she could after watching Nana do it. But as a sickly, inactive girl, she was about as stiff as Clan. So try as she might to copy Nana, it just wasn’t working.

“What if I try it this way? Maybe then I’ll get a little further...”

But in spite of everything else, Harumi had good instincts. Even though she wasn’t the slightest bit athletic, she made up for what she lacked with ingenuity and determination. When she bumped into problems, she tackled them in her own way or found clever ways around them. She was taking baby steps, but she was moving forward and improving at her own pace.

“Hmm, mmm! Owowow... Okay, j-just a little more… Hmm!”

But what Theia and Clan were paying attention to wasn’t Harumi’s stretching so much as it was Harumi herself. Even now, she was radiating girlishness.

“…Why is that so cute?”

“She’s not doing anything special… so what sets her apart from us?”

Harumi was only exercising as Theia had asked her to, but she looked so cute and girly doing it. Even though Clan and Theia were doing the exact same stretches, they didn’t give off that kind of impression. It was a complete mystery to the two of them.

“That’s what we’ll have to figure out, or else we’ll never get past this.”

As it turned out, Theia and Clan weren’t the only ones paying attention to Harumi. Nana was right on the same page with them. And so before they realized it, all three girls had stopped their own exercises to watch Harumi’s mysteriously cute stretching.

“…Oh? What’s the matter, everyone?”

After a while, Harumi realized that everyone was staring at her. When she did, she stopped stretching and looked up at the three of them with a confused expression.

“Ah, it’s n-nothing! We were just admiring how well you’re doing!”

“Y-Y-Yeah! I-I’m no good at this, so I was just watching how you’re doing it!”

“Don’t pay me any mind. I was just taking a breather myself.”

The three girls hurriedly tried to cover up what they’d really been doing and very awkwardly returned to their own exercises.

“Huh… In that case...”

Harumi couldn’t help but find it strange, but before long, she returned to exercising in the same adorable fashion she had been before.

Theia, Clan, and Nana wanted to understand the source of Harumi’s charming girlishness. They knew they’d be in trouble as women if they couldn’t figure it out. But the more they stared at her, the more self-conscious and confused Harumi became, which compromised her girly aura. So putting their heads together, the three girls decided that they’d have to observe Harumi without her noticing. Fortunately, spying was Clan’s specialty.



“Harumi, for starters, take a stance.”

“Um… Like this?”

“Hmm, they often hold guns low like that in spy movies and things, but in reality it’s not very practical.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. Even with an opponent right in front of you, you wouldn’t really be able to aim well like that. Can you imagine where you’d hit if you fired right now?”

“Now that you mention it, it is pointed straight in front of me, but it’s hard to

tell exactly where I’m aiming.”

“You’re not using the sight either, so you can kind of tell that’s not how it was meant to be held.”

“Then how should I do it?”

“Hold it level in front of your face so those markers on the front and the back line up. That’s the first step to taking aim at what’s in front of you.”

“Like this?”

“That’s right. Next you need to make sure you’re holding it with both hands to ensure accuracy and reduce the effect of the recoil.”

“I think I’ve seen this kind of pose in movies too. So there’s a reason behind it all, huh?”

“That’s right. All right, now try shooting it.”

“But… if I shoot, a bullet will come out, won’t it?”

“Don’t worry. It’s a training gun, so it just fires paint capsules. Besides, if you don’t try one for yourself, you’ll never really understand how they work. You want to be able to jam guns with magic in battle, don’t you?”

“Th-That’s right. O-Okay... I’ll give it a try”

“There’s no need to be scared. Just hold it firm in both hands and you’ll be able to handle the recoil.”

“O-Okay... I’m firing!”

Bang!

“W-W-Waaah! A bullet came out?!”

“Wow, even when she’s shooting a gun, she’s strangely cute… This is going to take forever.”

“Clan-san, can you weaken PAF’s assistance a little?”

“I can, but why?”

“Actually, when I tried to do pushups on my own, I couldn’t move after two or

three of them... Aha... hahaha...”

“Well, there’s no point in training without being able to repeat the motions. That said, with PAF’s standard assistance, it’s not much of an exercise either… All right, hang on. I’ll adjust the output some.”

“Thank you very much!”

“Let’s see here...”

Beep, beep! Ka-clack!

“If I include a control that allows for adjustments… Hmm… Something like this, perhaps?”

Beep, beep, beep.

“Harumi, I added a slider that lets you control the strength of PAF’s assistance.”

“What, already?”

“Yes. I only added a new line of code… Anyway, the strongest level is the same as always, but you can work your way down from there until you find something comfortable. You can move it back and forth freely to control the output from the machine.”

“Thank you very much. I’ll give it a try right away.”

“Just don’t overdo it.”

“Right. I think I’ll try starting at half strength.”

Beep.

“All right, let’s get to it… Doooh! Gosh darn it...”

“…‘Gosh darn it’?”

“Oooooh, darn it! Hmph! Hnnngh!”

“…It looks like we need a cuteness slider too...”

“Nana, is that your own fighting style?”

“Yes. I learned combat basics in training, but we’re magicians, so we’re not

properly taught martial arts.”

“So you polished the rest in battle?”

“If you want to put not receiving any real training as positively as possible, you could say that.”

“I see, so that’s why there’s no consistency in your movements.”

“You can tell?”

“Yes. Each martial arts style has a philosophy behind it and a logic to it, so it can be predicted to a certain degree. Certain moves lead into others, or a particular move might have a particular follow-up. Things like that. But predictions like that don’t work against you.”

“I often copied things my opponents did, so my fighting is really a patchwork of different styles.”

“Indeed, it certainly feels that way. Heh, it’s fascinating. Would you spar with me a little longer?”

“Yes, gladly.”

Wham! Pow! Krrrsh!

“Wow… Those two are amazing...”

“They’re on a completely different level. I’m starting to think I’ll never be able to catch up...”

“What are you talking about? Even if you can’t fight like they can, you have your amazing inventions, Clan-san.”

“Harumi...”

“And in that regard, compared to the three of you, I’m nothing but a normal girl... After meeting all of you, I’ve realized there are certain walls that can’t be overcome.”

“If you ask us, you’re even more amazing just as a normal girl...”

“What? Did you just say something?”

“I said you’re right. Not being able to do martial arts isn’t really a big deal.”

“That’s more like it, Clan-san!”

“...The real problem is trying to catch up with you...”

Clan continued to record Harumi for quite a while, and upon analyzing the footage with Theia and Nana, the three girls reached a certain conclusion. They realized they weren’t going to get anywhere just by watching Harumi.

After that, the girls continued to meet up for Nana’s checkups and rehabilitation. Harumi, Theia, and Clan all worked together to try and help her. But there was a second, secret reason for their meetings. Nana, Theia, and Clan were still pursuing their investigation into Harumi.

“We’re not going to get anywhere at this rate.”

“The problem is obvious.”

“The question is how to fix it.”

While Harumi was being analyzed by a medical device as part of her own checkup, Clan, Theia, and Nana formed a circle to talk. All three of them had very serious expressions on their faces.

“That said… I can’t think of a way to solve it.”

“It’s not exactly a conventional problem.”

“There aren’t many people we can ask for help, either.”

After observing Harumi all this time, they realized exactly how inferior to her they were in terms of girlishness. Worse than that, they realized they had no idea how to fix it. And even worse still, they realized that if they couldn’t fix it, they’d be stuck like this forever.

As Nana was already a Rainbow Heart archwizard by the time she reached puberty, she grew up never having the chance to be girly or play around with things like fashion. She’d gone straight from being a child to an adult without ever learning how to be feminine.

Theia was in a similar situation. While she had grown up around many people, her situation forced her to be untrusting from a young age. She subsequently

never had many friends, much less anyone to teach her things like how to be cute. That was a little different now, but it had only been a year and a half since she'd come to Earth.

Clan was on a completely different level. Her case was much more severe than Nana's or Theia's. Not only was she bad at handling people, but she'd practically grown up in a laboratory. She intentionally kept herself locked up away from other people, so she had to learn basic social skills before she could even be worried about her girlishness. Fortunately, however, thanks to her time with the others, she'd finally come around to that stage.

"In that case, why don't we just... you know..."

"Would doing that really be okay?"

"We want this, don't we? We've been working for it in secret all this time. We've basically done all the footwork already."

"I agree. Based on how things are between us, I think it'd be easy to just ask."

"I suppose you're right. I would feel better just to ask and get it off my chest."

"All right, then it's decided!"

If the three of them waited to mature naturally on their own, it would be a waste of time. So the three of them agreed to take action together. They were willing to do anything, even if it meant embarrassing themselves. The time for a bold move had come.

When Harumi got out of the medical scan, she was met with the sight of Theia, Clan, and Nana approaching her. They all looked unusually serious. Noticing that, Harumi began feeling a little anxious. She naturally assumed that the results of the scan were bad news.

"Um… How do the results look?" she asked fearfully.

Theia, Clan, and Nana all had such stiff looks on their faces that Harumi couldn't help worrying. Because of that, her voice was oddly hoarse.

"There aren't any problems in particular," Clan answered.

"It sure doesn't feel that way..."

Clan had denied it, but Harumi wasn't convinced right away. There was a disconnect between what Clan was saying and the look on her face.

"Really, there's nothing wrong," Theia reassured her. "If anything, the problem is on our side."

"On your side?"

Theia made it sound like something was wrong, just not with Harumi. And that brought about its own set of worries for her. That meant something must have happened to Theia or one of the others. Feeling the sense of dread building inside her, she timidly asked for an explanation.

"What do you mean?"

"The thing is, Harumi-san... the three of us have a common problem."

It was Nana that spoke up in response to Harumi. As the oldest one present, she was going to take the initiative and explain things to her.

"And as girls, it's a very important problem."

"An important... problem…?"

Nana looked and sounded so serious that Harumi didn't know what to think.

"In regards to that, there's something we'd like to ask you."

"I don't mind."

Harumi couldn't imagine turning them down for anything, so she readily nodded her head in agreement. As she did, Nana finally looked a little relieved.

"We want you to help us with our rehabilitation."

"What kind of rehabilitation?"

"Girlishness."

"What?"

"Our rehabilitation to become more feminine."

"Whaaat?!"

Nana's request was such a bolt out of the blue that the normally calm and quiet Harumi nearly shouted in response.

“But you’re all the very image of wonderful girls!”

“That’s the problem. We’re not, um... talking about our looks...”

Even the normally dignified Nana was starting to crack from the embarrassment of having to say all this. She fidgeted uncomfortably, twiddled her fingers, and looked up at Harumi, cheeks flushed. As the oldest girl present, it was especially humiliating to have to admit that she needed help being feminine. But Theia and Clan were feeling something very similar. They were both blushing too.

“That’s why we need you... to teach us... your secret to being to girly...”

“Me?”

Despite Nana having explained things, Harumi was still puzzled. She understood what Nana was asking, but she had no idea why she was asking her.

“I’m not very confident I can teach you anything.”

“We just want to hang out with you and have you show us how you normally do things. And what to avoid doing. Other than that, it’ll just be the same as any other rehabilitation!”

“She’s right! It’ll be totally normal otherwise!”

“And we won’t be much trouble! But we need your help!”

Even if Harumi said there wasn’t anything she could do for them, they were desperate for help. Nothing would ever change if they didn’t take the initiative on this. They knew exactly what the problem was, so they wanted to do something about it even if it wasn’t much.

“But wouldn’t it be better to ask Kiriha-san about something like that?”

Kiriha had been the one to help Harumi learn how to act like a bad girl, so surely she would be able to come up with a way to help Nana, Clan, and Theia be more girly.

“But it’s your help we want! Please!”

From their point of view, Harumi’s girlishness was on a completely different level even from Kiriha’s. Kiriha was so mature that she came off more as

womanly than girly, and that wasn't quite what they were after.

"Um..."

And so Harumi began to think it over. Though she wasn't confident that there was anything she could really teach them, she could tell that they were serious in asking her for help. She couldn't just casually turn them down. After pondering it for a while, Harumi decided to agree to help with their rehabilitation under a certain condition.

"…All right, I accept."

"Really?!"

"Excellent, Harumi!"

"You're a lifesaver!!"

"But I have a condition."

"Anything you ask."

Nana nodded her head without even asking what the condition was. She was so eager to learn Harumi's secrets that she never even considered turning her condition down, whatever it might be. Theia and Clan felt the same way, "In exchange for teaching you to be girly, I want each of you to teach me something too."

"And what's that?"

"From Nana-san, I want to learn how to fight in a dignified fashion."

Harumi actually had similar worries of her own. She was concerned that a normal girl was all she'd ever be. Harumi did try her best in fights, but she didn't have the combat smarts Nana did. Battle was always a harrowing experience for her and she didn't have much confidence in her skills. She constantly felt like she wouldn't be of any help to the others as she was now.

"From Theiamillis-san, I want to learn how to be more aggressive in relationships."

Harumi wanted to learn how to be more assertive. As Harumi was naturally mild and docile, she tended to be very passive. And whether it was in sports,

battle, or even just in everyday interactions, that tended to put her at a disadvantage. That's why Harumi had always wanted to be able to assert herself with people the way Theia did.

"And from Clan-san, I want to learn how to get teased by Satomi-kun."

What Harumi wanted to learn from Clan had much less application than the first two things, but she had always been envious of Clan. Clan had a special talent for ending up on the receiving end of Koutarou's mischief without so much as trying. And since Koutarou rarely ever treated her that way, she wanted to learn the secret behind it if there was one.

"My fighting secrets? I've never really thought about that..."

"That man is just toying with me! He doesn't jerk you around because he respects you!"

"Calm down, Clan. We want to learn something from her too, so it's a fair trade."

"I know that. Jeez..."

Though emotions ran high in certain cases, all three girls agreed to Harumi's request. It was only fair that she be compensated for helping them out.

"Harumi-san, we accept your condition."

"All right. I'm looking forward to working with you."

Harumi wrapped up their negotiations with a smile. She had been hesitant at first, but she now realized that they were really just going to be having fun together. Girlishness, smarts, relationship skills, and how to be teased were ultimately all things they could learn from each other just by talking over tea.

"I just hope we really can become more girlish."

"Anything is possible if you put your mind to it."

"I'm envious of that positivity of yours. Jeez..."

Nana and the others eventually realized that for themselves. It wasn't long before they found themselves all smiling and chatting away together, and that was exactly what the four of them needed.

“Then let’s start right away. What’s the best way to deal with Veltlion sleeping with his stomach exposed?” Clan asked.

“I haven’t encountered that yet… What would you do, Theia-san?” Nana asked in turn.

“In that situation… I’d give him a diving body press. What about you, Harumi?”

“A diving what?! Ah, u-um, I would put a blanket over him.”

After preparing tea and snacks, the four girls simply spent some time carrying on with each other. It wasn’t something Nana had a whole lot of experience with, and she found it both refreshing and meaningful.

*If I had been a normal girl, going to school like normal and making friends like normal… maybe it would have been like this...*

At long last, Nana finally realized what kind of a rehabilitation she truly needed. She honestly wasn’t too concerned about her girlishness. What she really wanted was just to spend time with friends like this.

“But wouldn’t Veltlion just fuss at you later?”

“Fuss? For what? He’s only ever said thank you to me for things like that...”

“That’s the Harumi effect for you...”

“I think the relationship each of you has built up with him is important.”

“But Veltlion is only ever kind to Harumi!”

“I really am envious of you, Clan-san...”

“There’s nothing to be envious of!”

But in the end, Nana decided to keep the truth to herself. She was worried saying anything about it might break the spell. These were the first friends Nana had made since Yurika, and she wanted their friendship to stay this way for as long as possible.

# Episode 2: Several Places You Must Visit Before Going Home

Kisshouharukaze City where Koutarou and the others lived was surrounded by mountains. They were verdant and forested, but rolling and modest, perfect for enjoying a scenic, peaceful day of hiking or just a nature walk. If you wanted to do something more like mountain climbing, however, you had to travel to the next city over. The north side of it sloped upward into a much more impressive mountain. While it didn't quite reach the two thousand meter mark, it was rugged and had plenty of rock exposures and cliff faces, making it a popular destination for mountain climbers across the region. But that wasn't its only attraction.

"Come to the Round River Peak Hot Spring Village this fall! Our powerful, mineral rich hot spring and mountain cuisine will refresh your exhausted mind and body! And why not take home some black hot spring eggs as souvenirs?"

A commercial playing on the TV in room 106 was advertising its best feature. The mountain of the neighboring city had a hot spring, so it was a popular vacation destination. Being able to go mountain climbing during the day and then getting to unwind in a hot spring that night made it the perfect weekend getaway.

*"...Black hot spring eggs?"*

Fire Dragon Emperor Alunaya, looking through Shizuka's eyes, stared at the strange object depicted on the TV. True to its name, it did indeed look like a jet black egg.

"Oh, have you never had one before, Uncle?"

Shizuka, who was looking at the same thing, responded to his muttering as if he was right in front of her. She spoke in a very calm and relaxed manner.

*"I cannot say that I have. What exactly is this 'hot spring egg'?"*

As Alunaya spoke, he appeared before Shizuka in an unusually petite form. He

was only about thirty centimeters tall, and rather round for his size. It made him look just like a stuffed animal. It was an illusion that Alunaya had conjured, which was something he sometimes used to make it easier to have conversations with people. He was also capable of projecting his voice and his perspective into the illusion. It was essentially like a stuffed animal with a built-in camera, microphone, and speaker.

“Well, in general there are two types of hot spring eggs.”

Shizuka smiled at the cute Alunaya as she answered his question, and he listened to her with great interest. As of late, the two of them had been interacting like a real uncle and niece.

“The more common type is just an egg that’s been cooked so the yolk is firm but the white is soft. It’s kind of like a specialty boiled egg.”

“...Is that possible? To have only the yolk harden?”

“Yeah. The yolk and white actually harden at different temperatures, so by skillfully adjusting the heat, it’s possible to harden just the yolk.”

“I see, so it’s a matter of cooking technique...”

“That’s right. If you’re interested, I can show you sometime.”

“Please do. I’m very curious.”

“Heehee, you got it. So anyway, Uncle, what that commercial was talking about was the other kind of hot spring egg.”

“You did mention that there were two kinds. What is the second one?”

“Well, in a hot spring, you can use the spring water to boil or steam the egg, and you call that a hot spring egg since it was literally cooked in a hot spring. The shell of a black hot spring egg turns black because of the minerals and things in the spring water.”

“How interesting... That must be a hot spring specialty then.”

“Precisely. I can’t make those for you here, so we’d have to go to a place like that to get one.”

“I see...”

Alunaya's adorable round eyes gleamed as he turned back to the TV. Though the commercial wasn't playing anymore, it was clear it was still on his mind.

"Heehee... Oh Uncle..."

Shizuka found this side to Alunaya endearing. Since she was close with Koutarou, she had a unique appreciation for men and their fixations, especially when their appetites were involved. And it was for exactly that reason that she'd end up buying a hot springs guidebook the next day. She thought it would be a nice way to say thanks to Alunaya for everything he did for her.

While Alunaya normally inhabited Shizuka, he'd taken to using his stuffed animal form more often than not after she gave him the guidebook. He didn't want to bother her just to read it.

"Oh ho... So the iron on the shell reacts with hydrogen sulfide, creating iron sulfide..."

The sight of Alunaya sitting on the tea table reading the guidebook in stuffed animal form was both humorous and fantastical.

"Hydrogen sulfide... Shizuka, what is hydrogen sulfide?"

"Hydrogen sulfide is, um... sulfuretted hydrogen."

"What is sulfuretted hydrogen?"

"Kiriha-san, help me!"

As he read through the guide, Alunaya would stop from time to time to ask Shizuka a question. And not being from Earth, he had plenty of them. The majority of his questions weren't a problem to answer since they were more or less common knowledge, but when it came to anything scientific about the nature of the spring and its minerals, Shizuka was out of her element. When that happened, she turned to Kiriha for help since she was nearby folding the laundry.

"Alunaya-dono, hydrogen sulfide is a poisonous gas for us humans. It's made through the bonding of explosive gas and sulfur."

"Explosive gas?"

“Do you know that running electricity through water doesn’t just cause it to evaporate, but that it also releases different types of gas?”

“I know about that. That’s what happens whenever the Thunder Dragon Emperor gets too close to the water.”

“When that happens, two types of gases are released: oxygen, which we breathe, and hydrogen, which is explosive.”

“Are you saying if I breathe fire while the Thunder Dragon Emperor is near the water, it will cause an explosion?”

“It depends on the ratio of oxygen to hydrogen as well as the humidity, but yes, it’s possible.”

“That’s a good thing to know! I’ll make sure to try it next time!”

“Uncle...”

“That hydrogen bonding with sulfur is what creates hydrogen sulfide. Because of its causticity, it reacts with iron, darkening it.”

“I see. Thank you for enlightening me.”

Pleased with Kiriha’s concise explanation, Alunaya cheerfully returned to reading the guidebook. Seeing that, Kiriha contentedly went back to folding the laundry.

“Thank you, Kiriha-san.”

Shizuka was a little relieved to see Alunaya go back to reading, so she thanked Kiriha too. Currently in the middle of folding one of Koutarou’s shirts, she flashed a smile at Shizuka.

“Don’t worry about it. Having him fall in love with this world is a good thing.”

“Maybe then the dragons will come here to play in full force.”

“Then you would really be bombarded with questions.”

“Anything but that...”

Shizuka was joking about dragons coming to visit, but Kiriha didn’t find it all that unlikely. Alunaya’s eager curiosity about Earth and human culture boded well.

“Alunaya-sama, it’s done!”

“Oh, I’ve been waiting!”

That was when Ruth entered the inner room carrying a tray of bowls. Each one had an egg in it that was still in its shell.

“Oh ho... So these are hot spring eggs, version one, huh?”

Alunaya stood up on the tea table to take a peek at the tray that Ruth was carrying. On it were eggs, supposedly cooked “hot spring” style where just the yolk was firm. Ruth, who also had an interest in Japanese culture like Alunaya did, had learned the recipe so she could give making them a try.

“I just hope I managed to cook them properly...”

Knock, knock, crack!

As Alunaya watched wide-eyed, Ruth carefully cracked the shell of the egg that had been kept at seventy degrees for just shy of half an hour. While she had followed Shizuka’s instructions exactly, she couldn’t help feeling a little anxious about how they’d turned out since this was her first try making them herself.

“Ooh!”

“It worked!”

Alunaya and Ruth were both excited at the results. The white of the egg coming out from the shell was soft, nearly runny, while the yolk maintained its spherical shape. It was a proper home-cooked hot spring egg, worthy of a picture in a cookbook.

“Shizuka, h-hurry up and eat it!”

“Yeah, yeah. I know the drill.”

Shizuka giggled as she picked up a bowl with an egg in it. As Alunaya relied on Shizuka for most of his senses, she would have to eat it for him to be able to taste it.

“Shizuka-sama, have some sauce with it.”

“Thank you, Ruth-san.”

Ruth poured sauce over Shizuka's egg for her. As ordinary soy sauce would haven been too plain for a dish like this, she'd made a special sauce of bonito and kelp broth, soy sauce, and mirin. She was always ready to learn new tricks in the kitchen, and this would certainly be added to her repertoire.

"Now, for the taste test of the hot spring egg, version one..."

"Let's dig right in."

As Alunaya watched on with sparkling eyes, Shizuka drove her spoon into the egg. Though the yolk retained its shape, it wasn't solid in the same way a hard-boiled egg would be. It was firm, but thick and slightly creamy. After scooping it up, Shizuka lifted the spoon to her lips.

"Oooh..."

"Thanks for the food!"

Shizuka put the spoon in her mouth. As she did, the flavors of soy sauce, bonito, and kelp filled her mouth. Past that was the rich taste of the custard-like yolk. The slight sweetness of the sauce kept it from being too strong and overpowering the delicate flavor of the egg. The balance was exquisite.

"Th-This is...!"

Alunaya's round eyes opened wide. Since he was connected with Shizuka, he could taste the egg as she ate it. It was unique. Mysterious, even. It was a completely new flavor experience for him.

"So this is a hot spring egg! It's delicious!"

Alunaya's heart was stolen by this strange new food. He was charmed by everything about it—its looks, its flavor, even its smell. It all suited his tastes perfectly. He also gave it high marks for such excellent use of the humble, ordinary egg as its main ingredient. Right now, he was simply in love with these hot spring eggs.

"I thank you, Ruth! I have never eaten such a mysterious yet delicious dish before!"

"I'm glad you liked it."

"Give me another!"

“W-Wait, Uncle!”

“It’s fine, it’s fine! What does it matter?”

“Nooo!”

Infatuated with the dish before them, Alunaya moved Shizuka’s body without her permission to eat egg after egg. He was gobbling them down so quickly that Shizuka was worried about her waistline.

Now that he had a taste for hot spring eggs, it wasn’t long before Alunaya wanted to visit an actual hot spring. He’d so far only had the homemade kind, but he was consumed with an increasing urge to try the kind that had actually been cooked in a hot spring.

*“This scenery reminds me off my own residence.”*

That was Alunaya’s first reaction upon seeing the mountain in the next city over. The landscape he saw when he peered out the window with Shizuka’s eyes reminded him of home.

“Do you live on a rocky mountain like this, Uncle?”

*“Indeed. A volcano, actually. The look of these craggy rocks is very similar. That said, the plants and buildings are unfamiliar to me.”*

“Well, if it looked exactly the same, there wouldn’t be much of a point in coming, would there?”

*“That’s a good point.”*

After getting off the bus and away from the eyes of others, Alunaya took his stuffed animal form and rode on Shizuka’s shoulder. As he really did look like a stuffed animal from a distance, there was no reason to worry about raising any suspicion as long as Alunaya stayed still. The stuffed animal was really an illusion created by Alunaya’s magic, but he used it as an avatar of himself to make conversations easier. Though it wasn’t an issue with Shizuka, other people were more comfortable talking to him when they knew where to look.

“So where did you live? Alaia-sama’s notes only mentioned a volcano...” Ruth asked.

Alunaya's illusion was already working. With the stuffed animal creature on Shizuka's shoulder, Ruth make eye contact with him as she spoke to him. Without it, it was harder to tell if she was actually talking to Alunaya or Shizuka, and conversations could get confusing that way.

"From your point of view, it would have been near the southern mountain range."

"Ah, there were a lot of volcanos there, weren't there?"

"Thanks to that, it was quite warm, which made it a comfortable place to live."

"But... I remember hearing that you had to move to a different world because the temperature was dropping."

That was where Kiriha joined in. It was just her and Ruth accompanying Shizuka and Alunaya on this trip because the others were all busy with one thing or another. But it worked out well enough. The four of them were the most suited for a hot spring trip like this.

"Indeed. The volcanos became less active as it grew colder too, so we dragons decided to relocate."

"Forthorthe naturally goes through colder periods every twenty or thirty thousand years. It is said that the temperature did begin dropping several thousand years ago, but it should still be a while yet before it kicks into full swing."

"I guess that you can say that you sensed the glacial period approaching then."

"Doesn't everyone want to live somewhere warm during cold periods?"

"I can understand how you feel, Uncle. I'm not good with the cold either."

The four continued their whimsical conversation as they climbed up the low slope leading away from the bus stop. The hot spring district was up ahead, and they would be staying at an inn there overnight. The girls were all looking forward to the hot spring, but all Alunaya could think about was hot spring eggs.

Upon entering the hot spring district, Alunaya looked around with great interest. While he had thoroughly studied the guidebook beforehand, actually seeing the place with his own eyes was completely different. It wasn't like every detail of the town was recorded in the guidebook either, so there was plenty to see and learn about that was completely new to him.

"Shizuka, Shizuka! The hot springs manju aren't brown! What is the meaning of this?!"

"C-Calm down a little, Uncle! If you move around that much, you'll give yourself away!"

The excited Alunaya was like a child. One thing after another captured his attention, and he dragged Shizuka along for the ride. Considering the daily life of a dragon, city life held no real interest for Alunaya, but apparently this was different. Its simple, rustic nature captivated him like a tourist.

"Heehee, he's like Master or Her Highness when they go out to play."

"Boys will be boys, even as dragons."

"My, my... Her Highness would be rather angry to hear you say that."

"Then please don't tell her."

"Ahaha, your secret is safe with me."

Kiriha and Ruth were having a good laugh together when, mysteriously, one of the clasps on the bag Kiriha was carrying came undone and the flap seemed to lift itself up. Quiet voices could then be heard from within.

"Ane-san, can we come out yet, ho?"

"It's unfair that only Uncle Dragon gets to play, ho!"

"That's true. All right, you can come out."

"Ho!"

"Ho, ho!"

After Kiriha discretely looked around, she opened her bag and two haniwas emerged. The haniwas returned the handheld game console and music player

they were holding to the bag before flying over towards Alunaya.

“Where’s this unusually colored manju? Ho!”

“Over there. I thought they were all brown, but this one is white.”

“You’re right, ho! I want to try one, ho!”

When Alunaya and the haniwas were together, they looked like a group of toys. It would be a disaster if any kids got their hands on them, but fortunately there weren’t many children at the hot spring. And even if they were found, each of them was small enough that it would be easy for them to hide, so there didn’t seem to be much to worry about.

“All right, then let us go.”

“Let’s go, ho!”

“That’s an emperor for you! A natural-born leader, ho!”

“Ah, wait up, you three!”

If anyone was in trouble, it was Shizuka, who was currently being taken for a ride by a dragon emperor and two haniwas.

“I guess that means the haniwas are boys too, Kiriha-sama?”

“They certainly act like it.”

Ruth and Kiriha watched over Shizuka as she ran from place to place chasing after Alunaya and the haniwas. While they felt bad for her, it was an amusing sight.

Alunaya’s stuffed animal form was an illusion he created to express himself and make it easier for people to talk to him. His consciousness, however, remained inside of Shizuka, and he relied on her for most of his senses. For example, he needed Shizuka to eat something in order for him to taste it. The same was true for feeling the hot spring.

“I’ve never really paid much attention to them, but hot springs are pretty nice...”

Feeling the warmth and relaxation vicariously through Shizuka, Alunaya was

enjoying himself. Delighted, he paddled across the warm water in his stuffed animal form. While he didn't make any waves or noise since he was an illusion, Shizuka spoke up.

"Uncle, it's proper manners to stay calm and quiet in the hot spring."

"Oh, I see. I'm sorry. They looked like they were having fun, so I just ended up doing the same thing."

"This bath is big enough to swim in, ho!"

"There are jets of water, ho!"

Alunaya hadn't meant any harm as he was only copying the haniwas, but if it was proper hot spring etiquette to stay calm and quiet, he was happy to abide by that. As such, he stopped swimming and simply drifted across the surface of the warm water.

"Karama-chan, Korama-chan, you two quiet down too."

"Sorry, ho..."

"We can't say no to Shizuka-chan, ho..."

The two haniwas also quickly complied with Shizuka's request. Following Alunaya's lead, they stopped splashing around and tried drifting. They looked like plastic bottles floating in a pond. Kiriha looked over the two of them with a dry smile.

"I'm sorry about that, Shizuka."

Kiriha had the longest hair of the girls present. It took a long time to wash, so she was still preoccupied getting ready to get in the spring. The haniwas had gone ahead and gotten in without her.

"I'm the one that should be supervising them."

"It's fine. I'll babysit while you wash that beautiful hair of yours before you get in. It's the least I can do after you rented out this entire place just for us."

Since they were bringing a mysterious creature and haniwas with them, Kiriha had used her contacts to reserve the entire bath for their trip so they wouldn't startle any of the other guests. Since the inn was managed by People of the

Earth who had left the underground a long time ago, they understood. Kiriha had done so much for their trip that Shizuka didn't feel like Kiriha had anything to apologize for.

"Thank you for that."

"Don't worry about it."

"She's right. You're the one that arranged this entire trip, Kiriha-sama."

Not only had Kiriha reserved the hot spring, she had seen to all the other details of their mini-vacation. She'd reached out to various other contacts to arrange the trip in order to suit Alunaya, Shizuka, and Ruth's wishes as much as possible. They were all grateful for what she'd done, and that certainly wasn't lessened by the haniwas having a little fun.

"Speaking of arranging things, what did you want to do while we're here, Ruth-san?"

"Ah, um..."

Ruth stumbled for an answer as the topic of conversation suddenly shifted to herself. Alunaya wanted to try hot spring eggs, so Shizuka had wanted to bathe in the hot spring while they were there. Surely there was something Ruth wanted to do as well, and Shizuka was curious what it was.

"Ruth asked if we could visit a shrine."

Since Ruth wasn't answering, Kiriha answered for her. She'd made the arrangements, so she already knew what it was that Ruth wanted to do.

"Visit a shrine? That's a very classy thing to want to do."

"Um... I... Yes..."

Though it was a totally casual conversation, Ruth was blushing wildly and looking away. Seeing her do that, a lightbulb suddenly switched on in Shizuka's head.

"I see... The pamphlet for this place did say something about a shrine for the god of fulfilled love being somewhere nearby."

Shizuka had a mischievous smile as she nudged Ruth with her elbow.

“Urk!”

Both Ruth’s eyes shot wide open. She then slumped her shoulders and shrunk down into the water like she was trying to escape. Her face was as red as it had ever been, all the way up to her ears. That alone was enough of an answer for Shizuka.

“Ruth-san, could it be that you want your love to be fulfilled?”

Shizuka rolled her towel up into a makeshift microphone and held it out towards Ruth. Seeing the gesture, she tried her best to come up with an answer.

“Y-Yes, but... don’t we all?”

“Indeed. I would be troubled if mine went unfulfilled.”

Unlike Ruth, Kiriha knew exactly what she wanted and had no trouble expressing it. She’d been carrying her love with her since she was a child and had come to full terms with her emotions.

“You’re right... We can’t just leave things be as they are. Not with him.”

Shizuka could admit her own feelings as well, just not as straightforwardly as Kiriha. Really, she was somewhere in between Ruth and Kiriha on the matter.

“That’s why... I just wish someone, anyone, would make a move...”

“Are you really okay with that Ruth-san?”

“He always puts himself last, so I don’t mind coming last either. Besides... I only wish to be an extra to Her Highness, like a second wife...”

“I understand how you feel.”

“So we all feel the same way, then...”

Ruth, Kiriha, and Shizuka all believed that it would be sad in its own way if they themselves were the only one that ended up happy. They all needed to be happy. They all deserved it. Especially the boy they loved the most.

“So in the end, this is because we all put each other before ourselves.”

“That’s what I think. But I want to pray for the happiest ending possible.”

“Then let’s go together tomorrow, all three of us!”

“Just don’t forget about my hot spring eggs.”

“How about some hot spring cooked haniwas, ho?”

“We’ve boiled really nicely, ho...”

Six cheerful voices could be heard from the private hot spring. It was the sound of good friends enjoying their slow soak and their time together. After everything they’d been through, precious moments like this were invaluable. Each of them enjoyed themselves to the fullest.



As they were staying at an inn, the girls didn't have to make breakfast themselves, meaning Kiriha, Ruth, and Shizuka could have a much more relaxed morning than usual. The inn served breakfast at 7 o'clock, so the girls started to wake up a short while before that.

"Good morning, you three."

The first to get up was Shizuka, who was full of energy. Kiriha and Ruth had slightly low blood pressure, however, so they were still dozing away in their futons.

"You're finally awake."

"Everyone is oversleeping, ho!"

"They're on Yurika's level, ho!"

But Shizuka wasn't the only one awake. Alunaya and the two haniwas were already up and appeared to be doing something on top of the table that had been moved to the corner of the room so everyone could lay out their futons. Intrigued, Shizuka moved over to take a look.

"Hahh... Never mind them, what are you guys doing so early in the morning?"

Though she was as bright-eyed and bushy-tailed as ever, Shizuka had only just woken up and couldn't help yawning as she investigated what they were up to.

"This."

Alunaya stepped to the side and revealed what was behind him. It was the guidebook that he so loved to read. After glancing at it, Shizuka cocked her head to the side.

"What are these marks for, Uncle?"

"We are checking off things that we absolutely have to eat before going home. After combining the information from the guidebook with what we observed of the storefronts yesterday, we've managed to narrow it down to seven places."

"We consulted with dragon uncle, ho!"

"These seven places are a must, ho!"

The three of them had been so excited about this little culinary adventure that they'd woken up early to sort out the details of their itinerary. First, they decided to exclude anything that could be purchased as a souvenir and taken home to eat later. After that, they prioritized anything that used seasonal ingredients and then ranked what they came up with according to their tastes In the end, they were absolutely insistent on trying the top seven dishes on their list.

"So make sure you don't eat too much for breakfast, Shizuka."

Alunaya couldn't eat things on his own. The only way for him to taste things was to have Shizuka eat while they were sharing senses. As such, he couldn't allow Shizuka to get full too soon.

"W-Wait a minute, Uncle! Are you saying you want me to eat seven different local dishes today?!"

"That's right."

"First is the salt-grilled sweetfish, ho!"

"Last is custard soft serve, made rich with fresh eggs, ho!"

"N-No way! If I eat that much, I'll definitely get fat!"

If she hadn't been already, upon hearing Alunaya and the haniwas' plan, Shizuka was wide awake. If she played along and ate everything they wanted her to, she would without a doubt gain weight. And there would be no way she could blame it on Alunaya's mana. She couldn't allow that to happen.

"Don't worry. I'll control my mana to make you two kilos lighter for a while."

"That's not the problem here! Wait, you're planning on making me eat two kilos worth of food?!"

Shizuka was always minding her weight because she wanted to maintain her figure. But even if Alunaya could magically control her weight, it didn't change what she looked like.

"I wouldn't be able to wear a swimsuit in front of anyone!"

"Then let's change just your appearance with an illusion."

“Nooooo!”

Unfortunately, the fire dragon emperor was even more oblivious to the subtleties of a maiden’s heart than Koutarou. Both his personality and his being of a different species worked against him in that regard. But what made it hardest for Shizuka was that Alunaya wasn’t doing any of it to be mean. Rather, he felt he was doing his part to bring them closer as friends.

In the end, the two were able to come to a compromise by agreeing that the calories of the seven dishes Shizuka ate would be expelled as heat via plasma breath. It was Kiriha’s idea, and Ruth ran the calculations on it.

“Using the fire that Shizuka-sama spewed out earlier as our baseline, you would have to breathe flames five and two-thirds times.”

“In other words, if we spew flames six times, we can eat whatever we want today?”

“You be quiet, Uncle!”

“Okay...”

“Since Shizuka-sama has spewed flames once already, a little under five times would be more accurate.”

Going off of Kiriha’s idea, Ruth wanted to do her part to help. Running the numbers, she figured out how many times Shizuka would have to breathe fire to counteract the calories she’d consume if she ate all seven local dishes. The magic number was apparently five and two-thirds, but Kiriha had a reservation about that.

“Just in case, it would be wise to avoid breathing fire five times in a single day. While it will work well for burning off calories, human bodies aren’t made to spew flames, so it’s difficult to calculate what kind of strain that would put on the body if done repeatedly.”

Even though it was her idea, Kiriha was a little nervous that this diet method might have a negative influence on Shizuka’s health. Normally, Alunaya used mana to breathe fire, but this time Shizuka would be relying on the energy she’d stored up inside her body via food. There was a possibility that it might

leave her depleted of necessary nutrients or something similar. Kiriha didn't want to push too hard.

"Then how about once per day?" Shizuka suggested.

"That shouldn't be a problem," Kiriha assented.

If they stuck to doing it just once a day to be safe, that would lower the strain on Shizuka and allow the others to keep an eye on her in the interims just to make sure there weren't any complications. Kiriha thought that was a good plan.

"So starting tomorrow, we'll be doing it once a day until Saturday, Uncle."

"But that would make for a total of seven times."

"I want to lose a little more weight."

"...Would seven times be okay, Kiriha?"

"That's between you and Shizuka, Alunaya-dono."

"Okay, then once a day until Saturday next week is fine."

"That's cheating, ho!"

"It's fraud, ho!"

"What was that?" Shizuka asked with a steely glare.

"N-Nothing, ho!"

"Shizuka-chan becoming even more attractive is a good thing, ho!"

"Heehee, I see you're worried about your figure too, Shizuka-sama."

"How could I not be after seeing you and Kiriha-san in the hot spring yesterday?"

"I think you have a beautiful body too though, Shizuka," offered Kiriha.

"Complacency only spells disaster," Shizuka sighed, shaking her head.

The six of them cheerfully continued to chat away as they climbed the mountain path. They were headed towards the shrine up ahead, their first stop for the day.

Upon entering the shrine grounds, the girls and their small friends calmed down. Even the ever-cheerful girls knew to behave at religious sites, especially when they'd come to ask a favor from the powers that be. Naturally, they wanted to stay respectful.

"We wish to win Round Haniwa-sama event tickets, ho!"

"Please, ho! We'll even attach some Hanina-chan goods, ho!"

"I have no intention of causing any trouble on these grounds, so please overlook some sightseeing."

The attendant haniwas and the fire dragon emperor had their own reasons for tagging along on the shrine visit, so they each paid their respects to the god enshrined there. Each of them was sincere in what they asked for, but it was nothing compared to the heartfelt, earnest wishes of the three girls.

*Please... may my feelings and those of Her Highness reach him...*

Ruth prayed wholeheartedly with her hands clasped before her chest. The others had been willing to make this trip for her, so she felt especially strongly about what she was asking for. To be connected to the first man she'd ever seriously loved. For Theia, who she also loved, to be happy. And it was the strength of those wishes that came through in her prayer.

*May the promise I made with Onii-chan on that day be fulfilled...*

If anyone had heard what Kiriha prayed for, they surely would have gone bug-eyed. Based on how she normally acted, it was hard to believe that she could have such a simple, honest, and pure wish. In her clasped hands was an old trading card. It represented Kiriha's feelings, both past and present. Ten years' worth of emotion had been poured into that card, and it all manifested now in a single prayer. She wanted to heal her beloved's wounded heart, and there was hardly a wish more innocent than that.

*May we find a way to make sure everyone is happy... Also, if possible, may my diet succeed...*

Even now, Shizuka was mostly thinking of the people around her. Perhaps it was just her personality, but the thought of praying for just her own happiness never even crossed her mind. She wanted the person she loved to be happy,

and she wanted the other girls—her friends—to be happy too. That's why she ended up praying for something that even she vaguely knew was probably impossible. But still, she snuck in a humble request for her diet to succeed. If nothing else, she was steadfast.

"Ane-san and the others are so serious, ho..."

"They're like Hanina-chan when Round Haniwa-sama is fighting, ho..."

"Let's leave them be for a few moments."

"How many, dragon uncle? Ho..."

"Listen, doing this now will make it easier for us to ask for what we want to do later."

"That's the fire dragon emperor for you, ho! A true leader, ho!"

In the end, their wishes were all the same. The girls all wanted everyone, including themselves, to be happy. They were trying to walk down that difficult path together, all the while believing that what they wanted would be at the end of the road.

After the shrine visit was over and the group was descending down the mountain path, Alunaya and the haniwas steadily grew more and more excited. After patiently waiting their turn, it was now time to have their fun on vacation.

"Where are the shops that sell salt-grilled sweetfish?"

"There are five in total, and the most popular one is a small restaurant called Saika, ho!"

"Saika is known for its special rock salt seasoning, ho! Its fish are supposed to be nice and crunchy too, ho!"

"All right, then that's where we're going!"

"Roger, ho!"

"You're the boss, ho!"

Alunaya naturally took the lead, and the two haniwas were armed to the teeth with all sorts of local information, tidbits, and factoids. With their powers

combined, they made the perfect tourist group. There was practically no stopping them. It was clear now just how serious they were about this mission to try their seven chosen local dishes.

“So the time has finally come...”

In contrast to the three eager tourists, however, Shizuka was dragging her feet. She was plodding along at the rear of the determined group.

“Indeed. And there’s no way they’ll give up now. Especially not when they have the plasma breath diet up their sleeves.”

“That part’s your fault, Kiriha-san!”

“But if it weren’t for Kiriha-sama’s idea, you would have gained around two kilos, Shizuka-sama.”

“Arrrgh! That’s even worse!”

Teary-eyed and sniffling, Shizuka walked forward with heavy steps. She was practically crying already. The mood at the front and back of the group couldn’t have been more opposite.

“Arf, arf, arf!”

Suddenly, something small darted into the path in front of them.

“Grrrrr...”

It was a small, white dog. A puppy, even. It looked like it probably wasn’t yet a year old, and it appeared to have run away from its owner. There was a collar around its neck with a leash dangling from it.

“This is what you call a dog, is it not?”

“That’s right, ho!”

“It’s a creature you can befriend, ho!”

“Arf, arf, arf!”

For some reason, the small visitor seemed to be hostile towards Shizuka and the others.

The puppy that had appeared was barking loudly at them, but the three girls all loved cute animals and couldn't help wanting to play with it. Together, they agreed to try and make an attempt to befriend it.

"How about something like this?" Ruth asked.

"Marshmallows, huh? Kiriha-san, can dogs eat marshmallows?" Shizuka asked in turn.

"Marshmallows are primarily egg whites and sugar, so it should be fine as you don't give it too many," Kiriha replied.

"Then I'll try giving it one," Ruth offered.

She squatted down in place, then opened up a small bag and pulled out a marshmallow about two centimeters big.

"Arf?"

As she did, the puppy stopped barking. It seemed to pick up the scent of the marshmallow, and it stared at Ruth, the source of the smell.

"Come to me, little puppy. I have a treat for you."

Being modest, Ruth put the marshmallow on her hand and presented it to the puppy rather than trying to approach it. It seemed to do the trick, however, as the puppy then came to her while vigorously sniffing the air. Its nose led it straight to the marshmallow, but it kept its eyes trained on Ruth. The temptation of the marshmallow was hard to beat, but it didn't fully trust this stranger yet.

"It's okay. I won't hurt you."

Ruth spoke gently to the dog and remained perfectly still. After a long, scrutinizing pause, the puppy chomped down on the marshmallow in Ruth's hand.

"There's no need to rush, little guy. There's plenty of it."

While a two centimeter marshmallow wasn't all that big for a human, to a puppy of this size, it was like trying to eat a whole melon. But the dog didn't seem to mind one bit as it happily gobbled it up.

“Now’s my chance...”

While the puppy was preoccupied with the snack, Ruth reached out with her empty hand to grab the leash hanging off its neck. The whole reason the girls wanted to get friendly with the dog in the first place was to get ahold of it. (Probably.) Since the puppy had a collar, its owner was likely somewhere nearby looking for it.

“I got it!”

“Arf!”

Just as Ruth got a firm grasp on the leash, the puppy finished up the last of the marshmallow. Ruth had feared the puppy might run away after it was done eating, but fortunately didn’t happen.

“Arf, arf!”

Instead, the puppy waggled with its tail as it looked up at Ruth. It seemed to have enjoyed the marshmallow quite a bit and was sniffing at Ruth’s bag. It could tell there were more in there.

“I’m sorry. That one was just a treat.”

While she actually wanted to give the cute puppy more marshmallows, Ruth decided she couldn’t. The puppy was so small and the marshmallows were so big. It surely wouldn’t be healthy to let it have too many at one time. And since it was someone else’s dog, she couldn’t risk spoiling it.

“Aooowww...”

“Aw, don’t do that!”

The puppy reached out with its front leg and pawed at Ruth’s bag. Looking up at Ruth with its little puppy eyes, it seemed to be begging for seconds. As Ruth was wondering what she should do, a helping hand came to her rescue.

Boing, boing!

It was in the form of a small pom-pom made out of animal fur. It was originally a decoration on Kiriha’s bag, but now it was bouncing up and down on the end of a thin stick. After realizing Ruth’s dilemma, Kiriha had quickly thrown it together as a distraction.

Boing, boing!

“Arf!”

Kiriha skillfully moved the stick to bounce the pom-pom around rhythmically, which grabbed the puppy’s attention in a heartbeat. She almost made it look like the fuzzy pom-pom was a real live critter, and the puppy was extremely interested in it.

Boing, boing!

“Arf, arf!”

The puppy chased after the pom-pom as it darted around. Kiriha skillfully controlled it, keeping it just barely out of the puppy’s reach. Because of that, the puppy was so focused on it that it seemed to forget all about the marshmallows.

“Thank you for the help, Kiriha-sama.”

“I’m good at this kind of thing.”

“You certainly look like you are.”



“That sounds like you’re calling me a tease.”

Kiriha smiled at Ruth as she played with the puppy. Kiriha could lead even some of the smartest adults around by the nose. The puppy never stood a chance.

“Oh, not at all. It was just very expertly done.”

“Heh, then I’ll let it slide.”

“Kiriha-san, I want to play with the pupper too!”

Seeing Kiriha play with the puppy after it had completely lowered its guard, Shizuka couldn’t hold herself back anymore. Her heart had been stolen by the

adorable frolicking dog, and she was raring to play too.

“Here you go.”

“Yay!”

Kiriha handed the pom-pom on a stick over to Shizuka and scooted over to make room for her. Taking over after Kiriha, Shizuka thrust the toy out for the dog to play with, but...

“Grrr!”

“Ow!”

For some reason, the puppy bit Shizuka’s hand instead of the pom-pom. While it didn’t hurt because she was protected by Alunaya’s power, it still came as quite a surprise.

“Why would you do that? Let’s be friends!”

“Arf! Grrrrr...”

The puppy’s attitude towards Shizuka was clearly different from the way it was with Ruth or Kiriha. Baring its fangs, it continued to growl and bark at her.

“Ruth...”

“R-Right!”

Tugging on the puppy’s leash, Ruth pulled it away from Shizuka. After getting some distance from Shizuka, the puppy stopped barking, though it still glared at her with its tiny eyes.

“Why do you hate me? Let’s be friends, pupper!”

Shizuka was depressed that the dog only seemed to dislike her. Still holding on to the makeshift toy, she sat down on the spot with tears welling in her eyes.

“Perhaps there’s a reason it doesn’t like you...”

“Maybe it’s Alunaya-sama. He’s so big and strong he could easily intimidate just a little puppy.”

“That’s very possible.”

Kiriha and Ruth suspected that Alunaya might be the cause since he inhabited

Shizuka's body. With their keen senses, it wouldn't come as a surprise if animals could tell he was present. And it made perfect sense that they would be frightened of him. After all, Alunaya was really a dragon well over twenty meters long.

"It's Uncle's fault!?"

"How rude! I'm the king of beasts! I'm generous to all creatures!"

Alunaya was rather displeased with this assessment. As he considered himself the emperor of all living things, he found it quite insulting to be accused of terrorizing a mere puppy.

"But I don't ever recall being hated by dogs until Uncle moved in."

"Et tu, Shizuka?!"

"Well..."

"Okay, if you're going to go that far, let's put it to the test!"

"Huh?"

"I will temporarily leave you. If the puppy still barks at you, then it's clear that it's not my fault!"

The final nail was the doubtful look Shizuka cast his way. Mortified, Alunaya decided to leave Shizuka's body to prove his innocence.

"Are you sure you'll be okay doing that, Uncle?"

"It will rapidly use up my mana, but it'll hardly be a problem for just half a minute or so."

As Alunaya didn't have a real body, his existence was maintained by concentrating mana into Shizuka. So by leaving her body, the energy he had would rapidly be expended to generate something of a spiritual form to sustain him. It was serious work, but it would still be easy to maintain for such a brief period of time. It was something like Sanae's astral projection, although he didn't have as much freedom and it wouldn't last as long. Really, there wasn't too much he could in this form, but it would be enough to prove his innocence.

"Then let's start!"

Fwoosh!

For a moment, Shizuka's eyes glowed red. Then a red light appeared to escape her body—that was Alunaya's consciousness and mana. The light approached the illusory Alunaya and merged with it. Essentially, Alunaya's consciousness and mana were being transferred to his stuffed animal form.

"So how about now?"

The light and the illusion were now one. Although it didn't change the way he looked, he now gave off an overwhelmingly powerful aura. In contrast to his adorable appearance, he was the most powerful creature on Earth.

"Arf, arf!"

And in Alunaya's grand presence, the puppy moved away from Ruth and ran up to him, eyes sparkling and tail wagging.

Based on the results of their test, Kiriha figured that the puppy must have barked at Shizuka because it was jealous. It liked Alunaya, but Shizuka was the one getting all the attention from him, and the puppy didn't like that.

Another possibility was that Shizuka was just too strong. With Alunaya insider her, she had strength beyond natural human limits. While Alunaya didn't necessarily change anything about her appearance, he supplied her with a great deal of mana and power. She was clearly superhuman. Looking at her from an animal's perspective, she was as dangerous as a bear or lion. Of course a puppy would be wary of her. But when confronted directly with Alunaya, even in a spiritual form, the puppy's natural inclination was to be friendly with such a powerful creature.

There were many other possibilities, but they all seemed far less likely to Kiriha. In the end, however, it was impossible to say for sure what it was. It wasn't like they could ask the dog directly. The only certainty was that the puppy was still barking at Shizuka.

"I... I can't recover from this..."

The puppy was wagging its tail at Alunaya, but barking at Shizuka. Under the weight of this cruel reality, her shoulders drooped as she trudged along the

mountain path.

“Hahaha, who said I’m not popular?”

“That’s the emperor for you, ho!”

“A true royal, ho!”

“But of course! Maybe I should go to one of those safari parks one of these days to see what happens!”

Unlike Shizuka, Alunaya was in high spirits. Not only had his name been cleared, but even a humble puppy had shown him the respect he deserved. He stood proud, even as a stuffed animal, and confidently led the group as they walked along.

“Don’t let it get you down, Shizuka-sama. That puppy might just have been an odd case.”

“She’s right, Shizuka. We don’t know the actual reason why it barked at you.”

“But it still barked at meee!”

Not even Ruth and Kiriha consoling her was enough to cheer Shizuka up. She was absolutely devastated.

“I don’t care anymore! If I get barked at even when I’m slim and cute, I might as well just try ten local specialty dishes today! No, twenty!”

She was so devastated, in fact, that she was willing to do just about anything to drown her sorrows. Eating to her heart’s content sounded like it might do just the trick.

*It seems Shizuka hasn’t considered how Koutarou will react when he sees her after this... but it looks like I should avoid pointing that out now.*

Kiriha had her doubts about Shizuka’s chosen pick-me-up, but as long as it made her feel better, she figured it would probably turn out okay.

“That’s more like it, Shizuka!”

“Delicious food awaits, ho!”

“We’ll eat until our stomachs burst, ho!”

“Yeah, that’s exactly what I want! I’m totally on board now!”

“Arf, arf, arf!”

And so Shizuka enjoyed all the local cuisine she could get her hands on. As a result, she ended up gaining more weight than expected for a total of three kilograms. Of course, that wasn’t discovered until after they returned home, and it was thanks to an inadvertently insensitive comment from Alunaya. It caused a whole new headache for Shizuka, but the fact remained that poor, devastated Shizuka on vacation wasn’t at all concerned about what would happen down the road.

# Episode 3: The Local Eating Champion

As Sanae and Theia had similar mental ages, they often shared interests. Food and games were both good examples, and today was no exception. On their way home from grocery shopping, something in the arcade had caught their eye.

“Doesn’t it look like we can get one?” Sanae asked eagerly.

“It does. Keep an eye out on the left side,” Theia replied.

“Aye aye!”

Sanae and Theia were currently in the middle of a claw crane game, carefully pushing buttons to try and snatch up a stuffed animal. This game in particular featured Kisshouharukaze City’s local mascot, Haruyama Shounosuke, as a prize. The adorably chubby stuffed doll had a cutesy samurai design, and it had stolen both Sanae and Theia’s hearts. They were dead set on catching one before they went home.

“You can do it, Theia!”

“Leave it to me!”

Theia was currently the one pushing the buttons. As a modern girl, Sanae wasn’t particularly bad at games like this, but Theia lived for them. So between the two of them, Theia’s job was to operate the controls, and Sanae’s job was to offer advice and cheer her on.

“Just a little more... A little more... Stop!”

“Isn’t it a bit off?”

“Maybe, but if it’s only a little, you can still get it.”

“All right, let’s do this!”

Click!

Once the arm was locked into place, it couldn’t be readjusted. Trusting in her skill and luck, Theia pushed the button to commit.

Whirrr...

“Go! Go!”

“Grab it!”

The two girls held their breath as they watched the motor work to lower the arm inside the machine. Theia had positioned it above the stuffed animal they wanted, but as it came down, it was clear it wasn’t perfectly centered. They watched anxiously as it got lower and lower.

“It grabbed it! It got it!”

“Oooh! Did we do it?!”

As if answering their hopes, the arm grabbed hold of a Haruyama Shounosuke by his stomach. The motor revved in reverse and pulled the arm back up, bringing the stuffed doll with it.

“Ah!”

“You weakling!”

However, shortly after the claw picked up Haruyama Shounosuke’s fluffy body, what was left hanging from the claw began to twist as it was lifted into the air. Unable to withstand the movement, the claw dropped the stuffed doll.

“Hmm... The arm is weaker than I thought.”

“It looks like we have to grab it dead on so it won’t move like that.”



“We’ll have to be very precise with where we lower the arm then.”

Haruyama Shounosuke, which had fallen on his back, was smiling at the two disappointed girls. They’d watched that carefree smile slip right through their claws, but neither one of them was willing to give up. They were both poor losers, and they were determined to take him home with them.

“Let me try it this time!”

“The arm doesn’t stop right away when you hit the button, so remember to push it a little early.”

“A little early? Okay, I got it!”

Sanae stepped up to the machine as Theia moved around to where she'd been. Switching roles, Theia would be the one supporting her now. The truth was that they'd be most likely to succeed with just Theia playing on her own, but it would be less fun that way. While their goal was to take Haruyama Shounosuke home with them, the two of them being able to play together like this was just as much, if not more meaningful.

In the end, it took them five tries to succeed. They both played twice, and Theia finally managed to snag it on her third try. At 100 per game, they'd spent a total of 500 yen, which was a pretty decent result considering it was a game neither one of them was used to. But most importantly, their beloved Haruyama Shounosuke was now in their hands.

"Man, I wanted to win one too..."

Sanae, however, pouted and let out a small sigh. Haruyama Shounosuke was smiling right at her, but she was a little disappointed. While she was happy that they'd won, she'd actually wanted to be the one to do it.

"I was only able to get it because you put it in a good position."

"That might be true, but still..."

While their goal had been to get Haruyama Shounosuke together, Sanae hadn't been able to do much herself. She'd wanted to win one and be able to brag to everyone back home that she'd gotten it herself. That was just part of the fun of games for Sanae.

"...Oh?"

As Sanae glanced back at the game machine, she noticed a poster on the side of it with an illustration of Haruyama Shounosuke. Interested, she brought her face closer to it.

"Hmm..."

"What is it?"

"It looks like there's a festival."

"A festival?"

“It says it’s the 500th anniversary of the birth of Haruyama Shounosuke!”

The poster was a notice that the shopping street would be having a celebratory festival in honor of the real-life inspiration for the town’s mascot, the local General Haruyama Shounosuke. It would mark five hundred years since his birth.

“Ah, I see. So that’s part of the reason they had these stuffed dolls made.”

“Yeah. It looks like it isn’t just a normal festival either. They’ll have a bunch of different events.”

“Oh? Let’s see here...”

Sanae and Theia leaned in with their cheeks practically pressed against each other as they inspected the poster together. There would be ceremonies, live performances from local artists, a marathon rally, a flea market, and all sorts of other events. One in particular, however, caught both of their attention.

“Theia, look at this!”

“Indeed! It looks like our time has come!”

They looked at each other with sparkling eyes, nodded, and dashed out of the arcade. They were going to get a flyer for the event from the shopping street’s information desk.

With the flyer in hand, they headed straight home to room 106. They were eager to show it to Koutarou and the others.

“...An eating championship in honor of Haruyama Shounosuke’s 500th birthday?”

Koutarou read the flyer out loud with a confused expression. The event that had piqued Sanae and Theia’s interested was an eating contest.

“Koutarou, let’s all participate in it! The prize is amazing! Look!”

“A gift certificate to the shopping street for 300,000 yen?!”

What had really grabbed Sanae’s attention was the prize. The winner would receive a gift certificate worth 300,000 yen that could be used anywhere on the

shopping street, as well as a life-sized Haruyama Shounosuke stuffed doll as a bonus. According to the man at the information desk, the shopping street's chairman had decided to splurge on the event since it was the five hundred year anniversary.

"Heh, the shopping street will regret challenging me!" Theia boasted.

"It's not like this was directed at you," Koutarou said dismissively.

"Shut it, you! Defeat is not an option for the royal families of Forthorthe!"

Theia was raring to go because it was a contest. She was naturally competitive and loved games of any kind. Really, bringing up her lineage was an excuse. She was too embarrassed to say it, but it was her way of inviting everyone to participate so they could all compete together.

"Let's all do it! With 300,000 yen, we can have high quality sukiyaki every day!" Sanae urged.

"She's right! Let's all participate for the sake of my glory! I will be the king of the competition!" Theia roared.

"...What do all of you think?" Koutarou asked as he turned to the others.

Koutarou himself didn't mind participating. Everyone knew that Theia loved competitions and Sanae seemed unusually excited for it too, so he wanted to let them have their fun. The flyer stated that all food would be provided by restaurants from the shopping street, so he also wanted a chance to eat his fill. That said, he couldn't force the others to join in, so he looked around the room to see how they felt.

"I will participate."

"I'll participate too. I want to eat a bunch of food."

The first two to speak up were Ruth and Yurika. In Ruth's case, she wanted to please Theia. Yurika's goal was simply food. She'd get to eat if she participated, and if she happened to win, she'd get a prize that would mean more food. It was really win-win for her.

"What are you going to do, Satomi-kun?" asked Maki.

"I'm thinking of participating myself."

“Then I will too.”

Maki wanted to be with Koutarou. In the past, she’d chased after him in hopes of forming a bond, but that wasn’t exclusively the case these days. Now she wanted to join in with the rest of the girls of room 106 as much as possible too. But since this would be a new and unfamiliar experience, she felt more reassured that Koutarou would be there. Everything seemed better to her with him around.

“I think I’ll join too.”

Apparently Kiriha was interested in the contest as well. Her inner child—who was normally well under control—was kicking and screaming for her to join in too. In the end, she decided it wouldn’t be too bad to let loose every once in a while. Her concern this time around lay elsewhere.

“The problem is those three,” she said, pointing to the girls across the room.

“I’m bad at eating a lot of food.”

“I want to participate myself, but I don’t know what my doctor would think.”

“I finally lost all that weight, so I want to avoid eating too much...”

Clan wasn’t a big eater in the first place. Harumi was in the same boat, but she was mostly concerned about her health. Shizuka had finally lost all the weight she’d gained from the hot spring trip, so she wanted to avoid putting it right back on again.

“It looks like you can give up at any time, so why don’t you all participate and just do it at your own pace?” Sanae suggested.

“She’s right! Just think of it as some free food,” Theia agreed.

“In that case, I think I will participate,” Clan acquiesced.

“Clan-san, why don’t we compete over a single plate?” Harumi offered.

“That sounds fun! Bring it on, Harumi!”

“Aw, Sakuraba-senpai, I want to do that too!” Shizuka admitted.

In the end, Sanae and Theia were able to convince the three girls to participate as well. All three of them thought it sounded like fun, they just had

personal reasons for holding back. But if they could bow out at any time, they had no reason not to join in for a while.

“You’re in too, aren’t you, Koutarou?” Sanae asked excitedly.

“I won’t let you say no!” Theia barked.

“Yeah, I’m in. I just said so, didn’t I?”

Just as he’d told Maki, Koutarou was interested in the contest too. Participating would mean getting to eat delicious food from the restaurants on the shopping street, and he wasn’t about to let that opportunity pass him by.

“All right, then we’re all in for an eating contest!” Sanae cheered.

“Let’s all win this for my sake!” Theia cheered right back.

“I’ll be winning this time!”

“Ohoho, we’ll see about that! I have no intention of giving the win to you!”

And so Koutarou and the rest of the Corona House crew registered for a local eating contest. Sanae and Theia were the most into it. Seeing the sparks fly between them, Koutarou couldn’t help feeling there would be a fierce battle ahead.

The eating championship for the festival had three stages: the preliminaries, the semi-finals, and the finals. Today would be the preliminaries, and plenty of participants filled the venue. It seemed that the grand prize had attracted a lot of attention.

“This is quite impressive. There must be at least a hundred people here,” Theia said as she scanned the crowd.

“We’re going to win this, so that makes us the most impressive,” Sanae said with a proud smile.

“Ha! I like your style, Sanae.”

“Heeheehee...”

Despite being faced with such a large number of competitors, neither Theia nor Sanae seemed to have lost their nerve. If anything, their fighting spirits

were burning even brighter.

“By the way, what’s being served for the preliminaries?”

Koutarou’s interest, however, was the menu rather than the number of participants. Curious about the food herself, Yurika had already looked it up.

“It looks like its dishes made with potatoes. Apparently the local Kisshou potato is going to be cooked various ways by the Japanese restaurant and the hamburger joint.”

“With so many participants, they’re probably planning on keeping costs low that way. There are plenty of variations, too. Stewed potatoes, deep-fried potatoes, roasted potatoes...” Kiriha added.

The more expensive dishes would be reserved for when there were fewer participants. For the preliminaries, they’d be better off sticking to cheaper ingredients that were prepared nicely by skilled chefs, or just sticking to familiar, well-loved comfort foods.

“I just hope the oily food is served later on,” said Harumi.

“It would be boring to have too many people drop out at the start, so that’ll probably be the case,” offered Clan.

“Goodness... I never thought about that. There sure is a lot to take into consideration with an event like this.”

“If it involves being sly somehow, you can always count on Clan to know her stuff,” Koutarou butted in.

“Shut it, you!”

Harumi and Clan, who both had modest appetites, were interested in the menu for different reasons than Koutarou and Yurika. It seemed, however, that the heavier foods wouldn’t be served until after they were already full.

“Potatoes, huh? Those are surprisingly caloric, aren’t they...?”

Shizuka had a slightly different worry than Harumi and Clan.

“One hundred grams of potato has about eighty kilocalories.”

Being data-oriented even when it came to cooking, Ruth immediately had an

answer. Potatoes have a good deal of starch in them, so they're calorie-dense compared to other vegetables.

"And they're great when they're greasy..."

"Yes. They're excellent with butter or when fried in oil."

"Aww..."

Restraining herself from eating something delicious was hard for Shizuka, but the consequences of indulging herself too much would be worse. As someone who loved food but was also worried about her weight, Shizuka was caught between a rock and a hard place.

"If you don't like it, then why not drop out now?"

"No! The problem is that I *do* like it!"

"My... Well, that is difficult..."

Ruth, on the other hand, had been told to put on a little more weight by the people around her, so all she could do was pity the poor Shizuka.

"Hey, everyone, it looks like its starting."

Maki saw the staff starting to guide participants into the municipal gym being used as the venue. It seemed all the preparations, including the cooking, were now complete.

"You look like you're having fun, Aika-san," Koutarou commented.

Though he was curious as to why she had a smile on her face, he thought it was good when she took interest in things.

"Do I?"

"You didn't realize it?"

"No..."

Unaware that she was smiling, Maki began curiously touching her own face. Seeing Maki like that, Koutarou couldn't help chuckling.

"Pffft..."

"Why are you laughing all of a sudden?"

With her hands still on her face, Maki cocked her head some. In that moment, it was truly impossible to tell that she had once been an evil magical girl or that she grew up under such cruel, harsh conditions.

“It’s nothing. More importantly, we should get a move on too,” said Koutarou.

“He’s right! Let’s go! We have to scout out our rivals!” Theia added.

“Maki, you try your hardest too! Our sukiyaki is counting on it!” Sanae added in turn.

“Ah, y-yes, I’ll do my best.”

Koutarou chose not to tell Maki why he’d laughed because he felt it didn’t need to be put into words. Maki was still curious about it, but she never got the chance to ask because Sanae and Theia whisked her away. Though she herself was unaware of it, that was exactly what she needed, and that was why Koutarou had laughed.

The preliminaries started with lighter fare, just as Clan had predicted. The first dish was imoni, a type of potato and meat soup, which had been cooked by the long-established Japanese restaurant from the shopping street. It was a large serving, but most participants were able to finish it, including Harumi and Clan who couldn’t eat a lot, and Shizuka who didn’t want to eat a lot.

“I did it! I finished first!” Harumi cheered.

“Ugh, to think I’d lose to Sakuraba-senpai!” Shizuka groaned.

“Well, I expected to come in last...” Clan sighed.

Clan, Shizuka, and Harumi were holding their own eating contest to see who could finish the first dish the fastest, and to everyone’s surprise, Harumi came out on top. She wasn’t a particularly fast eater, but Clan was completely inexperienced with trying to eat quickly, and Shizuka spent time carefully chewing her food to keep herself from eating too much. As a result, Harumi was able to edge them both out.

Following the imoni was a potato salad. It was made so that it would be light and easy to eat, but being an eating contest, the portion was heaping. It would

be the round Clan, Shizuka, and Harumi all dropped out.

“This is the first time I’ve eaten so much of the same food... Ugh...” Clan moaned.

“I just hope I haven’t gained too much weight...” Shizuka fretted.

“Everyone, please don’t force yourselves,” Harumi offered, trying to reassure them.

But they weren’t the only ones suffering. Other participants were starting to drop out too, and the girls who had joined mostly for fun were next on the chopping block. The third dish, home fries, sealed it for them.

“I don’t think I can finish this one...” said Kiriha.

“Same here. They taste quite good, so I might try making some at home, but...” said Ruth.

“I wanted to go a little longer, but... I’m almost at my limit too...” said Maki.

All three girls had to put their forks down. Kiriha and Ruth only made it about halfway through their mountains of potatoes. Maki managed to finish all of hers, but she bowed out before even seeing the next dish. It was a turning point for a lot of the other participants as well. They were starting to drop out one after another, leaving only the hardcore eaters.

“Wahaha! I have abandoned manners for the sake of victory, and now I am unstoppable!”

Theia was one of the participants still in the running. Being as active as she was, she was used to eating a lot in order to keep herself fueled. It rarely ever seemed that way because her table manners were so refined, but she had forsaken them for this special occasion. Her plan was to eat as much as possible as fast as possible before her satiety center could kick in.

“You’re good, Theia! But I won’t lose either!”

Hot on her heels was Sanae. With the large amount of spiritual energy that circulated through her body, she used up a lot of energy in a different sense than Theia. As a result, she normally ate a lot of food too. The only reason she was slightly behind Theia now was because the potato salad had green peas

and carrot in it.

“I have to eat as much as I can to recover my costs!”

Yurika was also putting up a good fight. She normally got poor mileage and rarely had the money to splurge on extra food, so she was determined to glut herself as best she could. While she wasn’t on the same level as Theia and Sanae, she was still up there with the best of them now.

“...There was no fee to participate, so there’s no cost to recover.”

Koutarou was a growing boy, and despite what the others had going for them, he was used to eating far more than they were. Moreover, he’d intentionally had a light dinner the night before and skipped out on breakfast that morning. Thanks to that, he was good and hungry by the time the contest rolled around and was able to eat at a faster pace than normal. He was among the top competitors and got to the fourth dish even faster than Theia did.

“But having this come out now is rough...”

The fourth dish was fried potatoes. Deep-fried foods were the heaviest fare yet, and the serving was enormous. On top of that, it was the fourth round. Such a heavy dish on top of everything that was already in his stomach was torturous. Even Koutarou couldn’t help but groan. Theia, on the other hand, had a fearless smile on her face.

“Would you like to give up?”

Theia had just finished her home fries, but even when the deep-fried potatoes were set in front of her, her confidence didn’t waver. Koutarou knew that she was just putting up a front, but it was still an impressive display of willpower.

“All you have to do is lower your head and say ‘I’ve lost. I entrust the rest to you, Your Highness’! Wahahaha!”

“Yeah, you can just leave this to us, Koutarou! I’ll definitely let you eat some of the sukiyaki I make with the prize money!”

About ten seconds after Theia, Sanae finished her own home fries. As a rather guileless girl, it showed on her face that she was having trouble getting down the deep-fried potatoes, but she didn’t let it slow her down any. She was a lot

more fired up than usual.

“You idiots! The only way I’m going down is in history! A real man would never give up here!”

“Well said! I’ll hold you to that!”

“You’re cool, Koutarou! But this win is going to go to yours truly, Sanae-chan!”

“Everyone is so amazing... I don’t stand a chance...”

Yurika was still putting up a fight. She had been eating at the same pace since the contest started, but she showed no sign of slowing down. She was good at eating, just not quickly. Because of that, she still had room to spare, but she couldn’t keep up with Koutarou and the others. Koutarou, Theia, and Sanae were going to leave her in the dust.

In order to pass the preliminaries, all four dishes had to be consumed. If too many participants succeeded, they would take the top twenty who finished fastest. Only sixteen managed to complete the challenge, however, so timing wasn’t an issue. The sixteen semi-finalists included Koutarou, Theia, Sanae, and Yurika.

“Ohoho! Having four of us make it into the final sixteen is a fantastic result,” Theia offered in praise.

“It looks like we’re the only girls,” Sanae remarked.

“You guys are just special,” Koutarou teased.

“Even me?!” Yurika exclaimed.

“...No, you’re just greedy.”

“That’s mean!”

Aside from Theia, Yurika, and Sanae, all of the remaining participants were men. Moreover, they were all big guys that looked like they could really handle their food. Because of that, the three young girls stood out a great deal. The whole crowd had their eyes on them.

“Hey, it’s you!”

Out of the blue, one of the other participants approached Koutarou and the others. He easily weighed over a hundred kilograms, and each step he took caused the gym floor to shake a little.

“Is that someone you know, Koutarou?” Sanae asked.

“Nope. What about you, Theia?” Koutarou asked in turn.

“I don’t know him either. Isn’t he one of your cosplay friends, Yurika?”

“He’s not. I don’t know anyone like that.”

As the large man was unfamiliar to all of them, Koutarou and the others anxiously looked around. They figured he must have been calling out to someone else nearby, but he walked right up to them. Seeing that they were clearly confused, he offered a bright, friendly smile.

“I guess you don’t recognize me like this, huh? It’s me, you know. Remember me?”

“Oh!”

Getting a look at the man up close and getting to hear his voice, the lightbulb came on for Koutarou. It wasn’t until he introduced himself, however, that the others caught on too.

“I’m Daisaku, the Sun Ranger’s Yellow Shine.”

Daisaku whispered the last part so that only Koutarou and the others could hear. Since he was part of a secret organization, he couldn’t discuss it too openly.

“Oh, of course! What a strange place to run into you again!” exclaimed Theia.

“If the yellow one is here, does that mean there are bad guys around?” Sanae asked.

Sanae seemed a little worried. The Sun Rangers was an organization meant to combat aliens, the underground dwellers, and other potential threats. If Daisaku was present, it might mean he was on a mission.

“Pffft, yeah. Theia’s here.”

“Are you trying to pick a fight with me, Koutarou?! If I’m a bad guy, that means you’re my henchman!”

“Huh...”

“Ahaha, I’m actually here off duty. I’m good at eating, and I’ve got my eye on that prize money.”

Daisaku started to explain himself as a way to casually break up Theia and Koutarou’s glaring match. He seemed to be as considerate as ever.

“So a powerful rival has appeared...” Yurika mumbled.

“Sure looks like it. I feel like the yellow guy *is* always eating something...” Sanae mumbled too.

“We won’t lose! Everyone, let’s put our best foot forward here!”

While Koutarou and the others felt that it probably should have been the Red Shine that came to challenge them since he was the leader, it didn’t change the fact that they had some stiff competition now.

The semi-finals were held at noon the following day, with the finals later that evening. While it was a pretty tight schedule, it was only inevitable considering it was a weekend festival. The preliminaries had been held on their own day because with so many participants, the preparations were a serious undertaking. With fewer contestants in the semi-finals and finals, that cut down on the work that needed to be done and they could be scheduled on the same day. Very few contestants would have been able to return for a third day anyway as it would be a Monday, so it worked out well to wrap things up on the weekend, even if it meant the contestants would be eating that much more in a single day.

“...And you ate a ton despite knowing that?! Are you an idiot?!” Koutarou roared.

“B-But... the kelp mochi were so delicious!” Yurika whimpered.

“To be honest, I had a hard time passing them up myself,” Theia admitted.

“But why would you eat food you didn’t need to on the day of an eating

contest?”

“But, but... I could eat as many as I wanted for free!”

“You idiot!”

While waiting for the semi-finals to start, Koutarou and the others decided to check out the rest of the festival. Apparently it was a mistake. She’d starved herself all morning, so Yurika couldn’t resist free mochi. By the time Koutarou and the others realized what she was doing and tried to stop her, she’d already gobbled down a good many of them.

“I guess that makes you a write-off...” Koutarou sighed.

“You’re an idiot. I always knew you were an idiot, but I had no idea you were this much of one...” Theia scolded, shaking her head.

“We’ll just have to do this, just the three of us! Get ready for a fight!” Sanae cheered.

“I’m sorry! I’m sorry, okay?! I’m sorry for being born!”

It was clear that Yurika was out of the competition. The mochi in her stomach were expanding as they absorbed moisture even now. And with the semi-finals right around the corner, there was no time to starve her again. Day two of the contest hadn’t even officially started yet, but Yurika’s fate was sealed.

Starting with the semi-finals of the eating competition, the menu would be popular dishes from the restaurants of the shopping street. Based on a vote held beforehand, the fourth to tenth most popular dishes would be served this round. And since the finals wouldn’t be very interesting if all the contestants were full already, the semi-finals would largely be a contest of speed. The four fastest contestants to finish all six dishes would advance to the finals, where the top three most popular dishes would be served.

“Hnnngh... If only I hadn’t been taken in by the lure of that mochi... This looks so much better...”

“Everyone, let’s just forget about Yurika.”

“Please don’t forget about meee!”

“Don’t worry, Koutarou. Just leave this to me! Yours truly, Sanae-chan, will be the champion!”

“You think a princess of Forthorthe would go down that easily? I will be the champion!”

“Yeah, okay. Let’s stay positive. Nothing good will come from dwelling on the past. What’s done is done. Yurika’s dead meat, but we all still have a chance.”

“The round hasn’t even started yet! Waaah!”

Now that it was the semi-finals, the audience was really filling in and there were considerably more people than before. As such, the sixteen remaining participants were gathering in a waiting room before going out in front of the crowd. Since it was just a segregated area of the gym being used as the venue, however, it was a rather generous space. It was more than big enough to fit all sixteen of them. Once Koutarou and the girls entered, Daisaku of the Sun Squad immediately called out to them.

“Hey, guys! You’re all looking rarin’ to go.”

Daisaku had heard them before they came into the room, and while he hadn’t been able to make out what they were saying, he could tell how excited they were.

Grrrowl...

“Heh, sounds like you’re ready to go too, Daisaku-san.”

“My, how embarrassing!”

Daisaku’s growling stomach told Koutarou and the others just how motivated he was. Everyone knew that he had a massive appetite, and if his stomach was empty—unlike Yurika’s—then there was no telling how much he’d be able to eat.

“But I am serious about that prize. I’ll do whatever it takes to win it, even if I have to embarrass myself a little.”

As he said those words, the aura about Daisaku changed a little bit. He was still feeling bashful, but it seemed to be for a different reason. Sanae picked up on the subtle change, and grinned as she nudged him with her elbow.

“Ah, I see! Got a girl, huh? Need some funds for a date, do you?”

“Oh, was I that obvious?”

“Eeheehee!”

“Hey, Sanae, don’t just go reading people’s minds like that. I’m sorry about her, Daisaku-san.”

Suspecting that Sanae had used her powers on him, Koutarou hurriedly apologized to Daisaku.

“It wasn’t anything like that. Jeez, you have no faith in me...” Sanae said, shaking her head.

“Even I could tell that. You’re just dense, Koutarou,” Theia added.

“...I couldn’t tell,” said Yurika as she slumped her shoulders.

But Sanae told the truth. It was her female intuition that picked up on the change in Daisaku’s emotions. She hadn’t had to use spiritual energy at all. Pouting with her cheeks puffed out, Sanae crawled up onto Koutarou’s back. She wrapped her arms around him, planted her chin on his head, and demanded an apology.

“So what do you have to say for yourself?”

“I’m sorry, Sanae.”

“I need three times the sincerity.”

“I am very sorry, Lady Sanae.”

“Very good. I forgive you.”

Seeing Koutarou and Sanae’s endearing back and forth, Daisaku smiled sweetly. He wanted to be able to do something like that with his girlfriend.

“So, what’s this girlfriend of yours like?” Theia asked.

She was quite interested in who might be dating the Sun Rangers’ Yellow Shine, but to be polite, she didn’t ask directly who it was. Instead, she kept her questions more general.

“Well, she’s a sensitive and cute girl, but she’s often misunderstood and tends

to lose out...”

“And you just couldn’t leave her be, could you?” Yurika asked.

A fan of all kinds of romance thanks to shoujo manga, even Yurika could understand Daisaku’s sincere and humble love.

“Couldn’t leave her be, huh? I’m not sure. I can’t say there was any specific reason I was drawn to her...”

“That’s just how people’s feelings are,” Theia said. “There isn’t always reason to it, exactly.”

“Heh, then yeah. I’d say it was probably because I couldn’t leave her be.”

Daisaku nodded. He had strong feelings for his girlfriend, and they were difficult to try and sort out. But in the end, what it really amounted to was that he wanted to be with her.

“And you want some funds for dates with this girlfriend, huh? Sounds like you can’t afford to lose, Daisaku-san,” Koutarou chimed in.

“That’s right. I’m not planning on letting anyone else beat me. Including you guys.”

“Well, the same goes for me, so here’s to the both of us!”

“Yeah!”

Koutarou and Daisaku bumped fists. As men, they had something of a mutual understand between each other in this situation. On top of that, they knew that they would both be each other’s real competition.

The menu for the semi-finals consisted of six dishes: beef stew from the long-established Western restaurant, takoyaki with onions from the takoyaki shop at the entrance to the arcade, katsudon from the pork cutlet restaurant, yakitori from the old chicken restaurant, twice-cooked pork from the Chinese restaurant, and a kebab sandwich from the fusion restaurant. They were all popular dishes from well known establishments on the shopping street. The participants would be competing to see who could eat all six dishes the fastest, and the top four would move on to the finals.

“I can’t eat another bite... Auuugh, but it’s so good... If only I hadn’t eaten all that mochi...”

The first to drop out was Yurika. Since she was already full, she just barely managed to get through the beef stew. It was the second dish, the takoyaki, that stopped her in her tracks. She could only eat about half of them. Taking all the mochi she’d eaten into consideration, however, Yurika still managed to eat an impressive amount of food. Her only mistake was eating *before* the competition.

“Too bad.”

“The exit’s over there.”

“Yeah, go tell Ruth and the others that the rest of us will be here a while longer.”

“Can’t you all be at least a little bit more nice?!”

“Don’t talk to us. We’re busy here.”

“Hnnngh... Life is so cruel... Waaah!”

Unfortunately, Yurika’s forfeiting didn’t win her any sympathy from Koutarou and the other girls. She had to take the walk off the stage by herself, lonely and defeated.

“...Are you sure it was okay to send her off like that, Koutarou-kun?”

“She only has herself to blame for this.”

“I see... She’s got a different air about her, but she’s a bit like Megu-chan.”

Even though one competitor was now out of the picture, neither Koutarou nor Daisaku slowed down any. If anything, they were picking up speed as one of their favorite dishes—the katsudon—was served.

“...Urk!”

However, that proved to be a mistake. Desperate not to lose to Daisaku, Koutarou was shoveling his katsudon down when a grain of rice got stuck in his throat.

“Hak! Hrrgh! Hak!”

Wham, wham!

Koutarou pounded on his chest in an attempt to choke down the rogue rice. Unfortunately, it didn't help any. He then reluctantly resorted to reaching out for his glass of mineral water and gulping some down.

"...Phwah!"

Thankfully, that managed to flush down the rice and Koutarou was spared.

"Are you okay, Koutarou-kun?"

"Yeah, I think so."

"Don't scare me like that, Koutarou!"

"That's what happens when you just throw food down your throat like that."

"Yeah, I guess I'll be more careful."

Koutarou was fine now, but the ordeal had totally thrown him off his groove. He couldn't help eating slower afterwards because he was worried about choking again. On top of that, it felt like the food in his stomach was absorbing the water he'd drunk, expanding and making him feel full faster. In a race to make it to the top four, all of those things were serious handicaps.

"Koutarou's going to have it rough from here on out."

"It looks like we're going to have to do it ourselves then!"

"It sure does!"

Realizing that Koutarou was falling behind, Sanae and Theia began to pick up the slack. They were both way behind Daisaku, but there were still three spots available in the top four.

"Defeat is not an option for the royal families of Forthorthe!"

"My innocent maiden heart will lead me to victory... And that prize!"

Neither girl was willing to give up just because Koutarou was faltering. With victory and the prize in sight, they kicked their eating into high gear to try and catch up to Daisaku.

The first to qualify for the finals was Daisaku, who remained strong from start to finish. Second was a local fisherman, and third and fourth were Theia and Sanae respectively. Koutarou admirably came in fifth, but couldn't catch up to the others. His hiccup in the middle of the race ended up costing him in the end.

"Sorry, you two."

"We have no intentions of holding it against you. Just leave the rest to us."

"Too bad, Koutarou! All you can do now is cheer for me!"

Koutarou apologized to Theia and Sanae, but neither one of them seemed to be upset. He'd simply gotten unlucky, and they didn't blame him for that. Unlike Yurika who had set herself up for failure, Koutarou's mishap was no fault of his own.

"Besides, if we look at this objectively, even if you had qualified, that would have meant one of the two of us didn't."

"She's right. Only the first two of us to finish would have moved on anyway."

Even if Koutarou had kept up with Daisaku, the fisherman still would have finished before Theia and Sanae. Only one of them would have been able to move on, but either way it worked out, they still had two of their group in the finals. In that sense, Koutarou's defeat wasn't so much of a tragic loss.

"But it is true we lost our best chance at winning this. We'll have to come up with countermeasures immediately."

"You'll help us with that, won't you, Koutarou?"

"Sure."

With Koutarou out of the race, however, there was a question of who would be able to defeat Daisaku. He was without a doubt their biggest competition now, so Theia and Sanae had to try to come up with something that might give them an edge.

If they'd wanted, they could have used nanomachines to physically decompose the food already in their stomachs. But realizing that it would be

unfair for them to use something like that that no one else on Earth could, they ultimately decided against it. Everyone had a certain amount of access to spiritual energy, however, so they decided that using that would be all right. But since having Sanae go all out still seemed like it would be a little extreme, they limited her help to improving their circulation.

“Sanae-chan special move: Astral Projection Feint!”

“What the heck? That’s unfair, Sanae!”

“Why don’t you use your own ‘Theiamillis-chan Washing Board Defense’ then?”

“Why, you little... Want me to kill you first?!”

In the end, Theia and Sanae mostly relied on exercising to try and work up an appetite again. They ran, jumped around, threw balls, practiced martial arts, and anything else they could think of to keep themselves in motion. Koutarou tagged along as something of a coach and for moral support.

“All right, maybe we should call it quits for now.”

There was a five hour break scheduled between the semi-finals and the finale of the competition. After spending four of those hours exercising with Theia and Sanae, he suggested that they give it a rest.

“Why? We still have time,” Sanae asked.

“She’s right. We need to use up as many calories as possible,” said Theia.

With an hour still remaining, they wanted to continue to exercise for a while longer. Koutarou, however, shook his head.

“Just cool your jets. Do you really want to eat right after exercising? And you want some time to shower and change too, don’t you?”

Theia and Sanae were concerned about trying to use as many calories as possible, but taking the way their bodies really worked into consideration, they would be better off to take a break before trying to eat again. And since he was constantly told to be more tactful, Koutarou was trying to show some consideration in telling them that.

“Now that you mention it, that’s true. I guess we do need some time to cool

down.”

“Aww, are you saying you want to see us up on the stage in cute clothes and makeup?”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“You don’t have to be shy. The truth is that you’d be happy to see Theia and me all dressed up, isn’t it?”

“Don’t worry. I shall present myself as a lovely princess you will be proud to serve.”

“I said that wasn’t it!”

Though Theia and Sanae had initially objected to Koutarou’s idea, they agreed to it after hearing him out. They both knew that nothing good would come from overdoing it.

Before they knew it, it was almost time for the finals. As Koutarou had been defeated in the semi-finals, only Sanae and Theia would be competing this time around. They felt a little anxious going up on the stage without him, but that anxiety was eased a little knowing another friendly face would be their. That said, they couldn’t exactly relax. That friendly face—Daisaku—was actually their biggest competition.

“I won’t let you win just because you’re girls.”

“I wouldn’t have it any other way! You’ll be a worthy foe to defeat!”

“Yeah, this cute girl is still going to win! That’ll get the crowd really fired up!”

“Great! Let’s all give this everything we’ve got.”

“Yeah!”

“Agreed!”

After greeting Daisaku, the two girls took their seats at the table on the stage. Internally, they were still getting themselves pumped up. While Daisaku was their greatest foe, they were competing against each other too.

“I’m going to win this time! That sukiyaki will belong to me!”

“Not a chance! I’m taking that prize home for us!”

Sanae and Theia were enemies when they first met, and even now that they got along, they both stubbornly refused to back down when it came to winning. But it wasn’t just because they were somewhat childish or because they were both sore losers. It was because they had fun going all out when they played against each other. So even as they challenged each other as rivals, they were friends above all else.

“Now then, the event you’ve all been waiting for: the final round of the eating championship in honor of the 500th birthday of Haruyama Shounosuke!”

Just as Sanae and Theia sat down, the announcer’s voice echoed through the gym. The time was now 7PM, the hour the finals were scheduled to start. The event kicked off with the announcer explaining how things were going to go down.

“Now, let’s go over the rules one more time!”

For the finals, the three most popular dishes from the shopping street would be served. The winner would be whoever could finish all three first.

“And now let’s introduce our contestants! First is Higashihongan Sanae, who finished fourth in the semi-finals! Where did she even put all that food? Next is...”

The announcer introduced the four finalists as they climbed up to the stage. As they were two cute girls in the final round of an eating contest, Sanae and Theia in particular got the spotlight shone on them. It seemed to get the crowd excited, and it was clear they were drawing a lot of attention.

“It sounds like the crowd can’t wait for things to get started, and let me tell you, neither can I! Let’s see the first dish!”

With the rules established and the participants in place, the announcer indicated a large screen set up on the stage. As he did, it flashed to a picture of the first dish to be served: beef curry from the curry shop.

“I’ve got this!”

Upon seeing the picture, Daisaku was convinced of his victory. He loved curry.

Even better, it was beef curry, which was his absolute favorite. He visited the shop on the shopping street to have it almost every day.

When the announcer gave the signal to start moments later, Daisaku claimed an early lead.

“Curry might as well be a drink! I can win this!”

Daisaku ate the curry like it was a soup. It wouldn’t be an exaggeration to say he was literally drinking it. It was only a matter of minutes before he gulped down the double serving. By then, the other three contestants had only finished about a third of theirs. It was clear to them now why Daisaku had been so confident.

“That guy’s an animal...”

“Is his stomach a black hole...?”

Theia and Sanae were mesmerized as they watched Daisaku wolf down his food. Getting distracted like that was a fatal mistake in a race of speed, but they couldn’t help it. They could barely even believe their eyes.

“Your Highness, Sanae-sama! You have to keep eating!” Ruth called to them from the crowd.

“Huwah?! Sanae!”

“O-Oh, right!”

With that, they snapped back to reality and quickly got back to eating. Thanks to Ruth, they weren’t distracted for too long.

“There are still two dishes left! We still have time to turn this around!”

“Let’s do this, Theia!”

While Theia and Sanae were rivals, they still felt like they were working together to defeat Daisaku. They cheered each other on as they dug in.

“All right. Looks like the second dish is going to be pasta, another favorite of mine. At this rate, I really might win...”

As the girls were eating away at their curries, someone brought Daisaku the

second dish. It was a waiter in the uniform of the popular Italian restaurant from the shopping street, so he naturally assumed it was pasta. That was a good sign. Since it was another of his favorite foods, it seemed the second round of the finals would be smooth sailing too.

“O-Oh no! I forgot!”

However, the moment the dish was set in front of him, Daisaku went pale.

“Their most popular dish is squid ink pasta!”

Even though Daisaku loved food in general, there were still a few foods he couldn’t stand. Squid ink was one of them. He didn’t care for its unique taste or dark color at all.

“Bad luck for me, huh? Ugh...”

In any normal popularity vote, squid ink pasta would never score very high. In Kisshouharukaze City, however, it was something of a local seasonal specialty, and it just so happened to be in season right now. That’s why it was on everyone’s mind at the time of the popularity poll for the contest. If it had been any other time of year, Daisaku would have been spared the nightmare on the plate before him.

“Sanae, Daisaku’s stopped!”

“You’re right! Now’s our chance!”

While Daisaku had gorged on the beef curry, he was picking at the squid ink pasta like a little girl would green vegetables. Theia and Sanae saw their opportunity to catch up with him.

“Hahahaha, looks like fate has smiled on me!”

But the girls weren’t the only ones that were picking up momentum. Upon learning that squid ink pasta was the second dish, the remaining contestant began eating his curry even faster.

“Oh, right, he’s a fisherman!”

“Tch, I guess he won’t let us win so easily!”

There was no way a local fisherman would dislike squid or squid ink. Even if

he didn’t particularly like them, he’d at least be used to them. So while the dish was a nightmare for Daisaku, it was a dream come true for the fisherman.

As everyone reached the second dish, the contest seemed to become anyone’s game. Daisaku, who had taken an early lead, was now struggling with the squid ink pasta and had fallen behind. The fisherman had jumped to the head of the pack, and Theia and Sanae were vying for second place. The margin between all four competitors was slim, so it looked like any one of them could still take the lead.

“I never expected this!”

“Stop talking and keep eating!”

While Theia and Sanae seemed as determined as ever, their petite, girlish frames were working against them. They were both gradually reaching their limits. Whether or not they could still win now depended on their guts as much as their stomachs. It was mind over matter from here on out. And even with their mouths smeared black from the inky sauce, both girls clearly had fire burning in their eyes.

“All right, bring me the next dish!”

The fisherman, however, was the first one to finish the pasta. It was somewhat expected, but he still seemed to have some room left for the next dish.

“Local fisherman Sasayama is the first to reach the third dish! That’s right, ladies and gentleman, the final round!”

The announcer’s excited voice echoed through the venue as a waiter delivered the third and final dish to the fisherman.

“To think it would be this... I was wondering why it hadn’t appeared yet...”

The third dish was ramen. There was no way ramen wouldn’t rank on popular dish poll. But while everyone had expected it, not everyone had expected it to come out last. This ramen in particular was the greasy variety that made abundant use of the fatty part of another local specialty, Harukaze pork.

“Chairman, you had no intention of letting me win, did you?!”

“I-It’s just a coincidence! It wasn’t intentional!”

Such a heavy, oily dish was tough on an older gentleman, especially when he already had a full stomach. Seeing it, he was sure the competition had been fixed against him.

“Sanae!”

“Yeah!”

Theia and Sanae forced down the last of their pasta. The pasta had stopped Daisaku, and the ramen had stopped the fisherman. The girls knew gunning through the ramen would be their last shot at victory.

“Oh no!”

“I can’t be picky now! I just have to eat it, like it or not!”

As Theia and Sanae broke into the last leg of the race, the fisherman and Daisaku desperately tried to eat faster. It was quite a daunting task, however, as they were both forcing themselves to eat things they really didn’t want to.

“I-I give up...”

Before long, the fishermen raised the white flag. He’d managed to get down half of the ramen, but his stomach couldn’t take any more. His old body got the better of him in the end.

“Theia, that guy just surrendered!”

“Now we just have to finish this to seal the deal!”

“Not so fast, you two!”

But just as the fisherman gave up, Daisaku finished his squid ink pasta. He’d had to put on the brakes for the pasta because he hated it so much, but he’d be going at full speed again on the third dish. Daisaku liked ramen almost as much as he did curry. He practically survived off of the two dishes. In fact, he may have even been made of them. So it was no surprise when he started to gobble down the ramen as fast as he had the curry.

“Yellow guy!”

“So you’ve caught up, beast!”

“You can practically drink ramen too!”

Sanae and Theia had already eaten up half of their ramen bowls, but Daisaku was quickly catching up. He was eating so fast that it easily looked like he might overtake them.

“We have to hurry, Sanae! There’s no time to spare!”

“I’ll definitely win! Sanae-chan will be the victor!”

“Megu-chan, I’ll definitely win and get those date funds!”

Daisaku dropped something of a bomb in the heat of the moment, but Theia and Sanae were so focused on their bowls that they hardly heard him. Right now, all they could think about was finishing the ramen in front of them. This was the home stretch.

“Maiden power!”

“The royal families will not be so easily defeated!”

“Megu-chaaan!”

The match was settled within a few minutes, but to the three contestants, it felt like forever. Each noodle was like its own battle.

“It’s oveeer!”

The three of them finished so close together that no one was really sure who’d actually won. They anxiously awaited the announcer to declare the victor.

“Our winner is none other than Higashihongan Sanae-san! A splendid victory against all odds!”

In the end, Sanae was victorious. She’d managed to drink up her broth and set her bowl back down on the table just moments before the other two.

“I did it!”

When her name was called, Sanae threw her hands up in the air in an explosive expression of celebratory joy.

Sanae's victory was in large part thanks to her determination. She simply wanted it more than the other two contestants. Strictly speaking, it could have been said that her healthy body and spiritual energy made the difference, but in the end, it was sheer willpower that took her to the finish line.

"I'm sorry, Megu-chan. I almost did it..."

"It's okay. You did your best, Daisaku-kun. Luck just wasn't on your side."

"Thank you, Megu-chan."

"Besides, look at how happy that girl is. You wouldn't want to take that smile away from her, now would you?"

Daisaku had come in second. He had done his best for his girlfriend, but he had fallen short right at the end. He hated squid ink even more than ever now. It was bad enough as it was, but now it had cost him his date funds.

"Hahh, I guess I lost..."

Theia had finished third. While she had performed excellently, she had the smallest stomach. Ounce for ounce, she probably put up the best fight, and if her size hadn't been an issue, she would have come out on top.

"But this might be for the better..."

While Theia was disappointed when she first heard the results, she didn't feel that way now as she watched what Sanae did after the award ceremony.

"Koutarou, Koutarou, look! It's the stuffed doll I won!"

"Oh, wow, that thing really is big!"

Sanae had been going on and on about sukiyaki, but the first thing she did when she finally won was show off the bonus prize, the giant stuffed Haruyama Shounosuke doll, to Koutarou. Theia understood exactly why, too. This made up for not being able to win one out of the crane game at the arcade.

"That's right! And it's proof of my victory, so praise me with everything you've got!"

"You did good, Sanae."

"With a more manly face!"

“Well done, my brother.”

“And one for the stuffed doll!”

“You’ve done well to come this far, Shounosuke-sama.”

“Heeheehee!”

Sanae also wanted to boast to Koutarou and have him praise her for winning the stuffed doll on her own. To Sanae, it didn’t really feel like she’d won until Koutarou acknowledged her.

“It’s no wonder she won, I guess. Koutarou already praised me for winning my stuffed doll...”

Seeing Sanae hugging the stuffed doll in such high spirits, Theia was able to honestly accept her defeat. It was a good fight, but Sanae had had more on the line.

“But Sanae... where are we going to put this?”

“In the room. Like right in the middle!”

“Hey now, that thing’s life-size!”

“It’ll be a reminder of Sanae-chan’s love and greatness every day!”

“I feel like all it’s going to do every day is get in the way...”

“Deal with it! Bask in my glory!”

“Hey, you know what? I have a good idea,” Theia offered.

“Yeah?”

“On the day after tomorrow, let’s ask Clan and Ruth to—”

While Theia had accepted her defeat this time, it didn’t mean she was going to back down. Sanae didn’t want that either. Her sparkling eyes said it all as she looked to Theia, and that’s why Theia had no trouble jumping into the fun with her again, competition or not.



# Episode 4: The School Exam of Love and Courage

After reappearing after two thousand years to save the empress and protect the country, the Blue Knight became a living legend in Forthorthe. The people hung on his every word, and he became quite the fuss among the citizenry. They celebrated and admired him for just about everything, and that was precisely what made Koutarou so apprehensive.

“Koutarou, stock in that ice cream shop you secretly visited yesterday has gone through the roof. It seems it’s become famous overnight for being worthy of the Blue Knight’s attention.”

“They found out that you visited, ho!”

“The people of Forthorthe are keeping a watchful eye on you, ho!”

Kiriha approached Koutarou with a digital newspaper in hand. He was currently sitting on a sofa in the living room of the imperial palace’s guesthouse. He was trying to take it easy, but upon hearing Kiriha’s words, he stood up with a frown on his face.

“That’s no good...”

“What?! I thought it was delicious!”

“Sanae, I didn’t mean it like that.”

The influence the Blue Knight had by merely existing was simply too powerful. Whatever Koutarou said or did had an impact on the actions and opinions of the people of Forthorthe. It was an ice cream shop this time, but the taxi he’d used the other day had been a problem too. The company took it out of commission and put it on display.

But even those were just small, everyday occurrences compared to what happened after Koutarou bought out DKI. Now that it was known as the company owned by the Blue Knight, its stock price, sales, and credit line had all skyrocketed without any change whatsoever to the business. Granted,

Koutarou's practically infinite financial strength also played a big part in that.

The success his image brought to businesses like the ice cream shop, the taxi company, and DKI was one thing, but how it affected their competitors was another. Their sales would come to a grinding halt because the people of Forthorthe only wanted to patronize the same places the Blue Knight did. As such, he inadvertently had an enormous impact on the economy of Forthorthe, and he was deeply concerned about that. So when he said it was a bad thing, he certainly didn't mean the ice cream.

"Then what are you talking about?" Sanae asked, confused.

"We really should be getting back to Earth. If we make this big of a commotion every time I do something, Forthorthe's gonna end up a mess," Koutarou answered somewhat solemnly.

*"You can't blame them, Blue Knight. That's just how important you are to them."*

"Uncle is right. You're their hero after all, Satomi-kun."

"That said, we can't just leave things as they are."

"But Maki-chan, won't Satomi-san be able to earn a lot of money this way?"

"I don't think there's much point of Satomi-kun earning more than he already does. If he asked for his full salary, he could already bankrupt the country several times over..."

After carefully considering the position he found himself in, Koutarou decided he should quickly leave Forthorthe. Taking a cue from the legend of the Blue Knight, he thought it would be in everyone's best interest. He knew the people of Forthorthe would disagree and beg for him to stay, but he couldn't look the other way when he knew what kind of trouble that would really cause.

"Well, now that that's decided..." Koutarou said as he turned to walk away.

"Where are you going, Satomi-kun?" Harumi asked.

"To tell Theia and the others that we're leaving. Please start getting ready to leave, Sakuraba-senpai. Same goes for the rest of you."

"You mean right now?"

“Don’t you think we should get out of here as soon as possible?”

“Well, yes, but... what about the ceremony and party tomorrow? Wouldn’t it be better to leave after that?”

“I’m worried the ceremony and party will only make things worse.”

“If you’ve thought things through that much, then I have no objections. Everyone, let’s get ready to go home.”

The other girls readily agreed to Harumi’s request. To them, Earth was where they belonged. It was their home, and they were looking forward to returning. They were all starting to miss school and Corona House. The real problem would be with the three girls not present—Theia, Ruth, and Clan.

Leaving the guesthouse, Koutarou walked down the hallway towards the main building of the imperial palace to meet up with Theia and the others. On his way, he came across several members of the palace staff.

“Good morning, Your Excellency!”

“Do you have any business to attend to, Your Excellency? You can count on me if you have any requests!”

“Hey, you promised not to try and win him over like that!”

“Ladies, mind your manners. You’re troubling His Excellency.”

“We’re sorry!”

Maids, attendants, and other palace personnel were coming and going in the hallway, and they all looked busy. Forthorthe was currently in the middle of all kinds of post-war policymaking to get the nation back on track after the disaster wrought by Vandarion and his faction. Now that hostilities had ceased and things were peaceful again, the only battles left to fight were political. There were countless meetings, conferences, and official functions to be had, including tomorrow’s ceremony.

“I don’t really have any... Actually, do you happen to know where Princess Theiamillis is at the moment?”

In front of the citizens of Forthorthe, Koutarou made sure to address Theia

properly, and he always spoke politely to uphold his image as a knight and the reputation of the imperial household. However, after everything that had happened, the people knew good and well what Koutarou was really like. Part of that was thanks to the footage they'd seen, which portrayed him in his daily life. Based on that, they knew what kind of close, friendly relationship he had with Theia and Clan. They knew he would fight with the princesses verbally and physically, but they chose to keep quiet about it and respect the image Koutarou presented for the public. Knowing he had a special connection to the princesses and knowing that he had such a relatable side to him, however, made the people love him even more.

"Um, this morning... I believe Princess Theiamillis has a dress fitting, practice for her speech, and interviews with the media. She's likely in the middle of the fitting or her practice, so she should be in her room."

"I see. Thank you."

"Oh my gosh! His Excellency thanked me personally!"

"That's not fair! You're always trying to get ahead!"

"How many times do I have to tell you girls to mind your manners?! Your troubling His Excellency!"

"Excuse us!"

Scolded by the grand chamberlain who happened to be present, the maids scattered in all directions. But they weren't just running away. They were plenty busy themselves and had business elsewhere. Realizing that piqued Koutarou's interest.

"I am truly sorry, Your Excellency. Ever since the war ended and you returned, the maids have been excitable... though I can't say I blame them."

"Don't worry about it. Things will calm down eventually."

"Thank you for such encouraging words, Your Excellency."

"That said... are you all really that busy?"

"Oh yes, very much so. But it's a wonderful thing. The country is at peace now, and this is nothing in comparison. The hardships of peacetime are a gift

compared to the hardships of war.”

“Thank you for such encouraging words.”

“Ohoho, Your Excellency! That’s my line!”

Koutarou had a nice chat with the chamberlain before parting ways, and while he didn’t scramble away like the maids had, he too seemed to be in a hurry.

“I really am just in the way... I guess once the saving’s been done, a hero’s only deadwood...”

Koutarou smiled wryly as he headed to Theia’s private room. He knew he’d been somewhat useful in the battle against Vandarion, but now that the fighting was over, he was just like any other seventeen year old boy. Unlike Kiriha who had experience in politics and economic affairs, all he could do was watch on as the others worked. Yet even then, he still wielded a huge amount of influence, so he decided that he should simply stay out of things. And the best way to make sure that happened was to return to Earth. The same went for Nalfalaren, which had since split and returned to being its two constituent swords. Knowing neither he nor the swords could stay in Forthorthe, Koutarou was ready to leave immediately.

“Oh, that crowd... There’s no doubt about it.”

As Koutarou approached Theia’s room, he saw a large group of people crowding by her door. There were maids, politicians, bureaucrats, financiers, and anyone else who had business with the princess.

“Men, don’t speak all at once! Can’t you present yourselves one at a time?!”

“Your Highness, calm down.”

Koutarou could hear Theia’s loud voice and Ruth’s more modest voice from inside her room as he approached.

“Sounds like they’re at it again...”

Getting closer, he realized that the crowd of people in the hallway was actually a line to have an audience with Theia. She was in her room attending to people as they came to see her.

“Looks like I won’t be able to talk to Theia directly. Guess I’ll have to make do

with the other one.”

Koutarou gave up on talking with Theia, turned on his heels, and headed for a different room on the same floor. He was going to see Clan. A last resort of sorts. He figured that, being from the Schweiger family rather than the ruling Mastir family, Clan might actually have some time to talk.

“Yup, just as I suspected.”

Unlike with Theia, there was no crowd in the hallway outside Clan’s room. Thinking he’d made the right choice to come see her instead, he reached out for the panel next to the door. It would read his biological data and inform Clan of his visit, but...

“I am sorry, Your Excellency. The master is currently out of the room.”

“Huh...? Cradle?”

“Yes, Your Excellency. I am undertaking all kinds of jobs in place of my busy master.”

“With the war over, you should get a chance to rest too.”

“An artificial intelligence without a task is one without meaning.”

“I guess that’s true... Well, do you know where Clan went?”

“She left for the science academy early this morning with the goal of explaining and validating the genetic manipulation and video footage of the past.”

“So even she’s busy now too, huh?”

“My master is the only one with verifiable data from the events of two thousand years ago.”

“No wonder she’s so popular. Now what do I do...?”

Theia, Ruth, and even Clan were all swamped with work. From the sound of things, Ceilēshu and Elfaria were probably just as busy, if not more so. Koutarou was reluctant to interrupt them just to say he was going home, so he decided to say goodbye in a less obtrusive way.

“In that case... I want to ask you to do two things.”

“I’m at your service, Your Excellency.”

“First, I’m going to prepare three letters. Can you deliver them to Clan and the others when they’re not so busy?”

Koutarou had given up on talking directly to Theia, Ruth, and Clan, so he was going to leave them letters instead. That way, he’d be able to depart as quickly as possible. That seemed like the best possible option since it would limit his time on Forthorthe, meaning the potential influence he had over the nation and its people would also be limited.

“Yes, Your Excellency.”

“Also, I’d like you to give us a lift back to Earth. Can you do that?”

Koutarou’s second request was a ride home. He was originally going to ask Clan or Ruth, but they were busy enough as it was. He hadn’t even been able to talk to him. But fortunately, he’d now come across the Cradle’s AI, which could also make the necessary arrangements.

“It is possible. As Your Excellency holds authority second only to Her Majesty, I am required to comply with all orders.”

“All right, then it’s an order.”

“As you wish, my lord. I am honored to be at your service.”

Koutarou held the rank of commander-in-chief as decreed by Alaia, which outranked any princess. In reality, he held about as much authority as the empress herself did. As such, the Cradle would comply with his orders with or without Clan’s approval.

As the technology of Forthorthe advanced and improved, the biggest danger in space flight became human error. As such, almost all ships were designed with built-in autopilot. It was considered the industry standard, and ships could always switch over to manual operation if necessary. The autopilot function was how Theia and Ruth could operate Blue Knight with just the two of them, and it would be how Koutarou and the other girls could get back to Earth without much trouble.

“Koutarou, Koutarou, when are we going to warp?” asked Sanae excitedly.

“I think we just did, actually,” Koutarou replied.

“Whaaat?! You should have said something! How am I supposed to appreciate it otherwise?!”

“It was over by the time I noticed it, honestly.”

Using a military-class space distortion maneuvering device, or warp engine, it took fifteen days to travel from Forthorthe to Earth. With such a lengthy voyage, however, it was customary to freeze time aboard the ship during the trip. And so two weeks literally passed in the blink of an eye for Koutarou and the other passengers, and Earth was already being displayed on the monitor in front of them.

“So that’s Earth, huh? It’s a relief to see it again after all this time.”

Shizuka stared hard at the softly glowing blue planet on the screen. She’d seen plenty of pictures of Earth from space before, but the image of it now felt nostalgic after having been away from it for so long. It was really starting to sink in for her that the war was over.

“In anime, the person who says that usually dies. You know, like the captain or something.”

“Not another word, Yurika-chan! It’s *got* to be bad luck to say that!”

“Ahahaha, sorry.”

Of course, Shizuka wasn’t the only one with a smile on her face to see her home planet again. They’d all felt the same tense unease when they’d left Earth to go fight, but that tension was now slowly lifting. Without realizing it, they’d all gathered on the bridge to look at Earth as it gradually grew bigger on the monitor.

“Satomi-kun, when will we be able to get off at room 106?”

Even Harumi sounded overjoyed. Knowing that some of the other girls on board didn’t have families, she was reluctant to say anything, but she was dying to see her parents again. But whether they had families or not, all of the girls felt something similar. They were all a little homesick. Shizuka couldn’t wait to

return to Corona House, a memento from her late parents; Yurika was eager to get her hands on her pile of manga once more; and Maki wanted to see her classmates and the girls of the cosclub. Each and every one of them had something they were looking forward to, and they were all smiling at the thought of finally being home again.

“Well, how’s it looking, Cradle?”

“This is as close as the warp will take us. From here, it will take roughly an hour and a half until we reach stationary orbit, after which it will take approximately an hour to create a gate to the surface. Conservative estimate is currently three hours total.”

“Three hours, huh? I can hardly wait,” Harumi said with a happy sigh.

“Koutarou, when we get back, we’re going out to buy ice cream,” Sanae insisted.

“We just had some on Forthorthe,” Koutarou objected.

“Who cares? It tastes different on Earth!”

“Okay, okay...”

“Satomi-kun, can I come too?” Maki asked.

“So Sanae and Aika-san for ice cream. Anyone else?”

“I would like to come as well,” answered Kiriha. “And I don’t believe I’m alone in that.”

The other girls all agreed in succession.

“We’ll go as a group then.”

The girls were all excited to be home again, and Koutarou was no different. Even though he sounded like he was being jerked around by their demands, the truth was that he relished every minute of this simple yet chaotic life he’d fought so hard to protect. He could hardly wait to get down to the surface and get back to his daily life with these girls.

Koutarou and the girls returned to Earth the night of January 31st. Since it

was already late, their hurried out to get their ice cream together. But that wasn't the only thing. Once they were all done with their ice cream, they scattered throughout the shopping street to buy the things they'd missed or wanted the most. Books, manga, candy, baseball equipment... Everyone got something different. And once they were all done shopping, they finally returned to room 106.

"Man, nothing beats the tatami mats in your own place..."

Koutarou, the first in the door, tossed his luggage aside and laid face down on the floor. The familiar feel of the woven mats and the smell of the soft rush straw they were made out of put him in an instant state of relaxation.

"It's important to appreciate that kind of thing."

Whump!

"Gueh!"

Sanae threw herself onto Koutarou's back as he lay on the floor. She was sensitive to the emotions of others, especially Koutarou's. How comfortable she felt when she clung to him largely depended on how relaxed he was, and in that sense, he was right. Nothing beat room 106. He was happy, and so was she as she held on to him.

"Now things would really be perfect if you just expressed your undying love for yours truly, Sanae-chan!"

"If that's what you want, don't jump on me full force like that."

"Teeheehee, sorry. I just couldn't hold back."

"Well, I guess I can't blame you for that..."

"Upsy-daisy!"

Unlike usual, Sanae quickly got off Koutarou's back. Surprised, he sat up to look at her and found her looking down at him with a smile.

"I guess I'll be off now. I'm gonna go home."

Sanae wasn't just eager to see room 106. She was also looking forward to getting to see her family. She wanted to hug them as much as she did Koutarou.

“Yeah, I think that’s a good idea.”

“I’ll see you later then?”

“You don’t have to come back tonight, you know.”

“Jeez, you always get so stubborn... Well, see you!”

“Later.”

Koutarou understood how she felt. He also wanted to see his dad, Yuichirou. And so with a warm smile, he saw off Sanae, who was already practically skipping towards the door.

“I believe we should return home for a visit as well.”

“Underground we go, ho!”

“The chief is waiting, ho!”

Whump, whump!

“Gueh!”

Now it was Kiriha and the haniwas’ turn. Just like Sanae had, they jumped onto Koutarou’s back. Kiriha was bigger than Sanae, and her bountiful chest and the haniwas didn’t help any either. All three of them jumping on him at the same time was quite a handful.

“Say hi to the chief and Kouma-san for me.”

But since it was Kiriha, Koutarou didn’t make the slightest objection. He was a bit staggered initially, but quickly composed himself. That wasn’t the reaction Kiriha had been hoping for, however, so she gave the haniwas a discreet signal.

“Ho, ho!”

“Ho, ho, ho!”

“Hey, don’t start dancing on my head!”

“Heehee...”

Smooch.

Satisfied with his reaction this time around, Kiriha got off Koutarou with a smile after leaning in close. Koutarou was too distracted with the haniwas on

his head to realize what she'd done, but Shizuka and Maki saw it all. They both blushed and looked at each other at exactly the same time. Realizing they'd both seen the same thing and both felt the same way about it, they nodded at each other.

"Satomi-kun!"

"I'm sorry!"

Whump!

"Guaaah!"

Maki was a relatively active girl and kept up a healthy weight. As quite some time had passed since the last battle, Alunaya had recovered his mana and Shizuka's weight was back to normal too. Koutarou could have probably lifted both girls with ease, but with the two of them suddenly pouncing on him, it knocked the wind out of his lungs.

"Wh-What are..."

"We're going back to our room too, so we figured we would say goodbye just like Sanae-chan and Kiriha-san did!"

"You don't... have to follow... their bad example..."

"I'm sorry, Satomi-kun. We just got a little envious..."

"I'll forgive you, Aika-san..."

"What's that supposed to mean, Satomi-kun?!"

"Whoa, Landlord-san!"

Unhappy that Maki seemed to be getting preferential treatment from Koutarou, Shizuka began bouncing up and down on top of him. Maki looked quite concerned at first, but at Shizuka's behest, she reluctantly began copying her.

"...Like this?"

"Guaaaaahhh!"

He was already struggling with them on top of him, but now that they were bouncing and pushing down on him even more, it was a losing battle. After a

few moments, he collapsed under their weight.



“S-Satomi-kun?”

“Ahahaha, whoops! Looks like I overdid it.”

“This isn’t something to laugh about, Kasagi-san...”

“But isn’t now our chance?”

“Oh...”

Seeing Koutarou looking so vulnerable, the two girls both blushed. They looked at each other, nodded, and then leaned in to bring their faces closer to

Koutarou's.

Koutarou was only out for a few minutes. As soon as Shizuka and Maki got off of him, he could breathe normally again and quickly came to. He'd blacked out, but it wasn't anything serious.

"...Huh?"

Waking up, however, he was confused. Things weren't quite as he remembered them when he passed out. He was now lying on his back, felt no weight on him, and could breathe without trouble. It even felt like there was something soft under his head. When he opened his eyes all the way, he spied someone looking down at him.

"So you've already come to..."

"...Sakuraba-senpai?"

"Good morning, Satomi-kun."

It was none other than Harumi. Based on how she was looking down at him and the soft, comfortable feeling under his head, Koutarou realized she was letting him use her lap as a pillow.

"I was quite alarmed to see your eyes rolled back like that when I came in..."

"I'm sorry for scaring you. The other girls were pretty worked up, and, well..."

"Heehee, everyone except me is so full of energy."

As they spoke, Koutarou and Harumi's faces were much closer than usual. Being as shy as she was, Harumi usually kept her distance even when talking to close friends. She was only this close to Koutarou now because he'd passed out and her nurturing instinct had kicked in.

*She really is a lot like Her Majesty Alaia... though I guess that's only obvious, considering she's her reincarnation...*

From this distance, Koutarou could see Harumi's face in vivid detail. While it was normally hard to tell, he could now see that she had a lot more in common with Alaia than just her hair. The shape of her face and even finer features like her eyelashes and brows looked the same. Their expressions were practically

identical too. It was almost like he was looking at a palette swap of Alaia.

*But even then, Sakuraba-senpai is Sakuraba-senpai. She's not Her Majesty...*

Despite how they looked, they were by no means the same person. They may have both loved Koutarou, Forthorthe, and their friends and families, but they approached those things quite differently. That was only natural, considering that even though they shared a soul, they'd lived completely different lives. And now that Alaia's spirit had been released from Signaltin, she was no longer a part of Harumi as she'd once been. The differences between them would only grow more pronounced from here on out.

"But you're plenty energetic right now too though, aren't you, Sakuraba-senpai?"

"Even so, it will take a while before my heart can catch up to them in that regard."

Harumi puffed out her cheeks in a pout. It was a face Koutarou never saw Alaia make. It was the expression, not of a princess, but of a normal girl. Alaia, reborn into Harumi, was now living the life she'd always wanted. That's why Koutarou decided not to grieve for Alaia. He thought it would be better to put that energy into smiling for Harumi.

"I'm sure you'll catch up soon enough, Senpai. You're a lot tougher than anyone gives you credit for."

"..."

Harumi suddenly fell silent. Confused, Koutarou looked into her eyes for an answer and saw that they were wet with tears.

"Sakuraba-senpai?"

"...I'd be happy if you were a little tougher with me, too."

"What..."

Harumi gave him a bittersweet smile. Her tears chased each other down her face, tumbling onto Koutarou cheeks as she looked down at him. In that moment, he felt like he was looking at Alaia and Harumi at the same time.

"Maybe it's from everything we've been through in order to come home safe

and sound...”

“Nah, you’re just tough.”

“Then... I’ll do my best to become even tougher.”

Harumi reached down to gently wipe her fallen tears from Koutarou’s face. With the last one, she leaned in, bringing her lips closer to his cheek. Then...

Thud, bang!

“Kyaaah!”

“What in the world?!”

They were both startled by the sudden sound of something hitting the tatami floor. The timing was so remarkable that it seemed like whatever it was had intentionally waited until Harumi was just about to make her move. She was totally absorbed in the moment, and sensing her intensity, Koutarou was completely focused on her. As they were both wholly preoccupied, the sudden noise startled them even more than it should have. They practically jumped at it, and both awkwardly turned to look in the direction the sound had come from.

“U-Um... I’m... I’m really sorry...”

There they saw Yurika, who was helplessly lying on the floor after trying and failing to climb up into the wardrobe that she used as her room. Upon coming home and seeing the atmosphere between Koutarou and Harumi, she’d tried to sneak into the wardrobe without bothering them. She was so focused on trying to stay quiet, however, that she’d missed a step and slipped, ruining the intimate moment between Koutarou and Harumi. In the end, Yurika trying to be considerate completely backfired.

The next day, February 1st, was a Tuesday. Koutarou and the girls would finally be returning to school.

That morning, Koutarou walked the road to Kisshouharukaze High alongside Kenji, who’d come to pick him up. As they neared the school yard, however, things didn’t seem to be as bustling as usual. Since it was the middle of exam

season, most of the third-year students weren't attending classes.

"Hey, Kou, is that Sakuraba-senpai?"

Kenji cocked his head as he spotted a few third-years by the bus stop in front of the school gates. Classes for them this time of year were mostly review sessions, and attendance was considered voluntary. In other words, while they were taking exams, they were practically on an extended leave. Unless they wanted to attend the supplementary review classes or use the library to study, none of the third-years really came to school. So when Kenji saw Harumi outside the school gates, he naturally assumed she'd come to study for something. He then remembered, however, that Koutarou had told him she'd already been accepted to a university, so something didn't quite seem to add up. She shouldn't have anything she needed to study for. Curious, he asked Koutarou about it.

"Is she taking exams after all?"

"No, she's already gotten into a university with a recommendation."

"Then what's she doing at school?"

"She's just serious. I mean, she likes school, after all."

Harumi was still coming to classes even when they were optional because she took school very seriously. But that wasn't the only reason. She was attached to the school and her friends there. Even if she weren't so diligent in her studies, she would have wanted to come anyway after being away in Forthorthe for so long.

"That's a model student for you, I guess."

"Of course. Don't compare Senpai to your average student. She's on a different level."

"Are... Are you bragging on her behalf?"

"You bet. She wouldn't do it for herself, after all."

"My, well, aren't you a good underclassman?"

"You could say that."

It had been a while since Koutarou had last seen Kenji, but Kenji was only asking about Harumi. He didn't seem to think it was weird at all that Koutarou had been missing for months. Or more accurately, he hadn't even noticed.

*Good, it doesn't seem like there were any problems. I guess that's Rainbow Heart for you...*

Koutarou was secretly relieved when Kenji didn't ask anything about where he'd been. He was acting like he always did—like nothing had even happened—thanks to Rainbow Heart. They had found a man about Koutarou's height, weight, and build, disguised him with magic, and sent him to school in Koutarou's place. They'd done the same thing for the girls of room 106 as well, and thanks to that, no one had noticed that they were ever gone. Rainbow Heart was even prepared to erase the memories of anyone who figured it out, but fortunately that hadn't happened. All was well, and the substitutes were now replaced with Koutarou and the girls as they returned. Everything went back to normal, just like that.

Rainbow Heart had wanted to help out with the operation once they learned that Darkness Rainbow was involved with Forthorthe somehow. They considered Darkness Rainbow their problem, so they were willing to lend a hand where they could, and keeping things normal on Earth for Koutarou and the others was one of their ways of accomplishing that.

"By the way, Kou..."

"Hmm?"

"Remember our New Year's visit to the shrine with my little sister?"

Those words made Koutarou tense up.

*Not good... I have to be careful here...*

Rainbow Heart's help was fantastic, but it wasn't perfect. Koutarou had been given a report of what had happened while he was gone, but it was really just an outline of events. It wasn't like he had specific details. That made getting into a conversation like this tricky, so he had to tread lightly to avoid saying anything that might give him away.

"Yeah? Something up with Kin-chan?"

“Yeah. You actually complimented her outfit for once while we were at the shrine. She must have been pretty pleased, because ever since, she’s been staring at pictures from that day and smiling all the time.”

“Oh yeah?”

Koutarou had been advised to be vague and not give direct answers to questions he was unsure of, so he chose his words carefully.

*I complimented Kin-chan on her outfit... What was she wearing? Since it was a New Year’s shrine visit, was it a kimono? Or was it just something new? What did I even say? Maybe that she looked cute? That it looked good on her?*

This was something of a precarious balancing act for Koutarou. He had no idea what Kotori had been wearing, much less what he’d allegedly said about it. He had to keep talking or else something would seem off to Kenji, but one wrong word and he’d blow his cover. Koutarou didn’t want to ruin his normal life after just getting back from Forthorthe, so he desperately wracked his brain for a way out of this.

“She’s in really high spirits and everything, so I’ll be counting on you next time too.”

Kenji was legendary for having tempestuous relationships with girls, but when it came to his little sister, he was like a completely different person. He’d always treasured his introverted younger sister. Koutarou knew what she meant to him, so he couldn’t treat this lightly or brush it off.

“Okay, but I need your help. For starters, show me one of these pictures.”

“Here.”

“...You’re really just walking around with a picture of your little sister?”

“Get off my back about it!”

“Hmm... So she really was dressed up, huh?”

“What? What do you mean ‘really’?”

“Oh, uh... I mean she really does look good. She’s gotten to the age that getting dressed up like this suits her.”

“I know, right?! But it’s kind of lonely, honestly. It’s like the older she gets, the less she needs me...”

“What are you, the father of the bride?”

Fortunately, Kenji’s willingness to talk about his sister was Koutarou’s saving grace. Kenji had voluntarily told Koutarou everything he really needed to know to get out of this jam. He was safe for now, but it was still too early to let his guard down. He had no way of knowing when something like that would come up again. But other than that, his normal, everyday life was spreading out before him. All he had to do was carefully ease into it.

The other girls had similar problems, but by and large, they were able to return to life at Kisshouharukaze High School without any real issues. And it was a welcome change. Even if they had special talents or were strong fighters, they were still just teenagers. They felt more at ease in the classroom than on the battlefield. And once they were back at school, it finally sunk in that the war was really over. Things were getting back to normal at long last.

“I’m sick of studying...”

“That was way too quick, Sanae. We only just back.”

“But I didn’t come back for this!”

“Uh, yeah, you did. You’re a high school student, remember?”

“I’ll just go back to being a ghost and leave the rest to you!”

“Ah— Hey!”

“Heehee...”

“That’s unfair, Sanae-chan! You always do this!”

And with things back to normal, Sanae was back to her old ways. Sanae-chan hated studying so much that she left her body as soon as she got the chance during lunch break, intending to leave the afternoon’s classes to Sanae-san.

“I wish I could astral project like Sanae-chan...”

Completely exhausted from classes and slumped over her desk, Yurika stared

up at the disembodied Sanae-chan. She had struggled with school to begin with, but now that she'd missed several months of it, she was a total mess.

"You can just do something with your magic. It'd be easy, right?"

"I can't do that. As the magical girl of love and courage, I can't use magic for personal reasons, remember?"

"Why's that the only part of your backstory you stick to?"

"It's not some backstory! It's a law of Folsaria!"

Since Yurika could use magic, she could theoretically do whatever she wanted to manipulate her test scores. The problem was that she wasn't allowed to as a magical girl, and she took pride in that title. She wanted to uphold it, even if it was making her miserable right now.

"Then you should have been studying all this time..." Maki said as she put her hand on her hip and sighed.

Scrupulous as she was, Maki had made sure to study up and gain an appropriate amount of academic knowledge before "transferring" to Kisshouharukaze High School. Since it was an infiltration mission for her, she didn't want to be singled out for having grades that were too high or too low. Darkness Rainbow had also considered it important for her to have a basic education.

"You know, I'd expect the difference between you magical girls to be night and day, but it's funny that Darkness Rainbow falls on the day side here..." Shizuka said with a wry grin.

Shizuka herself was only barely able to keep up. School life for her mostly centered around karate and the cooking society, but she strived to do her best in class too. She put in the effort every day, and it was paying off. That alone was enough to set her apart from Yurika.

"In Yurika's case, I think all her talent went towards learning magic. And because she can use such powerful magic now, Rainbow Heart has no choice but to use her for an important job like this, regardless of her other weaknesses. Being a genius has its downsides too."

As expected, the one having the least trouble readjusting to school was Kiriha. She'd had a strong sense of curiosity from a young age, and combined with her desire to mature into an adult and go to the surface as quickly as possible, she'd developed a remarkably impressive intellect. High school material was hardly a challenge for her.

"A genius, huh?" Maki smiled. "Coming from a real genius like you, Kiriha-san, that's rather convincing."

"You can't call someone like me a genius. Anyone could amass the knowledge I have."

"By that rubric, there are no real geniuses."

In the end, Yurika was the only one really struggling with school. She wasn't quite as bad off as she'd been as a first-year, so everyone knew it was perfectly possible for her to make one of her lucky comebacks. Koutarou and the others enjoyed giving her a hard time, but they had faith in her and mostly laughed it off. After all, they had no way of knowing what would happen that afternoon.

While Rainbow Heart was functioning as Folsaria's government and military now, its original goal had been the enforcement of the proper use of magic. Their policies stemmed from the realization that magic, when used freely and for personal gain, could be quite dangerous. And to prevent any such kind of abuse, they believed that all power, not just magic, should be used responsibly. It was a righteous, diligent approach to the matter, but it was about to become a huge problem for Koutarou and the others.

"It is a pleasure to meet you, everyone. I am Miyama Reina of Rainbow Heart's foreign special operations department."

After school that day, Koutarou and the six girls had been called into the school guidance office. The one that had called them there was a young instructor named Miyama Reina, who taught Japanese. A few months ago, she had taken over for another teacher who was out on maternity leave. However, Reina wasn't just a Japanese teacher. She was a magician of Rainbow Heart who had infiltrated Kisshouharukaze High School, and she was also the mastermind

behind the plan to find substitutes for Koutarou and the others while they were gone.

“Oh, how polite.”

Koutarou was a well-mannered boy, and he did his best to be respectful to Reina. Not only was she older and a teacher, but she had done a lot to help him and the others out. He stood up straight and bowed deeply to her. Harumi and Kiriha also lowered their heads, and Sanae, Maki, and Shizuka quickly followed suit. Only after everyone else had bowed did Yurika finally realize what was going on, and she scrambled to do the same.

“But really, it’s fine. There’s no need to be so formal. After all, we are the ones who are indebted to you.”

Faced with this unexpected display of maturity from Koutarou and the girls, Reina lightly put her hand to her cheek and smiled. It was a sweet, affectionate smile that radiated warmth and tenderness. Seeing it, it was no wonder she’d been chosen to infiltrate the school and pose as a teacher.

“No, it’s the least we can do,” Koutarou insisted.

“My, my... Well, since it would be problematic if another student or teacher were to overhear, I’ll get right down to business.”

Reina hadn’t called Koutarou and the others to the office because she had business with them as a teacher, but rather because she had business with them as a member of Rainbow Heart. She took on a more serious look and began explaining the matter at hand.

“I had you come here today to let you know that we will be having an academic strength test.”

“An academic strength test?!”

Koutarou and the others were quite surprised to hear what Reina had to say. It almost sounded like something a normal teacher would say, but they knew better.

“Yes. We used substitutes for you while you were gone because of extenuating circumstances, but as a result, we essentially had to cheat on

various tests, homework assignments, et cetera. That cheating, you understand, could of course be considered an abuse of magical power. So in order to keep said cheating from having any lasting negative effects, we have decided to give you all an academic strength test to prove there has been no harm done."

Rainbow Heart felt that Koutarou and the others should be held to a higher standard as allies of justice. As an organization, they frowned on dishonest behavior like cheating. While they'd had to resort to it while Koutarou and the others were in Forthorthe, they couldn't just overlook the consequences it might have. And so Rainbow Heart felt compelled to determine whether or not the grades they'd assigned had been justified. If Koutarou and the others could get passing scores on their own, then all would be well. But if not, then a serious offense had been committed, as it would essentially mean—even with good intentions—they'd falsified test scores. And if that were the case, as magical girls of love and justice, it wasn't just something they could overlook.

"We'll have all of you take the academic strength test to confirm that you all have the competency required to succeed on the tests and assignments that were administered in your absence."

"Um, I want to ask just in case, but... what happens if we fail?"

Hearing that a test was involved, Yurika naturally got nervous. She was struggling to keep up with class as it was, so she unsurprisingly had little confidence that she'd be able to pass such a test. And so she humbly asked about what was going to happen to her, forgetting that she was dealing with a magician of a lower rank than herself.

"In that case, we'll have you repeat a year. Rainbow Heart cannot allow for anyone to profit from something that amounts to cheating."

"N-No way! You're taking this way too seriously!"



Yurika’s sorrowful voice filled the classroom. Rainbow Heart was on the side of fairness and justice, and Yurika had never begrudged that more than she did today. Of course, Yurika wasn’t the only one who was uneasy. Everyone apart from Kiriha and Harumi felt varying degrees of anxiety about such a test.

“P-Please wait a second, Reina-sensei! When is that test going to be held?! It’s not today, is it?!” Koutarou asked in a panic.

While he wasn’t as worried as Yurika or Sanae, Koutarou knew he might be in trouble too. He didn’t have any room to laugh at them.

“We realize that holding it right away would put all of you at an extreme

disadvantage. That's why we've agreed to allow you ten days to prepare. The test will be held on February 11th accordingly."

"Thank goodness. We should be able to manage with ten days."

Hearing that they had ten days to prepare, Harumi smiled at Koutarou and the others. But then Reina said something unexpected to her.

"You are exempt from the test, Sakuraba-san."

"Huh? Why is that?" Harumi's eyes naturally opened wide in surprise.

"As you have already been accepted into a university, that means that both the high school and the university have acknowledged your academic capabilities and deemed them more than satisfactory. There is no need to test you further."

Harumi had exceptional circumstances. She had already been accepted into a university via early admittance through a recommendation, and her class was already on leave for the semester. It was true that there was no real need to test her any more on a high school level.

"But I want to confirm my academic strengths for my own benefit. I have my future as a university student to think about, after all. Besides, there's the school's quota for recommendations to think about..."

"Sakuraba-san... That's a wonderful attitude. I understand. I will prepare a seat for you for the test as well."

But Harumi always took her schooling very seriously. She wanted to take the test even if she didn't have to. If somehow she'd fallen behind, it wouldn't just affect her. If she performed poorly in university, it would negatively affect the number of students the university was willing to accept via recommendation from the high school in the future. And Harumi was just the kind of caring person to be concerned about such a thing.

"That's Sakuraba-senpai for you... I'm not sure I would go that far if I didn't have to..." Koutarou said in amazement.

"The strong can afford to be brave," Sanae agreed.

"Well, what about you?"

“If I give it my all, I think I probably have a fifty-fifty shot. I think...”

“I think I’m in roughly the same situation...” Yurika sighed.

Unlike the studious Harumi; Koutarou, Sanae and Yurika were in a precarious situation. Sanae had left all of the studying to Sanae-san and managed to get by that way, but Sanae-san had been in the hospital for quite a long time, so it wasn’t like her grades were especially good. And the trip to Forthorthe had only made that worse. She was potentially in a lot of trouble with this test.

Yurika was in a similar situation. She had started to take her studies seriously upon becoming a second-year, but unfortunately, she was just too far behind on the basics. Not studying while she was in Forthorthe had only exacerbated the problem. She had no real confidence she was going to earn a passing grade on her own.

While Koutarou wasn’t in as dire straits as either of them, he couldn’t exactly rest on his laurels. He was a below average student to begin with, and now he hadn’t been to school in several months. It would be quite a hurdle to catch up after that.

“Aika-san, we can’t take it easy either,” said Shizuka.

“With peace returning to Forthorthe and Folsaria’s future opening up, if we fail now...” Maki sighed.

Shizuka and Maki were both competent students, but they’d also missed several months of school now. They’d have to spend the next ten days making sure they were on track. So while they weren’t as bad off as Koutarou, Sanae, and Yurika, they couldn’t let their guard down.

“Hmm, things are getting interesting.”

Kiriha, on the other hand, was in a rather comfortable position compared to the others. In her studies, she had long since mastered what was considered high school material on the surface.

“We would like to exempt you from the test for a different reason than Sakuraba-san, Kiriha-san.”

“That would be problematic...”

“I understand, but we need to consult with you about Folsaria’s future. Ever since you’ve returned, various inquiries have been pouring in from above...”

“It sounds like I wouldn’t have the time to study anyway,” Kiriha said with a small shrug.

In her case, she would be able to go for a perfect score after just looking over the textbook and materials to jog her memory. But it looked like she wouldn’t even get the chance to do that.

Rainbow Heart’s academic strength test was scheduled for ten days out. It would cover five core subjects, but it would also mix in harder questions from elective subjects. The test would be scored out of 500 points, and a score of over 250 would be considered passing. In other words, getting half of the questions right in each subject would be sufficient. At first, the plan was to require a score of 60 points in each subject in order to pass, but once the harder questions were mixed in, the difficulty of the test increased and the minimum passing grade was lowered to reflect that. So while 250 points was all they would need to succeed, those points wouldn’t be easy to get. And after this was explained to them, Koutarou and the others immediately got to studying. If the test was going to be that hard, they didn’t have any time to waste. It would be a long ten days. But one of them ran into a wall straight away.

“Koutarou, Koutarou! If I’m important to you, then teach me how to study!”

Sanae approached Koutarou with a pen in each hand and a motivational headband on that read “Charge!” Though he flinched for a moment upon seeing this curious sight, Koutarou quickly recovered and flicked her on the forehead.

Whap!

“Ow!”

“I don’t have the leeway for that.”

“Then fail together with me!”

“What’s the point of that?!”

“It’s romantic to want to share the same fate as your beloved Sanae-chan!”

“At least try for a better fate than that!”

Sanae had spun out just trying to figure out what she needed to do to get a passing grade. Without even knowing where to start, she turned to Koutarou, but her future looked bleak. Sanae was starting to realize that she very well may end up failing.

“Maki-chan, even if I end up repeating a year, Satomi-san will let me keep living in his apartment, right?”

Yurika was already worrying about what would happen after she failed. She had no delusions about passing. Considering the trouble she was having just keeping up with class on a daily basis, she’d already thrown in the towel on this one. There was no way she could pass a surprise test like this.

“I don’t think you have to worry about that.”

“Really?! Well, yeah, despite what he says, Satomi-san is a nice guy. And he loves me, too. Eeheehee...”

But despite her imminent failure, she had stars in her eyes. Koutarou would support her even if she had to repeat a grade. That thought was enough to send her to cloud nine right now, but the high didn’t last for long.

“The real question is what he’d think of you in that case.”

“Urk!”

Yurika’s expression froze over. Maki’s words were like a cold knife to the heart. Koutarou was kind and he treasured Yurika, so there was no way he would kick her out even if she failed a grade. There was no doubt about that. The problem was how Koutarou would see her after that happened. She was terrified at the thought of him being disappointed in her and treating her like a freeloader.

*I even said that I wanted to go to the same university as Satomi-san and Sakuraba-senpai...*

Yurika recalled the events of almost a year ago. As their freshman year of high school drew to a close, Koutarou had asked Yurika what she was going to do in

the future. In response, Yurika had said that she wanted to go to Kisshou University together with him and Harumi. And ever since, Yurika had put in the work to try and catch up on her studies with Koutarou's help. While it hadn't been a smooth ride, she'd been trying her best this school year. But if she failed here and had to repeat a grade, all that effort would be for naught. She might also lose Koutarou's trust in her. Even thickheaded Yurika knew she couldn't let that happen.

"Auuugh..."

Though teary-eyed, Yurika cracked open her textbooks. Her chances of success were incredibly low, but she still had to prevail or else she would end up losing something precious to her. She couldn't stand the thought of it, and that drove her to study despite the odds against her.

"That's right, Yurika. You'll have to fight for this. There's no easy way out of this, but no pain, no gain."

Maki cheered Yurika on with encouraging words, but truth be told, her mind was somewhere else.

*I'm sure that Satomi-kun would still praise her for doing well if he saw her trying her best like this... but Yurika is better off if I don't tell her that...*

Maki despised lying, but not being completely up front wasn't necessarily the same thing. Besides, it was true that Yurika would have to fight for this. Koutarou would likely praise her willingness to fight more than her grades anyway. It didn't matter if the sword broke or not. Similarly, if Yurika didn't take this seriously and managed to pass somehow, Koutarou would still criticize her. If she wanted his praise, she would have to work hard no matter what the result was. And because Maki knew that, she didn't want to prevent her from working hard by telling her that everything would probably be fine.

In contrast to the cornered Sanae and Yurika, Kiriha and Harumi were taking things quite casually. Their circumstances were different, but neither Harumi nor Kiriha needed to study. Rather than burying their noses in books, they were preparing tea and snacks and offering moral support for the rest of the group.

"Kiriha-san, what's with that thick bunch of papers?" Harumi asked.

Kiriha didn't need to study, but she was still holding a bundle of papers for some reason. She was helping Koutarou and the others where she could, and whenever she had a free moment, she would look over the material in her hands. Harumi found that curious.

"These are the documents that Folsaria sent over. They're in a stir as it is with Darkness Rainbow, but with the end of the war in Forthorthe, things have really taken a turn for the complicated."

In Folsaria, Darkness Rainbow had been disarmed and decommissioned as a combat force. The elders of Folsaria were discussing how to deal with the remaining members when Nana had arrived with the message from Forthorthe that they would accept any and all immigrants. With that, any discussion among the elders broke down, and they came crying to Kiriha for help. They could see the writing on the wall, and they knew they needed to do something.

"Besides, we People of the Earth are related to Folsaria and Forthorthe, so we can't treat this like someone else's problem. We can't just consult with them either; we need to coordinate with them too."

Grevanas's court magicians were the ancestors of Folsaria, while the alchemists under Maxfern's direct control were the ancestors of the People of the Earth. In other words, both legacies were born from Maxfern's faction long ago, so Forthorthe's offer to accept immigrants was also extended to the People of the Earth. And so Kiriha, one of the leaders of the People of the Earth and a mediator with Folsaria, ended up becoming deeply involved in the matter.

"So you might stop your invasion of the surface and move to Forthorthe?"

"That option is indeed on the table now. But because of that, our politics have fallen into chaos as well."

"Oh my... It sounds like peace is a hardship in itself..."

The surface invasion that Kiriha was in charge of was going smoothly. She had taken the peaceful route, and the People of the Earth were living on the surface without having to kowtow to the surface dwellers or take advantage of them. Things were really starting to shape up, but now moving to Forthorthe was an option. Forthorthe was the ancestral home mentioned in their legends, so of

course there were those who would rather boldly return to Forthorthe than invade Earth's surface. But considering the progress of the invasion so far, they couldn't just abandon the plan either. It was an especially tricky dilemma for the frontrunners of the surface invasion. They had sacrificed a lot to achieve their progress so far, and they couldn't just accept that all their efforts were suddenly for naught.

The passage of time was another problem. After thousands of years, Forthorthe was completely alien to the current generation of the People of the Earth. It was hard to think of it as their true homeland, and so opinion on the matter of returning there was quite divided. Much like in Folsaria, a large controversy was brewing underground.

"Instead of focusing on that stuff, can you do something about the chaos with my physics, Kiriha-san?" Koutarou asked.

"Hmm... Angular momentum and centrifugal force, is it? It's easy to mix them up when derivation and integrals are involved, but it'll help to keep that kind of thing in mind. Let's not be unreasonable; let's just start from the beginning."

But even with everything else that was going on, Kiriha's biggest problem right now was that Koutarou was struggling with studying for the test, and that took priority above all else for her. She readily put down her papers and leaned in to look at what Koutarou was doing. They were so close together that if Koutarou had glanced in the right direction, he would have been able to see straight down her shirt. But they were both so focused on studying that even though the position seemed a bit compromising, neither one of them paid it any mind. Shizuka watched them wide-eyed, but it wasn't because of how close they were.

"Sakuraba-senpai, Satomi-kun called the future of Forthorthe, Folsaria, and the People of Earth 'that stuff.'"

The massive galactic empire of Forthorthe. The magical kingdom of Folsaria. The self-reliant People of the Earth, inventors of spiritual energy technology. Koutarou had written them and their futures off as 'that stuff.' Shizuka couldn't hide her astonishment.

"Well, I think Satomi-kun has the right to say that."

Harumi was surprised too, but less so since she had inherited Alaia's memories. She knew that Koutarou had been the one to protect all three peoples. To him, their current problems surely must just seem like "stuff." And since Harumi could understand how both Shizuka and Koutarou felt about it, all she could do was smile wryly.

"I mean, I guess that's true... But when you think of it that way, isn't it a little strange to see a legendary hero fretting over some high school test?"

This legendary hero in particular had chosen an ordinary life over status, fame, and wealth. That was perhaps the part that truly surprised Shizuka. But since that also meant that said legendary hero had chosen a life with normal girls like her and Harumi, Shizuka didn't complain.

"That's right! It's all Koutarou's fault!"

An unexpected but familiar voice suddenly resounded in room 106. The next moment, a small shadow pounced on Koutarou.

"Just what's with that overly perfect heroism, huh?! And just what are you going to do about the heartache I felt when I heard that you had cut and run home after fulfilling your duties?!"

Theia had leaped from the tatami mats with such force that the floor shook and she practically hit the ceiling, but she was currently in position for a splendid flying kick and closing in on Koutarou at a frightening speed.

"Hey, welcome back, Theia. That was fast."

Though the surprise attack was headed straight for him, Koutarou easily brushed it aside. With barely a glance in Theia's direction, he casually reached out with his right hand and pushed her leg aside, changing her trajectory. However, such a feat wasn't purely through Koutarou's power. Sanae had sensed the incoming attack and conveyed it to Koutarou by touching him. It was easy enough to read considering the attacker, Theia, was quite open about her hostile intentions.

"Don't give me that! What was with that measly letter you left behind?!"

But Theia didn't stop at that. After her kick was deflected, she tackled Koutarou in a grapple. Theia clung to him from behind and wrapped her legs

around his waist. She then coiled her tiny arms around his neck and began strangling him. Theia had recently learned that it was harder to use psychic powers to predict things like submission holds than it was regular punches and kicks. That was in part because once she was already on top of him, her movements largely depended on how Koutarou reacted.

“Ugh, th-that should have been enough! It’s not like it was goodbye forever!”

Koutarou tried to pull Theia off of him, but Theia’s slender arms were firmly wrapped so tightly around his neck that he couldn’t get his fingers under them to pry them off. While it might have been possible if he enhanced his strength with psychic powers, it was an unspoken rule between them that that kind of thing was off-limits. This was a straight up brawl, plain and simple.

“So Theia-chan is good at submission moves, huh? Maybe I’ll have her teach me some Forthorthian techniques someday...” Shizuka mused.

“That’s it! Get him, Theia!” Sanae cheered.

The sight of the two of them going at it was so blasé that the other girls watching on casually cheered for either side. Koutarou and Theia were only playing with each other, after all. They all knew this was their equivalent of a tickling match or kissing each other.

“Don’t think that excuse will work with the citizens! Forthorthe’s in an uproar right now because of you!”

“Th-The test is more important than that!”

Wham!

Giving up on trying to pry Theia off of him, Koutarou intentionally fell backwards. It was enough to slam Theia, who was firmly holding on to his back, right into the tatami mats.

“Wah... Wait, a test? What test?”

The impact knocked the air out of Theia’s lungs and she was dazed for a moment, but Koutarou’s words quickly brought her back to her senses. However, now that she was pinned between Koutarou and the floor, the strength in her arms faltered.



“A test so that... we don’t... f-fail a grade!”

“What in the world are you talking about?! This is the first I’ve heart of anything like this!”

“Rainbow Heart is doing their due diligence. They acknowledge that it was necessary to use substitutes for us while we were gone, but they’re going to make sure we can earn the grades we got. So... yeah, a test,” Yurika explained in brief.

“What?!”

Surprised, Theia unconsciously let up on Koutarou. Koutarou was stronger

than she was, but she'd gotten an edge on him with her skill and speed. She was no match, however, for the shock of Rainbow Heart calling for an exam.

"You're wide open!"

"Whoa!"

And Koutarou didn't miss his chance. He wasn't interested in letting Theia continue to choke him out. He got a good grip on Theia's arms this time and began to use brute force to pull them off of his neck.

"Curses on you and your stupidly strong muscles! You two, get him!"

"Pardon me, Satomi-sama! If I remember correctly, I do this..."

"...Is something like this all right?"

In the end, Koutarou was unable to escape Theia's clutches. While he was preoccupied with her, two new attackers appeared: Theia's childhood friend, Ruth, and Theia's friend and rival, Clan.

"Hrrrmmmh! Mmm! Mmmph!"

Ruth embraced and locked Koutarou's right arm at the elbow, diligently following an example she'd seen in an combat manual. Having no knowledge of hand-to-hand combat, Clan wasn't sure what to do at first. She quickly realized, however, that she didn't need to know martial arts to cover Koutarou's mouth and nose.

"Mhm... hmm..."

Having his dominant arm restrained, his neck wrung, and his mouth and nose blocked, Koutarou didn't stand a chance. Before long, he lost consciousness on the spot.

"...He passed out, didn't he?"

"Good job, you two! We are victorious!"

"Your Highness, isn't this going a bit too far...?"

As she was currently unhappy with Koutarou, Theia was somewhat satisfied with this outcome. But it was far from enough. She was ready to make use of any dirty trick known to man to make Koutarou say that he would return to

Forthorthe again. Her mission had only just begun.

Theia, Clan, and their bodyguard Ruth, had been dispatched to Earth by Forthorthe in order to negotiate for the return of the Blue Knight, Lord Layous Fatra Veltlion. Forthorthe was prepared to use any means necessary, but they knew that had to avoid resorting to tactics that would earn Lord Veltlion's scorn. Forthorthe didn't want a doll that looked like the Blue Knight. They wanted the real deal, and it wouldn't be a good situation for either party if Forthorthe made Koutarou hate them in the process of getting him to return. As such, they didn't expect a quick resolution, and it was imperative that Theia, Clan, and Ruth continued living out their daily lives with Koutarou to try and win him over. That in turn meant continuing to act as students of Kisshouharukaze High School.

"I see... While the substitutes were necessary, they want to do the right thing and make sure we didn't get grades we didn't deserve."

"Your Highness, shouldn't we take the test too, then?"

"I believe so. We have to think about the future, after all."

Once they were apprised of the situation, Theia and Ruth decided that they would take the academic strength test as well. As "foreigners," they stood out a great deal as it was, and they wanted to do everything they could to safeguard their cover as students studying abroad.

"But it wasn't like we skipped out on class because we wanted to... They could just let it slide this once..."

"Yurika, that's not something an archwizard of Rainbow Heart should say."

"Even you're taking this too seriously, Maki-chan..."

The only one unconcerned about the test at hand was Clan.

"Such obligations can be quite troublesome, hmm?" she mused.

She'd been living on Earth, but had never entered Kisshouharukaze High School with the others. In her case, there was really no need to. Theia had only done so because she was trying to make Koutarou her vassal for her trial. But

that wasn't important for Clan. All she had to do was remain on Earth to maintain her network and continue her research.

However, Koutarou wasn't about to let Clan enjoy gloating. Still somewhat bitter about the surprise attack earlier, he turned to her with a stern look.

"Clan, you should start school in the spring too."

"What?! Wh-Why should I have to do that?"

Clan's eyes opened wide in surprise at such an unexpected proposition She didn't see any point in it. As she was in charge of support on this mission, there was no real reason for her to go to school like Theia and Ruth. Moreover, she already had academic abilities far surpassing anything a school would be able to teach her, so going would merely be a waste of time.

"It's annoying that we're the only ones suffering. Misery loves company."

"He's right! It's unfair that you're the only one that gets to escape, four-eyes!" Sanae shouted in agreement.

"What kind of a reason is that?!" Clan demanded.

Koutarou and Sanae were trying to pressure Clan to transfer into their school, and while they claimed it was so they could all share the same fate, the whole argument was really just a temporary distraction from their current situation. Jumping on Clan's case was certainly easier than studying.

*But I'll take this kind of stupid fighting over anything else... I'm glad the war is over and everything was resolved...*

Even in the heat of the moment, however, Koutarou was able to appreciate that this was how things were meant to be. Neither he nor the girls of room 106 were really cut out for warfare.

"Love is everything!"

"I don't really get it, but Sanae is right!"

"Veltlion... I've said it before, but you're not going to die a pretty death, you know that?"

But even though Koutarou took a certain amount of comfort in the situation,

Clan was quite unhappy that things had suddenly been turned on her.

Between winter and spring breaks, the third term at Kisshouharukaze High School was only about two months, or two-thirds the length of the first and second terms. And because it was so short, there were no midterm exams. Instead there were just final exams, usually held at the end of March.

“We’ve still got a while until finals, right? So why are you studying?”

Because of that, Kenji couldn’t even hazard a guess as to why Koutarou of all people was studying during lunch break. He knew it was still too early for him to be panicking about finals.

“I, uh... Well, I guess it finally dawned on me that we have university entrance exams next year. I want to get my grades up while I can.”

Koutarou realized that he couldn’t just outright admit that an organization of magical girls was giving him a cumulative test with several months of material on it. At best, Kenji would think he was crazy. But on the off chance that he actually believed it, that would be another problem in itself. All Koutarou could do was try to cover up the truth.

“Oh yeah, your first choice was Kisshou U, wasn’t it?”

“Yeah.”

“I guess you’re pretty borderline as it is, huh? But hey, man, good for you.”

Koutarou wanted to go to the same university as Harumi, Kisshou U, which was known as one of the better schools in the area. Koutarou’s current grades were just below what the school would consider accepting, so it was easy for Kenji to imagine that Koutarou wanted to improve his grades as much as possible to clear that hurdle.

“So is that what they’re all doing over there too?”

“Yeah. Yurika’s first choice is Kisshou U too.”

“Now that you mention it, Nijino-san’s grades have been improving since we started our second year. She might be able to pull it off if she keeps this up.”

“You sure know an awful lot about her, Mackenzie...”

“Leave me be!”

Kenji was curious as to why everyone, not just Koutarou, seemed to be studying right now, but fortunately the timing worked out well. Since they were all about to enter their last year of high school, it was only normal to be thinking about university. Feeling like he’d gotten away with something, Koutarou secretly let out a sigh of relief.

“This is a good opportunity, so why don’t you study too, Mackenzie?”

“I’m moving on to Harukaze Academy, so I’m fine.”

“Hmm, that weak academy that doesn’t even participate in tournaments, yet is known for its sports clubs, huh? I bet you’re going for that soft tennis club that’s famous at the welcoming for new students.”

“I said leave me be!”

Koutarou forgot about studying for a while and amused himself by chatting with Kenji. All work and no play wasn’t healthy, so taking a breather like this every so often was important.

“B-By the way, Kou...”

“Or are you going for the softball team that’s rumored to have a really cute manager? Kin-chan would be disappointed in you, Mackenzie.”

“Just drop it! Anyway... What’s up with that?”

Kenji hurriedly changed the topic and pointed at an empty desk.

“What? Theia?”

Kenji had pointed at Theia’s seat. Since Koutarou couldn’t think of anything that might be wrong, he looked at Kenji in confusion.

“She’s been missing a lot these past few days. Ruth-san too.”

“Have they?”

Theia’s seat had been empty the entire day. The same was true for her childhood friend, Ruth. Several days had already passed since they’d returned from Forthorthe, but they were only sporadically attending classes. Koutarou hadn’t really noticed because he’d been so focused on studying and because of

the seat change at the start of the term. He now sat in front of them, but Kenji sat behind them and saw whenever they would duck out of class and disappear.

“Yeah. Did something happen with Theiamillis-san?”

“No... I can’t think of anything. If anything, the situation should have improved...”

“What do you mean?”

“Simply put, Theia’s been having a lot of problems back home lately.”

Really, it would have made more sense for Theia to be ducking out of class a few months ago than it would now. The coup d’etat was over and things should be calming down in Forthorthe by the day.

“I can kinda see that. Theiamillis-san looks well to do, and I hear rich people family drama is like no other...”

“But that’s all resolved now. She should have it pretty easy right about now...”

“Well, you know, there’s always loose ends and whatnot.”

“Loose ends, huh? I wonder about that...”

Koutarou crossed his arms and began thinking. Forthorthe was thousands upon thousands of light years away. If she hadn’t settled things to at least a certain degree, she wouldn’t have been able to return to Earth. Theia was something of an untraditional princess, but she wouldn’t abandon her royal duties.

“Then maybe she’s fine; it’s just all catching up with her and she’s taking it easy.”

“That does sound more like it, but... Hmm...”

It was possible that she was skipping out on school to go have some fun or relax after everything that had happened. But would Theia really do something like that now that she’d matured? Moreover, would Ruth allow it? Thinking about it that way, something still didn’t feel right to Koutarou.

*Just what is she doing...?*

Koutarou’s eyes naturally shifted to where Theia and Ruth usually sat, but

their empty seats didn't have the answers he was looking for.

Even with the upcoming test, Koutarou still had his part-time job. If it had come up earlier, he probably could have gotten someone to cover for him this weekend, but it was too short notice for that now. And so he headed to work like usual.

"Youngsters these days are usually so rough, but you're always so careful, Ko-chan... "

"Oh, this is nothing."

"My, my. I guess you're just suited to this kind of work. What a dear."

Koutarou was working alongside his usual colleague, an elderly woman. They were part of an excavation team working to uncover some unusual ruins. They contained technology well beyond what should have been available thousands of years ago, and their discovery had astonished the entire archeological field.

*These ruins are probably from back when Maxfern and the others were thrown to Earth...*

Two thousand years ago in Forthorthe, Koutarou and Clan had used her Super Space-time Repulsion Shell to cast Maxfern and his lackeys through space and time. The court magicians eventually ended up drifting to Folsaria, and the alchemists ended up on Earth. It was said that they then developed their own technology and became the ancestors to the People of the Earth. And if this ruin were a part of what Maxfern and the others had done once they'd ended up on Earth, it would help explain a lot.

*Since this is my doing in a way, of course I'd be careful with it...*

Koutarou took it upon himself to be especially careful with his work. He had a special connection to it now. He couldn't be reckless when it came to examining how the people he'd banished from past Forthorthe had lived and died. And so his motions with the brush he used to remove sand and soil naturally became more delicate, and he handled all the artifacts he uncovered with great care.

*But... then there's this feeling. I wonder what it is...*

Suddenly, Koutarou's hand stopped. Something else was distracting him. Ever since defeating Vandarion and returning home, Koutarou had had the nagging feeling that something had happened at these ruins once. The sensation grew stronger every day, but no matter how much he mulled it over, he couldn't think of anything that fit the bill. He thought about just writing it off as his imagination, but something deep inside him told him not to. It was a strange feeling.

"...Hmm?"

That was when Koutarou spotted something like a shadow out of the corner of his eye. Koutarou was surprised, but paid careful attention to the dark figure. It might have something to do with the strange feeling that had come over him.

"Who... is that?"

When he looked, Koutarou saw a man in a black suit and sunglasses standing off to the side in the trees and brush that surrounded the dig site. He was staring right at Koutarou. The moment they locked eyes, Koutarou knew something wasn't right. There was no way a man in a suit had anything to do with what he'd been thinking about.

However, because Koutarou had spotted him, the man frantically looked around and darted behind a nearby tree. That was suspicious in itself, so Koutarou set down his tools and decided to go investigate.

"What's the matter, Ko-chan?" his elderly coworker asked.

Since she knew Koutarou wasn't the type to skip out on work, she was worried something might be wrong.

"I saw someone shady. A man in a black suit."

"Oh my... But don't go chasing after him alone. People these days can be dangerous, so just let the supervisor know."

Realizing that Koutarou was about to go after the man, she politely tried to stop him. She was concerned about what might happen and was trying to look after him.

"All right..."

In reality, the chances of the mysterious man being able to take out Koutarou were low. Even if he had a gun, he wouldn't be able to defeat Koutarou who was protected by all manner of superhuman powers. But nonetheless, Koutarou heeded his elderly coworker. It wasn't like the man had brandished a weapon, and Koutarou hadn't felt any hostility from him. The mysterious man in black had just been watching. It wasn't reason enough for Koutarou ignore his coworker and go chasing after him.

Koutarou's shift ended as the sun set. The critical areas of the dig would continue for a while yet with the help of spotlights, but the area Koutarou was in charge of called it a day once it started to get dark. Koutarou's supervisor had assigned him to that area out of consideration since he was a high school student.

"It really gets cold fast once the sun starts to go down..."

Koutarou shivered a little as he hurried on home. February had only just started, and it was still undeniably the dead of winter. The bitter evening wind felt like it cut straight to the bone, and the sweat Koutarou had worked up on the job only made it worse.

"What is Clan doing over there...?"

When he approached Corona House, Koutarou spotted Clan by the gatepost. He was still some distance away, so he couldn't tell what she was doing, but she seemed to be staring down at the ground.

"Hey, Clan!"

"Ack! I-I'll call you back later!"

When Koutarou called out to Clan as he walked over to her, she started to panic. She frantically shoved something flat and rectangular into her pocket, and then turned to Koutarou and smiled.

"W-Welcome back, Veltlion!"

She was behaving quite strangely, and her smile was stiff. Suspicious, Koutarou naturally looked down at the pocket she'd just shoved something into. In response, Clan put her hand over it as if to shield it from view.

“Clan, you...”

“Wh-What?”

“That was a smartphone, wasn’t it?”

It was indeed a smartphone in her pocket. While it was relatively common nowadays for high school students to have them, something seemed weird about Clan using one.

“So what if it was?”

“...You weren’t using one before, were you?”

Clan had never used a cellphone before, let alone a smartphone. Seeing as how her only friends on Earth were Koutarou and the girls of room 106, there was never a need for her to have one. Whenever she contact them, she would use the computer in her bracelet to hack into existing telecommunication lines, so there was no real point in having a legitimate cellphone.

“I-I’ve gotten into playing games!”

“Liar! You were clearly just talking to someone. And it was clearly supposed to be a secret since you’re out here!”

Clan was using a phone that should have been superfluous, and she’d stepped out of room 106 to do it secretly. Her excuse about games didn’t add up, so it was pretty clear she was hiding something.

“Urk!”

“First Theia, now you. What in the world is going on?”

Theia’s absence, the mysterious man in the suit, and Clan’s cellphone. Koutarou began suspecting that it was all related somehow. The timing was just too coincidental.

“Nothing! And I’m not doing anything!”

“Yeah, okay. That’s not suspicious...”

Clan desperately denied everything, but that only made Koutarou more doubtful. He was sure now that something was up.

“I was just talking to an acquaintance! So I needed this phone! Do you want

me to continue to break your laws here or something?!”

“Okay, point taken...”

While that didn’t ease Koutarou’s suspicions but so much, it put a firm end to his line of questioning. It was true that her starting to use a normal phone was a good thing. Up until now, she had just hacked into telecom channels without any second thoughts. And since Koutarou didn’t really have anything else to go on, he had no choice but to relent for the time being.



“So... what are you using for a wallpaper? I’m really interested in how an alien uses a smartphone.”

“Th-That’s a secret! I won’t show you no matter what!”

“It’s not a big deal, right? Come on, let me see. Just a peak.”

“No way! Absolutely not! Not even a peak! Especially not you!”

But in the end, Clan was still in the hot seat. Koutarou’s interest had shifted from who she was talking to earlier to what her phone’s wallpaper was, and he wasn’t about it let it go.

Clan’s phone, however, was old news in room 106. Theia had gotten one too, and since phones were a sort of accessory, they held a special interest for teenage girls. They all noticed right away.

“Whaaat?! Theia-chan and them have phones now?!”

With the exception of Yurika, that is. Yurika lived in her own world and couldn’t really keep up with trends, so she didn’t bother paying much attention to things like that.

“Well, thanks to you, it looks like Satomi-kun wasn’t the last one to find out after all.”

Maki flashed a small smile at Yurika. Having finished their activities with the cosclub for the day, Yurika and Maki were casually chatting as they walked home. They were walking so close together that the setting sun shining over their shoulders only cast a single shadow.

“When did you find out, Maki-chan?”

“Me? I figured it out the day after Theiamillis-san and the others came back, I guess? I suppose keeping tabs on people is something of a bad habit left over from my days in Darkness Rainbow...” Maki said with a bitter smile and a shrug.

Quite some time had passed since she had chosen to live as Aika Maki rather than Dark Navy. But even so, her training as a warrior of Darkness Rainbow wasn’t something she could just forget. It was deeply ingrained in her, and that manifested in her everyday life. For instance, she’d noticed Theia and Clan’s phones because she instinctively kept strict track of the people around her. It seemed it would still take a lot for Maki to be a normal girl.

“That’s right, speaking of bad habits... Have you noticed, Yurika?”

“Hueh? Noticed what?”

Alarmed by Maki’s words, Yurika’s eyes opened wide. Although she was a magical girl, she had a terrible intuition. In response, Maki continued speaking in a hushed voice without breaking her smile. Her tone was quite serious.

“Just keep acting like everything’s normal. Now, can you tell that there’s a man in a black suit at one o’clock?”

“Um, one o’clock is kinda in the direction of the hand you hold your knife with, so...”

Yurika did as she was told and tried to act normally while focusing her mind ahead and a little to the right. When she did, she noticed a man in a black suit, just like Maki had said. He had his back to the two girls and was walking on the opposite side of the road. Her senses, however, told her nothing was out of the ordinary.

“I see him, but... what about him?”

“He’s actually shadowing us.”

“Whaaat?! How can he do that if he’s in front of us?!”

“Shh, you’re being too loud... There are two other men behind us too. Sandwiching a target is standard procedure for shadowing someone. So you can’t turn around, no matter what.”

“Wh-Wh-What’s going on?!”

The fact that they were being shadowed came as a complete surprise to Yurika. Now that the troubles with Folsaria, the People of the Earth, and Forthorthe were essentially all resolved, she didn’t think anything else would happen. She’d let her guard down, and now strange men were pursuing them. Yurika started to panic a little.

“They started following us around the beginning of February. I first noticed on the third of the month.”

“So they’ve been shadowing us for at least four days?” Yurika trembled.

Today was February 7th. That meant for the past four days, plus most of today, they'd been tailed by strange men. The thought sent a chill down Yurika's spine.

"I thought they were stalkers or something at first, but—"

"Please stop saying scary things like that..."

"Their movements are too organized, so they're not your run of the mill stalkers at least. Though group stalking isn't unheard of, so it can't be fully ruled out."

"I said please stop with the scary stuff!"

It had its downsides in her everyday life, but Maki had actually only noticed their pursuers thanks to her Darkness Rainbow training. Being a magical girl that specialized in indigo mind manipulation magic, she was extremely observant and wary of others.

"It seems like we have three following after each of us."

"I wonder who they are..."

"We'll need to put on some pressure to learn anything more. But should we really go that far...?"

They didn't know much about the men in black right now. As far as Maki could tell, there were three of them following Koutarou and each of the girls from Corona House. That meant there were at least thirty different men involved, so it was clearly some kind of organization. As she couldn't sense any mana from them, Maki suspected they were normal humans from the surface. There was no sign of them preparing to attack, however, and Maki couldn't feel any hostility from them either. It seemed like they were just observing, at least for now.

All the information that Maki had gathered so far had been through passive means so as not to raise any alarm. As the nature and scale of this organization was unknown, Maki remained cautious. But to learn any more, she would need to start using more serious measures like contacting them directly or casting magic on them, and that would mean a certain amount of risk. Maki was wondering if she should really be going that far.

“Why not talk with Satomi-san or Kiriha-san?”

“Yeah, they’ve probably noticed as well. They might have a good idea.”

In Yurika’s case, she always passed anything difficult or troubling off on Koutarou and Kiriha if she could. Maki, on the other hand, considered herself something of an agent of Koutarou, so she typically reported to him. So while their reasons were different, Yurika and Maki both ultimately came to the same conclusion.

As Maki suspected, both Koutarou and Kiriha had also noticed the men in black. Koutarou only knew about as much as Maki did, but Kiriha had more in depth information. Somehow, Maki wasn’t surprised at that.

“Ho, ho!”

“Ho, ho!”

“...As you can see, these men have a connection to Theia-dono and Ruth. But they are not Forthorthian. Their equipment is clearly from Earth.”

Upon noticing the men in black, Kiriha had sent her haniwas and subordinates shadow them in turn. She’d managed to gather some interesting information that way, and that was how she knew more than Maki. The two haniwas, Karama and Korama, had built-in projectors. At Kiriha’s behest, they played footage they’d recorded of the men speaking with Theia and Ruth in the shadows, smoking with their jackets off during breaks, and various other things.

The curious part, of course, was Theia and Ruth’s involvement. Kiriha and the others paid careful attention to their behavior in the video footage the haniwas were projecting onto a wall in room 106. Based on their expressions and gestures, Theia and Ruth were clearly in a position of authority. The men in black were respectful of them and quick to obey their orders. Moreover, the cigarettes they were smoking were Japanese, the manga they were reading was in Japanese, and the guns in their holsters were clearly from Earth. That was how Kiriha had concluded they were a Japanese organization rather than a Forthorthian one.

“And based on the fact that they couldn’t see through the haniwas’ Class I

Stealth Mode, we can assume that they don't have access to magic or spiritual energy. It's possible that they're just regular Earthlings."

The haniwas had several special functions, including a stealth mode. It allowed them to manipulate visible light and electromagnetic radiation to conceal themselves, and it had two settings. The standard setting was Class I, but there was also Class II. It was less energy efficient, but it had the added benefit of concealing spiritual energy. Kiriha had had the haniwas approach the men using Class I stealth. They were invisible to the naked eye, but still emitted a spiritual energy signature that way. It was something of a test, because whether or not the men in black detected them would reveal whether or not they had access to spiritual energy technology. Either way, Kiriha was getting valuable intel.

"What are they doing cooperating with the Earthlings... and why?" Shizuka asked, repeatedly blinking in confusion.

Up until now, Theia and subsequently Forthorthe had had no desire to get involved with organizations on Earth. She'd solely been focused on Koutarou and room 106, or in order words, completing her trial to earn her claim to the throne in the line of royal succession. Shizuka couldn't even guess why Theia would shift her focus now.

"Couldn't it be volunteer work?" Harumi asked innocently.

Harumi, who was sweet and slow to judge others, wanted to give them the benefit of the doubt. Volunteer work was what Kiriha had been doing for a while, so she thought Theia might be doing the same thing.

"Is that really something they'd be doing in those stiff looking suits?" Maki asked skeptically.

"Yeah, they should definitely be wearing cuter outfits," Yurika added.

The two magical girls were more dubious than Harumi. The black suits and leather shoes the strange men were wearing may have looked sharp, but that kind of attire wasn't typical for neighborhood cleanups or community fundraising. Something casual would have made a lot more sense. And so based on their outfits alone, Maki and Yurika doubted that volunteer work was what they were really up to, "Koutarou, why is Theia getting along with the dudes in

black?” Sanae asked frankly.

She’d given up on trying to figure it out for herself, so she leaned over on Koutarou and asked him for the answer while munching on potato chips. For every two she ate, she’d feed one to Koutarou.

“Beats me. I’m trying to figure it out, though.”

“You can do it, Koutarou! For the sake of your lovely and adorable Sanae-chan!”

“...What do you think, Kiriha-san?” Koutarou asked.

“Good call!” Sanae cheered.

Sanae didn’t personally think Theia and Ruth’s mysterious behavior was much of a problem. She couldn’t imagine that Theia was up to no good, nor could she imagine that Ruth would cooperate with her even in the event that she was. At worst, this was probably all just some kind of elaborate prank. All that really mattered to her right now as that she got to play around with Koutarou and eat potato chips.

“We don’t have enough information to go on,” said Kiriha. “We’ll need to take more drastic measures to be able to draw any solid conclusions.”

Thanks to the haniwas and her subordinates, Kiriha had gathered a good deal of intelligence, but it was all done from a safe distance. Because of that, just like Maki, she didn’t know the scale of their organization or its nature. Once it became apparent that Theia, Ruth, and Clan were involved, it was clear that nothing sinister was afoot. But they still wanted answers, and there was a limit to what they could learn simply by observing from a distance. Kiriha felt like it was time to move on to the next phase.

“I guess we’ll have to catch one of them then.”

Koutarou felt the same way. He didn’t want to do anything too rough or dramatic, but Clan had feigned ignorance when he’d asked her, and Theia and Ruth were essentially avoiding him. The three of them acting strangely would have been one thing on its own, but the strange men were something different altogether. Koutarou couldn’t ignore that part. With so many girls in room 106, he needed some peace of mind. In the end, he decided he would accept the risk

and try confronting one of the men in black.

Koutarou was willing to take such a drastic step in large part thanks to the information he'd gotten from Kiriha. She knew enough about them and the way they worked that it was simple enough to come up with a tactic to isolate one of them. That kind of strategic planning was Kiriha's forte.

"So this store's closed too... I'm really out of luck today..."

One of the men in black shrugged despondently in front of a closed convenience store. This man was the rookie member of the team assigned to shadowing Yurika, so he was often sent out to buy cigarettes, food, and various sundries by the other two. Today, however, things were proving to be more difficult than usual. The convenience store he frequented was closed for the day, and the one he'd tried next was also temporarily closed for redecorating. After sending a text message to his team explaining the situation, he headed for yet another store.

"I guess I don't have a choice... They'll chew me out if I come back without their cigarettes and manga."

As the men in black often had a lot of downtime during their shadowing, plenty of them enjoyed smoking a cigarette to kill time or reduce stress. The same was true for manga. They had essentially become necessities on the job. Not having them would negatively influence the quality of their work, so the rookie had to get them for his team even if it meant he had to go the extra mile for them.

"Take a left up ahead and... Maybe it'd be closer if I just go straight?"

Trying to save some time on his errand run, the rookie didn't hesitate to try a shortcut through an unmarked alleyway. Since it was his first time in the area, however, he had his hands full just looking at the map and trying to find his way. He wasn't paying much attention to his surroundings. That, of course, was what Koutarou and the others were waiting for.

"This road's a dead end."

"Whoa!"

Suddenly, a young man in a local school uniform appeared before the rookie man in black. But it wasn't just any boy. It was one of the targets another team was shadowing: Satomi Koutarou. According to his boss, Koutarou was the most important target in the surveillance operation. Realizing the situation he'd potentially gotten himself into, the rookie yelped in surprise and jumped back like he'd seen a ghost.

"Y-Y-You're...!"

"You know what I want, right?"

"Not good!"

Even though he was the rookie member of his team, he'd still gone through thorough training just like everyone else. He quickly collected himself and turned on his heels to make an escape. His boss would probably scold him, but it was much better then getting caught.

"This is a dead end too, mister."

"On this side too?!"

However, his escape route was blocked by a smiling girl.

"Fine, I'll just charge through! Hyah!"

Deciding it would be easier to get past the smiling girl than Koutarou, the man in black broke into a sprint and headed back down the alley the way he'd come. Seeing how petite the girl was, he was confident that he could shake her off even if she grabbed him.

"Jeez, I told you this was a dead end."

However, the man in black's decision was a mistake. In her own way, the smiling girl was much stronger than Koutarou. After all, she had spiritual energy powerful enough to affect reality.

"Sorry about this, young lady!"

"Oh, don't worry about it! Instead... take this!"

The girl in question, Sanae, approached the man in black while humming and skipping. As they crossed paths, she lightly tapped his shoulder with her right

index finger. The next thing he knew, he was spinning violently.

“Whoa!”

He spun a full rotation in the air before landing flat on his back. The impact knocked the air out of his lungs, but he had no idea what had happened to him. He’d collapsed to the ground after just a tap on the shoulder, but he couldn’t discern any other effects. It clearly hadn’t been a stun gun. All the man in black could feel was the pain from hitting the ground.

“Are you okay, mister?”

Sanae looked down on the confused man in black from above. All Sanae had done was pour spiritual energy into the left side of his body. It was a very gentle attack, if there was such a thing. With the man’s left side overwhelmingly more charged with more spiritual energy, he lost his balance and fell. In other words, he suddenly found himself with too much power. He wasn’t hurt at all other than the pain from the fall. In fact, if anything, his circulation had improved.

“I-I’m not really old enough for you to be calling me mister...”

While he didn’t know what had happened to him, he understood that he had failed to escape. The man in black resigned himself to that much as he sat up. Thinking things through, however, he came to another realization. Koutarou and his friends definitely weren’t normal. That’s what he’d suspected all along, and their secret was exactly what his team was trying to find out.

“Who are you guys? And why are you snooping around?”

Koutarou walked over to Sanae and the man in black. Seeing him, the man in black was shocked. Koutarou’s demeanor had completely changed. Rather than giving off the energetic air of a nice high school boy, he was radiating a stern and powerful will. Moreover, his tone of voice made it sound like he meant serious business. To the man in black, it was almost like he was facing his boss. And with that kind of pressure weighing on him, he was at his breaking point.

“Depending on the circumstances—”

“P-Please wait! We’re not your enemies!”

When Koutarou’s narrowed eyes gleamed, the man in black easily caved. The

truth was that making Koutarou angry would only be a hassle for him and his organization. They were merely shadowing Koutarou and the others for surveillance. They really didn't mean them any harm.

"Every villain starts off by saying that..."

"Just wait! We're related to the Sun Rangers!"

"...What?"

Koutarou stopped dead in his tracks at the mention of a most unexpected name. Sensing the pressure from Koutarou relent a little in that moment, the man in black decided to keep pushing.

"We're an affiliate organization, but the chain of command is more closely linked to Central!"

"An organization from Central, you say?"

Koutarou was willing to hear him out, but there was still a stern look in his eyes. There was a chance this man had just come across information about the Sun Rangers and that he was lying about who he was. Since the men in black didn't have any spiritual energy equipment, Koutarou was skeptical that they actually had any connection to the Sun Rangers. He pressed him for details just to be sure.

"Then you wouldn't have a problem telling me what their names are and what's happened recently."

"Kenichi-kun, Hayato-kun, and the younger Kotaro-kun! There's also Daisaku-kun and Megumi-san, who have been getting quite close recently!"

"Whaaat?! They had *that* kind of relationship?!"

"As for recent events, their efforts have been recognized officially and their salaries have been increased by 20 percent. At first becoming a Sun Ranger was considered a demotion, but they've really shaken things up. When it comes to the anti-invasion sector, they have the most experience and the best track record!"

"So you really do know your stuff..."

The man in black had been able to properly answer Koutarou's test question.

He even had insider information, including on Daisaku and Megumi's relationship. That indicated to Koutarou this man was indeed from an affiliate organization, just as he'd claimed. That was enough for Koutarou to start to trust him at least a little, but it gave rise to another question.

"But then why are you after information on us? Haven't the Sun Rangers told you everything you need to know?"

If this man or his organization had an in with the Sun Rangers, they should have been able to get information from them. The Sun Rangers certainly knew plenty about Koutarou and the others, so it seemed pointless for the men in black to be shadowing them. It didn't add up for Koutarou.

"They are refusing to give out information on you. They're saying that because it's an unofficial relationship, they're not required to divulge any details. If it weren't for that, their raises would have been well over 20 percent."

"Those guys..."

Koutarou felt a little warm and fuzzy. The Sun Rangers had purposely kept information on Koutarou and the others secret for the sake of the People of the Earth and the peace of Earth. Even though they could have gotten promotions or better raises if they'd talked, they'd stayed quiet for the greater good. They really were true heroes, and that made Koutarou happy.

"And candidly speaking, my superiors don't want to kowtow to Professor Roppongi. They're strangely elitist, and they don't want to admit that the tables have turned," the man in black said with a shrug.

With that, Koutarou was willing to trust him. He didn't trust him as much as the Sun Rangers, of course, but he felt like he no longer had to worry about him being an enemy.

"...Anyways, I get that you're kind of with the Sun Rangers, but that still doesn't explain why you're snooping around us."

Only one question remained: what had mobilized the men in black? Nothing like this had happened before, so some new development must have caused it. That was what Koutarou wanted to know.

“There are two reasons, really. We’ve been following you to learn about you and to protect you.”

“Protect...?”

His last few words threw Koutarou for a loop. He could understand wanting to learn about him and the others, but he couldn’t imagine why on earth this organization would think they needed protection.

“Truth be told... Several days ago, mysterious aliens called Forthorthians contacted us.”

“Forthorthians?! Damn, so it was their doing!”

Koutarou now realized why Theia and Ruth had been acting so strangely. They were missing school so often because they were in the midst of a parley with the Japanese government. It also explained why Clan had gotten a cellphone.

*Based on his reaction, it seems clear that Koutarou-kun has had connections to the Forthorthians for quite a while. I have to report this...*

The man in black took mental notes based on how Koutarou reacted. It seemed like Koutarou would be of great importance when negotiating with Forthorthe.

“Of course, there’s a big commotion in the government running from the top to the bottom, as I think you can imagine.”

“Yeah, I guess so.”

It wasn’t hard for Koutarou to imagine the government’s confusion when he thought back to how he’d felt when he first met Theia himself. It was hard enough for one person to swallow, let alone a whole government.

“They came proposing the establishment of diplomatic relations. Not with Earth as a planet or even the UN, but specifically with the Japanese government. They said that they want Japan to be their window to Earth no matter what. And if we comply, they said they’ll help make sure things go as smoothly as possible for us without disrupting Earth’s economy or political landscape,” the man in black explained with another shrug.

Not knowing why Forthorthe had singled out Japan, the government was

understandably confused at first. But they quickly got over the initial shock of it all and began examining the matter at hand from a national interest point of view. While the proposal was peculiar, it was also very attractive. If Japan could establish diplomatic relationships with aliens before any other country, they could spearhead a lot of fields that way. They could become the frontrunners of Earth's new space age.

"That alone doesn't sound too problematic."

"That's true, but the two conditions the Forthorthians set made us hesitate. We couldn't accept their offer until we understood the meaning behind them."

"I see... So what are these conditions?"

"The first is in regards to a policy concerning nationality. The Forthorthian government will nominate certain people on Earth, and if said people accept, the Japanese government will not be allowed to object to them changing their nationality. If Japan is truly meant to be a window of diplomacy to Forthorthe, such a measure is likely meant to keep the Japanese government from interfering in situations where citizens from other countries would like to become citizens of Forthorthe. That wasn't what was so hard to understand."

Koutarou thought it was more likely that such a policy was meant to protect the People of Earth and Folsarians. Since neither were technically legal citizens of Japan, things could get tricky if Forthorthe was only doing business with the Japanese people. And so Forthorthe had come up with a way to get around that. That was probably really what was going on.

"Okay, so what's the other one?"

"That's the problem. The second condition is extremely specific."

"What do you mean?"

"The second condition is you."

"Me?!"

"Yes. The second condition set forth by the Forthorthians was, quote, 'Satomi Koutarou, who is currently a second-year student at Kisshouharukaze High School, along with his family, friends, and acquaintances must not be used as

bargaining chips for negotiations with Forthorthe.’”

That request had absolutely baffled the government. It was far too specific, and extremely bizarre coming from an alien that had seemingly just arrived on Earth. But their first step to figuring it out revolved around one question: who is Satomi Koutarou?

“We can’t even guess why the aliens would be so obsessed with you, but we’ve been trying to figure it out. That’s the reason we’ve been investigating you. And as things stand, you’re a matter of national concern. If anything happened to you, it could mean an interstellar diplomatic disaster. That’s why we’re also keeping an eye on you to protect you.”

“Ugh, so that’s what it is...”

Koutarou held his head in pain. Forthorthe was trying to form an official diplomatic relationship with Japan using their technology and cultural exchange as bait. If Japan agreed, they would become the world leader in interplanetary diplomacy. It was an enviable position to be in. With a title like that, the tourism industry would be booming in no time, among other things. The government was probably drooling at the prospect, but they had to be careful. The aliens had given them a most unusual condition, and that was what had led to their investigation of Satomi Koutarou.

Once Koutarou was apprised of what was really going, he stormed aboard Blue Knight. Though Theia hadn’t come to school, Koutarou knew that she always enjoyed a cup of tea in a certain antique-style room on her ship at about this hour.

“Today’s tea leaves are Rubustori.”

“Let’s see... It’s quite good. You’ve gotten even better, Ruth.”

“I want answers!”

Wham!

“Pfhhht!”

Koutarou brought his fist down square on top of Theia’s head. He wasn’t hold

back much, so the tea in Theia's mouth came flying out as a fine mist on impact.

"What's wrong with you?!"

Theia glared at Koutarou as Ruth wiped the tea from around her mouth for her. Her spewing tea was something that happened from time to time when Koutarou was around, so Theia wasn't particularly caught off guard by it. Her eyes, however, indicated she was quite angry.

"That's my line! What the hell are you doing sneaking around in the shadows?! I heard that you're trying to establish diplomatic relations with Japan! Just what are you after?!"

Whatever she was really up to was why she and Ruth had been sneaking around. It was also why Clan had gotten a phone. Whatever her intentions were, they were shrouded enough that the government had put the men in black on the job. Just establishing diplomatic relations would have been one thing, but keeping it a secret from Koutarou made him worry. He suspected that there may be ulterior motives at play.

"You!"

Theia's reply, however, was as simple as could be. She pointed straight at Koutarou and boldly declared that he was the answer.

"Wh-What?"

Koutarou flinched. He looked like he had been caught completely off guard, but Theia pushed on regardless.

"I'm just making preparations so that when you feel like becoming a Forthorthian citizen, you can do so right away!"

"You idiot! Don't shake up an entire country just for that crap!"

"'That crap'?! Did you just say 'that crap'?!" Theia raised her eyebrows, ran up to Koutarou, and grabbed hold of his collar. "You don't get it! You don't get anything at all! You've saved Forthorthe! Twice now! You're our hero! Our savior! A knight without peer! That you would refuse to become a citizen of Forthorthe is unacceptable! That's all the people want! And that's why we were sent over so quickly!"

Theia was in tears. She was frustrated that Koutarou hadn't understood their feelings, but most of all, she was hurt that she'd been left behind in Forthorthe.

"Then wait until I'm good and ready! Why rush it and just ignore me like that?!"

"You don't have the right talk about being ignored after abandoning the people of Forthorthe and running back to Earth! And what was with that measly letter you left behind?! I searched all over thinking that there must be more to it!"

Theia continued to cry as she repeatedly pounded her fist against Koutarou's chest. Perhaps because she was channeling her feelings into it, each blow was harder than the last. After a good ten seconds, Koutarou couldn't take it anymore.

"We can't have both me and the sword in Forthorthe!"

Koutarou grabbed Theia's shoulders and forcibly held her at arm's length. She had the strength of a trained martial artist, so he couldn't just let her continue to punch him like that.

"Such proper answer is even more irritating! You damn model knight! It's not like you don't understand how much we Forthorthians love you!"

And with that, Theia began an all out attack on Koutarou. With her golden hair fluttering and her tears scattering, she swung her fists and kicked her feet like a frenzied wild animal.

"I couldn't just stay and pretend like nothing was wrong! Surely you noticed what was starting to happen to the economy because of me!"

"Even then, the citizens still want you there! I still want you there! We don't care about things like that!"

"Well, I do!"

With Theia seriously attacking him now, Koutarou had to respond in kind. Deflecting Theia's fists and feet, Koutarou began swinging too. They went at each other hard, each one trying to take the other out.

"This is how Her Highness and Master should be..."

Despite witnessing her beloved princess and legendary hero seriously fighting with one another, Ruth seemed to be enjoying herself.

“Master is and always will be the only one Her Highness can throw such intense emotions at...”

It was unusual, but Ruth knew this was one of the ways Theia and Koutarou expressed themselves. She had no need to be worried. After all, Theia wasn’t using any weapons, and Koutarou wasn’t using his sword or psychic powers. Neither one of them was aiming for vital points, either. This was simply a way for them to communicate. To level with each other. And no matter how much they fought, it didn’t lessen their goodwill or respect for each other. In other words, the Forthorthian princess and the Forthorthian hero were fighting because they wanted to. That’s why to Ruth, it only looked like they were horsing around.

Koutarou and Theia’s deathmatch lasted for several minutes. Humans couldn’t sustain a fight for but so long, especially when they were going all out. So when Koutarou and Theia stopped moving, Ruth couldn’t tell whether it was because they’d finally beaten each other down or if they’d just collapsed from sheer exhaustion.

“Good work, you two.”

Ruth handed them wet towels she’d prepared while they were duking it out. It was a gesture more appropriate for a sporting event than a brawl, but they were both grateful. By now, they’d burned off most of their frustrations and most of their energy, so they naturally fell into a compromise of sorts. A truce.

“Theia.”

“What?”

“Nothing’s going to come from us punching it out.”

“No, eventually I’ll win.”

“Are you being serious?”

“...No, not really.”

Feeling emotionally refreshed after getting to vent like that, Koutarou and Theia regained their composure. They both knew that fighting was meaningless without discussion. While the fighting itself was an important step in the process, it wasn't the answer.

"So let's settle this on the upcoming test."

"That's what I was thinking."

Changing gears, they agreed to set their sights on the test that would be held in a few days. Since their grades were roughly on the same level, they expected it to be a fair fight. Strictly speaking, Theia had an advantage in academics, but Koutarou had a leg up because of the language and culture barrier. They were basically tit for tat.

"If I beat you on the test, you'll stop doing strange stuff in the shadows."

Koutarou's demand was that Theia and the others stopped working behind the scenes. He didn't have a problem with Forthorthe establishing diplomatic relations with Japan as long as it was done fairly and openly. It would be an important step in allowing for Folsarians and the People of the Earth to legally immigrate. Koutarou had only been unhappy that Theia was essentially trying to do everything behind his back. She was even trying to make preparations for his return to Forthorthe, and Koutarou didn't like the idea of obstacles being removed from his path before he'd even decided to walk down it. He had his own life to think about.

"Okay. But in return, if I win, you'll come back to Forthorthe."

In the past, Theia's goal had been for Koutarou to swear loyalty to her, but now it was bigger than that. She wanted Koutarou. In order to have him back in Forthorthe, she would use any and all means necessary. Her people felt the same way. But since it would all be pointless if Koutarou came to hate her or her people in the process, she had to convince him properly and make him admit defeat on his own terms. To that end, the academic strength test was convenient.

"Fine, but only if you win."

"Oh, I will! Let me remind you the proud Mastir family has gone undefeated

for over two thousand years!”

“Yeah, well, at least two of those victories were thanks to me.”

“So you do get it. Your victories are our victories; that is the natural order of things. Your fate is tied to Forthorthe.”

“You’re getting full of yourself. Just don’t cry about losing later.”

“Ohoho, right back at you!”

Neither one was willing to relent a single step, yet they were both equally determined to make the other back down. It was a stalemate between invader and defender.

“Please don’t go at it too hard. You do have a test to get ready for, Your Highness, Master.”

Ruth, however, didn’t take a side in the matter. She was impartial to begin with, but that was also part of Theia’s plan. Theia would push hard, Clan would conservatively pull, and Ruth would do neither. Between the three of them, they would shake Koutarou up as best they could. While he had no way of knowing, Forthorthe was terrifying serious about his acquisition.

Theia’s eraser was shaped like a cute cat. It was something she’d been using ever since coming to Earth. Its cute design, however, compromised its erasing power. It was a matter of form over function.

“Koutarou, I’m borrowing your eraser.”

“Sure.”

That’s why Theia would always use a better eraser if one was nearby. And with Koutarou studying next to her, she didn’t hesitate to use his. The less she used hers, the longer it would keep its cute cat shape.

“Hey, Theia, about this part...”

“Gravity, huh? Ruth, what is the gravitational constant of Earth again?”

“It’s 9.8 meters per second squared, Your Highness.”

“An unfamiliar figure, but oh well. To begin with, gravity is the phenomenon

of...”

In return for using his eraser, Theia helped Koutarou out with things he didn’t understand. It was usually math or physics based since those were his weaker subjects. But it didn’t take long for Theia to start asking Koutarou questions too. Kanji, Japanese literature, and Japanese history were literally alien to her.

“Um, Kiriha-san...”

Yurika, who was raiding the kitchen for snacks, turned to Kiriha, who was in the kitchen preparing for dinner.

“Yes? If it’s the pudding, it’s cooling off in the refrigerator.”

“It’s not about the pudding. I mean, I want that too, but... those two are competing who gets a better grade on the test, right?”

Yurika peeked through the curtain that separated the hallway kitchen from the inner room. Koutarou and Theia were sitting at the tea table, ardently studying away.

“So I’ve been told. If Koutarou wins, Theia-dono and the others will stop moving around behind the scenes. And if Theia-dono wins, Koutarou will be going back to Forthorthe. It’s a decisive battle.”

“So why are they studying so happily together?”

Yurika’s question was something that most of the girls of room 106 had been wondering. Curious herself, Sanae peeked out from the curtain too as she took another sip of milk out of the curtain.

“Heh... that’s the complicated part of their relationship,” Kiriha responded.

She didn’t peek through the curtain like the other two girls did, but she cast a glance towards the inner room. While she couldn’t see Theia and Koutarou, she could easily imagine them happily studying together.

“But Theia-dono and Koutarou are earnestly trying to beat each other. There’s no doubt about that.”

“But... they’re working together, aren’t they? They’re helping each other study and everything. I’m not saying they should be mean to each other or trick each other, but wouldn’t they have a higher chance of winning if they didn’t

help out their competition?”

That was Yurika’s real question. They were using the test as a means to settle their dispute, but they were clearly trying to help each other succeed. That’s why Yurika couldn’t tell if they were serious about their match or not.

“They want it to be a victory won fair and square. They both want to be the victor, certainly. But do you think if they played dirty and took advantage of each other’s weaknesses that either of them would be able to honestly accept defeat that way?”

“That’s... um... No, I guess not...”

Thanks to Kiriha’s explanation, Yurika finally started to get her head around it. It was about the means of achieving the victory as much as it was the victory itself.

“This is a critical moment for both of them and there’s a lot riding on it. That’s why they want it to be a true contest of skill, and they each want to win it with their own strength.”

Both would do their best from start to finish. That would be the only way they could truly settle this. Since something important was on the line for both of them, they wanted to make sure they wouldn’t regret anything about the way it was handled.

“I mean, Theia-dono could always play dirty if she changed her mind. But don’t you think it would be foolish to blow up the mountain you love just to lower the summit in order to make it easier to climb?”

“Huh? Wait... Doesn’t this mean we’re all falling behind while we just stand here?” Sanae asked.

“Very likely,” Kiriha responded.

“Wh-What? How?” Yurika asked, quite concerned.

“Because Theia and Koutarou aren’t the only ones taking the test,” Sanae reminded her as she wiped the milk from her lips with a napkin.

Silence then fell over the kitchen, and Yurika visibly began sweating.

“I-I’m going to go study!” she shrieked and dashed out of the room.

“I think I’ll do the same,” Sanae said smugly as she ran after Yurika.

They both took their places at the tea table and began studying with Theia and Koutarou. The test wasn’t just about the results. That’s what Maki had told Yurika when they first found out about the test, and she was getting to see how true that was firsthand right now. Yurika and Sanae had been fervently studying up until today, so they were feeling a little bit better about the test than they had been previously, but they couldn’t afford to let that momentum go. If they slacked off even a little bit now, they’d be toast.

“I’m glad you both realized it...”

Kiriha lightly smiled and stirred the miso soup as if nothing had happened. Since she had always been diligent in her studies, Kiriha was the only one who had nothing to worry about right now. While everyone else was busy studying, she’d be there to cook and take care of the chores. And just like that, thanks to Kiriha, things carried on like usual in room 106.

It was now February 11th, 2011, a beautiful day without a single cloud in the clear blue sky. Yurika and Sanae, however, were trudging along too crestfallen to even look up and notice.

“I’m not going to make it... I’m definitely going to fail...”

“Yurika, all we can do now is pray! But we’ve tried so hard and gotten this far, so I’m sure god will help us out with the rest!”

“Really? Do you think so?”

“Yeah! If we believe, we’ll be saved!”

Over the past ten days, both girls had done all they could to study. They’d fought the good fight and worked themselves into delirium night after night. But even after all their hard work, neither one was confident that they’d get a passing grade. They’d tried their hands at a mock test Kiriha had made the night before, but the results hadn’t looked good for either of them. Based on that, it seemed like passing the real test today would be no mean feat.

“Please let the test be cancelled!”

“So you’ll pray for that, but not a better score?”

“Sorry, I just feel like that would be asking too much right now!”

They’d both started at an incredible disadvantaged. They’d all but stopped studying because of the trouble with the People of Earth and Folsaria, and then they’d had to go to Forthorthe for several months. And since they weren’t particularly strong students to begin with, making up for all that in just ten days was a lot to ask. They’d done what they could to prepare, but it hadn’t seemed to help much. At this point, all they really could do was pray for some divine intervention.

Unlike the two despondent girls, however, Koutarou and Theia were excited about the day’s test.

“It’s here! It’s finally time! At long last, the day you surrender to me has come!”

“You say the funniest things, princess! I’ll show you that the difference in our grades is like the difference in our height—undeniable!”

On February 1st, Koutarou and Theia’s grades had been just barely above the passing mark, but as a result of their competitive studying, they’d both done quite well on Kiriha’s mock exam. Their goals had shifted from surpassing each other to crushing each other.

“I’ll forgive such insolence if you throw yourself on the ground and beg! We’ll see who’s standing taller then!”

“Now, now, don’t get ahead of yourself. You’re the one who’s going to be lowering your head. I’ll bury you, Theia!”

“Ahahaha!”

“Wahahaha!”

Having studied plenty, both of them were confident in the results they would get on the test. Thanks to that, they were eager for their match and their chance to prove themselves. They were totally focused on each other and the competition ahead of them.

The two girls walking behind them looked on with a bit of jealousy.

“When they’re like this, there’s no room to join in,” Clan sighed.

“This kind of extreme relationship is something only Theiamillis-san could pull off, after all,” Maki agreed.

Both girls shrugged and smiled. In the past, both Clan and Maki had been extremely hostile towards Koutarou, but their relationships had evolved past that once they started to get along with him. Things were different now. They’d only been able to be so extreme with Koutarou in the past because they considered him an enemy. Theia, however, seemed to be different. And so the two girls watched on, somewhat in awe of how she could continue such an extreme relationship with Koutarou despite getting along with him. Moreover, her extremism didn’t negatively affect their friendship. Clan and Maki were left both puzzled by and somewhat envious of the way Theia so casually seemed to do the impossible.

*Starting school in the spring might not be so bad after all...*

Clan secretly started to reconsider Koutarou’s proposal. After watching Theia and Koutarou work so hard at studying together the past few days, a desire to join in had started to well up inside her. As things were, however, she wasn’t involved in school or the test. She was walking along with Maki for moral support, but Maki had always been a competent student. In short, neither of them were worried about impending the exam.

“Boys will be boys, including Satomi-kun,” Harumi said with a smile.

“Yeah, he’s antagonizing Theia just the way he would Mackenzie. He’s got the same look on his face and everything,” agreed Shizuka.

Even they had realized what was going on between Koutarou and Theia. He was surrounded by girls all the time, but whenever he felt like roughhousing, he knew Theia would be more than ready to tangle with him. And if he wanted to play video games all night or build plastic models, the only one who would willingly sit by him was Theia. Sanae was constantly poking her nose in too, but she just wanted to be doing whatever Koutarou was, so it was a little different. And while Yurika was the easiest one for Koutarou to ask out to play, Theia had the monopoly on “boy” stuff. Harumi and Shizuka were a little jealous of it all,

but they also knew that Theia was the right person for the job. And so they watched over her and Koutarou with smiles on their faces.

“I don’t see the problem with Her Highness having a secret weapon.”

Ruth was smiling happily too, but Kiriha looked at her with pity.

“Ruth, are you really okay with that? With Koutarou’s eyes fixed on Theia-dono?” she asked.

“My ideal man is someone who will support Her Highness together with me. As long as he plays with me too every now and then, that’s enough for me.”

Out of all nine girls, Ruth’s approach to her relationship with Koutarou was special. In her case, she couldn’t love anyone who wasn’t willing to protect Theia with her. Her ideal man would prize Theia’s heart as much as her safety, and that wouldn’t be possible with a one-sided love. Theia’s heart would only be happy if both parties needed each other. So in the end, Ruth’s ideal scenario put herself second no matter what. And she was okay with that.

“I can’t say I don’t understand those feelings.”

Kiriha had a good idea of how Ruth felt. The thing she wanted most of all was for Koutarou to be happy. Her being with Koutarou was secondary to that. That’s why she didn’t think that Koutarou had to choose her. But even if she wasn’t chosen, she wouldn’t leave his side. No matter who Koutarou chose, Kiriha would love him without fail. She was confident in that. That she would be with him in the future one way or another. And so she smiled now the same smug way she always did.

“But I’m worried these feelings might end up troubling Master...”

“Then so be it. Now that the crest is engraved on all of us, there’s nothing else that can be done. It’s only a matter of time.”

“Yes, I suppose so... I have to admit I am thinking about being a little mean.”

Kiriha and Ruth would normally end up unhappy in situations like this, but fate had led them away from that. They had all the proof they needed now that Koutarou had feelings for them as well. Armed with that knowledge, not even the two most considerate girls in the group were planning on going easy on

Koutarou in the future.

“We’ll be able to settle the score. Literally. I’ve been waiting for this day, heh heh...” boasted Koutarou.

“Ohoho! Yes, and the legend will conclude with my victory,” snickered Theia.

“What if... What if I just blow up the test venue with my magic?” Yurika wondered out loud.

“That would definitely save me, but it would totally ruin you,” Sanae reminded her.

“Aaauuuuugh...” she wailed.

For better or worse, it was almost time for the much anticipated test. The other girls were all prepared for what lay ahead, so they fondly watched over Koutarou, Theia, Yurika, and Sanae at the height of their fervor. With the bond they all shared, the excitement and dread of the four of them became the excitement and dread of all ten of them.

The academic strength test was scheduled for the evening of February 11th, and it would be administered in the conference room aboard Clan’s ship, the Hazy Moon. Room 106 would have been too small to hold the test properly, and the Hazy Moon seemed like a nice, neutral space as Clan wouldn’t be taking the exam. The exam started at 4:30 PM, and with breaks in between the sections of the exam, testing wrapped up just before 11 PM.

“I’ve done it, Koutarou! I performed the best I ever have on a test!”

“What a coincidence, Theia! Me too!”

“I can’t wait for the results!”

“You can say that again!”

“Ahahahaha!”

“Wahahahaha!”

While they likely hadn’t achieved the top scores out of the group, Koutarou and Theia seemed to be the most satisfied out of anyone with their

performance on the exam. With only ten days to prepare, they'd both tried to predict what kind of questions would be covered on the test and then studied accordingly rather than trying to learn several months of material all at once. And it seemed their focused strategy had paid off. They both felt like they'd performed better on this test than they ever had before.

In contrast, Sanae and Yurika were dreading the results.

"I don't think I made it..."

"Dear god, please let the grading form explode and disappear forever..."

"No, not on my ship!"

Sanae and Yurika had both been in low spirits ever since the exam began. They'd had their heads hung low the entire time like they were physically affected by the worry weighing down on them. They'd scrambled to fill in their answers, but didn't feel like they'd gotten anything right. They were both waving white flags by the time it was all over.

"So you're just accepting that you've failed like usual, huh?" Sanae asked.

"What else could it possibly be?!" Yurika whined, distraught.

"There's still that one in a million chance."

"I'm this desperate because I know I don't even have that!"

It was easy to tell how their tests had gone just by looking at them. Sanae and Yurika were on the opposite end of the emotional spectrum from Koutarou and Theia. But nevertheless, tensions were high for all four of them as they waited for the results. Compared to them, the remaining five girls were quite calm.

"Hey, Aika-san, C was the right choice for the last question on ancient literature, right?"

"I picked C too."

"Thank god! I was worried about that one!"

"Oh, but Kasagi-san, do you remember that question in the math section about factorization? How did you solve that one?"

After the test, Shizuka and Maki were comparing answers to gauge how

they'd done. Since they lived together, they'd spent a lot of time studying together. Naturally, they were still helping each other out even after the fact.

Ruth and Harumi were also comparing answers, but not on their own tests.

"It seems like Her Highness will score an average of over 70 points per section."

"With the language and culture barrier working against her, that's amazing."

Ruth and Harumi were comparing Koutarou and Theia's answers. They'd borrowed their answer sheets to get an idea of how they'd done even before the official results were in. Koutarou and Theia had agreed to it because they were as eager to find out themselves.

"Well, it's true that Japanese, English, and social studies are what's holding her back. There's a marked difference between those sections and how she performed in math and physics."

"Satomi-kun had the opposite problem, but it looks like he scored about the same across all sections. He should have an average score of over 70 as well."

Based on Ruth and Harumi's initial assessment, it seemed like Koutarou and Theia would be neck and neck. Their duplicate answer sheets were incomplete, however, so it would be a mystery what their real scores were until they were announced. Ruth and Harumi, however, both felt like they had the test under control, so they didn't bother comparing their own answers. They were patiently willing to wait to hear how they'd done.

"Everyone, the tea is ready. There's also some sakuramochi from the shopping street, but there's only a few, so it's first come, first serve."

Kiriha, on the other hand, wasn't concerned about her results in the slightest. She knew that as long as she hadn't mistakenly filled out something incorrectly, she would have a perfect score. As such, she was casually pouring tea for the others. Her answer sheet was what Ruth and Harumi were using to score Koutarou and Theia's tests. The exam had been a big deal for everyone else, but it was just another day for Kiriha.

The Japanese teacher in charge of the test who was secretly a magician of

Rainbow Heart, Miyama Reina, came to Koutarou and the others about an hour after they'd turned in their tests. In her hand was a list detailing the results. Only nine people had taken the test, so grading them hadn't taken too long, and Reina came personally to let them know how they'd done.

"Everyone, thank you for your hard work late into the night," she said.

"Thank you too, sensei," they all politely replied in harmony.

While Reina was a magician of Rainbow Heart, she was also their teacher. As such, they treated her with proper respect.

"I know the test was sudden, but you all performed better than we had expected."

Upon hearing those words, Yurika and Sanae's ears perked up. They looked at each other and smiled, hoping that maybe—just maybe—their prayers had been answered.

"I will announce the results starting from the top."

Reina smiled a little and then looked down at the list in her hands. She looked just like a teacher. If she ever quit working for Rainbow Heart, she'd likely found her second calling.

"First up is Kiriha-san with 496 points."

"That's strange," Shizuka couldn't help commenting. "To think Kiriha-san didn't get a perfect score..."

"Actually, Shizuka-san, 496 is a perfect score. Kiriha-san pointed out a problem with one of our questions, so it was discounted and the maximum score was lowered accordingly."

"Wow, then those 496 points are even more impressive than the full 500."

It was no surprise that Kiriha had the top score. The only thing she'd had to worry about was making sure she filled in her answer sheet correctly. She was so on top of the material that she'd even noticed a mistake in one of the questions. She had indeed achieved an absolute victory over the test.

"Well, my score isn't what's important here. The real battle is about to begin."

“That’s true. Satomi-kun and Yurika-chan’s futures are on the line...”

As impressive as it was, Kiriha wasn’t all that concerned about her score. She was far more interested in how Koutarou and the others had done.

“In second is Sakuraba-san with 447 points. Do remember, however, that it’s out of 496 points because of the detracted question. Your score would be over 450 otherwise.”

“I’m still nowhere near Kiriha-san.”

“You’re comparing yourself to the wrong person, Sakuraba-san. Even we turn to Kiriha-san for advice. Your results are superb.”

Harumi had scored almost 50 points less than Kiriha, but she had no outstanding weaknesses. All in all, she had nothing to complain about. Her high score was an indication of just how seriously she took her studies, but the serious and studious Harumi still seemed to be somewhat dissatisfied.

“Now, let’s move on to the next one. Things get more clustered here. In third is Aika Maki-san.”

“Me?”

Maki’s eyes opened wide. She hadn’t expected her name to be called. She figured that Shizuka or Ruth would come before her.

“Yes. You got 402 points. Your social studies performance was a little weak, but you were able to make up for it in the other sections.”

Being from Folsaria, Maki had a handicap when it came to Japanese and world history, but she was about on par with Harumi in other subjects. As such, she’d done well overall on the test.

“You did it, Aika-san! Good for you!”

“Thank you very much, Kasagi-san!”

“And Kasagi Shizuka-san is fourth, with a score of 395 points. A little more and you would’ve reached the 400 point mark. You were close.”

“Rats...”

“You averaged about the same across all sections, so it was a strong showing,

Shizuka-san. It seems you're working hard to improve your performance in your weaker subjects."

"Thank you very much, Sensei!"

Shizuka had gotten 75 to 85 points in each section, so it was clear she'd made it a point to study up in the subjects she normally struggled with. Everyone knew Shizuka excelled at athletics and cooking, and Reina praised her to see her putting that same kind of effort into her studies.

"Now, in fifth..."

"It wouldn't be strange for my name to pop up now."

"Pfft! Whatever. I'm next, Theia."

As the announced scores entered the 300-point range, Theia and Koutarou began listening intently. They'd both scored around 350 points on the mock exam, so they were sure their names would be called soon.

"Fifth is Ruth-san."

"I guess not..."

"I guess I got excited a little too soon..."

"You were just behind Shizuka-san at 380 points. Getting this kind of score despite coming from a different planet is very impressive. You did well, Ruth-san."

"Thank you very much."

"As expected, language and history were where you fell behind, but I believe you can make up for that in the future. Please continue to study hard."

"Yes, Sensei."

Ruth scored less than Shizuka because she was at a disadvantage in Japanese, English, and social studies. But being an alien, it was only natural that she struggled with those subjects. Like Reina said, Ruth—who excelled at gathering and managing information—would have no trouble catching up in due time. She'd performed admirably, all things considered.

"Now it's just us, Yurika, and Sanae."

“That means it’s going to be either you or me.”

“Indeed. I can’t imagine those two getting more than 300 points.”

“Heh heh...”

“Ahaha...”

Koutarou and Theia were chomping at the bit to hear who was next, but all Yurika and Sanae could manage was dry, bitter laughter. Reina would surely call Koutarou or Theia’s name. Even they knew that.

“Next, in sixth with 369 points is Satomi Koutarou-kun.”

“All riiiiight!”

“Ugh...”

“Seventh place is Theiamillis-san, just slightly behind at 367 points. The two of you were matched nearly point for point the entire test.”

When comparing Koutarou and Theia’s tests, they’d paced each other the entire way. The deal-breaker had been an easy English question in the last section of the test: how to spell baseball in English letters. Theia had incorrectly spelled it “beseball.” It was an easy mistake to make considering it was an alien language to her, but it had made the difference of two crucial points. In the end, she had the same weaknesses as Ruth, and that disadvantage cost her the match.

“Eighth is Sanae-san with 251 points.”

“Dear god, thank you!”

Sanae passing was all thanks to Sanae-san. Even after Sanae-chan got tired and went to sleep, Sanae-san continued studying. Ultimately, god didn’t have anything to do with it.

“Last is Yurika-san with 249 points. It pains me to say this to an archwizard, but... we’ll need you to repeat your second year, Yurika-san.”

“N-No way! Why?!”

“You didn’t make a passing score, I’m afraid.”

“Noooooooo! Please tell me that you’re joking!”

The bomb was dropped before Koutarou could even celebrate his victory. Nijino Yurika would have to repeat her second year of high school because of a single point. It was a shame, but Rainbow Heart wasn't willing to bend the rules for anyone. Not even Yurika.

Originally, Rainbow Heart had intended the minimum passing score to be an average of 60 points across all five subjects. Once the harder questions and how little time the students had to prepare were factored in, however, the required average score was lowered to 50. Yurika's total over all five sections was 249 points. She was just two points behind Sanae, but it put her put her below the required 50 point average. It was objectively a failing score. But somehow, Yurika managed to pass anyway.

"Theia-chan, I will follow you forever! I will do my best as Magical Girl Rainbow Yurika for the sake of Earth and Forthorthe!"

It was all thanks to Theia. Even though Theia was ordinarily strict even with the people she loved, she'd seen a flaw in the way the test was graded. Since the maximum achievable score on the test had been lowered by four points, she believed that the minimum passing score should be lowered accordingly. She couldn't just sit idly by and watch Yurika fail after all she'd done for Forthorthe, so Theia made argued her case to Reina. Reina then called an emergency Rainbow Heart meeting to field the issue, and in the end, they decided Theia was right. The error on the test had been theirs, so in the interest of fairness, they agreed to lower the number of points needed to pass to 246. It was just enough to save Yurika.

"Indeed, I'll have a lot of work for you in future, so continue with your studies."

"Understood! I, Nijino Yurika, will work hard to do my best!"

Feeling indebted to her, Yurika swore herself to Theia's service. Her eyes were aglow with gratitude and appreciation. It would all probably last until the next afternoon or so.

"Heh. You're being awfully nice for someone who just got bested, Theia."

"I suppose that's true."

“I thought you’d be mortified for sure.”

Considering how competitive Theia had been before the exam, her behavior struck Koutarou as strange. He’d figured she would throw a fit over losing.

“Are you unhappy?” she asked him.

“No, it’s just... anticlimactic, I guess.”

“As usual, you just don’t get it, do you?”

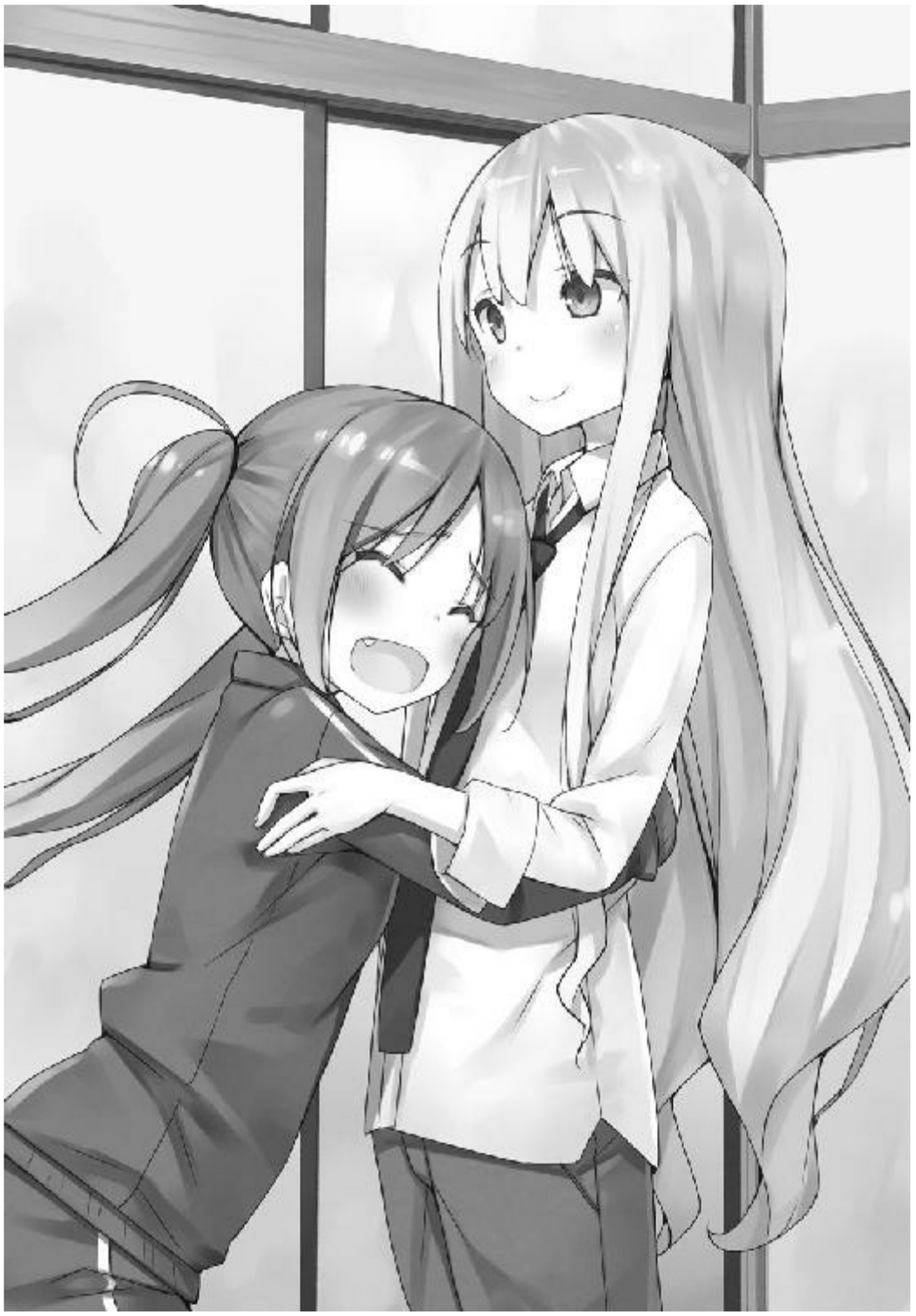
Theia let out a small, exasperated sigh. There was a tinge of reproach in her eyes as she looked at Koutarou.

“You are my knight. Your victories are my victories. In the end, what does it matter which of us wins?”

“Theia...”

“It’s not that you won that annoys me; it’s your attitude. Why can’t you understand something that simple? Argh! Now I’m getting irritated again!”

Theia puffed out her cheeks and glared at Koutarou. Despite what she said and how she was acting, however, she wasn’t unhappy with how the test had gone. She’d gotten to spend the past week working together with Koutarou. At worst, she was really just pouting.



“A-Ahem, a-anyways...”

Koutarou cleared his throat and forcibly changed the subject. If he looked into Theia’s pouting eyes any longer, he’d get sucked in to the point of no return.

“Knock off the secret funny business, will you?”

Their match over the test had ended in Koutarou’s victory. They’d agreed ahead of time that the loser would have to listen to the winner, and Koutarou’s demand was that Theia cease her operations behind his back. He didn’t want her trying to orchestrate a future where he didn’t have a choice about returning to Forthorthe.

“There’s a better way to change my mind without abusing your authority, isn’t there?”

It wasn’t like Koutarou hated Forthorthe. Despite it being a foreign country in a different galaxy, it was almost like a second home to him. He didn’t mind the idea of going back as long as it was for a good reason. The timing just wasn’t right as things stood. Both he and Signaltin had too much sway over the people of Forthorthe. He’d ultimately left for their good.

“A better way...?”

Theia’s face suddenly turned red and she looked down at the ground while as she played with her hair. She appeared to be incredibly nervous.

“What is it?” Koutarou asked.

“W-Well, i-if you insist... If that’s what you wish, I don’t mind... trying, I mean... I’m just... um... really happy.”

Despite seeming uncomfortable, she didn’t try and fight or run away. She just nervously rocked back and forth while stealing glances at Koutarou’s face. Watching her like that, Koutarou felt his heart start to beat faster. While he was too embarrassed to say it, Theia was being awfully adorable right now.

“W-Wait just a minute! What exactly are you planning on trying?!”

Koutarou also then realized that, based on her behavior, there was a high chance Theia had misinterpreted what he meant.

“Well, you know... apart from authority, there’s s-sex appeal... I thought about using things like that in the past... but I gave up the idea when I thought about what everyone would think of a princess using such a tactic... But if that’s what you want, Koutarou... I am a girl, after all... so I figured it would be okay...”

“Of course it’s not okaaaaay!”

Wham!

“O-Ow! I am beautiful, you know! So I figured that was the most likely answer if I can’t use violence or authority!”

“Are you an idiot?!”

“What is that supposed to mean?! And here I was seriously considering it!”

Eventually, their discussion deteriorated into the usual brawl. Theia jumped on Koutarou and headbutted him at point-blank range. Koutarou took it head-on, and though staggered, managed to grab her arms to keep her from trying anything else.

“Don’t resort to something like that just to try and change my mind!”

“Then just listen to your princess already, you damn model knight!”

Somehow, with the academic strength test over and tensions loosening up, the battle between Koutarou and Theia grew more intense than usual. There was no room for anyone else to butt in, either. They were completely fixated on each other. Right now, each one was exactly what the other needed.

“Her Highness may have lost at the test... but this is a wonderful outcome in itself.”

“Like I’ve said before, it’s only a matter of time. Now that Koutarou has fundamentally accepted us all, his resistance will eventually cave.”

“It’s true. Not even Master can hold out forever.”

“That’s right..”

The other girls watching on didn’t see Theia’s brawling with Koutarou as any different from her trying to use sex appeal to win him over. She had her own unique way with him. While Theia hadn’t intended it, Koutarou had played right into her hands. And she was just one girl. When it came to all nine of them, it was clear what Kiriha said was true. It would only be a matter of time.

And so the academic strength test administered by the magical kingdom of Folsaria came to a conclusion without anyone having to repeat a year. Without ado, any further study sessions were put on hold in room 106. Everyone was going to take a break until it was time to start studying again for finals in March. But in its place, something else started up again: the games that had once been a daily occurrence in room 106.

“I don’t think Yurika could manage such advanced subterfuge,” said Theia.

“Yeah, it’s a bad idea. We’d be better not take Yurika with us on this mission,” agreed Koutarou.

“Why not?! I’m your ally, Satomi-san! Your ally!”

“Enemy or ally, you’re a blabbermouth. With you around, you’ll totally blow our cover.”

“Please! I’m begging you! Pretty please!”

“You’re right, Koutarou. Let’s take Yurika off this one.”

“Not you too, Theia-chaaaaan!”

“Yurika, you just pick up firewood or something.”

“Grunt work again?!”

“It’s very important grunt work. Without firewood, we’ll freeze to death.”

“Auuugh...”

In the past, each of the invaders had sought ownership of the apartment for their own reasons. Since nobody wanted to destroy Corona House in the process, however, they’d all agreed to fight for the room peacefully. In other words, with games.

“I think we can trust Sakuraba-senpai, though,” said Koutarou.

“So you believe me, Satomi-kun!” Harumi exclaimed happily.

“On what basis?” Theia asked.

“Senpai’s a terrible liar. If she were fibbing, it’d show on her face for sure.”

“She... looks like she always does.”

“Yeah, that’s my basis.”

“I see... Then let’s put Harumi in with the candidates.”

“S-Satomi-kun, I’m not sure how to feel about that reason...”

As things were now, Sanae had gotten her body back, the People of the Earth had settled down, Darkness Rainbow had been dismantled, and the coup d’etat in Forthorthe had been thwarted. As a result, the invaders no longer had a stake in fighting for the apartment. They were still attached to it, however, but now

they simply wanted to be there with its current tenant, Satomi Koutarou.

“In that sense, couldn’t we trust Maki too?”

“Hmm... Aika-san, are you my ally?”

“Yes!”

“Yeah, she’s good.”

“Aika-san can’t lie, after all.”

“I am always your ally, Satomi-kun.”

“We are talking about in the game here...”

And with nothing left to fight over, the way they all played games together had been completely overhauled. The points were reset and redistributed among Koutarou and all the girls this time. They even decided on a new prize for the ultimate victor.

“That leaves the question of Kiriha-san and Landlord-san.”

“We have to be wary of Kiriha for the exact opposite reason as Yurika.”

“My, how harsh.”

“So just Landlord-san then?”

“I’ll go! I’ll do my best on the mission!”

“She’s suspicious... but better than Kiriha.”

“Veltlion, what about me?”

“You’re the queen of scheming! Of course you’re out!”

“J-Just how long are you going to keep bringing that up?!”

“Until it stops bugging you.”

“Jeez... Stupid...”

The new prize was no longer anything tangible. Instead, it was the powerful right to make demands of the other participants, which they would be obliged to fulfill. The girls were all so kind that Koutarou figured they wouldn’t ask anything too serious or selfish. Theia might use it to demand that he return to

Forthorthe, but just based on the odds, her chances of winning were only one in ten. Koutarou wasn't too worried.

"Koutarou, Koutarou, you should definitely take Sanae-chan! You'll definitely benefit from taking me with you!"

"How?"

"It'll become a super mission because you'll always get to be together yours truly, the adorable Sanae-chan."

"So there's no actual benefit?"

"An refreshing, energetic smile at every turn!"

"Yeah, that's not actually gonna help us get our hands on top secret documents."

"Pretty please?"

"...You're a spy, aren't you?"

"Eeheehee!"

But Koutarou's way of thinking was somewhat naive. No matter which of the girls ended up winning, they would all ask for the same thing. In that sense, they had a common goal this time and they were all working together towards it.

"Since we just successfully completed a mission together, if we leave Her Highness, Master, and myself as Team A... what shall we do about Team B?"

"Say, Theia... what do you think about Ruth?"

"Admittedly, I do find myself sometimes wondering what she might be plotting behind that calm expression."

"Me? I wouldn't dare."

"Oh yeah, Ruth-san was the one who thought up how to negotiate with the Japanese government, wasn't she?"

"Indeed. She's a shrewd one."

"We can't let our guard down then."

“Fear not! I will always be at the service of my princess and my master.”

“I’m starting to believe her less and less...”

“Same. Being at our service might be something completely different than what it sounds like...”

As things were, a certain someone hadn’t realized that the girls were working together and what that would mean for them. At this rate, there would be a whole new world of trouble ahead. In order to prevent that, this certain someone would quickly need to realize the problem and take action. And it wouldn’t be easy with the odds stacked against them nine to one. Kiriha had said it was only a matter of time, and that time was drawing nearer by the minute.

*“...”*

“Hmm? Huh? Did someone just say something?”

“What is it, Sanae?”

“Oh, I just thought I heard someone’s voice, Koutarou.”

“If you mean Yurika, she’s been calling for you for a while.”

“Sanae-chan, what snack do we open up next?”

“The sponge cake! And if you destroy it when you unwrap it, I’ll never forgive you!”

“Nuuu!”

And so the carefree, noisy night passed in room 106. It had been almost two years since Koutarou first moved in to the apartment, and in that time, it had gone from housing one person to ten. Their small world together was overflowing with energy, desire, and expectations for the future. Little did they know it would bring on their greatest trial yet.

*“...”*

The promised day was rapidly closing in. When that day came, no one—neither man nor god—knew whether or not a certain small prayer would be heard.

# Afterword

Long time no see. It's the author, Takehaya. This time, I don't have much room for the afterword, so I can't write too much. I'll get straight into it.

This volume consists of three short stories from *Invaders of the Rokujouma!? Hercules!* published on HJ Bunko's site, "Read It! HJ Bunko," and then half a volume of brand new content. The three short stories are all about getting into the characters, but the new material is pretty closely related to the main story. It's primarily about settling the bill for what happened while the gang was in Forthorthe, and it involves something important that will lead into the next volume. I'm sure there are several parts that caught everyone's interest.

With all of the invaders' issues finally resolved, it's at last time to delve into the core of the story and why this all happened. To tell the truth, it's the final episode that I had in mind when drawing up plans for the series ten years ago. Ten years, however, has given me plenty of time to think of material, so the series will continue. That said, I'm not going to delay the "final" episode; I'm just going to write it in a way that will allow for the story to continue. I decided that would give us all something of a clean slate and allow for more variation in future stories. Moreover, it fits perfectly. The next volume will be the thirtieth in the series, after all.

This volume has some short stories from *Hercules!* Thinking about it though, there's a new episode of *Hercules!* every other month. The main series is only published every four months, however, so unless there are two *Hercules!* episodes per volume (or four every other volume?), the unpublished episodes are just going to keep piling up. What am I to do?! I don't want to put out a book of just *Hercules!* material, and I'm worried that adding on two episodes per volume will cut down on the space for the main story. I'll have to think of a solution. Since this is such a conundrum, I'll have to consult with my editor-in-charge, S-kun, about it later.

Well, I've just about run out of space now. As expected, I wasn't able to write much, but I have to wrap it up here. I'd like to end with my usual thanks.

To everyone at the editorial department for their endeavors to publish this book; Poco-san for always delivering illustrations on time despite spreading out; and to all of the readers who picked up this book... Thank you all.

Let us meet again in the afterword for volume 28.

October, 2017

Takehaya

