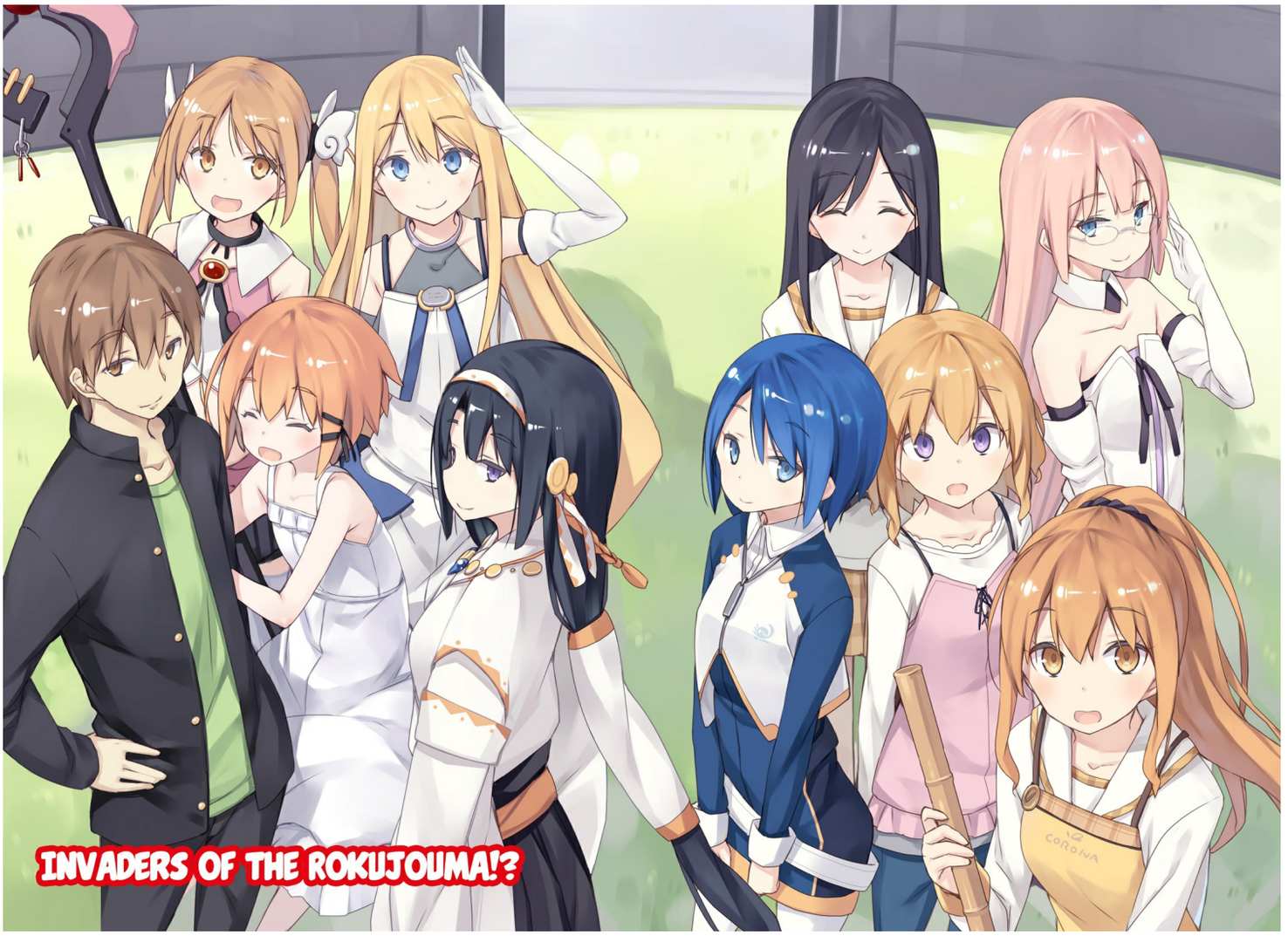
Invaders of the Rokujouma!? 29



Takehaya
Illust: Poco


"NO MATTER HOW SCARED I GET... I WILL NEVER EVER LET GO OF YOUR HAND, SATOMI-SAN..."


INVADERS OF THE ROKUJOUMA!?
CORONA


“Koutarou,
I’ve always been waiting for you...”

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STUDENTS OF KISSHOUHARUKAZE HIGH SCHOOL



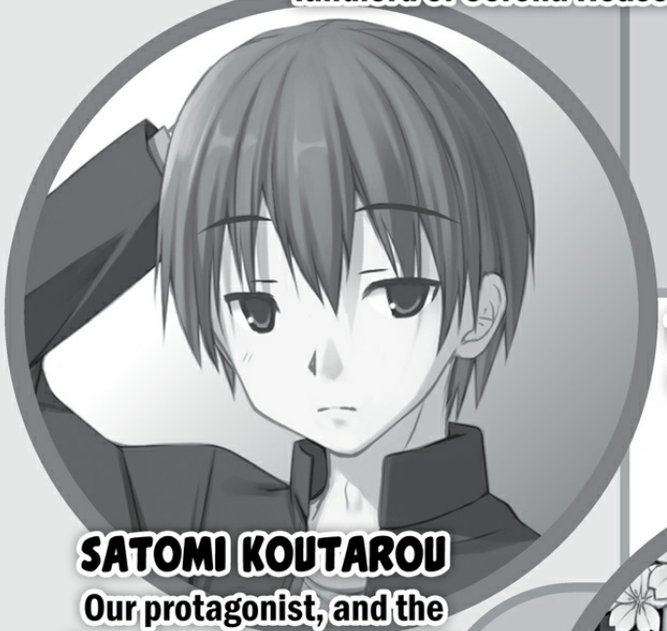
KASAGI SHIZUKA
Unquestionably strong.
Koutarou's classmate and the landlord of Corona House.



MATSUDAIRA KENJI
Koutarou's childhood and best friend.



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



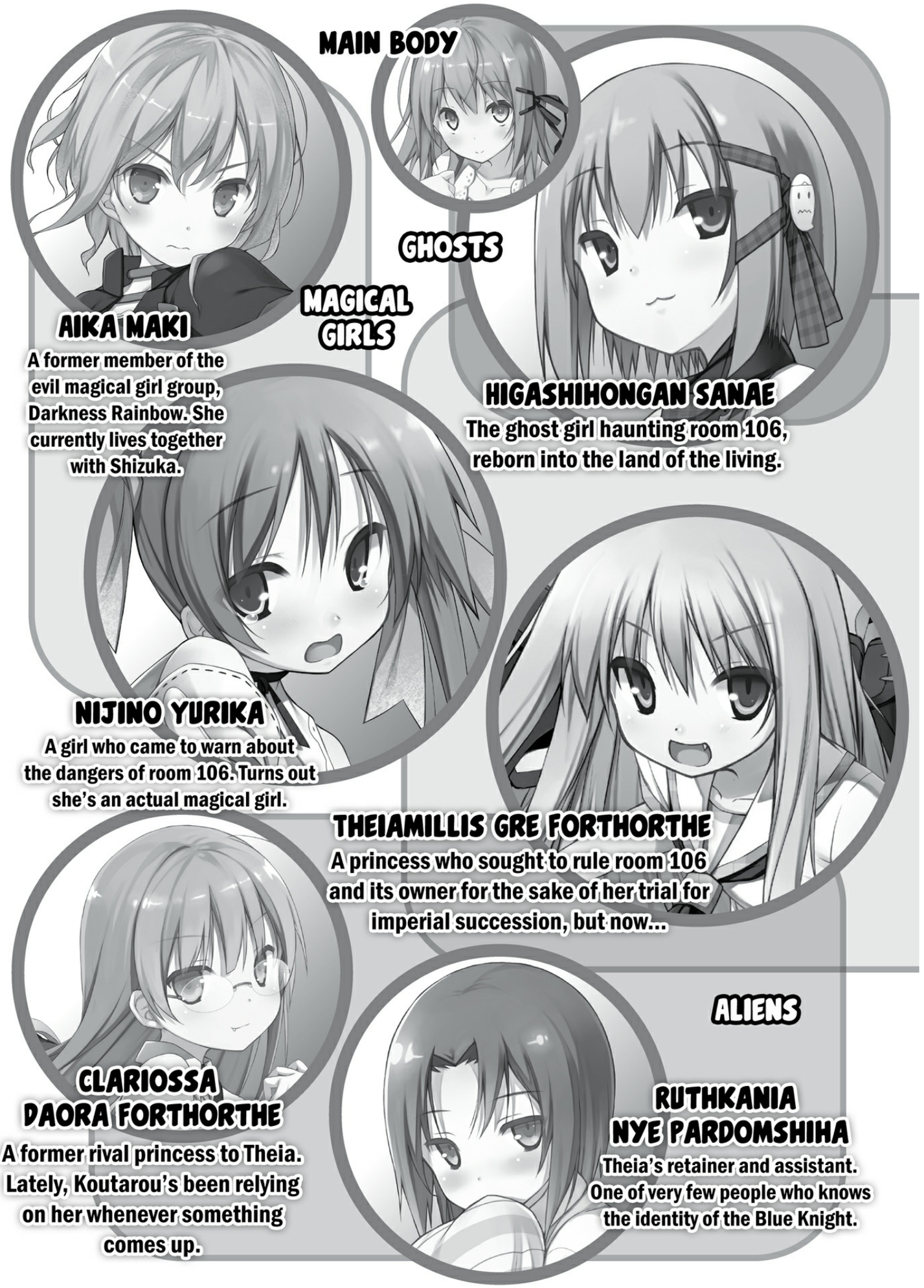
SATOMI KOUTAROU
Our protagonist, and the formal tenant of room 106.
Also the Blue Knight.

RESIDENTS OF CORONA HOUSE

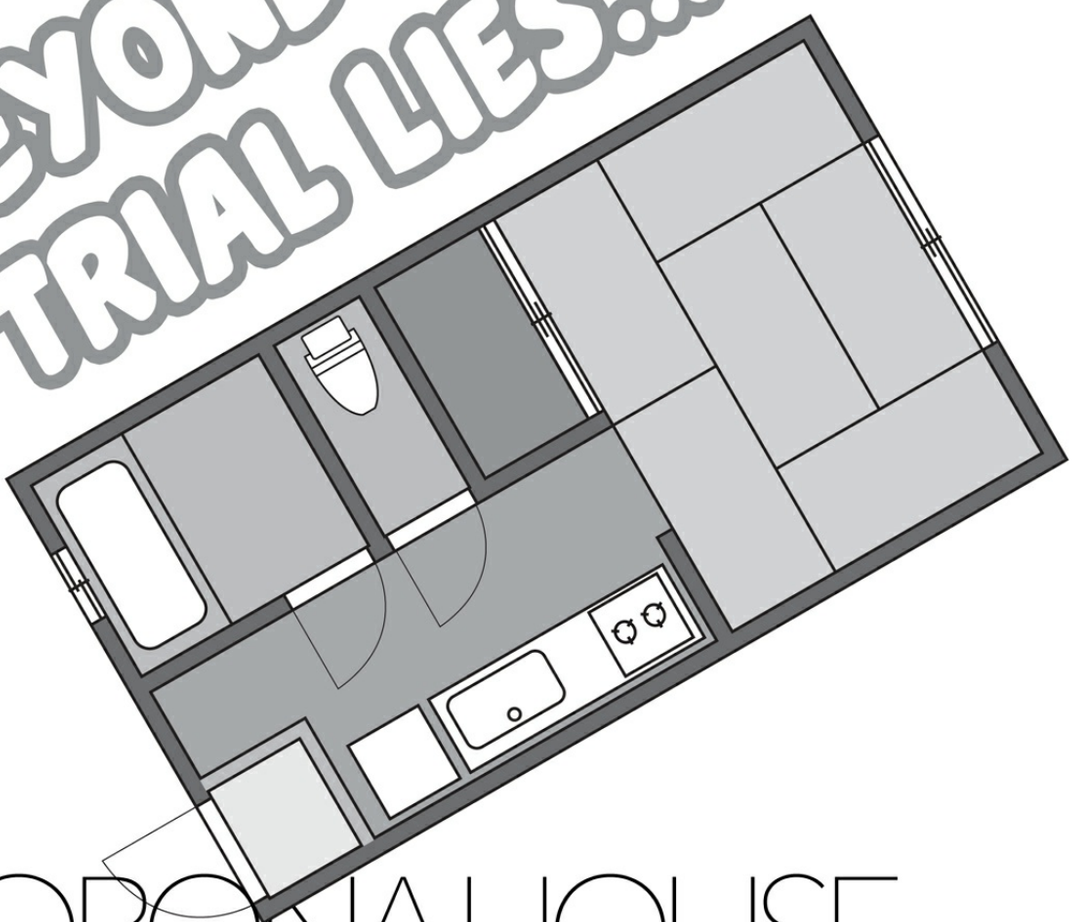


UNDERGROUND DWELLERS

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


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

BEYOND THE TRIAL LIES...



CORONA HOUSE
ROOM 106

The Whereabouts of Happiness

Wednesday, March 30th

Koutarou watched as Clan disappeared right in front of him. She wrapped her arms around his neck, but vanished before she could even kiss him. The desperate look on her face, the warmth of her hands, her pleading eyes, and even her emotional, earnest words all disappeared into thin air. It was like he'd suddenly woken up from a dream.

"Clan! Hey, Clan! This isn't funny! Come out right now!"

Of course, the first thing that crossed Koutarou's mind was that Clan had disappeared the same way Maki did. But accepting that was hard. It was easier to think that she was using her technology to play some kind of prank on him.

"Where are you, Clan?!"

Koutarou looked around in a fluster. He was hoping that Clan would appear with a mischievous grin on her face any second now... but no one answered him. His desperate voice simply echoed through the empty warehouse district. The only things around Koutarou were the still shadows cast from the streetlights. A gloomy silenc loomed over the area.

"Th-That's right, the Cradle! Cradle, where is Clan?!"

Koutarou hurriedly tapped his bracelet to bring up a communications line to Clan's spaceship, the Cradle. He figured that the Cradle's AI should be able to find her.

"My owner's communications device is either out of range, has been destroyed, or is in an area where communications are being intercepted. As such, I am unable to specify her present location."

"Clan's not just making you say that, is she?"

"I have currently inherited the authority to act on behalf of my owner, Princess Clariossa, and am obligated not to lie to you, Your Excellency."

“Clan… Where’d you go?”

In the end, the Cradle wasn’t able to give Koutarou the answer he’d hoped for. Not even the Cradle’s AI could locate Clan. And since no one on Earth had the technology to block out gravitational waves, the fact that the Cradle couldn’t reach her didn’t bode well. Anxiety spread through Koutarou’s chest as he slowly began coming to grips with the fact that she was gone... just like Maki.

“Koutarou, what happened over there?!” Theia’s voice came from his bracelet.

Since he’d kept the comms line with her open, she and the others had overhead his panicked conversation with the Cradle.

“Clan just disappeared! Right before my eyes!”

“What?!”

Koutarou could tell that all of the girls on the other end of the line were confused, not just Theia. Maki going missing was bad enough, but hearing that it had happened to Clan too was earth-shattering for everyone.

“What happened when Clan-dono disappeared, Koutarou?!”

Kiriha took over after Theia, her determined voice coming through the bracelet. It was reassuring to Koutarou, especially at a time like this.

“It was as we were looking at the footage that Ruth-san found! She started glowing right after we saw Aika-san being wrapped in an indigo light in the video, but the one that took her was orange!”

“So you’re saying it wasn’t an indigo light?”

“Yeah! Clan’s was orange! I’m sending the footage of it to you now!”

Koutarou tapped away on his bracelet as he explained things to Kiriha. His was just like Clan’s, and served as a computer as well as a communications device. Since it was always recording audiovisuals and information around it, Koutarou sent all of the data from the past few minutes to Kiriha and the others.

“It... really is orange,” remarked Kiriha as she watched the recording.

“Kiriha-san, something’s strange,” interjected Yurika before she could get any further.

“What do you mean, Yurika? What’s strange?”

“It was indigo when Maki-chan disappeared, but orange when Clan-san disappeared... If this is magic, it doesn’t make sense.”

“If I recall, the color of the mana depends on the type of spell used, no?”

“Exactly! If this was a spell taking them, then Clan-san would have disappeared into the same indigo light Maki-chan did. ”

Indigo was mind manipulation magic, while orange was alteration. At first, Yurika had assumed that Maki used mind manipulation magic to make it look like she had disappeared. If she had manipulated their memories, it would explain why they couldn’t find any trace of her. But the light that took Clan was orange. Orange was the magic of alteration, which was used to change an object’s state of matter or its characteristics. It was used in a completely different way from indigo. But despite that, Clan had disappeared the exact same way. The only difference was the color of the light.

“I mean, there *is* a possibility that different spells were used on Maki-chan and Clan-san, but...” she muttered hesitantly.

“I can’t imagine a reason to adjust the spell just to change the color of the mana,” replied Kiriha, shaking her head.

“Me neither. That’s why...”

“It probably isn’t magic at all. Just what is going on...?”

Making someone completely disappear like that with Forthorthe’s advanced science or the People of the Earth’s spiritual energy technology would be difficult. That’s why Kiriha had suspected that the culprit was magic. But based on what Yurika was saying, that probably wasn’t the case.

“If it’s not magic, then... the lack of any sort of evidence bothers me. If it were an attack or a kidnapping, there should be some sort of clue as to the identity of the perpetrator. And if it were some kind of natural phenomenon, it’s highly strange for it to happen twice in a row. For now, we have to assume there’s an

unknown force at play here.”

Right now, nothing else was adding up. Kiriha’s best guess was that there was something else causing this. Something out of their control.

“It’s like they were just spirited away...” Koutarou muttered bitterly.

His words got Sanae’s attention.

“Spirited away? I remember my papa saying something about that once...”

She’d heard her father talk about it before, but it was so long ago that she had a hard time recalling it. It might not even be related, so she quickly put it out of her mind and turned her worried thoughts to Clan and Maki.

“Where’d you go, Maki, Glasses...?”

“Kiriha-san, this couldn’t be caused by a timeslip, could it?” Koutarou asked.

“A timeslip?” she asked in turn.

“You know, like in those sci-fi movies. Where someone goes back in time and changes history.”

Without any other clues to go off of, Koutarou began suspecting that perhaps someone had altered history. He’d done it once himself, and he’d seen movies and animes about the same kind of thing. Based on what he knew, it was relatively easy to do. The tricky part might be getting to the past, but once you were there, any wrong action could have monumental consequences. So however unlikely it might seem, Koutarou thought there might be a decent chance that was what was afoot.

“There’s no doubt that timeslips exist, but there’s likely little chance that the course of history has been altered,” said Kiriha.

“What do you mean?” Koutarou asked.

“Clan-dono explained it, didn’t she? When history changes, it enters a different flow. In other words, a parallel universe is born.”

“Now that you mention it, yeah. I think she did say something about that.”

When Koutarou and Clan ended up in the past, they were both terrified of the thought that they’d gotten in the way of the Blue Knight and Alaia meeting.

That's when this had come up before. By preventing something so important, history would change and branch off from that point. That's why they'd desperately struggled to try and get things back to the way they should be— to reconnect the diverging flows of time.

"In other words, even if someone changed history at some point, it would have no bearing on the present we inhabit. Both worlds would simply continue on as separate timelines."

According to the paradigm clarified by Forthorthian science, while it was possible to change the past through a timeslip, such changes wouldn't alter any already existing worlds. Instead, they created new, parallel ones. That, in essence, prevented the paradoxical loophole of timeslips being caused by other timeslips. For example, if Koutarou had returned to the past to save his mother and succeeded, his future self would never think of returning to the past to save his mother since she would still be alive. That would mean that Koutarou—as he had travelled back in time—would cease to exist since the world that generated him was no more. But if the original world and the divergent world remained separate, there would be no such contradiction. Functionally, Koutarou would only be visiting a different world by travelling to the past, and the existence of his home world remained unaffected by anything he said or did while visiting because the two realities were their own separate universes. That was the conclusion Forthorthe's scientists had reached on the matter.

"So the timeslip theory doesn't really fit the bill either..." sighed Koutarou.

"If a timeslip were the reason, its effects should be more widespread," replied Kiriha.

"That's true."

Koutarou had thought he was onto something, but was no longer convinced a timeslip was the cause behind Maki and Clan's disappearances.

"So we're at a standstill... All right, I'm going to keep looking for them," he declared.

"We'll do the same," replied Kiriha. "Call us if you find something."

"Will do."

So far, they didn't have a single clue regarding Clan's disappearance. All they could do for now was keep looking. They split up and searched all over town. It was like trying to find a needle in a haystack without any leads to go off of, but it was better than doing nothing.

Koutarou had first met Clan during the cultural festival of his first year in high school. She had set a trap to kill Theia and make it look like an accident, and had casually walked by Koutarou on her way out of the building. But Koutarou had no idea who she was. They'd passed each other in the gymnasium, and he had just assumed she was one of the actresses in the play. But Clan knew better. She had carefully studied the people around Theia, and Koutarou in particular left an impression on her since he was playing the Blue Knight. It wasn't until much later, however, that Clan told him all this. It was only then did he learn that that was actually their first encounter.

"Where did that idiot go...?"

Koutarou recalled that moment as he looked around the gym's equipment room, which had served as a standby and storage room during the school plays. When trying to think of places to look for Clan, he decided to start at the beginning... which meant where they first met.

"You're really in for it when you get back. Good grief..."

Koutarou was trying to keep in good spirits by joking around and staying lighthearted. But the truth was that he knew better. He was well aware that, with both Maki and Clan gone now, this was no joke. Things were dead serious. There was even a chance that the two girls were gone forever. That dark anxiety swirled in his heart. He was impatient to find them, and the idea that that might never happen only made him more restless.

"Next is the roof, and then the forest..."

When he needed to talk to just Clan, Koutarou would often meet her on the school rooftop. Her spaceship, the Cradle, was also hidden in the forest outside of town. There were other places Koutarou could think of, but those two were the closest, so he decided to check those first.

"Just who would do this? And why...?"

Koutarou took off running. He didn't know why Maki and Clan had disappeared, and he didn't know where they might have gone. Taking things slowly would only fuel the anxious restlessness building inside of him. And so he ran, trying to escape that feeling.

"Layous Fatra Veltlion."

"Yes."

"In this urgent situation without an empress, I, Princess Clariossa, will act in her place. This is a royal command. As a knight of Forthorthe, do what you must!"

"As you wish, my princess! I will do so wholeheartedly!"

"By the way, Koutarou, rather than another request, I have a suggestion."

"What is it?"

"Won't you serve me?"

"Wh-What?!"

"You left me behind right away, didn't you, Veltlion?"

"What now, all of a sudden?"

"Even though you said you needed me..."

"This was inevitable."

"I'm sure you'll continue to say that it was inevitable from now on too."

Memories of Clan flashed through Koutarou's mind as he ran towards his next location. Just like with Maki, there were too many to even count. And the thought that they might never be able to make any more of them together weighed heavily on him. He couldn't let that happen. That's why he continued to run as fast as he could, anxious to leave those feelings behind.

Clan had disappeared before dawn, and Koutarou and the others had been desperately searching for her and Maki for well over ten hours now. They'd tried anywhere and everywhere they could think of, and used any means they had at their disposal to look for signs of the two missing girls. But still, there was nothing. They'd even tried calling for them via the contract with the sword, which they believed was their strongest connection, but had gotten no response.

"Everyone, you're all going to collapse at this rate. Let's all return home and take a break for a while. If we wear ourselves down too much, we won't be able to look for anyone," suggested Harumi.

With that, the girls all decided to return to room 106. Harumi was right. With everyone at their limits, there was no room to object.

"You all look awful," Koutarou said when he returned to the apartment himself.

He found the girls all sitting on the floor, completely drained. After running around for an entire day, they were physically exhausted. Not to mention the mental toll the worry for Maki and Clan took on them. Thanks to that, none of the girls had their usual cheerful smiles.

"Even if it's true, that's not something you say to girls, Satomi-kun," objected Shizuka.

"Okay, um... You all look down for the count."

"Mm, that's better."

The tough Shizuka just barely had enough energy left in her to joke around a little. No one had the energy to laugh, but at least the heavy atmosphere lightened up a little.

"We don't know what's going on... and that's the scary part. We don't even know how Maki and Clan are doing..." said Theia between breaths.

And she was right. They were completely in the dark. While she hadn't said it out loud, there was the chance that the worst possible outcome had already happened. That worry haunted the back of everyone's mind.

“Well, I know no one may have an appetite, but let us eat something for starters,” said Ruth.

And with that, she started setting the tea table. Kiriha was already taking care of the dinner in the kitchen.

“If we don’t take care of ourselves, our minds and bodies won’t work right. We’ll just sit here, dwelling on the what-ifs... So for their sake, let’s eat and rest up,” said Harumi as she began helping Ruth.

Since there wouldn’t be enough room for everyone around the table, she pulled a foldable table out from the wardrobe and started setting out tableware and seating cushions.

Eight cushions, huh...?

In total, there were now eight people in room 106. Harumi had gotten enough for everyone, but it was noticeably less than usual. While he didn’t say it, the missing ninth and tenth cushions pained Koutarou. He ordinarily complained about how cramped it was in the apartment, but now that there was extra room, it felt lonely. That made Koutarou realize once more just how important these girls were to him. If he didn’t figure out what had happened to Maki and Clan, there was no telling what might happen to the other girls too. That’s why he continued thinking of what to do even long after dinner. He had no intention of sitting still.

With night upon them, Koutarou knew that blindly searching in the dark wouldn’t get them anywhere. Instead, he decided to try contacting a certain someone—Crimson. She was one of the powerful leaders of Darkness Rainbow, and had returned to Earth to work on the problems regarding Folsaria and Forthorthe. Koutarou figured that he might be able to get some information on Maki through her.

“Maki is gone?! Really?!”

Crimson’s loud voice rang out from the speaker of his smartphone. Her tone and volume told him that Maki’s disappearance was news to her.

“Yeah. We’re all working together to look for her right now.”

“Wait, what’s going on?!”

“Actually...”

Koutarou told Crimson when, where, and how Maki had disappeared. He was usually pretty bad at explaining things to others, but he couldn’t use that as an excuse this time.

“...And we can’t find any leads. That’s why I was wondering if you knew anything... but from the sounds of it, that seems unlikely.”

Her surprise told him that this was the first she’d heard of anything, which meant that she didn’t know anything either. Unfortunately, it seemed Koutarou had gotten his hopes up for nothing.

“Nothing’s come across our information network. But I’ll check in with Green just to be sure.”

“Please do.”

“I’ll start looking for her too. I can think of a few places where she might be.”

“That would be a huge help, but... are you sure?”

“Don’t you know? I don’t exactly have anything better to do.”

While Crimson had come to Earth as a guard for Purple and Green, who were in charge of negotiations, Rainbow Heart was handling things in Folsaria. And with things peaceful here on Earth, Crimson had plenty of time on her hands.

“I see... You really are a good friend of Aika-san’s.”

“That’s right. Got a problem with that?”

“No. I was just thinking that Aika-san must be happy to have a good girl like you for a friend.”

“Hmph.”

Having gotten embarrassed, Crimson quickly cut the call. It wasn’t all that surprising that an evil magical girl would have such a reaction to being called a “good girl.” But Koutarou remained oblivious. He was too worried about Maki and Clan to think much of anyone else.

So neither Miyama-sensei or Crimson know anything... Maybe it’s just like

Yurika said and this actually has nothing to do with magic?

Koutarou had actually contacted Miyama Reina before he called Crimson, but she didn't have any information for him either.

But if it's not magic, how were the two of them taken?

If neither Darkness Rainbow nor Rainbow Heart knew anything at all about what had happened, it was hard to believe it had anything to do with magic. There was still a possibility that a completely unrelated third party was involved, but if someone like that had showed up in Kisshouharukaze City, Rainbow Heart would have made a move. Thanks to his interactions with Nana in the past, Koutarou knew they kept a vigilant watch over things. Taking both that and what Yurika had said into account, it seemed less and less likely they were dealing with a magical phenomenon. But that only deepened the mystery. He couldn't even imagine how Maki and Clan were kidnapped if it *hadn't* been magic.

"Damn it, I don't get it at all!"

Putting his smartphone back in his pocket, Koutarou started running again. Without any help, he had to rely on his two legs to count on in his search for the girls. But that hadn't turned up anything so far, and it didn't seem like it would anytime soon. As such, Koutarou was unable to contain his frustration. He was getting fed up with this wild goose chase of an investigation. Yet even then, he never considered stopping. He wouldn't let something like that keep him from looking for them. Even if he was going in circles, he'd keep running.

Even when the sun rose on the next day, Koutarou was still out looking for Maki and Clan. He'd barely taken any breaks since the previous night. He just kept moving; he couldn't find it in himself to stop.

In searching for people, Koutarou found using the psychic powers he'd gotten from Sanae was the most effective. Since he was very familiar with the presence of both Maki and Clan, he was sure he could sense them as long they were within a few dozen meters. Going off of that, all he had to do was walk around town. His powers wouldn't reach up to the top of tall buildings from the street, but then all he had to do was go up to the top floor and head back down.

Koutarou had spent the past two days searching much of Kisshouharukaze City this way. While it wasn't a very big city, it was still a city. Koutarou had walked almost 200 kilometers in total. Without psychic powers to enhance his body, he would have collapsed long ago. But even after all that, he hadn't found Maki and Clan. He'd come across a few other acquaintances, but had found no hint of the two girls in question.

Hmm?

Walking along, he suddenly felt a familiar aura nearby.

"Your Highness, it's Master!"

"So this is where you were, Koutarou."

Theia and Ruth appeared up ahead. When they realized it was Koutarou, they ran up to him with relieved expressions.

"Master, your complexion does not look good..."

"Wait, have you been out here all this time?"

But when they got closer, they realized the condition he was in. Though it didn't show much because his psychic powers kept him sustained, exhaustion was writ in Koutarou's eyes. It was a subtle indicator that Ruth and Theia only noticed because they knew him just that well.

"Yeah."

That's why Koutarou honestly admitted it. Trying to hide it wouldn't work on Theia and Ruth now. He knew them well too.

"If you don't rest a little, you're going to hurt yourself."

"If you collapse, that's the end of the investigation for you, you know?"

The two girls were worried about Koutarou's wellbeing. Ever since Maki and Clan disappeared, he had been looking for them around the clock. At this rate, he would do himself in before they found anything, and that would only prolong the investigation. So even though they knew how he felt, they had to stop him— for his own sake and everyone else's.

"Sorry, I couldn't rest now if I wanted to. I get restless if I'm not moving, and

even if I laid down, I'd be too distracted to sleep. So if I can't rest, I might as well keep looking."

Koutarou meekly shook his head. He knew they meant well. But resting would only make things worse for him, so he had to keep going.

"What are we going to do with you...? If Maki and Clan heard that, they'd be both happy and angry."

"And I'd love to let them hear that."

"You can say that again."

That was where Theia and Ruth gave up on persuading Koutarou. They knew how stubborn he was once he set his mind on something. Since convincing him through words would be hard, they changed tactics.

"Then let's continue the search."

"Yeah."

Koutarou began walking again, still searching for Maki and Clan's auras as he moved down the street.

"Ruth, you and I will be in charge of the places outside the range of his perception."

"Understood. I'll send out the scouts."

Theia and Ruth followed after Koutarou, gathering additional information on their surroundings as they went. They were going to help Koutarou by sending him the data from the unmanned scouts and Blue Knight in orbit high overhead.

"Hey, why are you following me?" he asked once he realized they were tagging along.

"Is there a problem with that?" Theia asked.

"It would be more efficient if we split up."

"That's true. We think so too," replied Ruth.

There was little merit to the three of them moving as a unit. Since they were each capable of working on their own, sticking together just reduced their covered search area. Of course, Theia and Ruth both knew that. They were

following him for a different reason.

“Then why?”

“We don’t have as much stamina as you, Master. If we keep going at your pace, we’ll eventually collapse.”

“You’re the kind of man who can’t rest for your own sake, but you will for others. That’s what Kiriha said.”

“That girl...”

Kiriha had essentially put a bell on the reckless Koutarou. An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, and a precious person for a precious person. Koutarou was investigating to save Maki and Clan, but he wouldn’t do anything to endanger Theia and Ruth. They were all important to him.

“Okay, okay, you guys win. I’ll make sure to get some rest.”

That was where Koutarou finally gave up. It would be easy enough to oppose Theia and Ruth, but if he did that, all of the girls might end up ganging up on him. This was meant to be a threat in its own way.

“That’s Kiriha-sama for you, isn’t it, Your Highness?”

“Heh, resistance is futile when we’re all working together.”

Theia and Ruth nodded at each other with relieved smiles on their faces. They were worried for Maki and Clan too, but even they would be upset at how reckless Koutarou was being. And Theia and Ruth knew that better than anyone thanks to the bond they’d all formed together. Maki and Clan were their precious friends too.

Three hours after grouping up with Theia and Ruth, Koutarou did as he promised and took a break. But as expected, he was restless. Even sitting down at the cafe, his eyes were anxiously looking outside the window. He was present in body but not in mind.

“Koutarou, I understand how you feel, but think about yourself a little more.”

“If you’re going to be like this, the rest of us have to be worried about three people, Master.”

“I know that, and that’s not my intention... but I just can’t quite…”

Koutarou knew that he shouldn’t be acting like this. Regardless of his reasons, he shouldn’t be making the girls worry. But his desire to find Maki and Clan was eating away at him. Their disappearance cast a dark shadow over his mind.

“It wasn’t until they were gone that I realized that they were such a big part of my everyday life. It’s like the day doesn’t even start without them.”

“I feel the same. With them gone and you different, I haven’t had an ordinary day for two days now.”

“Us all being together has meaning. I’ve learned that over the course of yesterday and today...”

Both Theia and Ruth shared his feelings. The only difference was that they had the additional burden of worrying about him, which helped them keep a calmer, more rational view on things.

“That’s why... Here.”

Theia scooped up some of the cream from her chocolate parfait and held it up to Koutarou’s face. Koutarou was puzzled by the gesture and looked at her for an answer.

“Sweets are the best when you’re irritated and restless. So eat this and calm down a little. If you do, you’ll probably come up with a good idea or two.”

“Theia...”

Koutarou had to stop himself from saying that now wasn’t the time to be playing around. But after taking a deep breath, he ate the cream that Theia presented. He realized that he had indeed lost his cool after he almost said they didn’t have time to mess around while they were intentionally on a break. Maybe he did need rest and food.

“It’s good.”

“Right? It’s my favorite.”

Seeing Koutarou take a bite of her parfait, Theia put on a big smile. She then took bite after bite of it herself. After experiencing some relief, she felt like the parfait tasted even better than usual.

“Oh, Master, you have some cream on your face.”

Koutarou had some lingering cream around the edge of his mouth. Since Theia had fed him, it wasn’t like her accuracy was perfect. Ruth pulled out a handkerchief from her bag with a smile. She was going to wipe his mouth with that.

“It’s okay. You don’t have to use such an expensive looking handkerchief for something like this...”

Thanks to Theia, Koutarou had regained some of his composure. Certainly enough to tell that Ruth was holding a rather luxurious handkerchief. That’s why he stopped her and reached for the paper napkins on the table instead.

“I have nothing more precious than you, Master.”

But hearing Ruth clearly express her intentions, he relented. With a paper napkin in his hand, he let Ruth gently wipe the cream off his mouth.

Right now, there’s nothing more precious to me than Ruth and the others... And that’s why I can’t sit around and do nothing...

Ruth’s kind words helped reaffirm how he felt. Right now, there was nothing more important than the two girls that were missing, the two girls that were in front of him, and the five others that were out there doing their best to help.

“...And what about me?”

Unlike Koutarou, however, Theia took offense. She considered Ruth to be her precious vassal, and was unhappy at the thought those feelings weren’t returned. She looked at Ruth, who seemed to be enjoying herself as she wiped Koutarou’s face, with a frown.

“It’s just a figure of speech, Your Highness. Besides, you’re not a belonging, Your Highness. It’s not like I could wipe Master with you.”

“Hmph, very well. By the way, Ruth... did you not have the courage to wipe the cream away with a kiss?”

“Y-Your Highness!”

“Seeing how you’re acting, you at least considered it.”

“I didn’t! I did no such thing, Master!”

Theia and Ruth were both feeling a little better to see Koutarou feeling the same way. Seeing that, Koutarou realized that there was another reason Kiriha had sent them his way.

“You’ve sure gotten a lot bolder, Ruth.”

“I haven’t! I really mean it! Please believe me, Master!”

When shouldering too much on your own, everything was like a downward spiral. Your mood, your thoughts, your wellbeing. Koutarou had experienced that himself. In order to prevent that, they all needed to work together with friends they could rely on. And when Koutarou realized that they were stronger together, he was at last able to smile after all this time.

“You finally smiled, Koutarou.”

“Though it appears to be more of a smirk...”

“It seems these kind of jokes work on him, so let us continue a while longer.”

“Y-Your Highness, please spare me!”

Though Koutarou had smiled, he was only really laughing at himself for being so pathetic that he made the girls worry. But still, that was better than nothing.

The effects of a well-deserved break were immediately obvious. Now that he had his wits about him again, Koutarou asked Ruth to analyze a map and calculate an efficient route for them. Before now, he’d only been going where he felt like he should, meaning he’d likely made repeat visits to certain areas while missing others altogether. It was a rather ineffective way of searching. Realizing that alone made their pit stop at the cafe worth it. Now he could probably save more time than if he hadn’t taken a break at all.

“Ruth-san, where to next?”

“Take a right at that corner. It looks like a roundabout at first glance, but since this is a winding road, it’s actually the shortest route.”

“Got it. Thanks.”

Like before, Koutarou was in the lead with Theia and Ruth following behind him. They were moving as a trio through the city's complex alleyways with Ruth's guidance. They proceeded that way for a while, but eventually Theia stopped and crossed her arms to think.

"Hmm... I feel like I'm the only one who's not helping at all."

Koutarou was scanning the area with his psychic powers while Ruth was giving guidance and directions. Theia, however, was simply walking along with them without contributing anything. The data from the scouts and spaceship was being processed by the AI thanks to Ruth, so it wasn't really like they needed a third hand.

"Maybe I should split off from the group..."

If she couldn't help Ruth and Koutarou, she felt like it might be better to leave them to their own devices while she found something else to do.

"It's not like you're making things harder," objected Koutarou. "So don't let it bother you and just stay with us."

"But..."

"At times like this, we need someone like you around. We need a leader. Besides, nothing good would come of you going off by yourself and getting lost in your own headspace."

Koutarou knew better. If he'd stayed by himself, he'd still be walking around aimlessly. The only reason he wasn't now was because Theia and Ruth had come along. Theia, as a natural-born leader, had a particularly strong influence over people. Her positivity and determination helped everyone stay motivated. That's why Koutarou didn't think that she was useless. Though he was too embarrassed to say it out loud, he considered her a bright star that would guide him through even the darkest of nights.

"Koutarou..."

"It's just as Master says, Your Highness. And with the disappearance of Clan-sama and Maki-san, there's still the possibility that this is an attack. So for safety's sake, I can't recommend working on your own."

“Yeah. So, Theia, just stay alert and keep an eye out for enemy attacks. I’m too busy concentrating on my spirit sight, and Ruth-san is on her bracelet.”

Koutarou was so focused on his search that he’d developed a sort of tunnel vision, and Ruth was occupied operating the drones and other things. Theia, however, had good eyesight and made an excellent lookout. Since they didn’t know what they were up against, that was an important role right now.

“Ah... R-Right! You may leave it to me!”

Theia had been depressed over not being very useful, but she suddenly looked like she’d come back to life. There was a light and confidence in her eyes once more, and she used those eyes to scan their surroundings. She carefully observed everything around them to make sure there weren’t any enemies. And in doing so, she noticed something about Ruth, who was walking next to her.

“What is it, Ruth? Why are you crying?”

Ruth was indeed in tears. But since they’d known each other for so long, Theia knew right away that they weren’t tears of sadness or pain. Yet that in and of itself was strange. She couldn’t imagine any other reason for Ruth to be crying right now.

“N-No, it’s nothing... Don’t mind me.”

Ruth shook her head while softly whispering her answer. When she did, the tears that scattered from her cheeks sparkled as they caught the light of the sun.

“It doesn’t look that way to me...” Theia whispered back to Ruth.

Since Ruth kept her voice low, she assumed that meant she didn’t want Koutarou to hear.

“It really is nothing. It might be inappropriate to say in this situation... but I was just feeling how blessed we are.”

It wasn’t any one thing that had happened. But in looking back on everything, Ruth was reminded of her feelings. She felt lucky. Happy. And the reason she hadn’t said anything at first was because that felt inappropriate to say now.

“I know that Clan-sama and Maki-san disappearing is a terrible thing. But... when I look at Master so desperately searching for them, I can tell just how much he values them...”

Ruth was watching Koutarou, focused on nothing but his search. So much so that he himself didn’t even notice Ruth was crying. That’s how she knew what the girls really meant to him. And that, in and of itself, was why she was crying in the first place.

“It just makes me so happy to think... that he would do the same for us if we were to disappear...”

Koutarou would put the same amount of energy and effort into looking for them if something happened. And it was when she realized that that she couldn’t stop herself from crying.

“I know I shouldn’t be happy over this situation, but... I can tell just how much Master loves us...”

The boy she loved also loved her in return. There was nothing happier than that. She still didn’t know if it was a romantic love, but seeing Koutarou like this, she knew that he treasured and needed her. And that was true for Theia and the other girls as well. Having reaffirmed that, Ruth became unable to keep a lid on her overflowing feelings.

“Because two years ago, he was so... Even though he had no one he could trust in... And yet… Hngh...”

Ruth pressed her hands to her chest and let out a stifled sob. If there hadn’t been anyone else around, she would have simply let the tears flow. That was just how strong and intense the feelings insider of her were. It was an unusually powerful moment of expression from the normally modest Ruth.

“That’s true. Just like you said, our feelings aren’t just one-sided. We trust and are trusted. We love and are loved. That’s the kind of person... No, that’s the kind of people that we’ve met. We are blessed. Even if we can’t share that feeling right now, it is the unmistakable truth.”

Tears begin forming in Theia’s eyes as well. Being as tough as she was, she didn’t let it show as much as Ruth did, but her tiny chest was still welling up

with emotion.



“That’s how I’d feel from the bottom of my heart... if not for what was happening right now.”

Indeed, the problem was the two missing girls. Without Clan and Maki, their happiness was painful. Their togetherness was lonely. Both for them, and for Koutarou.

“You have nothing to worry about,” said Theia.

Her smile and her words radiated her usual confidence. She already knew what she had to do.

“We just need to find Clan and Maki, and it’ll all be all right. Then we can just tell them what happened and laugh about it like idiots together.”

“Your Highness...”

If there was a problem, they just had to resolve it. It was a simple, clear, and very Theia-esque answer.

“And when that time comes, Koutarou will be the one in trouble.”

“Oh my...”

At first, Ruth opened her eyes wide with surprise at Theia’s words. But then the corners of her lips curled upward and she began giggling. Both at Theia and her striking boldness, and at herself for being the one to overthink things for once.

“Hee... Heeheehee!”

“Ahahaha!”

Theia and Ruth laughed out loud together. There was only one answer for them at the end of their two year long journey. They didn’t want to laugh just the two of them, but together with everyone precious to them. That was all.

“What’s the matter, you two?”

Koutarou might not have noticed if it had only been one of them, but their overlapping laughter reached even his focused ears. Curious, he turned to look behind him.

“It’s nothing. It’s a private—”

“It’s a girl’s secret, M—”

When he did, his eyes shot open wide. Like he had seen something terrifying.

“It can’t be... Why?!”

Since Koutarou had never looked at them like that before, Theia and Ruth immediately realized that something was wrong.

“Ruth, you’re glow—”

“Your Highness, your body is wrapped in red li—”

Both girls were engulfed in light, Theia in red and Ruth in yellow. It looked like the vibrant colors would swallow them. Seeing that, Koutarou realized that Theia and Ruth were going to disappear too. The colors were different, but this was exactly what had happened to Clan.

“Theia! Ruth-san!”

Koutarou started running towards the two of them on reflex. It wasn’t like he could do anything, but he couldn’t just stand by and watch it happen. So he ran towards them, desperately reaching out for them.

“Koutarou!”

“Master!”

They reached out for him in return. Their hands were already fading away into the growing light.

“Don’t go! Don’t you dare disappear!”

Knowing he was about to go through the same thing he did when Clan disappeared right in front of him, Koutarou felt like he was going insane. He was desperate to anchor them to this world somehow.

“Your Highness, is this...?!”

“I see! So that’s what this means!”

As their bodies began vanishing, Theia and Ruth seemed to understand what was happening. They understood why they were disappearing. The light absorbing them had let them know. It was saying that their bond was being tested.

“Koutarou! There’s a pattern to this! Ask Kiriha! She’s suspected something like this all along!”

“Our meeting was no coincidence, Master! There’s a clear reason behind it!”

They only had a few moments, and both of them were desperate to give Koutarou the lead he needed before their time was up. Maki was the first and alone when it happened, so there was no way she could help. Clan had been able to do a little better. And now with Theia and Ruth disappearing at the same time, they wanted to do as much as they could. What they said now could be the clue that led to the resolution they were so desperately seeking.

“Theia! Ruth-san! Please wait! Don’t go!”

“The rest depends on your feelings! If you need us—”

“Master, believe in us! We will definitely—”

However, Koutarou wasn’t properly listening to what they were saying. He was too desperately focusing on trying to take their hands. And the girls reciprocated. Despite understanding their own fate, they earnestly reached out to Koutarou. No matter what fate demanded of them, they would always reach out for him.

“...”

“...”

But in the end, they never connected. Just before their hands touched, their bodies melted in the light and disappeared. All Koutarou was left with were their final words, and even that wasn’t clear. They were just nearly inaudible whispers.

“God damn it! GOD DAMN IT!”

And so, following Maki and Clan, the princess and her retainer disappeared, leaving Koutarou alone. His sorrowful screams echoed well into the distance.

Understanding and Bonds

Thursday, March 31st

After returning to room 106, Koutarou told Kiriha everything. What Theia and Ruth had said, that there was a pattern to the incidents, that their meeting hadn't been a coincidence. That there had to be a reason for it. Hearing all this, Kiriha crossed her arms and started thinking. It was actually something that had been on her mind all along, but Theia's last words helped Kiriha decipher what was really going on.

If Theia-dono said that, then I haven't been wrong to think that too much is happening around Koutarou, including all of us... but I still don't have any leads as to why that is... We might be pressed by this pattern, but I need more time...

Thanks to Theia and Ruth, Kiriha had a slightly better understanding of the situation. But still, she didn't know everything. There were critical pieces to the puzzle missing.

"Kiriha-san, did you figure something out?!"

Koutarou put his hands on the tea table and leaned forward eagerly as he asked her for details. Theia and Ruth had disappeared before his eyes, the very same way Clan and Maki had the day before. He was intent on finding them all, no matter what.

"I'm nursing a theory, but it's too soon to say for sure. The situation is just too delicate and complicated."

"Damn it, just what's going on?!"

Bang!

Koutarou slammed his fist into the table with terrific force. It was a small wonder the table didn't break, but the loud sound of the blow echoed through the tiny apartment. It was enough to startle Yurika, who then cowered in fear. But Koutarou was so caught up in his own emotions that he wasn't paying

attention to things like that.

“I’m sorry, Koutarou. We finally got some more information, too...”

However, Kiriha’s apologetic words made him regain some of his calm. He still had five girls around him, and letting his emotions get the better of him would only make them uneasy. It wasn’t like the four girls who disappeared were the only ones precious to him. Reminding himself of that, he repressed the intense feelings welling up inside him.

“I’m the one who should apologize... I’m sorry for getting upset.”

“You saw them disappear with your own eyes. Of course you’d be upset.”

Kiriha didn’t blame Koutarou. Rather, she was quite sympathetic. She also knew that part of the reason he was so upset over this was because it was an unpleasant reminder of watching his mother die right in front of him.

“Thank you...”

“Don’t worry about it, Koutarou. Besides, it’s not like we know absolutely nothing.”

“So you did figure something out?!”

Koutarou had had his eyes downcast for quite some time, but he now looked up at Kiriha anxiously. As if waiting for that, she nodded her head.

“The next to disappear will probably be me or Yurika.”

“Are you sure?! How can you tell?!”

“Theia mentioning a regularity or pattern to the incidents was a hint. Maki, Clan-dono, Ruth, Theia-dono... Does that order bring anything to mind?”

“You mean it’s going in the reverse order of when they came to room 106?!”

“Or perhaps more specifically the order in which we met... But either way, if that’s the pattern, it’s very likely that either I or Yurika will be next.”

“Wait a minute... Why isn’t it one of you for sure?”

Whether it was in the opposite order they met or the order they came to room 106, Kiriha, who had appeared before Theia and Ruth, should be next. However, Kiriha was saying that it might be Yurika. Koutarou didn’t understand

why.

“Things get complicated when you take into consideration the timeslip, because there’s a discrepancy between when you think we first met and when I think we first met.”

Kiriha met Koutarou when she was just a little girl, so of course she considered that their first meeting. But from Koutarou’s point of view, the first time he encountered Kiriha was when she showed up in room 106 years later. So potentially—technically—Yurika might be next in line.

“I see... to Kii-chan...”

“With four people already gone, it’s fairly safe to assume that something is going to happen to the rest of us too. And how exactly that happens should help us clarify the mystery a little more.”

“So you want us to wait around until someone else disappears?!”

“Presently, that’s all we can do.”

Kiriha was correct. Without any leads, what they really needed to do was learn more information—as much as possible. And with things as they were, that meant gleaning as much as they could from the disappearances themselves. Especially since they knew another one would likely happen before long. Koutarou knew Kiriha was right, but it still didn’t sit well with him.

Really, since she might be next, Kiriha was more or less suggesting that she sacrifice herself for the sake of the greater good. It was logical, but emotionally difficult to accept for her friends who’d be left behind.

“You can’t be serious! We should be thinking about how to keep anyone else from—”

Just as Koutarou raised his voice again, he realized that Yurika, who listening in and sitting slightly behind Kiriha, had gone pale. Tears were welling in her eyes, which was enough to quell Koutarou’s frustrations for the moment.

“Yurika, what’s wrong?”

Shelving the discussion with Kiriha for now, Koutarou ran immediately over to Yurika. She looked up at him, her tears already streaming down her cheeks.

“Th-The next one to disappear... is Kiriha-san or m-me... right?”

Yurika was shaken with anxiety. Her whole body was trembling. She was terrified to hear that she might be the next one to disappear. And even if she wasn’t, she would be the next in line after that. She felt like she’d just been given a death sentence.

“Satomi-san, I’m scared... I don’t want to disappear.”

Yurika wrapped her arms around herself, trying to stop the shaking. She had plenty of courage when it came to anything involving magic, but this was completely different. Anyone would be afraid to face such a great unknown. Yurika was terrified knowing that she would disappear soon, but the other girls were scared too.

“I’m... supposed to be... the magical girl of love and courage... And yet...”

She knew that a magical girl should be brave at times like this. She should be inspiring everyone else, but she was shaking too much to even try. And her own weakness only upset her more.

“It’s okay to be scared, Yurika. No one could stay calm in a situation like this where we don’t know what’s going on. Even I’m scared.”

As far as Koutarou knew, he might disappear too. Kiriha had roughly estimated the order of their disappearance, but that didn’t mean he wouldn’t be at the end of the line. And if Kiriha was wrong, he could even be next. So he knew what Yurika was going through. That’s why he put his hands on her shoulders and smiled at her as gently as he could.

“But even so... I’m definitely going to do something. It’s okay.”

Yurika felt the warmth from his hands and from the awkward smile on his face. She also felt encouraged knowing that Koutarou, despite how confused and scared he was himself, was trying to cheer her up.

“Satomi-san!”

Yurika threw herself at Koutarou and wrapped her arms around him. She held on to him as tightly as she could, as if she never intended to let him go.

“I’ll definitely do something, Yurika, so you don’t have to be scared anymore.

Believe in me.”

He had no basis for his claims. He had no idea how to resolve the situation. But it was all he knew how to say. He had to say it. For Yurika’s sake, and for his own. With four of the girls gone now, a large hole had opened up in his heart. He couldn’t stand for it to get any bigger.

“I believe. I believe in you, but... can I stay like this a little longer?”

“Yeah.”

Yurika believed in Koutarou. But her heart and her quivering body weren’t on the same page. She needed a little more time for Koutarou’s warmth to spread through her body and stop her trembling.

Based on the order of the disappearances so far, Kiriha assumed that she or Yurika would be next, and began preparations for when that time came. She had observation equipment to gather detailed data on what was happening, but it hadn’t rendered anything useful so far. She needed to prepare something more advanced and accurate, but since that would take some time, Koutarou and the others would continue their search in the meantime.

“All right, I’m off.”

“See you guys later.”

Koutarou and Yurika left room 106 together. Knowing that she’d disappear soon, she didn’t want to leave his side. Even when she needed to go to the bathroom, she was scared to leave him. And out of consideration for how she felt, the other girls had opted not to go with her and give her some alone time with Koutarou. They knew how she must feel. Kiriha included, though it was particularly remarkable she was still able to act like everything was normal since she was in the same position.

“Yurika, could you not cling onto my arm so much? It’s hard to walk...”

Yurika was embracing Koutarou’s arm as they walked along. That in and of itself wasn’t a problem, but fear made her hold on to him much tighter than usual, which made it harder for Koutarou to walk.

“I-I’m sorry...”

Yurika hurriedly tried to ease her grip on him, but her stiff fingers and arms wouldn’t listen to her. Her heart’s desire to cling to him was stronger than her mind’s intention to release him.

“I guess... I really don’t want to let go of you...”

“That’s okay. Then don’t worry about it.”

“I’m sorry...”

While it was hard for him to move while basically dragging Yurika along, he slowed down to accommodate her. He thought it was better to go slow and have Yurika feel safe than the alternative.

“Don’t apologize, silly. This isn’t your fault.”

Yurika wasn’t the one who’d caused the incident, and she certainly wasn’t to blame for being scared considering the position she was in. That’s why Koutarou wasn’t mad, and he wasn’t hard on her. But that didn’t apply to himself. He was frustrated at his inability to resolve the problem, and his inability to comfort Yurika, who was still clearly terrified. Of course, all the other girls were scared too. And he couldn’t even imagine how the missing girls must feel. But as much as he wanted to do something about it, he couldn’t. All he could do was continue the search for now. He felt helpless. Powerless. And that feeling began squeezing at his chest. It hurt so badly that he wanted to scream. But it was still nothing compared to how Yurika felt.

“Oh? If it isn’t Kou.”

Suddenly, a familiar voice called out to Koutarou from behind. When he turned around to look, he saw his old friend Kenji standing there.

“And you’re with Nijino-san, huh?”

Kenji was eyeing Yurika clinging to Koutarou’s arm and grinned.

“That’s rare. Are you two on a date?”

Kenji of course knew that Koutarou and the girls had a very close relationship. That’s why he’d try and tell him every now and then that he needed to make up his mind. So from his point of view, Koutarou going on a date with Yurika was a

welcome sight. So while he was happy to poke a little fun, he was mostly truly happy for his best friend.

“If only... There’s actually some trouble.”

“Huh... Sounds serious.”

Though Kenji was joking around at first, Koutarou didn’t get angry. His expression stayed as steeled as it had been. And with Yurika just staring down at the ground, Kenji got the hint. Something was clearly going on, and the joking smile faded from his face.

“Yeah. We’re looking for Aika-san, Theia, and Ruth-san. Have you seen them anywhere?”

Since Kenji didn’t know Clan, Koutarou left her out.

“Did something happen with those people?”

Kenji figured something had happened between them and Yurika, and Koutarou was more or less acting as a mediator. But something struck Koutarou as strange about what Kenji said.

“‘Those people’? Don’t make it sound like they’re strangers. You’re classmates, remember?”

“Huh? We are?”

Kenji cocked his head to the side at Koutarou’s remark. He was acting like he’d never even heard their names before. Koutarou assumed he was messing around with him.

“Stop joking around. This is serious”

“Yeah, I hear you. But were those girls really in our class?”

Weirdly enough, Kenji seemed serious. He folded his arms pensively and thought about it. It was like he really didn’t know who they were.

“How could a womanizer like you forget girls in our class? Aika-san is Yurika’s cosplay friend, Theia wrote the script for the school plays last year, and Ruth-san is Theia’s childhood friend. Don’t pretend like you’ve got amnesia or something.”

“The plays, huh? Wait... Who was that again? Um, hang on. Now that you mention it... Kou, was she blonde?”

“Mackenzie, did you...”

It was then that Koutarou realized something was utterly and truly wrong. He had his spirit sight active since he was looking for the girls, so he could see Kenji’s aura too. And it was perfectly clear. That meant whatever Kenji was saying, he wasn’t lying. But it was also somewhat distorted, which indicated that Kenji was confused. It was all quite alarming given the situation.

Did Mackenzie really forget about Theia and the others?!

Even if Koutarou thought he was just messing around, his aura indicated otherwise. It seemed he really had forgotten about them. He could vaguely remember Theia, who naturally left quite a strong impression, but it was otherwise like he’d never even met the girls in question.

Vrrr, vrrr...

That was when Koutarou’s phone began ringing. He hurriedly pulled it from his pocket, less curious about who was calling and more anxious to get in touch with Kiriha and the others to let them know what was happening.

Wait, it’s Crimson... Surely she hasn’t…

They’d talked just yesterday, but Crimson was calling him back already. If it had been anyone unrelated to what was going on, Koutarou would have just ignored the call and handled whatever it was later. But he got a bad feeling when he saw Maki’s friend’s name on the caller ID.

“What is it, Crimson?”

“This is bad, Koutarou! It seems like Maki is disappearing from Purple and Green’s memories!”

“What?!”

Surprisingly enough, it seemed it wasn’t just Kenji forgetting about Maki and the others.

After getting off the phone with Crimson, Koutarou parted ways with Kenji.

Kenji was out and about on his own business, so Koutarou felt like he'd lucked out. He knew he couldn't continue the search with him around. After that, Koutarou started calling his other classmates in a fluster. It seemed like they too had forgotten about Maki, Theia, and Ruth. The drama club members still seemed to recall Theia since she'd been quite involved with them for some time, but it was just like what had happened with Kenji.

"Is there really some kind of timeslip behind this…?"

Koutarou was sitting down on a bench in the park, racking his brain over the strange situation that was only growing more and more complicated. They'd previously discounted the possibility of a timeslip, but this new development made Koutarou reconsider it. He'd seen something similar in a movie once. When history was changed, the person affected disappeared, making it like they'd never existed at all. People who knew them then lost their memories of that person—not because they were forgetting, but because their minds were aligning with the timeline where said person never existed in the first place. It took something special or a strong connection for anyone to retain their memories.

"Even if that's not the case, if people are forgetting, then..."

Koutarou gritted his teeth. Whether or not it was a timeslip, the girls and people's memories of them were disappearing. He had to wonder if they were the only ones affected. Maybe other people were disappearing too, and they just didn't know because it was happening somewhere else. Or maybe they'd already forgotten too.

The terrifying thought that they might never be able to get to the bottom of this or stop it crossed Koutarou's mind. If this didn't center around Koutarou and the girls—if it was something happening on a much larger scale than that—it might not be within their power to do anything about it. But he couldn't admit that. Koutarou shook his head repeatedly as if to shake off such thoughts. If he didn't believe that he could do something, he really would become powerless. And he couldn't let that happen. Not only did he need to find the missing girls, he still needed to protect the ones who remained.

"Don't lose heart. I'll definitely find them... I'll definitely protect you..."

Koutarou unconsciously put more strength into his grip. Yurika, who had been holding his hand out of fear, felt it. And with that, she finally looked up from the ground.

“Satomi-san…?”

When she raised her head, Yurika saw Koutarou’s serious face like he was lost deep in thought. From time to time, he would mumble something or scratch his head. And seeing all that, she realized he’d squeezed her hand unwittingly.

“I should have listened to Clan more seriously... but it’s too late for that now...”

Koutarou was oblivious to the fact that Yurika was looking at him and that she’d softly called out to him. He was so deep inside his own head that none of it even registered. All he could do was desperately rack his brain as he tried to come up with a solution for the troubles plaguing him.

“I see...”

Looking at Koutarou, Yurika realized he was scared too. Not because he too might disappear, but because he might shortly be separated from the people he loved. In other words, he feared his everyday life shattering to pieces. And that made Yurika realize what the truly frightening thing about all this was.

“I feel the same way...”

She was scared of what was happening. People disappearing without warning. Memories vanishing. That was bad enough. But Yurika was most frightened of what happened next. Not disappearing per se, but being separated from Koutarou and the others. In other words, losing the people she loved.

“I don’t want to be alone again...”

Yurika had always been easy to misunderstand. She was unlucky and awkward. Very few people had ever gotten to know the real Yurika. Nana had nearly cracked the code, but after tragedy struck, Yurika was left on her own again. Alone. And becoming a magical girl only furthered her sense of isolation. With a secret identity, she had more of a reason than ever to hide her true self from other people.

“But... even if that’s the truth, I won’t accept it. You’re my classmate and a cosplay-loving, stupid freeloader of a roommate.”

“Satomi-san... I’d prefer things stay that way too...”

But between their struggles and their everyday lives, things had changed between Yurika and the others. She was the magical girl of love and courage, a righteous warrior who wouldn’t forgive those who would abuse magic. But she was also a normal girl. She wanted to be able to go through her day-to-day life like anyone else. And she’d finally met someone who understood that. But that wasn’t all. She too understood how he felt. He was special just like she was, but still wanted to live an ordinary life. And because they both understood how the other felt, their bond was incredible.

“You’re too kind, so of course you’d help clean up. Right, Satomi-san?”

“Why would I help?!”

“Whaaat?! Are you saying you hate me?!”

“I despise all forms of trouble.”

The ordinary days they’d spent together were like a dream. They each helped each other out where the other was lacking. Living like that, both of them were able to smile. Scary and difficult things happened from time to time, but they always worked together to resolve them. Then they would go back to their precious everyday lives in peace. Those days were what Yurika really treasured. A chill ran down her spine when she thought about what her life would be like if she’d never met Koutarou, the one person who really understood her. The fear of losing him far surpassed the fear of disappearing.

“If I had never met you and never come to room 106... I might not have been caught up in this incident, but... I would never want that...”

She was scared of both, but the thought of losing Koutarou was far more dreadful than the idea of disappearing. That was just how much she’d come to love her life since meeting him.

“No matter how scared I get... I will never ever let go of your hand, Satomi-san...”

That was the conclusion Yurika had reached. She'd finally found someone she understood and who understood her in return. She wouldn't let go of that. She couldn't, even if it meant losing her life.

"Satomi-san..."

And so Yurika squeezed Koutarou's hand back. She couldn't just stay scared. Even though she wasn't good at much, she could at least encourage the irritated and flustered Koutarou. She'd already stopped shaking. Now she just had to comfort him like he'd comforted her.

"Yurika?"

"Please take a deep breath. You look scary with that face, Satomi-san."

Still firmly holding on to his hand, Yurika smiled at Koutarou. She'd stopped quivering, but she still wasn't sure she could manage a smile. Nevertheless, she was desperate to try.

"Heh... Yeah, you're right."

That might have ended up actually working in her favor. Seeing her nervous face, Koutarou had no choice but to listen to what she was asking of him. So he stopped, took a deep breath, and flashed a small smile.

"Thank you, Yurika— Wait, you're glowing?!"

"Huh?"

A blue light had appeared around Yurika's chest. It rapidly grew brighter and bigger, and before long, it had engulfed her entire body.

"Is this what happened to Maki-chan and the others?!"

Yurika's face distorted in surprise. But only for an instant. The blue light soon told her what it was and why this was all happening.

"I see! This is the same light that saved Sakuraba-senpai and Purple-san in the past!"

Blue was one of the colors of the rainbow, and all the light of the rainbow ultimately came from the sun's light. That was why this incident was happening. There was a solution. At the place that started it all. The real question was if a

small but truly extraordinary miracle would happen upon arriving there.

“You too?! Please wait, Yurika! Don’t you disappear on me!”

Her hand still in his, Koutarou tried to hold on to her. But the tighter he held her, the more it became apparent her warmth was fading. Yurika would disappear. In a matter of seconds, at that. But those few seconds would be pure agony for Koutarou.

“Satomi-san, I will definitely go to Kisshou University with you!”

Yurika’s body was fading into the blue light. Using the precious time she had left, she did her best to tell Koutarou how to return to their beloved everyday life.

“I believe in that! So you need believe in that too—”

“Yurika! Yurikaaa!”

But it was over all too soon. Yurika did her best, but it seemed she hadn’t properly gotten through to Koutarou.

“Why is this happening?! Why?! GOD DAMN IT!”

Koutarou was too focused on Yurika disappearing to really listen to the message she was trying to leave him. Contrary to her wish, a deep despair and sense of loss ruled his heart.

When Koutarou returned to room 106 alone, a heavy gloom fell over the apartment. That didn’t change even as the sun rose. The atmosphere was so weighty that the fresh morning light felt cold and the vivid blue sky looked empty.

“You’re all so gloomy! If you don’t cheer up, you won’t be able to find anyone!”

Currently there were only five people in room 106: Sanae, Kiriha, Harumi, Shizuka, and Koutarou. The effect of losing Yurika was great, as Sanae’s energy alone wasn’t enough to brighten the mood in the room. Not having any leads despite having lost half of their group of friends weighed heavily on everyone who remained.

“And Koutarou, you haven’t been properly sleeping, have you? We can’t have that, you know.”

“I couldn’t sleep even if I tried...”

It had now been three days since Maki first disappeared. Koutarou had barely gotten any sleep since then. Even when he closed his eyes, all he could think about was what was happening. His mind wouldn’t let him rest. He’d barely even taken any breaks over the past three days for the same reason. And since he’d been going nearly at full steam for so long, he was worn completely ragged. He hardly even came back to the apartment to eat, and was looking rather gaunt.

“I feel like I’ll go crazy if I don’t do something,” he muttered with a haggard face.

“Koutarou...” sighed a worried Sanae.

Shizuka and Kiriha were currently making breakfast, but even the time spent waiting for that was agony to Koutarou. The normally full table now only had three people sitting around it. The empty-feeling apartment was just a painful, irritating reminder. And he didn’t have any way to blow off those negative emotions building up inside of him. He certainly couldn’t take them out on the remaining four girls. This was all because the other girls had disappeared. They were all so precious to him that each loss was like being stabbed in the heart, but he still couldn’t scream. Not at the girls in front of him. No, they were just as precious. So he kept those feelings bottled up inside. And without anyone else to blame, he blamed himself. The crushing frustration and helplessness just kept mounting and mounting.

“Here we go, everyone.”

“It’s time to eat.”

Shizuka and Kiriha came from the kitchen carrying trays. They were smiling, but everyone could tell that they were forcing it. As they got to the table, they set down food for everyone, but Koutarou didn’t even seem to notice. He was staring at the table, but his mind was elsewhere. He was thinking of the missing girls.

What did they do to deserve this...? Why did they have to disappear...?

Recently, Koutarou had given up on hiding how precious the nine girls were to him. Of course, being totally open about it was still hard. But he just couldn't bring himself to keep pretending like they weren't precious to him after they'd all staked their lives to save him. That would be unforgivable.

I still haven't been able to do anything for them in return. And they did so much for me... I just finally started to realize that we couldn't stay like this!

That's why he had decided to put some effort into it. He wanted to properly answer the goodwill and devotion that each of the girls showed him. He wanted them to be happy, and he wanted to facilitate that. He wanted to believe that their everyday life together would continue forever.

This was supposed to be the beginning, not the end! So why?! Why this?! Why now?! What did they do to deserve this?! All they did was save me and the world!

Koutarou suddenly stood up. He didn't even know if he'd managed to eat anything or not. But the emotions inside of him were urging him forward regardless. He couldn't sit still a second longer. And once he was on his feet, he only had one goal.

"What's the matter all of a sudden, Satomi-kun?" asked Harumi.

"I'm going out to look for everyone."

"But you still haven't—"

"I've rested enough."

Turning his back on a worried-looking Harumi, Koutarou headed for the front door. He was adamant about finding the missing girls as quickly as possible. Finding them would also mean finding a way to protect Harumi and the other remaining girls. He couldn't waste any more time.

"Sanae, could you go with Koutarou? I'm worried about his wellbeing."

"I'm off!"

Sanae was already standing by the time Kiriha finished her sentence. She would have gone after him even if she hadn't said anything. Sanae gobbled

down another bite of fried egg, and ran out of the inner room with a piece of toast in hand.

“Sanae-chan sure is strong... Even in this situation, she doesn’t hesitate.”

Shizuka smiled bittersweetly as she saw Sanae off. She was truly distraught, but she didn’t sense the slightest bit of hesitation from straightforward Sanae. And she was jealous of that.

“Sanae is well aware of what the most precious thing to her is,” said Kiriha with a smile. “We’re all probably just too weighed down thinking about things that don’t matter as much.”

Kiriha didn’t chase after Koutarou because she had a role to fulfill. Preparations had to be made in order to get more detailed data on the disappearances. But that wasn’t the only thing that kept her behind.

“Kiriha-san, the next one should be...”

Harumi had realized the reason why Kiriha asked Sanae to go with Koutarou, and stared forlornly at the front door she’d just left through.

“Sadly, yes,” said Kiriha. “And it doesn’t look like my preparations will be complete in time.”

“Are you saying Sanae-chan is going to disappear?! Today?!”

Shizuka’s eyes shot wide open as she processed the meaning behind Kiriha’s words. She too now realized why Kiriha had sent Sanae after Koutarou.

“The disappearances have been occurring on a daily basis, and it is likely to be Sanae today.”

Kiriha reluctantly nodded as she confirmed Shizuka’s suspicions. Considering the pattern and what they knew so far, today would be the day Sanae disappeared. Kiriha was working diligently to make preparations to get the data they needed, but it took time to get the extremely sensitive and advanced equipment ready. She’d need more than just a day. That’s why she sent Sanae with Koutarou, so that he would be by her side when it happened. She too knew what Sanae treasured the most.

Since Koutarou insisted on continuing his search without getting any real rest, he was obviously worn down. And with her spirit sight, Sanae could tell that better than anyone. So the first thing she did after catching up to him was put her small hands on his back.

“Sanae?”

“Just stay still a little. I’ll make it so you have more energy.”

Sanae barely explained herself, but Koutarou could tell that she was pouring spiritual energy into him, so he decided to let her do as she pleased. He felt her energy start to spread through his body.

“Jeez, to end up in this state... How reckless...”

Sanae’s spiritual energy coursing through Koutarou returned his own disordered spiritual energy to its normal state. Someone’s general wellbeing was directly related to the flow of spiritual energy in their body. Getting that in order would help Koutarou at least feel a little better. It wouldn’t make up for lost sleep, but it was better than nothing on an empty tank.

“I know. But I can’t help myself.”

“Put yourself in the position of the one clinging on to you, will you?”

“I’m sorry.”

Sanae loved clinging to Koutarou’s back, but that made her especially sensitive to his spiritual energy. If it was disordered or troubled, it made Sanae feel sick. In other words, Koutarou needed to take care of himself in order to help take care of Sanae.

“We’re important to you, right?” she asked.

Pouring spiritual energy into someone was a rather advanced technique, but Sanae hardly looked fazed. She could carry on a conversation with Koutarou with no trouble whatsoever.

“Yeah. With everyone disappearing, I feel that especially strongly.”

Koutarou and Sanae’s spiritual energies were connected, so trying to lie would be meaningless. The truth was obvious in his heart. Not that he had any intention to lie to Sanae in the first place. That wasn’t the kind of relationship

they'd built.

"Then I forgive you."

"Keep a secret from everyone, okay?"

"Okay. But I think they already know."

"Even then, it's important to keep up appearances."

"Gosh, boys sure are difficult."

With Sanae's energy now freely flowing through Koutarou, his condition improved considerably. It even seemed to lift his spirits a little. It was all thanks to Sanae—both her spiritual energy and the conversation they'd had just now. This was exactly what Kiriha had hoped for.

"That'll do it."

"Thanks, Sanae."

"Heehee! Now do you understand how valuable Sanae-chan is?"

"Yeah."

As thanks, Koutarou patted Sanae's head. She happily smiled. The spiritual energy she felt through his hand was indeed much better than before. She was satisfied with her own work.

"By the way, there's something that's been on my mind, Koutarou."

"What?"

"My papa once told me a story about people being spirited away. He said it was an old legend from our shrine."

Sanae's family had served as the caretakers of a local shrine for generations. It was so old that it had a long, storied history complete with all kinds of legends that had been passed down. Sanae recalled her father telling her about one that involved people being spirited away.

"Spirited away, huh...?"

"Let's ask him about it. Maybe it's related in some way."

At first, Sanae hadn't thought the old story had anything to do with what was

going on. But the situation was only growing more confusing and they didn't have any other clues to go off of. She thought it would be better to at least give it a chance than to continue searching aimlessly. Even if it was unrelated, it might give them a push in the right direction.

"...All right, let's go."

After thinking for a moment, Koutarou nodded. Just a while ago, he probably wouldn't have listened to her. He was in bad shape and felt like he was hitting the end of his rope. But thanks to the little boost from Sanae, he was thinking a bit more clearly.

"Right now, I'm ready to grasp at straws."

"What's that mean?"

"It means I'll try anything I can get my hands on, no matter how small or silly."

"That's the attitude!"

The two of them then headed for Sanae's home, the Higashihongan shrine. Sanae jumped onto his back and hugged him like always. She always wanted to stick to Koutarou, but right now she also felt like she had to protect his heart.

This wasn't Koutarou's first visit to the Higashihongan shrine. He would walk Sanae home from school from time to time, and he'd attended festivals on the shrine grounds before. It was a familiar place to him, but he'd never been inside the house behind the shrine on the property. It was a beautiful, old, and big Japanese-style building that was well maintained and in extraordinary condition. Of course, the garden and pond around it were just as splendid, and the whole scene had a breathtaking harmony to it. It was quite clear that this wasn't just any home. While she practically never showed it, Sanae was actually the daughter of a high-class family.

"So, Sanae, where do we go from here?"

"This way. Haru-chan at the office said papa wasn't there for lunch, so he's probably in the dining room."

While it wasn't anything flashy, the Higashihongan estate was luxurious. Two

years ago, Koutarou would have been nervous to be there. But he didn't feel a tinge of it now as he followed Sanae inside. He had gotten quite used to luxurious accommodations during his stay in the palace on Forthorthe, and he was so worried about Theia and the others that he didn't have the energy to be nervous anyway.

"Oh, what's the hurry, Sanae?"

On their way to the dining room, they ran into Sanae's mother, Kanae. She seemed to be on her way out, as she was wearing an elegant suit and carrying a custom handbag. She looked much younger than she really was; it was hard to believe she had a seventeen year old daughter. The truth was that she had been born with a lot of spiritual energy, which was constantly rejuvenating her body.

"Mama! Do you know where papa is?"

"Hello, Kanae-san."

"Oh, hello, Satomi-kun. Thank you for always taking care of Sanae."

Fitting for the matriarch of a prominent family, Kanae gave Koutarou a proper and polite greeting. She was an energetic and athletic girl in her youth, but her role in the Higashihongan family had taught her to be more demure. Her training in archery had also taught her a great deal of composure.

"I should be the one thanking you. Your daughter is always helping me out."

Since Koutarou had escorted Sanae home several times, this wasn't his first time meeting Kanae either. But he was a bit of a stickler for manners, and still greeted her politely even after all this time. After everything he'd been through, his manners tended to stray towards a Forthorthian style. But cultural barriers aside, all manners came down to the same polite and respectable principles. And seeing Koutarou present himself so wonderfully, Kanae felt like he was well on his way into manhood.

"How is Nana-chan doing?" she asked.

"She just returned to her own country, so I'm sure she'll come see you before long."

"That's good to hear. I'll have to make preparations."

“Jeez, mama, save that for later! Where’s papa?!”

Meanwhile, however, Kanae was a bit concerned about her daughter. Chalking her mannerisms up to the time she’d spent recuperating from her illness, she decided to leave it be. Kanae concluded that if Sanae’s boyfriend was dependable, she had nothing to worry about.

“Oh, I’m sorry. Soutarou-san just finished eating, and I believe he’s in the study right now. Apparently he has a meeting with the people from the shopping street about the spring festivities this evening.”

“Thank you! Let’s go, Koutarou!”

“Yeah. Please excuse us.”

“No worries. My, those two sure seem to be in a hurry...”

Sanae ran down the hallway, and Koutarou followed right after her after pausing to neatly line up Sanae’s scattered shoes next to his. It almost looked like this was an everyday occurrence between the two of them. Kanae was surprised.

Sanae, you’re treating that Satomi-kun like he’s an extension of yourself. You’ll never be able to settle for anyone else at this rate... You’d better treasure him, Sanae.

Kanae saw them off, quietly rooting for her daughter in her mind. It wasn’t at all related to the problem they were having now, but in the grand scheme of things, her heart was in the right place.

Higashihongan Soutarou, like his daughter Sanae, had been born with powerful spiritual energy. The tradition of passing down techniques to use it, however, was long forgotten. Sanae had only mastered the art because of the long time she’d spent as a ghost. Her father was essentially just a normal person with immense spiritual energy. But even then, he felt something when he first met Koutarou.

There’s something to this boy... Just what is it? It doesn’t seem to be something bad, but... A strong mind? Extraordinary luck? I think I’ve met someone like this before...

Since Soutarou couldn't focus or control his spiritual energy, all he got was a passing feeling. At best, it was a strange sort of premonition. But something very special had caught his attention, and that was Koutarou.

"Papa, are you listening to me?!"

"Eh? Ah, sorry about that, honey. What were you saying?"

However, seeing his beloved daughter's angry face in front of him, he realized now wasn't the time to be worried about any of that. His recovered daughter bringing home what seemed to be a nice boy was a welcome occurrence. He had no reason to focus on anything else to the point of upsetting her.

"Jeez! I asked you to tell us that legend about being spirited away!"

In the past, Sanae's spiritual energy had split her soul in two, leaving part of her in ghost form haunting room 106 and the other in her body in the hospital. That latter was the version of Sanae—Sanae-san—who'd heard the story from her father about the legend.

"That old legend, huh? Why are you so interested in that all of a sudden?"

Soutarou remembered it well. It was a story he'd told his daughter who could barely even get out of bed. But it struck him as odd that she'd bring a friend over to ask about it now, and as such, he looked at his daughter with a puzzled expression.

"Just tell us! It's important!"

"Important, you say?"

When Soutarou saw Koutarou, he'd vaguely recalled that he once met someone else with a strange destiny. It was a youthful girl in a pink costume who carried a staff taller than she was, and they'd met eleven years ago now. That girl had used strange techniques to save him, Kanae, and Sanae.

Maybe he's like that girl from back then somehow... No, that couldn't be. But still, okay!

Remembering that girl, Soutarou decided not to ask anything and simply fulfill his daughter's request. What he was feeling from Koutarou might just be his imagination, and it wasn't like he had any reason to keep the legend a secret. If

his daughter said she wanted to hear it, he was happy to tell her. And even if Koutarou was like that girl, it would be a good thing.

“All right, I’ll tell you.”

“Thank you, papa!”

“It’s been a long time since I heard it myself, however. I learned it from my grandfather, so let’s see what I can remember...”

Soutarou smiled at his daughter as he readjusted his posture on the cushion he was sitting on. And after taking a sip of his freshly poured tea, he began recounting the legend as best as he could for Sanae and Koutarou.

It was said that over a thousand years had passed since the first building of the Higashihongan shrine was constructed. It seemed like the religious organization had been around even longer than that, but sadly there were no remaining records of it. Over the course of the shrine’s storied history, it had been through two fires. A great deal of records were lost that way. The ones lost in the second fire were from the latter half of the Warring States period and onward, and some of those records were pertaining to cases of people being spirited away.

Considering the era, it was only natural to assume that most of the real causes were bandits. During the Warring States and early Edo periods, only the cities were particularly safe. Bandits were a constant threat along the roads and in small villages. If a murder-robbery happened out of sight, it wasn’t all that uncommon for people to say the victim had been spirited away if evidence or a body could never be found. But there were several stories among the records where that clearly hadn’t been the case—stories of people returning after being spirited away. And those who returned all said the same thing. In an old shrine on Kisshou Mountain, the small mountain where Kisshouharukaze High School was now, they met a goddess and had their wish granted.

When Soutarou mentioned said goddess, he indicated a picture behind him. It was of a woman painted in shades of black. But what stood out the most about the painting was the rainbow behind her. It was so clear and vivid that it looked

like there was color even in the black ink painting. This painting had been with the Higashihongan family for a very long time.

“In this area, people have worshipped the goddess that rules the sun since ages long past. And what’s more, the Higashihongan family has enshrined that goddess, Oohime-sama.”

The ink painting of the woman was of a goddess known as Oohime. Hearing that name, Koutarou remembered something.

I think Oohime was the name of the haniwas’ spaceship... which means that Sanae’s family has had an encounter with the People of the Earth at some point?

The name of the spaceship-like weapons system that the haniwas used during the battle in Forthorthe, Oohime, was taken from the name of the goddess of creation that appeared in the People of the Earth’s legends. Now it turned out that a goddess with the same name, who was also a deity of the sun, was enshrined at the Higashihongan shrine. It didn’t sound like a coincidence. But that meant that there had been some sort of exchange between them in the past, if they weren’t related outright. This was a shocking development.

But that’s not important right now. What’s important is the people being spirited away...

A surprising connection had arisen between Sanae’s family and the People of the Earth, but that wasn’t what Koutarou had come to find out. He put his surprise and questions aside for the moment and focused on Soutarou’s story.

“Then does that mean that those people who came back from being spirited away met with this goddess, papa?”

“Yes. According to my grandfather, those who were spirited away and wished for selfish things disappeared, while those who wished for nothing or for the happiness of others were able to return safely.”

The goddess granted the wishes of those who visited her shrine. But those who made selfish wishes to her disappeared, while those with righteous hearts were granted happiness and sent back. Only those with wicked hearts were truly spirted away. In short, the goddess known as Oohime only granted the

wishes of the righteous.

“So being greedy is bad, right?” asked Sanae.

“My grandfather said that it might just be a fabricated tale to teach those listening a lesson,” answered Soutarou.

“So it’s a lie?”

“Lies comes in many forms. It was a long time ago, after all. It might not have started as a lie, but it’s possible that the story was altered as it was passed down, like a telephone game. So it may have started as a true story, but ended up a fabricated tale with the passing of time.”

Soutarou and his grandfather didn’t think that the legend was true. But they didn’t interpret it as a malicious lie. Rather, they believed it was a story told to convey a moral. It could have also just been some rumors than ended up taking the form of a story. Either way, neither Soutarou nor his grandfather believed it.

“It’s hard to hear the heir to the shrine saying stuff like that, papa.”

“You sure are harsh, Sanae. But it’s not like I don’t believe that the gods don’t exist. I believe they’re out there somewhere. I just think that this story was made up to serve as a lesson.”

“So it’s kind of a case by case thing?”

“That’s right. If I were to give an example... Sanae, you being born to us was without a doubt the doing of the gods.”

“Heehee, thanks, papa. That’s a nice thought.”

“I think so too.”

After their exchange, Sanae and Soutarou lightly bumped fists. Koutarou couldn’t help thinking they looked an awful lot alike as they smiled at each other. It seemed Sanae-chan got her energy and cheerful disposition from her father, whereas the more reliable Sanae-san had inherited her dependability from Kanae. They really were a wonderful family with strong ties. Koutarou was a little envious.

After hearing the story of the legend, Koutarou and Sanae quickly left the

house. Both because they didn't want to keep Soutarou from his work, and because they had something they needed to talk about privately.

"Koutarou, what do you think about what papa said?"

"I think he's right. Whether or not people being spirited away really happened, there was a lesson in the story. To live righteously."

Koutarou had been listening in a desperate attempt to discern any clues about what was happening, though it seemed it was all in vain. But he didn't let it get him too down. He hadn't had his hopes up very high in the first place, so it didn't feel like much of a loss for this to be a dead end.

"I don't think so..." Sanae said in a much lower voice.

Sensing the change in her tone, Koutarou turned to look at her. He was met with the rare sight of Sanae thinking seriously about something.

"Is there something on your mind?" he asked.

"Yeah... I want you to listen without laughing..."

Sanae was dead serious. She looked at Koutarou with an incredibly discerning glance. And seeing her like this, he couldn't bring himself to try and tease her any. He simply nodded.

"You have my word."

"All right, then here goes... Lately, I've been hearing a voice that no one else can."

"If only you can hear it, does that mean it's a ghost?"

"Hmm... I can't really tell. I can hear the voice, so if it's a ghost, I should be able to see them too. But I haven't seen anything."

"Then it's like someone speaking telepathically through auras?"

If it was a voice only Sanae could hear, Koutarou assumed it was someone speaking to her via spiritual energy. If it was a normal voice, Theia's sharp ears would have no doubt picked up on it too. Koutarou had some spiritual power as well thanks to Sanae, but it was nowhere near as potent as hers. If it was a weak or distant spirit, or even another psychic like her, it made sense that only

Sanae could hear it. And since she couldn't see the person talking to her, that was all they really knew.

"Also, it's a woman's voice."

"A woman's? Is it someone you know?"

"I don't know. I feel like I should know it though..."

Sanae felt like the voice was familiar, but even after racking her brain, she couldn't match it to anyone she knew. It felt like the answer was on the tip of her tongue, but hidden behind a thin veil.

"She spoke to me, but I don't really understand what she meant."

"What'd she say?"

"I think... she said something like that the promised time has come and that this would be the greatest trial."

"The promised time? The greatest trial?"

Taken at face value, it sounded like something big was happening. But without knowing what this "trial" entailed, that was all he could parse. It left Koutarou scratching his head.

"That's strange..."

"But it didn't feel scary. That's why I was thinking that maybe it was the goddess that my papa mentioned that was talking to me."

"I see, so you think that the trial is the disappearances... Yeah, that's not a bad theory."

"Right?"

Sanae had been just as puzzled as Koutarou at first, but after hearing her father's story, she began thinking that what was happening to them might be the great trial that the voice spoke of. Of course, trying to link an old legend to what was happening to them right now was a bit farfetched, but they really were grasping at straws. As Koutarou had suggested, it was the best theory they had right now.

"But then... why us?"

“Huh, you’re right...”

But even with that as their running theory, there were still a lot of unanswered questions. First and foremost, why were they chosen to be spirited away by the goddess?

“And if it’s that goddess from the story, there’s no way they wouldn’t come back.”

“Yeah, they’d be back right away.”

According to the legend told by Soutarou, those who wished for the happiness of others came back. By that rubric, the girls should be guaranteed to return. None of them were the type to wish for anything greedy.

“Maybe I was trying too hard to make a connection,” said Sanae, a little defeated.

“Maybe, but it still wasn’t a bad idea. Right now, we want any and every small clue we can get.”

“Yeah... Where did they all go...?”

There were several holes in Sanae’s theory, but if they gave up at that, they would never find the girls. They had to keep trying, keep thinking, and consider everything. Sanae was certainly on the right track in that regard.

But still... A goddess, huh? I wonder why that word attracts my attention...

Koutarou had another reason of being so positive about Sanae’s theory. A specific part of it really stuck out to him.

“Hey, Koutarou, stop for a minute.”

But it still didn’t give them any ground to stand on. It was just that one word that got his gears turning. Nevertheless, he paused his train of thought when Sanae called out to him.

“What is it?”

“Hup! Okay, you can go now.”

“...Sure.”

Sanae had stopped Koutarou to climb up on his back. When she thought

about the missing girls, she got worried and felt lonely. Moreover, when she thought about herself disappearing, she got anxious and scared. Koutarou knew what was going through her head. That's why he didn't say anything and simply let her do as she pleased. Though he couldn't admit it, he honestly felt more at ease like this too.

"Where should we go next?" she asked.

"Places we haven't been to yet that kidnappers might use as bases, I guess."

"In movies, aren't those always warehouses and stuff?"

"So the warehouse district at the harbor, huh? All right, let's give that a try."

Koutarou had checked there when Maki went missing, but he hadn't searched the entire area. So with Sanae on his back, Koutarou made his way towards the coast. He didn't use public transportation because he wanted to search the streets along the way too. That made it quite a hike, but Sanae was feeding him spiritual energy and negating the effects of her own weight, so there was practically no strain on Koutarou. He walked down the sidewalk with firm steps.



“Say, Koutarou...”

After they’d gone a ways, they finally hit a road by the coast. When they did, Sanae put more strength into her arms and held on to Koutarou tightly. They could feel each other’s hearts beating.

“What?”

“Actually, it’s nothing.”

“It’s gotta be something.”

“...”

“You can say it, you know.”

“Yeah...”

Koutarou had a rough idea of what Sanae wanted to say. It was easy to guess based on how she was acting. But sometimes it was better to put things into words. Now was one of those times.

“Well, um... aren’t you scared? Of suddenly disappearing,” Sanae asked.

“I am.”

“Even you are?”

“Yeah, of course. People are disappearing and we don’t know why. People’s memories of them are disappearing too. And I might be next. I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t scared.”

Kiriha suspected that people were disappearing in the opposite order they’d met Koutarou, but that might all be a coincidence. Koutarou still very well might be the next in line. So in that regard, trying to guess who would be up next was pointless. It could be any of them.

“Then... you won’t get angry if I say I’m scared?”

Sanae leaned forward a little to look at Koutarou’s face. As she did, he shook his head.

“Of course not.”

With that, Sanae let out a sigh of relief. And then, shyly, she quietly whispered

into his ear.

“I’m really scared...”

“That’s okay. Like I said, I’m scared too.”

Koutarou reached up to pat Sanae on the head. There was nothing to be angry over. It was perfectly natural for her to be frightened. Sanae then smiled bitterly.

“That might be true... but what I’m scared of the most is being the last one left.”

“Sanae...”

“If everyone disappears and I’m the only one left in room 106... I would hate being all alone waiting forever for everyone to come back...”

Sanae was scared of something one step further than what Koutarou had thought. She was scared of going back to how she’d been two years ago. To be all alone and waiting for the people precious to her to come back...

“That’s why, Koutarou, when you disappear, make sure you take me with you.”

That’s what she really wished for. She was scared of disappearing, sure. But it was still better than going back to how things had once been. She feared solitude more than anything.

“That won’t do.”

“It’s not like I can do anything, so I’d rather disappear with you. I don’t want to disappear, but I don’t want to be sad all alone either.”

“Sanae...”

When Koutarou lost his mother, he’d felt like a part of himself had died with her. Like he wasn’t whole anymore. That would probably be something similar to how the last person left would feel. So he could completely understand why Sanae was saying she’d rather disappear than go through that.

“I don’t know how to do it, but I’ll try to make it happen.”

“It’s a promise, then?”

“Yeah.”

Koutarou was horribly afraid of being left alone too. That’s why he couldn’t say no to Sanae. If he was the last one left, he wouldn’t have the courage to live on his own either.

“Heehee, then I’ll always be with Koutarou! Teeheehee!”

Hearing his answer, Sanae let all of her tension go and leaned on Koutarou, completely entrusting herself to him. She had a truly happy smile on her face as well.

“You idiot. We’re going to do our best to find the others without disappearing ourselves.”

“Yeah, I know. But if the worst happens, at least I’ll be with you.”

“Don’t take it easy just because of that.”

“Don’t worry. Put your unconditional trust in your beloved Sanae-chan.”

“You telling me not to worry only makes me worry more, you know? Like when it comes to your studying.”

“Ugh, b-but... believing is love!”

“What a convenient love that is...”

“It’s fine! Love is all!”

Sanae was scared of disappearing and being forgotten, but she could face that fear as long as she was with Koutarou. That’s why what she feared most was being alone. If her beloved could protect her from that, then she had nothing to be afraid of. And with that comfort, she could focus on finding her friends and getting back to their everyday lives.

“All right, Sanae-chan Super Ultra Great Hyper Spiritual Energy Detector Max—”

And just as Sanae was gathering an unprecedented amount of spiritual energy to search for the missing girls, she was wreathed in a purple light.

“Huh, isn’t this...?”

“Sanae?!”

“Hnnngh! I won’t looooose!”

Having promptly realized that she was disappearing, Sanae used her gathered spiritual energy to try and reject the purple light.

I can’t! I can’t leave Koutarou behind!

Her promise with Koutarou wasn’t one-sided. She had no intention of leaving him behind either. That’s why she used her power to fight the light taking her over. She was going to buy enough time to make another move.

“H-Huh?! How?!”

But something surprising happened. The spiritual energy she’d gathered all disappeared, and instead the purple light rapidly grew brighter. It was as if the purple light *was* her spiritual energy.

“This light is coming from inside of me?! I-I see, so that’s what this is!”

As Sanae realized the origin of the purple light, it engulfed her entire body. And it let her know that her line of thinking wasn’t wrong. The light told her what was really going on.

“Koutarou, we totally had the wrong idea!”

Sanae hurriedly tried to explain to Koutarou. Her body was already growing faint, but unlike the other girls, she had control over spiritual energy. She could use her powers to talk to Koutarou even after she could no longer physically speak. That would afford her a little extra time.

“Glasses, Maki, and the others aren’t the ones who were spirited away!”

“What?!”

“You were the one who was spirited away!”

Sanae gestured wildly to try and help Koutarou understand what she’d figured out, but it wasn’t enough.

“That’s... This isn’t some... ‘s attack! We’re... your—”

Even Sanae’s spiritual energy was now quickly fading into the purple light. Her voice was weakening, and she could no longer get out a full sentence. The end was near, so she decided to try and tell him something else instead. She wanted

to tell him the answer. The solution to everything.

“Kou... rou... lo... ve...”

“AAAHHHHH, SANAAAEEEEE!”

What Sanae tried to convey to him in her final moments were her honest feelings that had built up over the years.

What We Seek, and What We Seek to Protect

Sunday, April 3rd

Koutarou didn't remember what happened after Sanae disappeared. He couldn't recall what he'd done or where he'd gone. That was how serious the shock of losing her was.

The next thing he knew, he was looking up at a familiar ceiling—brown wood, aged and a little faded, with a fluorescent light hanging down from it. He was in Corona House room 106. When he turned his head to look, he saw that the clock on the wall read 12:30. Ten or so hours had passed since Sanae had disappeared.

"Good morning, Satomi-kun. You're finally awake."

The next thing he saw was a smiling Shizuka. She was wearing an apron over top of her usual clothes and holding a rag in her hand. She had been doing chores in the kitchen, but when she realized that Koutarou had woken up, she'd come over to see how he was doing. The moment he saw her face, Koutarou sighed.

"Hmm, I can't say I'm happy that your first response to seeing me is sighing."

Shizuka puffed out her cheeks as she sat down beside him. Her eyes were half filled with loving kindness, and half unhappy disappointment.

"...I'm glad you're still here, Landlord-san."

Shizuka had interpreted Koutarou's sigh negatively, but the truth was that it had been a sigh of relief.

"Huh? What do you mean?"

The air left Shizuka's cheeks. Seeing that, Koutarou smiled in a self-ridiculing fashion.

"To be honest... I was scared that if I went to sleep, nobody would still be

here when I woke up.”

Maki, Clan, Theia, Ruth, Yurika, and now Sanae... Koutarou was terrified that the remaining three girls might disappear in his sleep. After losing his mother at an early age and clashing with his father, Koutarou was just as afraid of being alone as Sanae was.

“So that’s why you didn’t want to sleep...” Shizuka said softly.

That’s why Koutarou had been looking around the clock for the girls who’d disappeared. Since he was scared to sleep, he just kept searching in hopes of resolving the incident as soon as possible. And he’d kept it up right until he hit his limit. When Sanae disappeared, he reached peak exhaustion. That’s what had finally put him to sleep.

“Pathetic, right?”

Koutarou continued smiling bitterly. He already knew how important these girls were. Them disappearing served as a painful lesson. One so grim that it kept him from getting a moment’s rest. Now, rather than just knowing, he felt just how much they meant to him.

“You’re only human, Satomi-kun. You may be a legendary hero, but you’re still only human.”

Shizuka didn’t think that Koutarou was pathetic at all. Both of her parents had died when she was young, so she knew all too well the pain of losing people who were precious. Just the same as Koutarou. And she was feeling it now too. She hadn’t been able to sleep much herself.

“Besides... if you weren’t, we’d all be sad. Just the thought that you might not need us is terrible...”

If the current situation hadn’t been hard on Koutarou, it would have told the girls that they weren’t really all that important to him. That’s why Shizuka couldn’t criticize him taking things so hard. That would be the same as telling him he should value them less.

Thank you, Landlord-san... I need to keep it together!

But because Shizuka was so forgiving of his weakness, Koutarou didn’t think

continuing to expose it would help anyone. He knew he wasn't the only one in need of support. Surely Shizuka was scared too, and Koutarou wanted to pump himself up for the sake of the girl who continued to smile in front of him. Fortunately, having gotten some sleep, he could manage that much now.

"Speaking of, where are Kiriha-san and Sakuraba-senpai?"

Since Shizuka had said "we," Koutarou was reminded of the other girls. He needed to know if they were still there too.

"Don't worry. They haven't disappeared yet. Kiriha-san's device arrived, so she should be putting it together with the haniwas."

Shizuka flashed a small smile and pulled out her phone to call Kiriha. She put it on speaker mode so both she and Koutarou could talk to her.

"What's the matter, Shizuka?" she answered.

While it was a bit staticy since the volume was so loud on speaker phone, Koutarou still felt a huge relief to hear Kiriha's calm voice on the other end of the line.

"Satomi-kun woke up, so I thought I should let him hear your voice. Go on, Satomi-kun."

"Hi, Kiriha-san."

"You don't sound very energetic, Koutarou. Are you okay?"

"I just woke up."

"Then I guess that's normal."

Koutarou thought Kiriha sounded just like she always did, but knowing her, he couldn't relax just because of that. She was too good at hiding things.

"How are things going with you?"

"We've started assembling the observation equipment."

"That's not what I was asking about."

"...I'm okay. I don't have the leisure to break down crying."

Out of all the girls, Kiriha was the most mature. She had no problem holding

her feelings back. So even if she sounded calm, there might be something she was keeping bottled up inside.

“Don’t hold in too much, okay?”

“Then let me borrow your shoulder later.”

“If that’s all you need, I don’t mind.”

“That’s not the reaction I was expecting.”

“There’s no point cracking jokes in a situation like this.”

“Heh... Then I guess I really will borrow your shoulder.”

In the end, Kiriha admitted how bothered she really was in a roundabout way. Koutarou suspected that she was the one that he really had to worry about the most. She was the type to endure everything without ever uttering a complaint to anyone. She was normally tough enough to handle things herself and pull through, but because she hid so much, Koutarou was never sure when that wasn’t the case. Chances were this was probably one of those occasions, so he knew he needed to pay special attention to her.

“I’m handing the phone to Harumi now.”

“Hello, Satomi-kun. How are you feeling?”

When the conversation reached a natural break, Kiriha passed the phone to Harumi so she could talk to Koutarou too. Harumi had been standing behind her, patiently waiting for her turn, so she sounded a little less shy than usual.

“Like I said before, I just woke up, so I’m not very energetic.”

“But would you be if you hadn’t just woken up?”

Harumi was worried about Koutarou just the same way he was about Kiriha. He too kept things to himself.

“Landlord-san has been looking after me, so I’m okay.”

“Sakuraba-senpai, please don’t worry about Satomi-kun. I’ll do something about him.”

“Please do, Kasagi-san.”

“You got it.”

It was clear that Harumi wanted to take care of Koutarou herself. But she had to help Kiriha. Since she could use magic, she would be assisting with the observation. Alunaya specialized in combat magic, so he wasn’t much use when it came to utilitarian applications of his mana. As such, Shizuka didn’t have a lot to offer this time around, so it only made sense that she was the one to stay behind and watch over Koutarou. And all Harumi could do was trust her with the job. Knowing that, Shizuka decided that she’d do the best job she could for both Harumi and Kiriha’s sakes, as well as Koutarou’s.

“How are you holding up, Sakuraba-senpai?”

“I’m okay. I’ve just gotten better, after all.”

“Don’t let your guard down. It’s at times like this when you’re at risk.”

“Yes, I’ll be careful.”

With Signaltin’s contract rewritten, Harumi’s health had greatly improved. But it was in her nature—and Alaia’s—to work with reckless abandon when she had a goal in mind. Koutarou was worried about her too, just for a different reason than Kiriha.

“I’ll be right over after I’ve eaten something,” said Koutarou.

“We’ll be waiting for you.”

“Feel free to take your time,” piped up Kiriha. “We’ll need serious manpower to install the equipment, so make sure you eat your fill and replenish your strength.”

“Got it. I’ll see you guys later.”

He’d now heard that they were safe, but Koutarou wouldn’t relax until he could see it with his own two eyes. Hearing their voices only made him want to see them even more.

Shizuka had made Koutarou dinner the night before. The menu consisted of beef stew, salad, and rolls. It wasn’t a very breakfast-y meal, but since it was after noon now, it was technically lunch anyway.

“It would have been much better if you’d gotten to eat it last night.”

Shizuka had originally made it all for dinner the previous night, but Koutarou wasn’t in any state to eat, and Sanae—one of the group’s biggest eaters—wasn’t around anymore. As such, there were plenty of leftovers and the meal was getting a second act.

“The flavor has permeated through it now, though. It’s good.”

“I just can’t accept the potatoes crumbling.”

Like with curry, beef stew was still delicious the next day. But since Shizuka was part of the cooking society, she was particular about presentation, and would have much preferred it if Koutarou had gotten to eat it while it was fresh. The potatoes were falling apart after being reheated, and nothing looked quite as nice as it had the night before.

“I took the time and trouble of preparing the potatoes separately, and it was all for nothing.”

“Not that many people would notice...”

“That’s true...”

Both of them fell quiet as the mood grew somber. It was only Koutarou, Shizuka, Harumi, and Kiriha left now. All four of them were definitely the type to notice. Those who wouldn’t notice—or wouldn’t care—were already gone.

“I wish Sanae could’ve had some too... She’d love this...”

Koutarou gazed at the empty cushion next to him. Beef stew was one of Sanae’s favorites. She hated carrots, so she’d always start by picking them all out and giving them to Koutarou or Yurika. But not even carrots hampered her enjoyment of beef stew. And in order to pawn her carrots off on him, she’d always sit next to Koutarou when they had it. Right on the vacant cushion next to him now.

“Eat your carrots yourself. You’ll die early if you don’t eat your vegetables.”

“If I die, I’ll just become a ghost, so that’s fine. You’re the one who needs to eat your veggies so you can live a long, healthy life, Koutarou.”

“It’s a terrible idea to live so irresponsibly relying on psychic powers.”

“Papa said that whether it’s food or something else, people who are obsessed with material things are never happy.”

“This isn’t what he was talking about!”

Just staring at her cushion, Koutarou could vividly imagine Sanae. And it impressed on him even more strongly how wrong it felt for her not to be there. Of course, that wasn’t just limited to Sanae. There were five other missing faces at the table, too.

“Before I knew it, it all became ordinary...”

At first the girls had just been invaders that he wanted to throw out of his room as quickly as possible. Yet now, it felt weird that they were gone. Before he realized it, Koutarou had started taking their presence for granted.

“I never imagined that this would have happened when I met you two years ago, Satomi-kun.”

Shizuka felt the same way. When she first met Koutarou, she’d just hoped that he wouldn’t mind the rumors about the ghost and stay a tenant for as long as possible. She’d only thought of the ghost—Sanae—as a nuisance. But now she felt the opposite. Sanae was missing, and she wanted her to come back. The other missing girls had made terrible impressions on her too. They were loud, broke windows, set fires... But if that was all it took for them to come back, she’d gladly let them do those things.

“I thought my high school life would be more ordinary...”

“Me too. But now with everyone gone, I realize just how happy I’ve been the last two years.”

If the girls hadn’t invaded room 106, none of them would have ever developed such strong bonds. That included Koutarou and Shizuka, who would just be regular classmates and a normal landlord and tenant. And if things were like that, Shizuka would still be alone. She wouldn’t have anyone she felt like she could be at ease around. Going through high school like that would have been hard, and sad. That’s why she was especially grateful she’d met so many wonderful people.

“I can’t say it in front of everyone, but I feel the same way.”

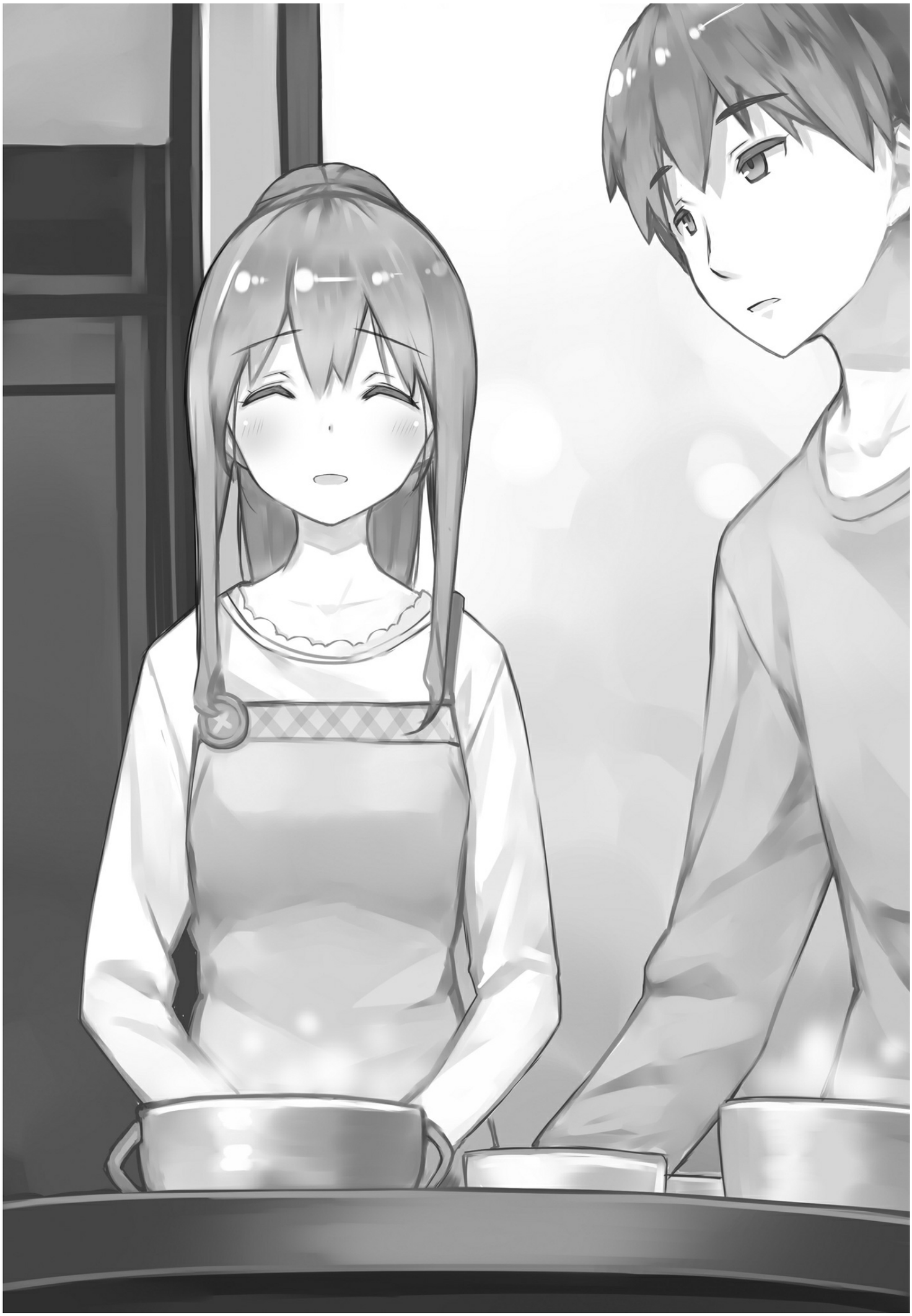
“Why can’t you say it? Jeez...”

“I guess you could call it a matter of manly pride.”

“Boys will be boys, I guess... Heehee, if it weren’t for us, there wouldn’t be any girls who would put up with you.”

“I’m well aware of that.”

Koutarou felt the same way Shizuka did. While he was a teenage boy and couldn’t say it as openly as she could, there was no doubt that the girls’ existence had brightened up his high school life. Things were bleak without them, which is why he had to find them no matter what.



After they ate lunch, Shizuka took Koutarou with her and headed underground. Flipping up one of the tatami mats in room 106 revealed a tunnel. It was a secret passageway the haniwas had dug out for Kiriha. It led between the apartment and her base, which was where Koutarou and Shizuka were headed now. Kiriha and Harumi were preparing the observation equipment there.

“This underground tunnel and base made me so mad at first...”

“That’s perfectly understandable. Someone was digging around below your inheritance from your late parents, after all.”

“Yeah, but lately, it hasn’t bothered me as much. The most I worry about now is the housing authority finding out.”

“I guess it probably does violate some codes.”

“This technically increases the floor space of the building, too.”

“But Kiriha-san and the others are so important that you look the other way.”

“Yeah. If it means Kiriha-san and the others come to play, I can overlook something like this. It seems she was mindful of Corona House while she was building, after all.”

Koutarou and Shizuka’s voices echoed down the tunnel ahead of them. The passageway to Kiriha’s base was actually quite long. The ceiling was held up by concrete pillars, and the walls had been finished with concrete too. Having a basement directly under Corona House would certainly have an influence on the strength of the foundation. That’s why Kiriha had made sure to include support by adding the pillars, and building her actual base far away enough and deep enough that it wouldn’t compromise the building.

“I’m so grateful to my mom and dad. I only got to meet you and everyone because of room 106... Really, because of Corona House.”

In the past, Shizuka had been angry that Kiriha had messed with the building her parents had left her. But now she appreciated the bigger picture. It was the building that had allowed them to all come together. A little damage to it or an underground tunnel being built beneath it was a small price to pay for

friendship.

“In that case, I have to thank you too, Landlord-san.”

“Oh yeah?”

“It’s because you took such great care of Corona House that I was able to meet you and everyone else.”

“Satomi-kun...”

Several years had passed since Shizuka’s parents passed away and she inherited Corona House. Koutarou had only been able to move in because she’d managed it and taken care of it all this time. He’d even be able to overlook the ghost situation because the apartment was too good to pass up. Otherwise, he would have just gone somewhere else. So really, she was the one who’d enabled Koutarou’s current, wonderful life. That’s why he felt like he needed to thank her.

Ah... Satomi-kun really is special to me...

Hearing Koutarou’s words, Shizuka could feel something warm stirring inside of her. Up until now, she had always considered herself to be a relatively realistic girl. But lately, she found her thoughts drifting towards the dreamy.

As things were, she’d started to think that they’d all met because it was fate. That this was the way things were supposed to be. A lot of scary and sad things had happened along the way, but the good far outweighed the bad. Shizuka had felt like it all led up to this—the wonderful life they had together now.

And she wanted to continue living that wonderful life, in the same wonderful place in the same wonderful world with the same wonderful friends. To anyone else, it might seem like a completely ordinary wish. And it was, but that was precisely what made it so special to her.

“Say, Satomi-kun...”

“Yes?”

“I will protect the place you call home forever. Like I always have up until now.”

That was the answer Shizuka had reached. It was simple and had been right in

front of her since the very beginning. But funnily enough, sometimes it was the obvious things that were hardest to see. That's why it had taken her all this time to realize it for herself.

"You're a normal boy. That's why, even if everyone in the universe treats you like a legendary hero, I'll just watch over the place you call home..."

Shizuka would no longer hesitate. She sought something wonderful. Something ordinary. A small, comfortable place that even a legendary hero would want to come back to and live out his ordinary life as an ordinary boy. That's why Shizuka had decided to protect room 106, Corona House, Kisshouharukaze City... everywhere Koutarou called home.

"You're..."

Koutarou wanted to say something. But it didn't turn into words. It was probably because there was a lot he wanted to say, and there simply weren't words to convey it all at once. This was the time for action. If he pulled her close and embraced her, surely she'd understand what he was really thinking and feeling without him having to say anything at all.

"All right, we're here!"

But while Koutarou was still thinking, the two of them made it to the end of the passageway. At the end was a solid metal door—the entrance to Kiriha's base.

Knock, knock! Creeeak...

Shizuka opened the door and entered with light steps. Since she had visited the place several times before, she knew her way around and didn't show any reservation.

"Sakuraba-senpai, Kiriha-san, I've brought Satomi-kun!" called Shizuka.

"Satomi-kun, it would have been fine for you to sleep a little longer," said Harumi.

"But you came at a good time. We were just in the need of some muscle," said Kiriha.

"What are you spacing out for? Let's go, Satomi-kun," Shizuka said, turning to

Koutarou.

“Y-Yeah, sure...”

With Koutarou staring straight at her, Shizuka grabbed hold of his hands and dragged him into the room where Kiriha and Harumi were waiting. Most of the girls had already disappeared. But Koutarou still belonged where he—where they all—called home. Shizuka knew how important that was, and swore to protect it accordingly.

“Kasagi-san, look!” Harumi gasped.

“Karama, Korama, forcibly activate the observation equipment! Pray that it works!” Kiriha ordered.

“Huh...?” Shizuka asked, puzzled.

And that’s when it happened. All of a sudden, Shizuka was surrounded by a black light. While black light sounded like a contradiction, it was very different from darkness. Even when cloaked in it, Shizuka could still be seen. She was illuminated, just by a glow that cast great shadows. It was indeed a black light.

“Why?! It’s too soon! I have to protect Satomi-kun’s home!”

Of course, Shizuka was greatly confused. All of this was happening just after she’d clearly realized her own wish and decided on a way to achieve it.

No way... That’s what it was?! My goal is to protect our home! Our world! That’s right; that’s what it was from the very beginning! And that’s the answer!

The black light told Shizuka the truth, which alleviated her panic and confusion and helped her see the situation for what it was. Shizuka was convinced that the light had appeared exactly because she had realized her wish.

“Electromagnetic radiation and gravitational waves are both increasing! It’s an incredible amount of energy, ho!”

“Spiritual energy and mana are both beyond measurement, ho!”

“This is strange! With this much energy gathered, there should be adverse effects afflicting us!”

Kiriha was even more confused than Shizuka now. The data from the observation equipment set up in the room indicated a dangerously powerful energy surrounding Shizuka. But despite that, no harmful effects were manifesting. This power was so great that it wouldn't have been strange for it to generate serious heat or even warp space itself. But the black light surrounding Shizuka was the only physical sign anything was happening.

This explains why there were no traces! It never had any effect on the surroundings!

In order for them to find any evidence of the disappearances, there would have had to have been something left behind of them. Some kind of trace. But apart from the light itself, nothing had happened. There was nothing *to* leave a trace.

"Satomi-kun, use Signaltin!"

"Of course! That might do the trick!"

One of the abilities of the legendary sword passed down the Forthorthian royal line for generations was to nullify mana. If mana was increasing alongside the light, Koutarou might be able to cut that off with the sword and keep Shizuka from disappearing. Koutarou understood exactly what Harumi was suggesting he do.

"Come, Signaltin!"

Koutarou held his arm out and his hand forward. As he did, Signaltin, its tip pointed upward, appeared along with a white light. This sword, normally stored on Blue Knight, had the power to transcend space and time to come to Koutarou.

"Satomi-kun, something's strange! Signaltin isn't working!"

Immediately after Koutarou called Signaltin, Harumi was nearly screaming. Something very odd was happening.

"What?!"

"I can't control the mana! What's going on?!"

Harumi bit her lip as her expression contorted in anguished panic. Signaltin

was only as good as a normal, mundane sword right now. But it wasn't like its mana had disappeared. The crest on Harumi's forehead was still present, and she could still feel her connection with the sword and Koutarou. But unlike normal, when she tried to control the sword, Signaltin wasn't listening. It was like it was ignoring her.

"Is it even possible for you not to be able to control the sword, Sakuraba-senpai?!"

Koutarou stared at the unresponsive Signaltin. Harumi should have had a stronger connection with the sword than anyone considering their history together. Harumi had been able to control its powers like it was an extension of her body. That was still true even after the contract was rewritten. Which left both her and Koutarou in stupefied awe at this development.

"There's nothing you can do, Satomi-kun..."

Shizuka gave her confused friends a sympathetic look. She had already accepted the reality at hand. She was going to disappear. In fact, her body was losing its form as she began fading into the black light.

"Landlord-san! No!"

"I'm disappearing as I should. Nobody can change that fate."

"That can't be true!"

Just because Shizuka had accepted it didn't mean Koutarou had. There was no way he could. He promptly reached out to Shizuka with his right hand, trying to keep her in place.

"Protecting this place was my role. That's why I existed. And Satomi-kun, we were blessed to be able to meet each other here. That is all. Don't ever forget that—"

Shizuka put her cheek against Koutarou's extended hand. She had already lost most of her form, so the warmth of his hand didn't reach her. But even then, it was more than enough. She understood just how much he treasured her. And just how much pain he was in right now. But it's because he was this way that Shizuka could trust him so. She was sure that he would be able to bring about a miracle.

The observation equipment in the basement registered powerful spiritual energy and mana up until the moment Shizuka disappeared. But the moment she vanished, all the meters fell to zero. There was no remaining magic or any signs of distorted space. It was unnaturally normal.

“How can things perfectly stabilize after that, ho? This isn’t possible, ho!”

“It’s like she was really spirited away, ho!”

To say it was strange was an understatement. While the equipment hadn’t been fully installed, not even Kiriha had expected that they wouldn’t be able to get any residual evidence at all. The whole reason she’d set up the equipment was to try and better understand the traces left behind after the phenomenon. But like the haniwas said, all anything indicated was that Shizuka really had been spirited away.

“No... I... I couldn’t do anything again...”

Koutarou slumped down on the spot. The moment Shizuka disappeared, all his strength left him. In its place, a pain several times stronger filled him. Just like the other girls, Shizuka was a big part of Koutarou’s life—a big part of him. Losing her made him feel like a part of his heart had been ripped out. The repeated pain and frustration over not being able to do anything for the girls only amplified the pain and frustration of losing them. At this rate, Kiriha and Harumi would disappear too. There was nothing he could do to help them either. And that was if he didn’t disappear first. No, the order no longer mattered. All possible scenarios now were equally bad.

Wham!

Koutarou slammed his fist into the ground. Since the floor of Kiriha’s basement was made out of concrete, blood began dripping from his knuckles. But not even that sharp pain could distract him from the agony gnashing at his heart. Koutarou raised his fist to try again.

“...If you’re going to hit something, I would rather you hit me. That way I might feel a little better.”

That was when Kiriha sat down in front of Koutarou—right where he was

about to bring his fist down. She was smiling bitterly.

There was no doubt that she wanted to stop Koutarou from hurting himself. But since she was experiencing the same unbearable pain he was, she was willing to entertain the sad thought that maybe him hitting her would lessen the pain for both of them.

“I... don’t think I could hit you.”

Koutarou couldn’t hurt Kiriha out of frustration. She was the first girl to learn of his weakness and accept him regardless. He’d rather suffer the pain he was feeling through and through than lay a hand on her. So he slowly lowered his raised fist.

“It seems like we’ll both just have to endure it...”

“Yeah...”

Kiriha continued smiling bitterly as she followed the slowly falling fist with her eyes. She would rather that he hit her. She was hard enough on herself that she felt like she should be punished for not being able to crack the case. She was also eager to do anything she could to alleviate Koutarou’s pain. But in the end, she couldn’t do anything for either of them. They’d both have to suffer through it on their own.

“You’re wrong, you two.”

However, Harumi had a slightly different opinion. She approached Koutarou and Kiriha, wrapped her arms around their necks, and pulled them both closer into a huddle.

“The three of us will support each other.”

“Sakuraba-senpai...”

There was no need for them to suffer alone. They could bring their pain together and support each other. It wouldn’t change how much it all hurt, but the warmth of having friends close by might make that pain a little easier to bear.

This is Harumi’s power. And the power of Princess Alaia’s feelings of 2,000 years ago... We don’t stand a chance against her when she’s like this...

Koutarou was encouraged by Harumi's words, but they meant even more to Kiriha. She could accept even her own weaknesses and shortcomings when uplifted by the strength of Harumi—and Alaia who had become one with her.

"And... let's all stay together as much as possible from now on. Nobody wants someone to disappear alone."

It seemed inefficient for the three of them to stay together while searching, but that might not be the case. Based on the data—or lack thereof—they'd collected during Shizuka's disappearance, it was clear it was unrealistic to hope they would find anyone just by walking around on foot. If the girls were hidden by something as powerful as what had taken them away, they might never be found. So for now, it was a better idea to properly set up all of the observation equipment and try to get more detailed data. In other words, the three of them should be working together.

But in truth, Harumi was saying and doing this all for the sake of appearances. She too was terrified. Especially of losing people precious to her without even realizing it. Not even Harumi's strength was any match for a dark terror like that.

When Shizuka disappeared, it wasn't like all of the necessary equipment had been set up. Kiriha had only been able to activate the machines that were ready in time, and had had to forcibly start them to record data. The results weren't promising, but there was yet hope. There were additional devices they could get readings with. Shizuka also hadn't been in the anticipated range, either, so there were doubts as to the accuracy of the data gathered. And above all else, repeated observation was the name of the game in the field of scientific inquiry. They'd simply have to finish the setup and try again.

"Kiriha-san, I connected the thick, red cable."

"Thank you. Karama, Korama."

"Physical connection confirmed, ho!"

"Linking the systems, ho!"

The machines that still needed to be put in place were mostly the large, heavy

ones that required some muscle to move. As Kiriha and Harumi had been the ones in charge of setting things up, they'd naturally saved the difficult part for last. With the help of his psychic powers, Koutarou could move almost anything. Now that he was around, things were proceeding rapidly.

"Everyone, why don't we take a break for food?"

Harumi had started off helping with the job, but had eventually moved to Kiriha's kitchen to prepare food for everyone. She'd finished up just now.

"It's that time already? Well, Kiriha-san?"

"You go on ahead. I have to make a call."

"Sure... all right."

There weren't many calls Kiriha might have to make at a time like this. Realizing the situation she was in, Koutarou headed for the kitchen without a word of protest. After seeing him off, Kiriha headed to her computer and booted up a communication application to make her call.

"Chief."

"Ah, Kiriha."

Kiriha had called her father, the chief of the People of the Earth, Kurano Daiha. Daiha had a serious expression on his face when he answered, but upon seeing it was his daughter calling, that quickly changed. He went from chief to doting father in a heartbeat. It was such a dynamic change that it would surprise anyone seeing it for the first time.

"You seem to be doing well."

"Truth be told, I'm not. Everyone's been in an uproar here ever since you solved the biggest mystery of the People of the Earth. I don't get a moment's rest."

The People of the Earth's biggest mystery was where they originated from. It was only vaguely detailed in their legends, but Kiriha and her friends had figured it out through an adventure. The alchemists working under Maxfern were sent from Forthorthe because of Koutarou, and ultimately became the ancestors of the People of the Earth.

When that became known, it was a huge source of conflict. The People of the Earth were split amongst three opinions. There were those that thought they should migrate to their true home in Forthorthe, those that thought they should carry on like normal and continue migrating to the surface, and those that thought deciding now was too rash. Since it wasn't a black and white matter, reaching a consensus wouldn't be easy. As such, Daiha had a hard time guiding his people as their chief. He spent his days running around and delegating between three factions from morning to night.

"Shouldn't you be celebrating this as a leader?"

"That's the only saving grace. It's a handful, but I'll forever be able to take pride in resolving this problem."

"I'm glad to hear it."

Kiriha smiled. Daiha looked like he was drowning in work, but he was still keeping his head above water. Indeed, he was a father Kiriha both loved and admired.

"Speaking of good news... what about you?"

Daiha smiled as well. It was a childish smile she'd often see him make while he was playing with her when she was young. And seeing it now, she felt like he was teasing her.

"What do you mean?"

"Don't play dumb. I'm talking about your man."

Daiha treasured his daughter so much that he had a hard time imagining letting her go. Especially to some boy. But after hearing about what kind of man Koutarou was and the details of his relationship with Kiriha—not to mention that he'd saved the People of the Earth—Daiha was actually supportive of Kiriha's choice.

"I think I'm just a step away."

"Then I guess it's time to start thinking of a name."

"A name? For what?"

"My first grandchild, of course! If it's a girl, she can take your mother's name.

The real question is if it's a boy! It needs to be a valiant and noble name fit for a ruler!"

Since Daiha had no problem with the man Kiriha loved, he started thinking it might not be so bad to dote on a granddaughter rather than his daughter. In fact, he was practically pushing for them to get married. An expectant stare was eyeing Kiriha through the screen.

"We need to take into consideration the other party's opinions too, so it's still too early to decide."

"Forgetting that and enjoying the moment is what this is all about!"

"If you understand that much, then by all means, carry on."

"You know, you're getting to be more and more like her. Especially your harsh streak."

"I'm honored."

"Sheesh... By the way, didn't you have some business with me?"

Having gotten a little bit too excited over seeing his daughter, Daiha collected himself and realized that she must have called for a reason. They were both busy people, after all.

"No, my business is already concluded. I wanted to know how you were holding up."

"Hmm... Well, I have enough time to have a little father-daughter chat."

"That's reassuring."

Daiha was quick-witted. As chief, he had to be. He had caught on to Kiriha's intentions with just a few words. What she'd really wanted to know was the scale of the confusion amongst the People of the Earth after receiving the offer to migrate to Forthorthe. Fortunately, Daiha had enough composure to discuss such a serious matter with a smile. It made for one less thing on Kiriha's mind, so she returned her father's smile.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

"I am. I also have enough time for a little... father-daughter chat."

Indeed, Kiriha was lying to Daiha with a smile on her face. In truth, she was in the middle of a crisis. Her friends were disappearing one after another, and she would eventually disappear too. She'd like to resolve the incident before then, but sadly, it wasn't looking good. And she couldn't tell her father that. It would only worry and sadden him. If he would forget her eventually anyway, there was no reason to ruin the time they had left together.

"If you have that kind of free time, where's my grandchild already?"

"If you want an unhappy marriage, I'll force the matter."

"I can't have that. She would get angry at me."

After that, Kiriha's silly conversation with Daiha continued for a while. But that was exactly what she'd wanted—to see her father's smiling face and for him to see hers one last time. After all, they may never meet again.

The call only lasted about ten minutes. Both Kiriha and Daiha had other business to attend to, but the timing seemed to work out for her. By the time she entered the kitchen, preparations for dinner were finally complete.

"It seems I came at just the right time."

"Please sit down, Kiriha-san."

Harumi welcomed Kiriha with a smile and a ladle in hand. Kiriha nodded and took the seat Harumi offered. Koutarou was sitting next to her. Waiting until she sat down, he leaned over to her.

"You could have talked for longer, you know..."

"My father is a busy man. He doesn't have the time to dote on his daughter all day."

"Fair enough."

Koutarou hadn't been eavesdropping, but he could only imagine that she'd called her father. He could understand wanting to get in touch with your only relative. If he were in her position, he'd probably do the same. Indeed, it was almost certain Kiriha would disappear next.

"I'll have to give you a reward later, Kiriha-san."

“That’s rather considerate for you.”

“I’ve matured a little, you know.”

“That’s true... Then I’ll look forward to it.”

Despite knowing that her turn was coming, she knew she had to keep calm and finish setting up the observation equipment, even if it wasn’t easy. She was desperate to leave behind something when she disappeared. There was no guarantee that the missing girls could be saved. They had no way of knowing. But Koutarou wanted to let her know that he understood how she felt. He too was desperate.

“Now, let’s eat.”

Harumi brought the finishing touches to the table and sat down facing her friends. Since it was a round table, they all had an easy time seeing each other.

“Honestly, this is a more proper dinner than I expected,” said Koutarou.

There was rice, miso soup, a meat and potato stew, and a dish made out of cold tofu—a full-on Japanese dinner. Considering she’d whipped all this up in their current situation, it was easy to imagine how particular Harumi was about getting a proper meal.

“Really, it’s because things are like this that I want to keep things normal. I won’t accept less.”

Their friends had disappeared, but they were going to get them back. She wanted to keep things normal because she wasn’t about to accept this as the new normal.

“I agree with you,” said Kiriha. “If you don’t eat right, nothing else will go well. Fueling your body properly is important.”

“That’s true. Then let’s get to eating. Thank you for the food, Sakuraba-senpai.”

“Yes, thank for the food.”

“Bon appetite!”

Harumi’s positive thinking worked in favor of the other two. Moreover, they

didn’t want to waste Harumi’s efforts. Especially not when she was working so hard to smile for them. So they both smiled as brightly as they could for her too, and dug in.

“Huh, isn’t this...? Sakuraba-senpai, you really made this meat and potato stew well.”

“Can you tell?”

“Yeah. I thought it looked good, but it tastes really good too.”

“The time needed to boil the potatoes and onions differs. They’re both tender and the flavors have mixed well, yet they’ve managed to keep their shapes. That takes quite some skill,” remarked Kiriha.

“Heehee, I just copied the beef stew from yesterday and did my best.”

The three friends were actually close to their limits. Even smiling was hard. But if any one of them broke down now, they surely all would. So they each kept on earnestly smiling for the sake of the other two. Like Harumi said, they were supporting each other. They would use that to hold out against their breaking hearts.

“How did you do it?” Koutarou asked.

“I divided them for boiling.”

“So then you mixed them back together after making them separately, huh?”

“Yes. I’m glad it worked out so well.”

“It really does taste good. You can tell just by looking at it.”

In order to avoid specific topics, the three of them talked about the dinner itself. If they let their guards down, the conversation would end up shifting towards their absent friends. It was the same reason they were eating in the basement. There were too many memories in room 106. It would be too hard for them to keep smiling there.

“Ah...”

A single tear ran down the smiling Harumi’s cheek. She had avoided thinking about her friends as much as possible so that she wouldn’t cry. But with

Koutarou and Kiriha complimenting her on her cooking, she couldn't help remembering the other girls. Sanae eating with sparkling eyes. Yurika begging for seconds. Shizuka asking about how it was made. Theia cautiously trying something she'd never tasted before. Ruth wanting to know the recipe. Maki worrying if she'd need to be able to cook a dish like that to be considered a normal girl. And Clan grabbing gustatory data with her sensors. All that was normal. But those girls were nowhere to be seen now. That's why Harumi couldn't hold back the tears.

"Sakuraba-senpai..."

"I-I'm sorry! I just got some dust in my eyes!"

Harumi hurriedly wiped away her cheeks and conjured her smile once more. Kiriha and Koutarou both knew she was lying.

"You shouldn't rub it in that much."

"Here, let me take a look."

But they both pretended not to notice. Otherwise, they might break down too. So they just continued smiling. Like Harumi had supported them, now it was their turn to support her.

The three of them ended up spending the night in Kiriha's base. If they slept in range of the observation equipment, it could take data even while they weren't awake. Koutarou laid out futons he'd brought down from room 106. As expected, all the physical labor was his job. After that, Koutarou and the girls took turns taking baths. When Koutarou came back from his, the room was different.

"Kiriha-san, why is it like this?"

Koutarou had spread the futons out even distances apart. If they were too close together, they might wake each other up while tossing and turning in their sleep. That was especially an issue for Koutarou, who was particularly restless. But now, the futons were all spread out right next to each other for some reason. It was like they'd become one big futon.

"No particular reason. We just wanted it this way," answered Kiriha.

“I thought that it would be better if we could all feel close...” supplemented Harumi.

“You know how terrible my sleeping habits are, don’t you, Senpai?”

“I wanted to do this in spite of that.”

“Besides, it’s not like we’d get angry about getting caught up in your sleeping antics now.”

“In you insist...”

Thought he felt like he was being talked into it, he knew how Harumi and Kiriha were feeling. He too was afraid of someone disappearing, and didn’t mind keeping them close. So he didn’t object too fiercely.

“So where should I sleep?”

“In the middle.”

“Wouldn’t it be better to be on one of the sides? If I’m in the middle, I might take you both out.”

“Satomi-kun, I want you to take the middle.”

“...Okay.”

Though he didn’t fully understand this part, Koutarou obediently laid down in the middle. Both his mind and body were exhausted, but he wasn’t tired. There was simply too much bothering him, but just lying down and closing his eyes should help. He knew he needed it, too. Tomorrow would be another long day.

“We should turn in as well.”

“Let’s.”

Following Koutarou, the two girls laid down on their own futons. But unlike Koutarou, they didn’t close their eyes immediately.

“Excuse us.”

“Sorry for this.”

“Hmm...? Whoa!”

Sensing the girls were up to something, Koutarou opened his eyes. When he

did, he saw an unexpected spectacle.

“That’ll do it.”

“You really do feel the most at ease like this.”

“Don’t you?”

Harumi and Kiriha were both embracing Koutarou from either side, while holding hands overtop his chest. In the end, all three of them only used the middle futon.

“What is...?”

“I’m sorry. We know we’re being demanding, but...”

“If we don’t do this, we can’t even sleep... I’m sorry, Satomi-kun.”

“Um...”

Koutarou was surprised at first, but he soon realized that he couldn’t reject them. Since they couldn’t sense spiritual energy like him, they could only tell the others were near by touch. This was their only option.

“Let’s get some sleep, you two.”

Koutarou couldn’t tell them to find some other way to comfort themselves. So he quickly gave up and closed his eyes again.

“Thank you, Satomi Koutarou.”

“Thank goodness... Sorry again, Satomi-kun...”

Kiriha and Harumi held hands while leaning on Koutarou’s shoulders. It was just about the only way they could relax now. That’s why they were even willing to overlook Koutarou’s sleeping habits. Getting caught up in his rolling around would be far preferable to sleeping alone.

“Karama, Korama, I’ll leave the rest to you.”

“We won’t overlook any abnormalities, Ane-san, ho.”

“But we’d rather not have any, ho.”

The two haniwas were in charge of watching over the three until morning. If anything strange happened, they would activate the observation equipment

and record the data. They had slept through most of the day for that sake, so they had enough strength to last the night.

“I trust you. Goodnight, you two.”

“Yes, ho...”

“Goodnight, ho...”

However, the haniwas weren’t as energetic as usual. While it was natural for them to speak in quiet voices since their owners were going to sleep, that wasn’t the only reason. The haniwas knew that the next to disappear would be Kiriha. For Kiriha to make her predictions, she needed detailed calculations, which the haniwas had helped with. They knew firsthand the conclusion she’d arrived at. And they were painfully aware of how Kiriha felt. That night was the first time they ever grieved not being able to shed tears.

Kiriha was the woman she was today because of everything that had happened eleven years ago. At the center of it all was a single boy with a little stupid look on his face. Their meeting and parting packed her heart with love and had been her first step towards growing up.

“And now I’m living beside you...”

It was now six in the morning. Having woken up at the same time as she normally did, her first instinct was to make sure the other two were okay. Fortunately, neither of them had disappeared. She let out a sigh of relief.

“There... There’s nothing as fantastic as this... Kii is... truly happy.”

Kiriha lifted herself up a little and looked down at the sleeping Koutarou next to her. She looked as if she were about to give him a kiss. She was so close that Koutarou’s breath was making her bangs flutter. He was defenseless. If she really wanted to kiss him, she could easily do it. But she didn’t. She couldn’t see any value in doing something like that if Koutarou wasn’t up for it. She didn’t want to kiss a doll. She wanted to feel the feelings of her beloved in the lips she kissed. Simply put, it was because she was so serious. Or, as Theia put it, because she was after something more romantic.

“I want to look at you forever... but I probably don’t have much time left...”

A stream of tears streaked down Kiriha's cheek. Up until now, the girls had disappeared in the reverse of the order they'd met Koutarou. The only anomaly was Theia and Ruth, who'd disappeared together, but there was an argument that they'd met him at the same time. And if the pattern held true, Kiriha would be the next to go. Even though she'd met Koutarou eleven years ago, Harumi had nearly two thousand years on her. The disappearances were also happening roughly a day apart. It was now the next morning, or seventeen hours after Shizuka had disappeared. Kiriha believed that she didn't have much time left.

"If only this moment could last for all eternity..."

Kiriha didn't want to spend what remaining time she had on wiping away her tears. She simply wanted to stare at Koutarou's face. She was trying to carve the image of him into her heart as best as she could. She was supposed to have accepted that she was going to disappear. And if he got the data from her disappearance, Koutarou might even be able to figure out what was going on. To that end, disappearing was something she had to do to try and help her friends. But now that the hour was upon her, even though she thought she'd resigned herself to her fate, her heart began to stir.

Only now did she realize how great the happiness she had was, and that gave her pause. She would soon lose that happiness, and there was no guarantee she'd ever get it back. That gave way to fear. A terrifying, seeping fear that inspired a sense of hopelessness. It felt like her soul was slowly being ground down. It left her wanting to cling to her happiness, even if it was selfish.

"I've gotten so weak... Kii endured an uncertain ten years... And here I am... I don't even want to leave him for an instant..."

Kiriha's tears fell down onto Koutarou's cheek. When she was younger, Kiriha had never once doubted that she would met the person she loved again. She was convinced that she would grow up into a wonderful woman to support him and live by his side. But right now, Kiriha couldn't do that. She had faith that Koutarou and Harumi would get to the bottom of things, yet she still couldn't help fearing their approaching parting. She had too much to let go of... for however long that might be.

“Are you crying, Kii-chan...?”

That was when Koutarou reached up and placed his hand on Kiriha’s head. Kiriha was no longer a child, so her head was too big for his hand to cover entirely. But she felt the same comfort from the gesture that she had eleven years ago.

“Did a bad guy show up again? Don’t worry... I’ll do something...”

“Yeah... I believe in you...”

Still in a daze, Koutarou confused the crying Kiriha with her eleven-year-old self. But she didn’t think he was wrong.

“I believe you, but I’m scared...”

Kiriha threw her arms around Koutarou. Her whole body was trembling. And Koutarou didn’t hesitate for even a moment to embrace her right back. Firmly and with both arms to try and stop her from shaking.

“It’s okay to be scared... It’s my turn now...”

“What?”

“You accepted my weakness... so now it’s my turn to accept yours...”

“Onii-chan... Heehee... Yeah, please do.”

Before Kiriha knew it, she had indeed stopped quivering. She was still scared. But the person she loved had accepted her, scared or not. And that made her happy. Happy enough to ease her fear a little. It only reaffirmed for her that Koutarou was the only that would do.

When Koutarou awoke, there was something black in front of him. It took quite some time to realize that was Kiriha’s head. And that his arms were firmly around her. Having grasped the situation, Koutarou figured that he must have done something in his sleep.

“Are you awake, Kiriha-san?”

“Hmm? It seems you woke up, Koutarou.”

Kiriha raised her head and smiled at Koutarou. That was when Koutarou

realized she was holding something. An old foil trading card that had long since lost all its shine. It was Kiriha's most prized possession.

"You're still treasuring that, huh?"

Feeling nostalgic, Koutarou smiled as well. Having only just woken up helped. Their hardships seemed a little further away right now.

"I feel courage welling up when I look at this. I feel like I can do it, no matter how difficult it might be."

"If you say that with a serious face, I'm not sure how to react."

"Then I'll stop being so indirect... I love you."

"H-Hey..."

"Heehee."

Kiriha had gotten the card from Koutarou when she was young, and had treasured it ever since. It was a token of all the emotion she'd poured into it over the years. A token of her single-minded love. And if she was looking at it, that meant that she was reaffirming her feelings. But she didn't need the card when the real thing was right there next to her. Kiriha put it away and gave Koutarou a big hug.



“Koutarou, don’t you look at my necklace sometimes?”

“Guys don’t walk around with things like that.”

“I know. It’s in that drawer filled with mementos.”

Kiriha was being much more direct than usual. But strangely enough, Koutarou didn’t feel troubled. Even though she was hugging him tightly, she wasn’t trying to tease him. Koutarou looked down at his chest where she was resting her head.

“I’m scared I’ll drop it if I walk around with it.”

“Heehee, then I understand. I forgive you.”

“But... I do look at it from time to time.”

“That makes me happy.”

Koutarou began to sense a different emotion in Kiriha’s smile. Behind the happiness in her eyes hid desperation.

I see... the next one is...

When he realized it, Koutarou instinctively put more force in his arms. Pulling Kiriha closer, they were now face to face. Kiriha on top, looking down. And Koutarou below, looking up. They were as close as lovers would be.

“My, this is unusual.”

“Call it youthful curiosity.”

“You know what to say to make me happy, don’t you?”

Kiriha smiled sweetly and pressed her lips against Koutarou’s forehead. She knew that his actions weren’t motivated by curiosity in the slightest. As a teenage girl, that saddened her a little, but all else aside, she was still happy that Koutarou wanted her closer.

Thinking about it, this is the kind of feeling that Kii wanted back then... and eleven years have passed since...

Kiriha could feel herself just filling with happiness. On the day he saved her, she had decided to accept the hurt Koutarou. She had sworn they would

support each other and live happily. There were no romantic feelings involved; she simply wanted to be with Koutarou. The romantic feelings got mixed in when she met him again two years ago, but what she'd truly desired all along was this kind of connection.

But that won't be all from now on, Satomi Koutarou. Kii's not the only one here anymore. Kii was always curious, and I'm a healthy teenage girl, after all. Heehee...

Her innocent desires and her womanly desires matching up was fortunate. It told her she'd made the right choice. Time was up for Kiriha, but even now, she could proudly say that she had existed for his sake.

"You two seem to be having fun..."

"Good morning, Harumi."

"You awake too, Sakuraba-senpai?"

"Anyone would wake up with people having so much fun next to them."

"Are you jealous, Harumi?"

"I'm not— Kiriha-san!"

Harumi's adorable pouting turned into a scream partway through. The end had come, and all too suddenly. As Kiriha was smiling at the sulking Harumi, a green light appeared around her bountiful chest. It grew brighter and spread from her chest to cover her entire body.

"Karama, Korama!"

"The system is operating normally, ho!"

"Data from the past thirty seconds has been saved! Beginning analysis now, ho!"

Unlike with Shizuka, the proper preparations were all perfectly in place this time. The observation equipment had been running since yesterday and was constantly processing data. The haniwas had ordered the machines to go back thirty seconds before the light appeared and thoroughly analyze everything.

It's just as I thought! My prediction isn't complete, but it might be enough

with the observation data!

As she was wrapped in the green light, Kiriha realized that she'd been on the right track. Something on the other side of the light told her how the person responsible for this incident truly felt. Kiriha didn't have time to convey everything she had just learned to the others, but her clever mind was a powerful weapon.

"Koutarou, I want you to open the ninth envelope I've left in the drawer with your mementos!"

Surmising that the other girls had all been trying to convey a message before they disappeared but hadn't had the time to get it across, Kiriha made a few predictions about what was going on and what was going to happen. She came up with nine possible theories. Her idea was that when she disappeared, if she were able to convey which of those theories was closest, she'd be able to give Koutarou a better idea.

She'd written out her nine theories and put them in numbered envelopes in Koutarou's wardrobe drawer. The ninth and final prediction was the one Kiriha felt was the closest match. While it wasn't perfect, she hoped that it—along with the data gathered from her disappearance—could crack the case.

"Kiriha-san! Damn it, can I still do nothing?!"

"Don't be sad, Koutarou. This is necessary step in resolving things. I'll leave the rest to you."

Kiriha was disappearing. That was an unavoidable fact. Everything would be left to Koutarou and Harumi. Kiriha's job was done.

"Kiriha-san, what should the two of us do?!"

"Don't worry, Harumi. Fate is on your side. But even then—"

Koutarou and Harumi had prepared themselves for this to happen. They knew they wouldn't get anywhere without it. But that didn't make it any easier. They were watching a precious friend disappear.

"I'm sorry, Koutarou. I'm going to have to break that promise."

Kiriha had only one regret. She was breaking a promise she'd made with

Koutarou long ago, and that broke her heart. She'd made that promise with all her heart, after all.

"I'm sorry for leaving you behind."

"It's fine! What's not being able to see each other for a little while?!"

Koutarou remembered that promise well too. From his perspective, it hadn't been that long since he had made it. Kiriha had promised Koutarou, her Onii-chan, that she would always be by his side and that she'd never leave him. She felt like disappearing was a direct violation of that promise. Koutarou, however, saw it differently. Just because she was physically going somewhere didn't necessarily mean she was leaving.

"That's true... My heart is always with you."

"I'll definitely bring you back! And everyone else too!"

"I know... Kii and I will believe in you forever..."

And so Kiriha disappeared into the green light. She believed in Koutarou, so she was sure that they would meet again. But saying goodbye was still hard. She felt a stinging pain in her chest from leaving him behind as she disappeared. She cried and cried, much like she had as a little girl when she was forced to part ways with Koutarou in the past.

Beyond Time and Distance

Monday, April 4th

While they had been prepared for it and knew that it was necessary, Koutarou and Harumi were still deeply affected by Kiriha's disappearance. Once she was gone, they sat there in still silence for quite some time. The shock of being reduced to just the two of them was unimaginable. They simply stared blankly at where Kiriha had just been.

After the shock began to subside with time, they began processing their emotions. They mourned losing Kiriha and being left behind. They supported one another in a shared embrace, crying freely and screaming without reserve. They were now alone, really and truly. Even the haniwas had disappeared with Kiriha. There was no reason to hold anything back.

"The calculations are finished, ho!"

"Come see, Big Brother, ho!"

"Karama?! Korama?!"

"Satomi-kun, over there! The computer!"

Two unexpected voices brought Koutarou and Harumi to their senses—Kiriha's haniwas. After being gone for several hours now since they'd disappeared along with Kiriha, their sudden reappearance gave Koutarou and Harumi new strength. They shot to their feet and ran over to the main computer.

"You two are okay?!"

"We can't say for sure, ho."

"Right now, we're just models this computer has generated to make it easier to communicate, ho."

"So you're like an AI based on the haniwas?"

“That’s more or less correct, ho. And the fact that we’re here means our original forms have disappeared, ho.”

“Big Brother, we don’t have much time, so we want you to listen well, ho!”

The two haniwas were currently displayed on the computer’s monitor, but they were smaller, cuter, CG versions of themselves, like adorable anime characters. They were essentially avatars for artificial intelligences based on the haniwas’ memories and personalities that would serve as an interface for dialogue in the case of emergencies. Which meant, sadly, that they weren’t the real Karama and Korama.

“It’s about the data from when Ane-san disappeared, ho!”

“By analyzing it in detail, we were able to discover a few things, ho!”

It seemed they had appeared because they were programmed to run the analytics on Kiriha’s disappearance in the worst case scenario. They were finishing what the real haniwas had started.

“They did it, Satomi-kun!”

“Yeah!”

Hearing the haniwas’ report, energy returned to Koutarou and Harumi. Plagued with despair since Kiriha vanished, the haniwas gave them a glimmer of hope. It was the first good news they’d gotten in a long while.

“The observation equipment says that...”

The haniwas quickly began to update them on the results of their analysis, and Koutarou and Harumi listened intently. They were both happy, but neither was smiling. This wasn’t the time to be celebrating.

The starting point of their observation was the fact that not even the girls of room 106 had been able to learn anything about the disappearances. They were experts on science, magic, and psychic powers, so the fact that they couldn’t find traces of any evidence at all was telling. It meant that whatever was there was imperceptible, even with their extraordinary abilities.

So in order to learn anything, more serious equipment had to be brought in.

The farther the galaxy, the bigger the radio telescope needed to be to see it, after all. That was the approach Kiriha had taken.

But when making a radio telescope, there were two potential options. The first was to make one massive parabolic antenna. The second was to create several smaller ones. Kiriha had chosen the latter way of thinking. She's prepared several of the same type of sensor and set them up to record at the same time. The idea was that some kind of trace evidence might become apparent when analyzing their collective data. Any given sensor could pick up what seemed meaningless—static, feedback, et cetera. But if multiple sensors observed the same thing, that indicated it had significance as data. When Shizuka had disappeared, not all of the sensors had been set up yet. There weren't enough active to draw any meaningful conclusions. But this time was different. All of the sensors were in place and running when it happened. Between the lot of them, they'd managed to detect something.

Considering the amount of data collected between all the sensors, processing it had taken quite some time. But it had paid off. Kiriha and the haniwas' disappearance had left Koutarou and Harumi with a clue.

After the virtual haniwas debriefed Koutarou and Harumi, they pulled up a map on the monitor with a large circle drawn on it representing what the data indicated.

"When Ane-san was disappearing, there was a slight back and forth of auras between here and a second location. The second location is somewhere in this circle, ho."

"With that in mind, we looked through the data again and found that electromagnetic radiation and mana showed the same tendency. But we can't say for certain with those, ho."

"This circle covers the school, this neighborhood, and the station, huh?"

"That narrows our search area down quite a bit."

Corona House, the local station, and Kisshouharukaze High School formed a triangle that fit just within the circle drawn on the map. Whoever had taken the girls was somewhere in that area.

“Estimated accuracy is only 95 percent, ho.”

“Which means they might be just outside of this area, ho. So we don’t want you to get too hung up on the circle itself, ho.”

“Got it. Thanks, you two. You did great.”

The area in question was still rather large for just two people to be searching, but Harumi was right. It was better than trying to scour the entire city. It wouldn’t be impossible for them to search everywhere within the circle in two —no, one day if they really tried. This was a significant development.

“Thank the real us, ho.”

“We’re just avatars, ho.”

The two haniwas on the screen looked somewhat sad. They knew that they were fakes, and that their real selves had already vanished.

“Yeah, I absolutely will.”

“This and the letter that Ane-san left behind should give you a much better idea of the situation, ho.”

“Ane-san said it was the ninth envelope. You should hurry up and read it, ho!”

“Satomi-kun, let’s go get Kiriha-san’s letter. Then we can consult with these haniwas.”

Harumi was thinking that the haniwas might be able to give them an explanation of Kiriha’s letter and help them move forward. But the virtual haniwas shook their heads.

“You shouldn’t do that, ho. Coming back here would be dangerous, ho.”

“What?”

“What do you mean?”

“There’s a chance that this base would have been made even if Ane-san didn’t exist, which is why it’s still here, ho. There’s also a chance that we’d still exist as an interface, which is why we’re here too, ho. But...”

“Just like how memories of the girls who disappeared began vanishing from people’s minds, things with a low chance of existing will be weeded out

eventually, ho. We don't know how long this base will stay here, ho."

That was yet another of Kiriha's assumptions. If memories of the girls were disappearing from people with weak connections to them, it wouldn't be strange for their physical influence on the world to begin to fade as well. The universe might be in the process of correcting everything that happened because of the missing girls. The fact that the girls had disappeared with their possessions—Maki with her staff, Kiriha with the haniwas, and so on—only seemed to support the theory.

"We can't connect with the Hazy Moon in orbit anymore, ho."

"Of course—if Clan never existed, the Hazy Moon never would have come to Earth!"

"That's right, ho. That's why staying here would be dangerous, ho. You should return to Corona House soon, ho."

"The letters that Ane-san left behind might disappear for the same reason, ho!"

"So you should hurry, ho!"

"This is goodbye, ho... Big Brother, Harumi-chan."

The haniwas knew what they were likely facing, which was why they'd hurried to get the job done. There was no telling how long Kiriha's secret base would last with her gone. The virtual Karama and Korama stood side by side on the screen and smiled sadly. It was now time to bid them farewell.

"Good luck, Big Brother! Harumi-chan, ho!"

"This is all we can do, ho! We'll pray for you, ho!"

"Wait a minute! What'll happen to you two?!"

"We will disappear with the base, ho."

"That's our fate, ho."

"Satomi-kun, why don't we move the haniwas over to a computer we can take with us?"

"That's a good idea!"

“It’s no use, ho. Without Ane-san, there would have been no one to prepare us, ho. We will eventually disappear too no matter what, ho.”

“More importantly, you need to get going, ho. All you have to do is solve this incident and bring us back, ho. Then you can integrate our memory data with the original haniwas, ho.”

“Karama, Korama... Okay, we’ll see you guys later.”

“Haniwas, let everyone know that we’ll save them as soon as we can.”

“Understood, ho! We’ll let them know, ho!”

“Big Brother, Harumi-chan! We will love you no matter the outcome, ho!”

“Thank you...”

“There will only be one outcome. Because we’re going to save you!”

“We believe in you, ho! Bye-bye, you two!”

“See you later, ho!”

And so Koutarou and Harumi left Kiriha’s base. While they might not have been the real thing, it still hurt to leave the haniwas behind. But if they didn’t, they would never be able to get to the bottom of the incident. It was an agonizing decision to have to make. And the haniwas knew that. That’s why they continued to wave their tiny hands even after Koutarou and Harumi left.

To my beloved Satomi Koutarou,

If you’re reading this letter, it means that I have disappeared. I hope that you manage to gain some useful data from my disappearance, but even if you don’t, I hope this letter helps you find some direction in what to do next.

I’ve formed nine possible theories about the disappearances. This letter is the last of them—the one I believe to be the least likely. It’s so absurd that I even considered throwing this away, but I couldn’t bring myself to do it. Unusually enough for me, my intuition told me not to. Perhaps the most fitting thing is to say that I felt fate at work, much like I did when I met you. I know it will be difficult to comprehend what I’ve written here, but please read it through to the end and bear with me.

If I disappeared second to last, then I believe the following to be at work. This incident is affecting us in reverse of the order that we met you. There is, of course, a certain chance that that is just a coincidence. But realistically speaking, the odds of such coincidences happening one after the other is hardly believable. I'm equally skeptical that this is some sort of natural occurrence. That leaves me no choice but to believe that what's currently happening is the work of someone who has decided to undo our meeting you.

But that line of thinking raises a few questions of its own. We are disappearing, and people's memories of us are going with us. Considering we can no longer contact the Hazy Moon, I'm also left to believe that the effects we've had on reality are being undone as well. Which means that our existences are being erased in the truest sense of the word. But who or what could have the power to do that? A timeslip seems like a possible answer, but according to Clan, changing history creates an alternate timeline rather than having an effect on this one. That essentially means it's impossible to alter the reality we already inhabit via a timeslip, which limits the potential answers significantly. While I can think of a few other ways altering reality might be possible, they would all literally require something on the level of divine power to pull off.

The only exception would be if all ten of us were caught in an illusion a long time ago and have been unable to escape it. But even then, being able to do that without Maki or Yurika noticing, while affecting all ten of us under the protection of the true sword of kingship at once, and for such a long period of time... That too would take the power of a god. I know that suggesting a divine being is involved would turn the gears of anyone's common sense and force them to suspect something more simple and realistic is at play—myself included. But if we humor the theory, it would explain several things that I've always found strange.

To begin with, why did we all invade room 106 at the same time? Wasn't the timing just too perfect? Like clockwork, a new invader appeared each day. Doesn't it make you feel like it was all part of some plan? Moreover, how is it that all of us who came to room 106 found ourselves needing you so? From our individual points of view, the answer is obvious. You were exactly what we were missing. The reverse is also true. How were you able to develop bonds with all of

us? Taking it case by case, it's because we each had something that you were missing. And because of who you are, Satomi Koutarou, there was a reason that you couldn't ignore each of us.

But looking at the bigger picture, it's truly bizarre. The odds of nine strangers all developing feelings for the same man are incredible low. And him returning those feelings to the best of his ability lower the odds even further. In that case, wouldn't it make more sense to think that those nine girls were connected to you by the little red string of fate? Let's look at an even bigger picture.

Fundamentally, far too many incidents that could have shaken the world as we know it have happened around us. Why is that? Why do they keep happening? We can trace it as far back as Earthlings and Forthorthians existing in the same universe, their civilizations appearing at almost the same time. Two completely unrelated species that can interbreed developing in completely different regions of space... Even on an astronomical scale, it's a bit much. It's the kind of coincidence that would be unlikely to ever happen again even in the repeated death and rebirth of the universe.

It makes me think that the world we inhabit was made so things would happen this way from the very beginning. I have so many questions, and I feel like someone's behind it all. But just who is that someone? I can only think of one answer. In the decisive battle of Folsaria, Yurika made a gamble to make up for her mana shortage. That gamble was merging with us to become a single person, gathering all of our mana together. The result should have been someone sharing our liknesses and abilities. But the person who appeared was a woman who looked nothing like us and had powers completely unlike our own. I can't say for sure that she's the one guiding us, but I can say beyond a shadow of a doubt that someone is.

Which means that it's important to find out what this person, this being, is hoping to accomplish, because we're disappearing for the sake of that goal. And considering that the order in which we're disappearing is the opposite of the order we met you, we should assume that the goal of this being who's erasing us has something to do with you.

But there are too many possibilities and I can't say exactly what that goal is right now. There are too many converging potentialities to be able to see the

truth clearly. That being said, I have a hunch. If the end goal of everything that's happening involves you, then I think it's safe to assume that it all started with you, too. Something must have happened. We've just overlooked it, whatever that starting point was.

And that *is what we really need to figure out. Satomi Koutarou, please try to remember. Something must have happened around the time when you first came to room 106. That something decided your fate as well as ours. If you can find it, we might be able to get to the bottom of what's happening. Your timeslip might have had an effect on the cause and outcome, so if possible, think back on things that happened before you moved in as well.*

I am sorry for being so vague. However, if things go well, I might be able to leave behind another hint. If you were able to gather any data from my disappearance, please use that and this letter to narrow down the possibilities.

If my theory is correct, the solution to this incident will be exceedingly difficult. I don't even know if there truly is a solution. But I would like to believe there is. That the bond between you and us can't be severed this way. If possible, I'd like you to believe the same.

With love,

Kurano Kiriha—Kii

The letter that Kiriha had left behind was intentionally written to be as easy to understand as possible, but its contents were still vastly difficult to comprehend. It suggested something so outlandish that it took Koutarou and Harumi a great deal of time to even process. By the time they managed to get their heads around it, the sun had already set, so their discussion continued over dinner.

"About the being that Kiriha-san mention... I recall something similar."

"Really?!"

"When Darkness Rainbow attacked the first time, I was seriously injured and Yurika merged with me. Since she was unharmed, she thought that she could share the burden of my wounds and save me. But when we merged, someone

else altogether appeared.”

“Now that you mention it, I think I heard about that...”

Harumi had made them omelet rice and vegetable soup. It was a delicious meal considering it had just been thrown together with only ingredients they had on hand in the apartment, but right now, neither she nor Koutarou was concerned about the taste of the food in front of them. All that was on their minds was Kiriha’s letter.

“Before she disappeared, Sanae also told me she’d been hearing a voice.”

“A voice? Who was it?”

“I asked her the same thing, but she said that she didn’t know. Just that it was a woman’s voice.”

“If it’s the same woman I’m talking about...”

“It would make what Kiriha-san wrote even more credible.”

At first, the both of them had been stunned and puzzled by what Kiriha had suggested in her letter, but looking back on their experiences and putting everything together, it started to make sense. As things stood, they were convinced enough to move on Kiriha’s theory, accepting it as true.

“Satomi-kun, maybe that woman is somewhere in that circle the haniwas came up with?”

“Maybe. At least we know what we should do next now, Sakuraba-senpai.”

Combining the contents of the letter with the search radius the haniwa had given them, Koutarou and Harumi had a clear path in front of them. At the end of it, they would find the being that Kiriha wrote about, or clues of the missing girls—if not the girls themselves.

“It’s not too different from what we were already thinking, though.”

It felt strange. Despite the fact that they had new purpose, they’d essentially just be doing what they had been all along—searching for something around town. Koutarou found it a little disheartening.

“Knowing that we’re on the right track will help a lot, so it’s not the same as

before, Satomi-kun.”

But Harumi shook her head with a smile. She didn’t see it the way Koutarou did. She felt hopeful. Encouraged. It was true they would still be searching, but a great fog had been lifted from in front of their eyes. They knew what they were looking for and where this time. It was a completely different game.

You really are in there too, aren’t you, Your Majesty Alaia?

Koutarou could feel Alaia’s unwavering will in Harumi’s smile. Maybe it was a side Harumi had always had in her, but Koutarou was happy to see it now. He wanted to believe Alaia was still somewhere inside her, even if it was only a misunderstanding.

“What’s the matter, Satomi-kun?” Sensing something strange in the way he was looking at her, Harumi tilted her head in confusion.

“I was just thinking about how strong you are, Sakuraba-senpai,” Koutarou answered vaguely.

It was hard for him to talk about Alaia after she was gone, but what he said wasn’t exactly a lie. Roughly speaking, it meant the same thing.

“Let’s both do our best, Satomi-kun. There’s still hope.”

“I’m glad you’re with me, Sakuraba-senpai...”

“All nine of us are. We’ll all take your hand and help you stand again, always.”

Koutarou honestly thought that Harumi was strong too.

You’re the only one who would say that... or maybe...

The qualities of a true leader—the ability to inspire hope, to give people a goal and the will to pursue it—were burning brightly inside Harumi. It was only regrettable that she was putting them to use under such circumstances.

After dinner and a catnap, Koutarou and Harumi took off into town. They were going to investigate the places Koutarou had visited just before and after moving into Corona House, as Kiriha had suggested in her letter. Since it was nearly midnight, they’d be limited to searching outdoors for now. But that didn’t stop them. They had plenty of places to check, and they were pressed for

time. Once the date changed, Harumi might disappear. They had to hurry.

“Satomi-kun, over here!”

“Whoa!”

With hardly any warning, Harumi pulled Koutarou into a nearby bush. It was a strangely forceful gesture for her. Caught off guard, Koutarou turned to her in surprise.

“What is it, Sakuraba-senpai?!”

“Be quiet for a moment!”

Still holding on to Koutarou, she was carefully watching what was happening just beyond the bushes. When Koutarou looked to see what was there, he realized why she’d done what she did.

“Phew, it’s already April, but it’s still so cold at night...”

“Quit complaining. Once we get back to the station, we’ll have some ramen.”

Two policemen were walking by. It didn’t seem they’d seen Koutarou and Harumi, but since they were on patrol, they were frequently stopping and looking around. Harumi had realized they were coming, and pulled Koutarou into the bush to take cover.

“Sounds great. You buying?”

“Good grief, what am I supposed to do with you...?”

They held their breath as the policemen passed by and disappeared around the corner. Luckily, they’d escaped detection.

“Thank you, Sakuraba-senpai.”

“I’ll keep an eye out until morning comes, so you can just focus on using your spirit sight, Satomi-kun.”

“Thanks.”

Two high schoolers out in the middle of the night would only invite questions. Especially from a police officer. And it wouldn’t help any that it looked like they were sneaking around. So to avoid any trouble, they’d have to be careful. Koutarou hadn’t even noticed the two officers because he’d been so focused on

his spirit sight. He'd detected their auras, but that didn't tell him they were cops. So having Harumi keep an eye on their surroundings would be an important part of the search going forward.

The range the haniwas had given them was a circle that could just encompass the triangle formed between the high school, Corona House, and the station. It was less than two kilometers in diameter and it would take about half an hour to walk end to end. But within that circle was a complex series of roads, alleyways, and sidewalks. Even excluding the places Koutarou had already checked, it would take several hours to clear. By the time they'd gotten through most of it, the sun was already starting to come up.

"Sakuraba-senpai, how are you holding up?"

"I'm all right. I've built up some stamina, so I can manage this much."

"That's good. But let's continue our break here a little longer anyway."

"You really don't have to worry about me."

"That might be part of it, but the shops are going to start opening up soon."

Koutarou and Harumi were currently taking a break in a 24/7 family restaurant. It was partly to get some food and respite, but it was also to kill time until businesses started opening. Between midnight and early morning, they'd been limited to searching places outdoors, but that would change soon. There were still some roads they hadn't checked, but they'd be able to give those a look while on their way to their various destinations. They couldn't afford to waste their energy.

"So it's already about time for that... Satomi-kun, do you have any hunches about which shops or business to check?"

"We'll need to go to the real estate agent, the do-it-yourself store, the supermarket, and the shopping street."

Those were the places Koutarou had frequented before and after moving in that were inside the circle. But his memories were a little vague considering that was two years ago now, so he was willing to try anywhere that he had an inkling about.

“We first met on the day the entrance exam results were announced, didn’t we?”

“That’s true... I guess that makes it the first of the meetings?”

“We’ll need to check school too then.”

“That’s on the far side over by the mountain, so let’s hit everything else first.”

“All right.”

Using their memories and the maps on their smartphones, Koutarou and Harumi planned a route for their search. Since they were currently by the station, they would start by going through the shopping street and heading in the direction of Corona House before finally turning towards the school.

“Did anything strange happen on the day we first met?”

“Nothing stranger than meeting you.”

“Was I strange?”

“Not strange... I just thought you were special.”

“I thought you were too. Thinking back to it, it might have been love at first sight.”

They spent a little while longer chatting away in the restaurant before it was time to resume their search. While they were supposedly talking about things related to the incident, it would just sound like they were reminiscing to anyone who overheard. But thanks to that, they were able to relax. While they didn’t come up with any new hints, it worked out well in the end.

After leaving the restaurant, Koutarou and Harumi checked out the area around the station. They had already walked the streets, so they were specifically investigating businesses that might be of interest. They’d just finished up at the supermarket, which was a shop Koutarou frequented even well after moving to Corona House.

“Senpai, where are we going next?”

Since Koutarou was solely focused on his spirit sight, he wasn’t paying much

attention to where they were going. As such, he was relying on Harumi to navigate.

"..."

"Senpai?"

Since he hadn't gotten a response, Koutarou temporarily switched back to his normal vision to turn around and see if she was okay. When he did, he saw her standing there with a blank look on her face, staring off into the distance like she was thinking about something.

"Ah, I-I'm sorry!"

Realizing that Koutarou had turned to her, Harumi hurriedly looked down on the phone in her hand and started reading the map. Seeing her like that, Koutarou smiled a little.

"So you admire things like that too, Sakuraba-senpai?"

Harumi had been watching a young couple— a boy and girl about their age who were walking arm in arm. Seeing their calm and happy aura together, it was clear they were in love.

"U-Um, yes..."

Harumi couldn't look back up. She was embarrassed and didn't want Koutarou to see her beet red face. She had no idea what she'd even say if she had to look him in the eye. But more than anything, she wanted to apologize to the girls who'd disappeared.

Is this really okay? How could I just space out like that? Wasn't I supposed to stand by his side and walk together with him?

Such thoughts suddenly popped into her head. They felt like Alaia's feelings, but also her own. But it didn't really matter whose feelings they really were— she knew that they were right.

"Satomi-kun, when we get everyone back... would you walk with me like that?"

With newfound determination, Harumi raised her head and said what was on her mind without hesitation. Of course, considering the situation, she couldn't

ask him to link arms with her right now. It wouldn't feel right. She'd feel too guilty thinking about her missing friends. But she had to ask him about it now precisely because she was feeling uneasy. She wanted hope for the future. Something to look forward to. So thanks to her complexly intertwined emotions, Harumi ended up taking a big step forward. It wouldn't have been a big deal to Sanae or Kiriha, but for Harumi, this was like a massive leap on the moon. It was a big decision that would mean a big change for her.

"Sakuraba-senpai..."

Koutarou was a bit puzzled by her request. It was quite unlike her.

No, if anything... I've probably made Sakuraba-senpai endure for too long.

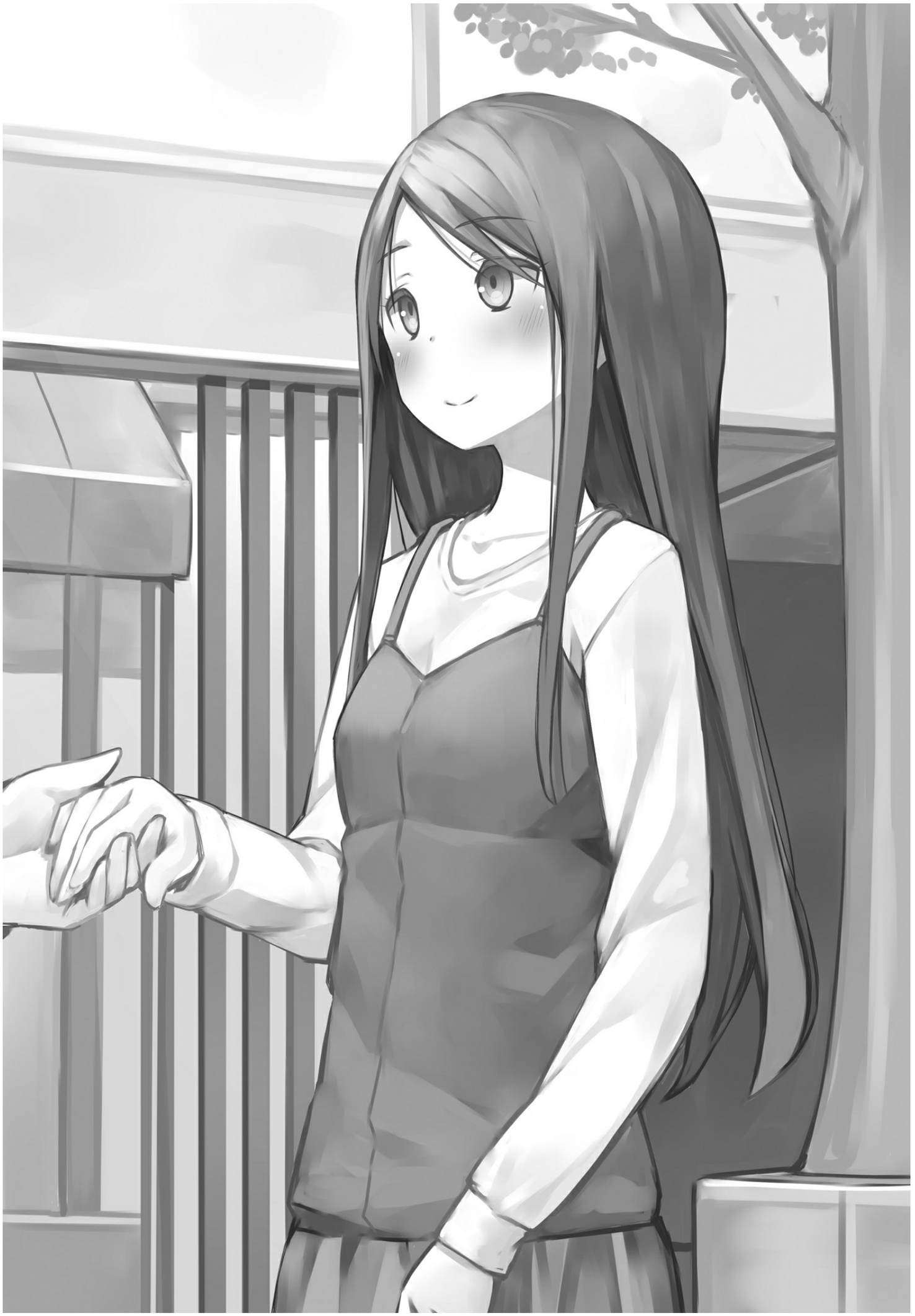
But he soon had a change of heart. Harumi had done all kinds of things for him. She'd never asked for anything in return, but now she was finally making known her desires. He couldn't simply write that off as being "unlike her." There was also no doubt that Harumi was feeling very anxious about their current situation.

"So... where were we headed next?"

Koutarou avoided answering Harumi directly. As expected, he was too embarrassed to put it into words. Instead, he decided to show her what he was thinking. He reached out with his left hand to gently grasp her right. Much like Harumi, he felt some resistance to walking around like the couple from before under the circumstances. But he also knew that Harumi was anxious. He too was feeling the same thing. So he decided to compromise and take her hand.

"U-Um, next w-we should head t-towards the shopping street. Um..."

In that moment, Harumi was starting to worry she'd perhaps been to bold. But with her hand holding Koutarou's, she couldn't let go in spite of herself. She couldn't give up the warmth she felt from him. Harumi had once tried to kiss Koutarou on the cheek. Compared to that, holding hands should be nothing. But feeling like this was fundamentally different from back then, she could hardly calm herself. She tried her best to answer Koutarou and check the map to see where they were going, but she barely knew what she was saying or doing. Her mind was blanking out.



It was now April 5th, so spring break was just about over. At Kisshouharukaze High School, the opening ceremony was usually held on the 6th. As such, there were plenty of people out and about at the shopping street even early on a weekday morning. All the local kids were trying to soak up as much as they could out of the last of their vacation. That worked out in Koutarou and Harumi's favor. If it weren't spring break, they'd stand out. And since they'd be skipping school, they'd still have to avoid police and other authority figures even during daylight hours.

"Ah! Baron! And the lady!"

But as it were, they'd caught the attention of a kindergartener rather than the police. It was apparently a girl who'd seen their hero show and remembered it well.

"So Baron and the lady really *do* get along, huh?"

She eagerly ran up to greet them, and upon seeing that they were holding hands, began to point at them with a smile.

"Fuhahahaha, that's right! I guess there's no use hiding it! This lady and I are actually friends!"

Koutarou played along with the young girl. He'd actually continued to help out with the hero show, so this kind of thing would happen from time to time. And in order not to disenchant the children, he would always put on his Baron Demon act for them.

"She's really pretty! Are you still trying to make her your bride?"

"But of course. I'm just waiting for my chance to snatch her up... That blasted Harukaze Man keeps getting in the way of everything!"

"Of course he does! Must be hard for you."

"Heehee..."

Harumi couldn't help but giggle at their endearing chat. But even though it was just a giggle, it was the first time she'd laughed in days. She could feel it lift her spirits. And when the little girl heard it, she turned her attention to Harumi.

"Do you like Baron more than the glasses guy, lady?"

By “glasses guy,” she probably meant Kenji who’d played her boyfriend in the hero show.

“It’s a secret, but yes.”

“I know how you feel! It’s so easy to fall for the bad guys!”

“The black, spiky outfits are always so impressive.”

“Those spikes are so cool!”

Following Koutarou’s lead, Harumi played along too. During the hero show, Harumi had failed in playing the part of Kenji’s girlfriend because her true feelings had shown through for Koutarou—the bad guy. That had become canon and incorporated into later performances.

“But it must be hard being in a love triangle, lady!”

“A love triangle? You sure know some difficult words...”

“Yeah! You have to protect Baron from, um... Huh?”

The young girl’s expression suddenly clouded over. The girl was trying to say that Harumi had to defend Baron from someone... but she couldn’t remember who. She’d forgotten all about the evil Black Rose.

“Um... Who was it again?”

“What’s wrong?” Harumi asked.

“I don’t know... It’s strange. Baron, lady, I feel like I’m forgetting something really important.”

The young girl looked at them with a confounded expression. She was trying to remember something but couldn’t, even though she knew it was important. There was fear and confusion in her eyes.

I see, this girl is one of Kiriha-san’s friends...

It was then that Koutarou realized she was talking about Black Rose, Kiriha’s role. And since this young girl was a friend of Kiriha’s, she had a deeper connection with her than most. That’s why she could tell that she was forgetting something important, which upset her.

“...I’m sorry about that, little girl.”

“Huh? Did you do something, Baron?”

“I did. Just recently, Harukaze Man destroyed my secret weapon and some of the fuzzy-brain gas I was working on leaked out.”

Having realized what was happening, Koutarou decided to assuage her doubts. He couldn’t stand to see her tormented by her missing memories.

“So that’s what it was!”

“Your memories should return soon, so don’t worry.”

“Okay. But make sure you do your bad guy things in a cooler way next time.”

“Heh, sorry about that.”

Fortunately, Koutarou’s white lie was enough to get her smiling again. It certainly helped that he had a reputation for losing to Harukaze Man. Koutarou let out a sigh of relief that all seemed well now, but it made him feel the absences of Kiriha and the others all the more acutely. It was affecting far more than just him and Harumi.

Koutarou and Harumi were walking side by side down a river embankment. After parting ways with the little girl, they’d largely fallen silent. Their interaction with her had made them both realize that the disappearances of their friends had a much bigger impact than they’d imagined.

“We aren’t the only ones who need them... though it’s a bit late to realize that now...”

It wasn’t just Kiriha and the children. Sanae had her parents, Yurika had the cosclub, Maki had Crimson, and so on. They were all probably feeling the same unexplainable loss that little girl was right now. But that was all the more reason to find the missing girls. Koutarou felt a sense of duty, different from before, welling up in his chest

“Satomi-kun, do you think there will be people like that if I disappear too?”

Koutarou’s quiet mumbling to no one in particular had reached Harumi’s ears. It made her wonder what things would be like if she vanished. It was an especially weighty thought, considering it was likely a matter of when, rather

than if.

“Lots of ’em. There are the kids at the hospital, the people in the drama club. Your classmates from last year, that girl from before, not to mention your mom and dad.”

Koutarou believed that everyone Harumi knew would feel that way about her. She was the nice girl who read books for the children in the pediatric ward. She was the star of both plays—everyone at school knew her. Even the children who’d seen her in the hero show remembered her. And above all, there was no way that her bond with her parents would be broken so easily.

“Would you remember, Satomi-kun?”

“Of course. Even if everyone else forgot, I would never forget you or the others.”

Koutarou squeezed Harumi’s hand as he spoke. The girls had saved him several times—and more than just his life. They’d saved his heart and soul. That’s why he couldn’t imagine ever forgetting them.

He really is the one... We need him, and he needs us. I can’t leave him behind. I couldn’t possible disappear. I have to be by his side forever and always...

Koutarou’s words and the warmth from his hands told Harumi just how important he was to her. He was her world. But it wasn’t just the two of them in that world. Koutarou and all nine girls each needed things from each other. And they needed to be with each other—together—for that world to feel whole. That’s how connected they were. Putting her faith in that, Harumi squeezed his hand back.

“...Thank you, Satomi-kun.”

“Let’s go. We have to find everyone else.”

“Yes!”

Harumi nodded and began walking next to Koutarou, still firmly holding on to his hand.

This is fine, isn’t it, Alaia-san...? This was your wish, but it’s mine too. For everyone to always be by Satomi-kun’s... by Layous-sama’s side...

Harumi felt like everything had now fallen into its rightful place. Her wishes and Alaia's coincided. And that wasn't all. The other girls wished for the same thing, and it was all within reach. There was only one problem left—their absence. If they could just resolve that, everything would be perfect. As long as they could do that, no matter what hardships might befall them, they could support each other and live together with smiles on their faces.

"Ah..."

And so Harumi's body began glowing. The moment she noticed the pure white glow, she understood why it had appeared. After all, it had come from within her.

"So the trial began because all of our wishes came true! Because we believed that was our everything!"

The light surrounding her wasn't anyone else's doing. It was Harumi's light. And with the proper conditions satisfied, it began overflowing from within.

"Senpai, what are you talking about?!"

But even though Harumi understood, Koutarou was in the dark. He was simply shaken upon realizing that Harumi's time had come.

"Layous-sama, everything else is up to you! Don't deny the true wish inside of your heart! If you pray for it to come true, I'm sure we'll meet again!"

Like with the other eight girls before her, Harumi didn't have much time left once the light appeared. Her figure was already beginning to fade. It would only be a matter of seconds. That's why she was desperate.

"Everything was for this moment!"

"Sakuraba-senpai?!"

"Crossing endless time and immeasurable distance... It was all so that you—that we—could reach this conclusion!"

After meeting, Koutarou and the girls had confronted all manner of difficult trials together, leading them to understand and need one another. That's why the girls disappeared. Because if they didn't, they wouldn't be able to see the true emotion lying hidden underneath it all.

“Please don’t forget! We—”

For the briefest moment, it looked as though the eight other colors were shining past Harumi’s white light. Like Harumi herself was overlapping with them.

“We love you!”

With those words as her last, Harumi disappeared from sight. The last Koutarou saw of her was her loving smile—he couldn’t tell if it was Harumi’s or Alaia’s.

Koutarou was assaulted by the pain of losing everything. The loss was far greater than just Harumi. But with her disappearance, the weight of losing all of the girls came crashing down on him at once. His desire to protect her had kept his grief and his pain in check, but there was nothing holding them back now. And those dark, terrible feelings rekindled the tragic memories of watching his mother die right in front of him.

“AAAAAHHHHHHHH!”

The fact that he’d finally accepted the girls and started believed in a future with them when they disappeared made their loss all the more unbearable. It was like the floor had disappeared from underneath him. Like his soul was being sucked out of him. And it wasn’t quick, or even finite. The pain renewed itself, the loss repeating over and over in his mind. It was endless. He lost himself in it—forgetting where he was, what he was doing, and even to breathe. It was like a constant state of drowning. Pure torture. As if to escape from it, as if to make himself feel anything else, he fell to his knees and slammed his fist into the ground.

Slam, thud, crack.

“AAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHH!”

Yet no matter how many times he hurled his fist into the pavement hard enough to break it, it did nothing to distract him from the pain in his heart. But he couldn’t stop trying. In spite of his busted and bloody knuckles, he couldn’t stop swinging his fist.

“Please come this way! Th-There’s an application form to fill out!”

“Actually, it appears in this room... The rumors say it’s a ghost.”

“Now get scared and leave, you dimwit! This place is haunted!”

“I’m the princess of love and courage, Magical Girl Rainbow Yurika! I will protect the peace of this town!”

“First off, I would like to apologize. I am deeply sorry for appearing in such a way.”

“Waaaaah! D-Don’t fondle them more, idiot!”

“Who would bring out a wide-area destructive weapon intended for space combat for a childish reason like that?”

“That’s why I keep telling you that you’re simple-minded, Theiamillis-san!”

“There’s no need to worry. I actually wanted to take up cosplay properly.”

Try as he might, the physical pain couldn’t make him forget the pain in his heart. If anything, it seemed to be bringing back memories starting with when they first met. And each swing of his fist brought him closer to the present.

“Layous Fatra Veltlion. In this urgent situation without an empress, I, Princess Clariossa, will act in her place. This is a royal command. As a knight of Forthorthe, do what you must!”

“I thought something was strange. Why had all the armor’s data been erased...? If you had just been thrown out of the universe, there would have been no need to do that.”

“So please tell me, Koutarou! Is the owner of this necklace still happy? He’s not feeling lonely... is he?”

“Okay, then I’ll just say it. Here goes... I love you, I love you, I love you, I love you, I love you, I love you, I love you, I love you, I love you—”

“I’ll pray, but it won’t be for your victory. I’ll simply pray that your future will be bright forever and ever...”

“...So win, Satomi-kun! I will protect you! From any enemy and any trial!”

“That’s not what I meant! Why can’t we just take a little more time to confirm

our bond and love?! Physical contact is important, you know?!”

“Koutarou, Harumi, Ruth, and everyone who isn’t here... Please live together with me. Whatever path we find ourselves on, walk hand in hand with me.”

“You just saved me. You saved me all by yourself, without borrowing anyone else’s power. You’re not powerless. Stay confident. You definitely have the power to save others.”

When they’d first met, Koutarou and the girls had been in constant conflict with each other. But by the end of their first year together, they were all holding hands. And by the close of the second, they had become irreplaceable to one another. Even Koutarou, who had once rejected bonding with others, had begun to believe in a future with the girls.

“AAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHH!”

But that was all taken from him in the blink of an eye. The future he’d envisioned was snatched away. Despair wasn’t enough to describe it. There was no way something as petty as a few broken knuckles would take his mind off of it. But even then, he couldn’t stop throwing his fist. Because if he didn’t do something, he felt like he would be absolutely crushed by his suffering.

“AAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHH!”

Thud. Splat.

No one was there. No one to comfort him. No one to even bear witness to his loss. Koutarou was left all alone in the middle of a seemingly infinite darkness. It was just him and his bloodied fist. The people who should have been there to hold him back and support him were nowhere to be found.



Kashiwagi Shiori coming across Koutarou on the promenade was purely by chance. She felt it was fate at work since she'd just been thinking about wanting to see him, but all such romantic notions went flying out the window the moment she saw Koutarou's fist covered in blood, as did her natural shyness. She knew Koutarou well enough to know that something was seriously wrong. And she couldn't just stand by and watch.

"Satomi-kun! Don't hurt yourself like that!"

Running immediately over to him, Shiori grabbed hold of Koutarou's arm just as he was about to swing it into the ground again, which proved to be rather dangerous. Koutarou had completely lost sight of himself and his surroundings. As such, he continued to swing his arm, unaware that someone had even grabbed him.

"Kyah!"

Shiori was sent flying and hit the ground hard enough to knock the wind out of her. But it didn't faze her. She got right back up and ran over to Koutarou again.

"Stop it, Satomi-kun! You're going to break your hand!"

This time she intentionally put herself in harm's way, throwing herself at Koutarou to stop his fist.

Wham!

"Ugh!"

It struck her in the side, which felt far worse than being thrown.

Satomi-kun is hitting the ground with this much force... I have to stop him!

But she endured the pain and used her momentum to knock him over. If she didn't stop him somehow, he would only end up hurting himself. Rather than her own safety, that was all that was on her mind.

Whump!

Shiori squeezed her eyes shut and stayed still for a moment. It was partially because of the pain of hitting the ground with Koutarou, but also because she

was afraid his fist might come flying again.

"..."

But it seemed he'd fallen still as well. And upon realizing he wasn't moving, Shiori fearfully opened her eyes.

"...Satomi-kun?"

Shiori had fallen on top of Koutarou. His face was right in front of hers, and he was looking right at her. No... He was looking past her, staring up at the blue sky and white clouds. But Shiori knew that he wasn't actually looking at anything His empty eyes were rejecting the world.

It's like he's back to how he used to be in elementary school...

This side of Koutarou was familiar to Shiori. It was how he'd acted all throughout their early grade school years.

I wonder what happened. Did someone precious to him... No, that's not what's important right now! I just have to do something!

You see, in the world where the nine invaders didn't exist, Shiori and Koutarou's relationship was a little different. Upon realizing that Koutarou had a wall around his heart when they entered high school, Shiori had begun actively trying to break that down. It was something she'd only had the courage to do in a world where the invaders weren't around, because she told herself she was the only one who could do it. And so over the past two years, Shiori and Koutarou had gotten closer to one another. Of course, the boy before her right now didn't remember any of that. But it was all Shiori knew.

"You can't do that, Satomi-kun... You'll worry everyone."

Shiori pulled a towel that she used for club activities out from her bag and began wiping off Koutarou's hand, not minding getting blood on it in the slightest. Once she'd cleaned off all the blood and dirt, she used her handkerchief as a makeshift bandage to wrap his hand.

"...Kashiwagi, who's 'everyone'? Everyone's gone... There's no one left to worry about me..."

Even as Shiori was treating him, Koutarou had been silent. It was like he

wasn’t paying any attention to her or what she was doing. But for some reason, he had reacted to her use of the word “everyone.”

“What are you saying, Satomi-kun? Didn’t you make a promise with everyone that you’d go to nationals this year?!”

It seemed that the “everyone” Shiori was referring to meant the baseball team. You see, in a world without the invaders, Koutarou was still playing baseball. During their first year of high school, Shiori had become the baseball team’s manager and convinced the reluctant Koutarou to join.

“‘Just because we’ve lost once or twice doesn’t mean we will forever! I believe in you guys! So you guys believe in our future!’ That’s what you told them, Satomi-kun! And if you break your hand, who’s going to pitch for them?!”

“Kashiwagi... I see, so if they hadn’t been there, I...”

Thanks to what Shiori said, Koutarou was able to understand what was going on. He was no longer in a world where the invaders of room 106 existed—this was one of the many parallel universes that Clan had mentioned. Somehow, he’d ended up here with all of the girls gone.

So what Shiori was saying... must have been the words of the Koutarou she knew. But hearing them, the current Koutarou knew that wasn’t something he would have said two years ago. No, in order to say something like that, he’d need to have faith in other people and believe in the future for himself. That was a change that had only been effected in his life after meeting the invaders, so in this world, it must have been Shiori and his eight teammates who’d saved him.

“We won’t always fail, huh...? That’s true. And they believe in our future. I can’t just sit around here...”

Hearing those words—his own words from this timeline—gave him strength. It wasn’t over yet. He was in the midst of gloom now, but it couldn’t keep raining forever. And most importantly of all, there were people that believed in Koutarou and a happy future. People who were counting on him. He couldn’t let them down. And so, Koutarou stood up.

“Thank you, Kashiwagi. I remembered something important thanks to you.”

Once he got to his feet, Koutarou bowed to Shiori. He didn't know what was going to happen next, so he made sure to properly thank her before they parted ways.

"You don't need to thank me. Your right hand doesn't just belong to you, Satomi-kun. It's a part of everyone's dream, remember?"

"You're absolutely right. I was an idiot."

"Your emotional side comes out from time to time, so I always have to keep an eye on you."

"Kashiwagi... You know me really well, don't you?"

"I've been watching over you for a long time now, you know. I know all about you—good sides and bad. Heehee..."

Seeing Koutarou's willpower restored, Shiori flashed a satisfied smile—one different from any smile he'd ever seen on her lips before. It was a sign of just how close they were in this world.

Huh... Yeah, maybe she would know!

Seeing her smile at him like that, Koutarou was struck with a revelation. And he didn't waste any time asking Shiori about it.

"Kashiwagi! Did something unusual happen to me right around the time we started high school?!"

In the world Koutarou had come from with the invaders, it was hard to tell where the beginning proper was due to the timeslip. But that shouldn't have happened in this world, so things might be a little more definitive. And Shiori, who'd always lived here and had been watching over Koutarou, might know something about it.

"Something unusual? Well, thinking back to when we started high school..."

Shiori put her right hand on her cheek and began thinking. But then she frowned apologetically.

"Only one thing comes to mind."

"What is it?!"

“Well, it’s nothing big, but... I think it was the day before the entrance ceremony? You, Mackenzie-kun, and the others were playing baseball at the top of the hill, and you had to be rushed to the hospital because you hit your head. You remember that, don’t you?”

“The day before the entrance ceremony? I think I do...”

Koutarou also had a memory of being taken to the hospital, but it didn’t have anything to do with baseball. He’d had to go because he’d fallen and hit his head on the job at the excavation worksite.

I see, that ruin only existed because I travelled to Forthorthe in the past! It was built by the alchemists I exiled, after all! But if I never went to past Forthorthe in this world, they never would have come here! That means there’s no dig, so Mackenzie and I must work somewhere else! But even then, I still hit my head there and was taken to the hospital!

It was a strange coincidence. The reasons were totally different, but he’d hit his head in the same place and had to be taken to the hospital on the same day —in two completely separate timelines. It was so strange, in fact, that Kiriha would surely say it had to be more than just a coincidence. It was a sign of something greater at work. There had to be a reason for it.

“Satomi-kun?”

“Kashiwagi, I really owe you one. Thanks to you, I still have a hope.”

Since the dig site hill had been just outside the circle the haniwas projected, Koutarou hadn’t bothered investigating it. But thinking back on it, they’d said there was a small margin of error in their estimate. That meant the hill might be within the real search area after all, so Koutarou was planning on heading there next.

“Really? I’m glad I could be of help.”

“Sorry, but I’m in the middle of something important, Kashiwagi, so I have to go now. See you tomorrow, right?”

“Tomorrow? Oh, that’s right. Tomorrow’s the opening ceremony, isn’t it? Yeah, see you then.”

“See you.”

“Bye-bye, Satomi-kun.”

Koutarou then took off. His destination, of course, was none other than the top of the hill where Harukaze High was. But after getting a short way away, Koutarou stopped and turned around.

“Oh, and Kashiwagi...”

“Yeah?”

Shiori hadn’t moved at all. She was simply watching him go. As such, they stood facing each other roughly ten steps apart.

“I might say some weird stuff tomorrow, like that I don’t remember meeting you here. But that’s not because the me of tomorrow is weird... It’s because the me of today is. So don’t take it personally; it’s not like I’m trying to be mean or anything. Just treat me like normal, even if I say something odd, okay?”

Under normal circumstances, this meeting between Koutarou and Shiori would have been impossible, so Koutarou wanted to do what he could to make sure it didn’t have any strange effects on this world. It wasn’t all that different from when he’d travelled to the past with Clan.

“So you really aren’t the same Satomi-kun I know...”

Shiori’s response floored Koutarou. Apparently she’d realized that something was different about him.

“You knew, Kashiwagi?!”

“Yeah. The way you looked at me was different...”

“I see...”

Koutarou only really remembered Shiori from elementary school, but this version of Shiori had been friends with him for two years. Of course the Koutarou of this world would look at her differently.

“That, and you called me Kashiwagi.”

“That’s your name.”

“Yes, it is... Heehee. But after the tournament last summer, you started calling

me Shiori.”

Shiori smiled happily as she revealed her secret to Koutarou. She couldn’t help but find a certain mischievous amusement in his confusion.

“That’s... No wonder you noticed.”

He smiled too. Indeed, even the thickheaded Koutarou understood what she meant by that. In this world, Shiori and Koutarou were dating.

“Then why did you bother helping me and hearing me out? You knew that I was someone different, didn’t you?”

“It’s complicated... You might not be my Satomi-kun, but you’re still Satomi-kun.”

Shiori flashed a troubled smile. Her intuition told her that the boy in front of her wasn’t her boyfriend, but he was still very clearly Koutarou. It was a confusing situation. Fortunately, Koutarou had helped explain things, and she took him at his word. While she might not have been dating this version of Koutarou, she knew him well enough to know he wasn’t the type to lie about serious things.

“So that’s why you believed me...”

“Yeah. And... there’s something I want to ask you, too.”

“Go ahead. I’ll answer anything.”

If the Koutarou of this world had chosen Shiori, he trusted his own judgement and had faith that he could tell her what she wanted to know without worry.

“If you’re not mine... then who’s Satomi-kun are you?”

It was a simple and earnest, yet incredibly complicated question. But of course the Shiori of this world would be interested in knowing, so Koutarou smiled wryly as he tried his best to answer her.

“Who’s...? Huh, that’s a tricky one. There’s more than one girl that’s helped me out. That’s why they’re all precious to me... and I can’t decide. Even Mackenzie is yelling at me to make up my mind.”

“I see. So those girls are who you’re going to save?”

“Yeah... You really do understand me, don’t you?”

“Heehee, of course I do.”

When Shiori first came across Koutarou, he was in a dark place. He looked like he’d lost something very important, and his grief was apparent in his actions. She’d run to his side because he was the boy she loved.

“All right... I’m really going this time.”

“Sure. See you tomorrow, Satomi-kun.”

Shiori could tell that no matter what happened from here, she would never meet this Koutarou again. This Koutarou wasn’t her Koutarou, after all. That was the natural way of things. But she still felt a little sad, which was why she told him she’d see him again.

“Yeah, see you tomorrow!”

Koutarou felt the same way, and reassured her in kind. Regardless of what happened from here, it was nicer to think of things that way.

“Good luck! Go save them, okay?!”

“And you guys get to nationals! That’s my dream too, you know!”

“Yeah! I’ll drag you there with us!”

They were both aiming for tomorrow. A bright future. They were just fortunate enough to have a chance encounter on the way there, which is why they were able to part with smiles on their faces.

The Being of the Beginning and the End

Tuesday, April 5th

Meeting this world's Shiori had given Koutarou hope. More specifically, it was his own words in this world that had helped him remember his wish with the invaders. They believed in him and they were waiting for him. He couldn't just give up, because that would mean abandoning them and their future together.

"I thought so..."

After leaving Shiori, Koutarou headed straight for the dig site where he worked part-time. But as he stood there catching his breath at the top of the hill, all he could see was an undisturbed field. There were none of his colleagues, their equipment, or even the prefab huts they used anywhere in sight. It was about what he'd expected. After all, there weren't any ruins here in this world.

"But there has to be *something* here..."

Undeterred, Koutarou walked forward with resolute steps. Worksite or empty field, Koutarou had hit his head here in two different timelines. Thinking back on it, that was what had triggered him being able to see Sanae. There had to be something to it. Koutarou was convinced of that.

"And then there's this feeling..."

Something had been tugging at Koutarou's sixth sense ever since he set foot in the field. He didn't know what or where it was coming from. It was so vague that he really had to focus on it to feel anything. But that sensation only strengthened his conviction.

"Let's see, the area I was in charge of back then was..."

Recalling what he could from two years ago, Koutarou slowly walked forward. If there was something here, it made sense that it would be around the area where he'd been working, but not actually inside of it. It would've had to have

been somewhere that wasn't uncovered yet at the time.

"Then there's the baseball thing... Did I get hit by the ball? Or did it roll into the bushes or something?"

According to what Shiori said, he'd been playing baseball with his friends when it happened. But since Shiori hadn't been there personally, she didn't know all the details. Koutarou would have to fill in the blanks for himself.

There were several conceivable ways he'd hit his head. He could've been hit by a stray ball, or slid into something while trying to catch one. But Koutarou thought the most likely possibility was that he'd chased one into the bushes. It was fairly common to trip on things underfoot when looking up into the sky to try and catch a ball.

"Which means... it would've been around here?"

Scanning the area, Koutarou made note of all the undergrowth and such that would have been near his worksite. If he and his friends were playing baseball here, they'd need a pretty wide area for it. They'd need space enough to position their team correctly, particularly the infielders, pitcher, and catcher. Koutarou looked around and thought about how he'd lay the diamond out, then thought about which positions would have been closest to his work area. As he did, he realized that there was a grove of trees he'd spotted earlier that was basically where bleachers would be off of first base. He could easily imagine himself in charge of first base or right field and running towards the grove after a ball.

"So past this..."

Koutarou walked over to the grove and stared into it. It was still plenty light outside, but the grove was overgrown enough that it was hard to keep track of his footing. The trees and shrubbery were also just dense enough that it was hard to see anything up ahead. But the longer he stood there, the stronger the feeling got. There was definitely something in there.

Whoosh!

"The swords?!"

As if to confirm his theory, his two swords, Saguratin and Signaltin, appeared

before him. He hadn't called for them. They had appeared completely on their own.

"...So I'll need the swords, huh?"

It was bizarre. Without the girls, Koutarou never would have gone to Forthorthe... meaning he shouldn't have either sword in his possession. Yet here they were. Full of questions, Koutarou grabbed hold of both blades. Though he didn't know what, he was sure that the swords coming to him on their own meant something.

"Koutarou..."

The moment he grasped the swords, he could hear someone's voice in his head. It was a memory of someone calling his name in the past.

"That's right! I remember hearing someone's voice here!"

With that, Koutarou recovered part of his lost memories. Two years ago to the day, he'd heard a strange voice call to him while he was working and come to this grove to investigate.

"Koutarou..."

As he replayed what he remembered of that day in his head, he heard the voice again. But this time it wasn't a memory.

"This way..."

"It's the same as that day... I heard this voice and entered the grove..."

Reliving his memories, Koutarou stepped into the grove. It was so densely overgrown that it made it hard to see ahead. Back then, he'd been convinced that it was Kenji trying to play a prank on him. And in this world, he was sure he wouldn't have hesitated to chase a ball in here.

"Then... I fell into this hole!"

Eventually, Koutarou stumbled across a hole just big enough for a person to fit through largely disguised by the underbrush. This was where he'd fallen and hit his head.

Being his second time here, Koutarou was more cautious. Rather than falling, he carefully descended down the hole. It was dark inside, but he could see well enough thanks to the glow of his swords. It didn't take long to reach the bottom, which, unlike the small shaft down, was wonderfully illuminated.

"What is this?!"

Koutarou found himself in a room that stretched ten meters in every direction with a floor and walls of elaborate stonework. Standing in the middle it all were nine pillars forming a circle. Each one was about as tall as a person and had a differently colored glowing sphere atop it. There were all seven shades of the rainbow, plus white and black. When they mixed together, they produced a warm light like the sun.

"There's someone here?!"

In the center of the circle formed by the pillars was a single stand. It too was made of stone, and its surface had been artfully shaved down to perfection. On top of it stood a lone girl with a mysterious appearance. She had long hair shimmering in all nine colors of reflected light. Her unique outfit looked like a shrine maiden's, but had a much older feel to it. When Koutarou looked at her closely, he could see that her feet weren't even touching the pedestal. She was just barely floating above it. But what stood out the most about her were her eyes. They were profoundly clear and beautiful. Looking into them was like peering into a pristine lake. And those beautiful eyes were staring right at Koutarou.

This is strange... What is this feeling?

Koutarou was confused, but there was no sense of alarm or unease. He felt no fear or apprehension about the mysterious girl in front of him. Quite the opposite. She felt familiar to him. Like she was someone he knew well.

I've never met her before... No, I met her once in Folsaria, but she had four colors back then... Just who is this girl?

Koutarou remembered one previous encounter with this girl, but he'd only seen her. They hadn't properly met, much less talked. There should be no reason that he felt this way about her.

Shing!

“The swords?!”

While Koutarou was puzzling over her identity, his two swords left their sheaths and floated up into the air before him on their own. From there, they morphed into one and began glowing many colors. It was Nalfalaren, whose blade shone like the girl before him.

“Koutarou, I’ve always been waiting for you...”

As if she’d been waiting for the swords to become one, the girl started speaking. He recognized her voice. He’d heard it before he’d come down here, and he’d heard it under the same circumstances two years prior. But hearing it again now, he felt like he knew it from somewhere else, too. It felt like the voice of an old friend, but that couldn’t be right. He had no memory of ever speaking with her. Something didn’t add up.

“Just what are you...”

Unafraid, Koutarou slowly stepped closer to the girl. His heart told him that she posed no danger, though that puzzled him all the more.

“Infinite yous exist in the infinite spanse of infinite time and the infinite universe, but you right here are the first to return with all nine colors residing in this sword.”

As Koutarou approached, the girl stepped down from the pedestal and faced him. She was shorter than he was, but since she was floating ever so slightly, they stood roughly eye to eye.

“Who are you? What are you talking about?”

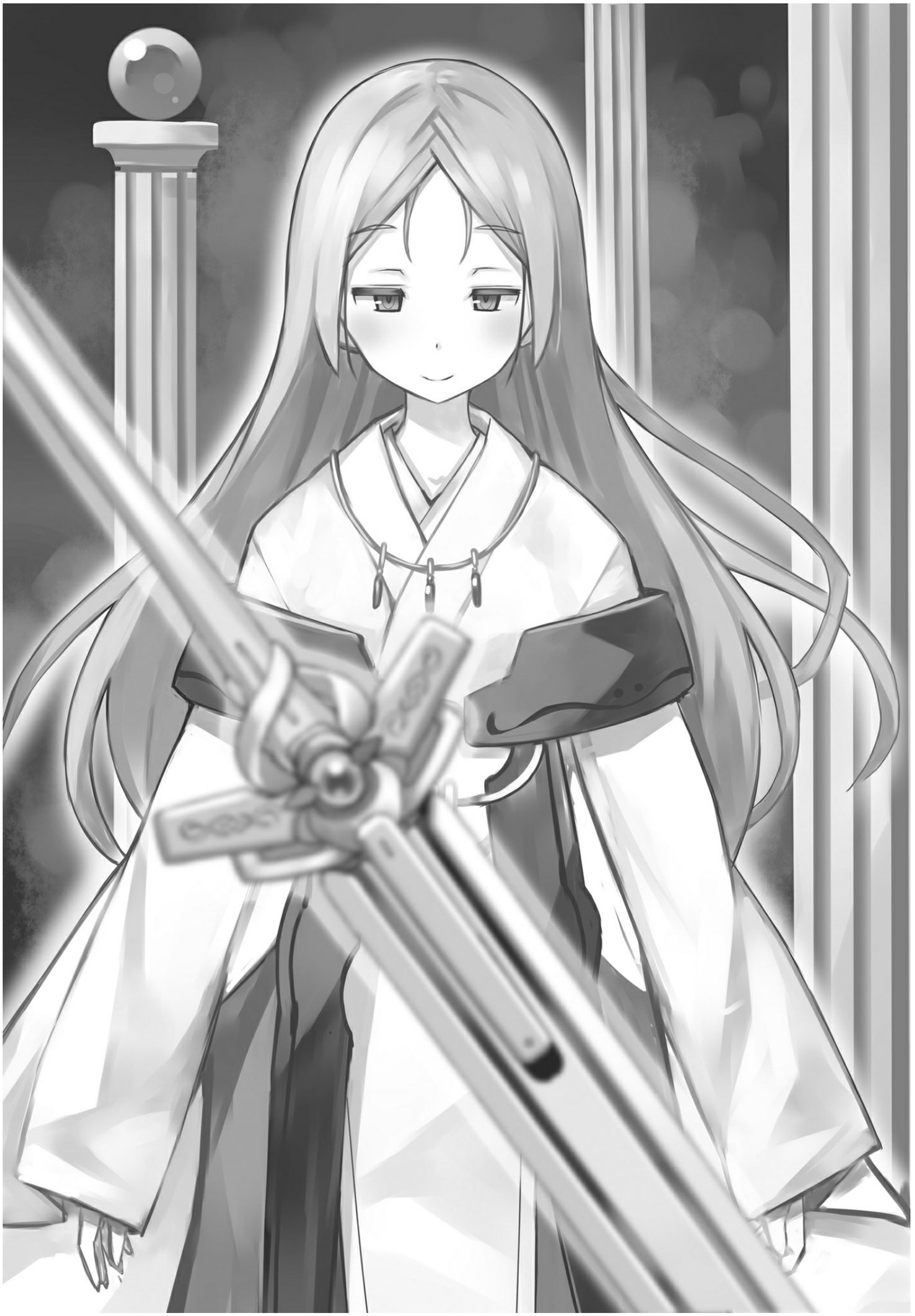
Koutarou’s confusion only grew as they exchanged looks. He felt like he knew those eyes and what lay on the other side of them.

“The first wish has come true. Two more remain.”

But instead of answering him, she merely said things that bemused him further still.

“Ah...”

However, that kicked it all off. His missing memories from two years ago came flooding back to him at a frightening pace, like water from a burst dam.



Two years ago, Koutarou had fallen into the same hole and met the same girl he stood before now. The experience was largely the same, the only difference being that he was on his guard the first time since it was all unfamiliar to him.

“What are you...”

“I am looking for that answer myself.”

“What are you doing here?”

“I’ve always been waiting. For you to come to me...”

What she’d said was so abstract that Koutarou couldn’t make sense of it. Back then, he’d still had a high wall built around his heart. He had no expectation of making a lasting connection with a passing acquaintance, so he didn’t particularly care whether he understood what was going on with her or not. But she’d said something that grabbed his interest. She’d said she was waiting for him.

“You were waiting for me...? What do you mean?”

“You have infinite potential. You are the only hope that might free me from my omniscience and omnipotence. A singularity in probability.”

“I don’t really follow... Can you repeat that in a way I can understand?”

Her words baffled him, so she omitted most of the explanation and only told him what he needed to know. Since she couldn’t tell him everything, that would be the only way to make it work.

“I will grant you three wishes. Three and only three, but for anything.”

“You’ll grant me... wishes?”

“Yes.”

“Any wish...? You really mean anything at all?”

“Yes.”

That only fanned the flames of his confusion. There was no way he could just believe a claim like that. Even if she was serious, he figured that she was only speaking metaphorically. He thought that she just meant she’d do her best to make his wishes come true.

“All right, then, for starters... I want to have a fun high school life full of ups and downs. But since I’ll have university entrance exams as a third-year, I guess that should only continue until the end of my second year... How about that?”

And so Koutarou casually made his first wish. It was a harmless wish—one he wouldn’t be heartbroken over if it didn’t come true. He had no idea why this girl was making him such an offer, but he didn’t think that was too much of an unrealistic request. After all, if he made a friend here, then his high school life would have already taken a turn for the better.

“I understand. Then—”

And as a result, Koutarou did indeed lead a fun high school life full of ups and downs for two years.

Fully regaining his memories, Koutarou was shaken. He now remembered what he’d wished for and what had happened afterward, but even then, it was difficult to accept. This was truly earth-shattering.

“J-Just wait a minute! Does that mean that you sent them to me?!”

“Yes. You should have had a fun high school life full of ups and downs, just like you wished for,” the girl replied with a firm nod.

By “them,” Koutarou meant the invaders. And by agreeing, the girl was acknowledging she’d sent them to room 106. Koutarou met the invaders and fought with them, then slowly came to understand and feel for them. They’d held hands through thick and thin, the extreme and the everyday... all because he’d wished for it.

“Then why?! If you did all of that, why did you suddenly stop?!”

Koutarou assumed that if she had been the one to send the girls, she must have been the one to take them away. And he didn’t understand why. Both he and the girls had suffered terribly for it. She could have just left them be.

“Your wish was for two years. Since the designated time has passed, I returned everything to normal.”

The reason she had erased the girls was simple. It was because Koutarou’s

wish had been fulfilled. Two years ago, Koutarou had figured he'd need to buckle down and study for his last year of high school. That's why he'd only wished for two years of fun. And as such, his wish had now expired. In a way, it could all be chalked up to that wall around Koutarou's heart. For you see, in the past, lasting bonds and friendships hadn't been included in his wish for a fun high school life. He'd never dreamed to ask for that. But the past two years had changed his frame of mind, making it a problem now.

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

That was the truth behind the overlapping probabilities that Kiriha had pointed out. It was hard to believe, but her predictions and everything that had happened backed up what this girl was claiming. Koutarou couldn't find a single way to refute it.

"...I have two wishes left, right?"

"Yes. Two and only two."

Only one problem remained, and that was what to do from here. Koutarou had had two fun-filled years, so he now should focus on studying like he'd planned. Or he could just wish for success on his exams. He could even wish for another exciting year. If he put a time limit on it, things could easily return to normal just like they had this time. There were infinite possibilities.

"Then... give them back to me."

But all Koutarou wanted was for the missing girls to be returned to him. He never considered wishing for anything else, and he had no second thoughts.

"By 'them,' you mean all nine?"

"That's right. Nothing more, and certainly nothing less."

In the past, Koutarou and Clan had clashed over a dilemma regarding their timeslip. They only had so much time, and thusly had been forced to choose who to save and who not to save on their way back to their normal lives. They'd come to the conclusion that the best thing to do was not to seek out those who needed to be saved, but limit their interference to helping those in front of them. That was the rule they'd decided on about how to handle their finite lives.

And Koutarou applied that same way of thinking now. If he could truly have any wish granted to him, that was a power far greater than even time travel. But he limited himself to correcting the situation he was currently in. He didn't want to play god. He just wanted his life back.

"If those girls are returned without a time limit put in place, the world you inhabited with them will be permanently established as your reality. You won't be able to return to the normal life that you wanted in the past."

With the girls around, Koutarou's world would open up in unbelievable, irrevocable ways. It would change his life forever, meaning he could never go back to being just a normal high school student.

"I don't mind. Please do it."

"...Why do you feel that way?"

"It's not like I have a particular reason. It's just that I need all of them in my life. Before I knew it, they *were* my normal life."

The sun rose in the morning and set in the evening. Rain clouds made rainbows. There didn't need to be an explanation for it, it was just the way the world worked. And for Koutarou... part of his world was the invaders. It didn't altogether matter why; it was simply how things had come to be.

"The same goes for them... and the people around them! This is what we all wished for!"

Koutarou remembered the little girl who was grieving Kiriha's loss even though she couldn't remember her. She felt like she was missing something, and it upset her terribly. That was probably happening for all the other girls' friends and family too. Sanae's parents, Harumi's classmates, Yurika's cosclub friends... The list went on. Koutarou had to return the sun and rainbows to their proper places for their sakes too. Even if the start of everything had been nothing more than a whim, it was all too real now.

"Ah, over the passage of endless days and nights, through the crossing of immeasurable distance... Just how many times have I dreamed of this moment in these infinite yet closed worlds?"

Strangely enough, upon hearing Koutarou's wish, the girl began to cry. Tears

streaked down her cheeks without end, catching the nine colorful lights shining in the room as they tumbled towards the floor.

“Why are you crying? Are you sad?”

Koutarou didn’t understand why the girl before him was crying. His wish shouldn’t have been anything that upset her, yet there were tears coming from her eyes. Koutarou couldn’t help finding it mysterious.

“No, I’m crying because I’m happy. I’m happy that you desire the girls and made that wish.”

As the girl shook her head, glittering tears scattered from her eyes. She tried to wipe her eyes, but no matter how many times she did, the tears just kept coming. In the end, she gave up on wiping away her tears and smiled. Her cheeks were still wet from crying, but her smile was indeed a joyful one.

“I was always waiting for that... You’ve finally wished for it, Koutarou...”

As she smiled, her body turned semi-transparent. For a moment, Koutarou thought that she would disappear as well, but he soon realized that was a misunderstanding.

“Hey, Koutarou! Were you lonely? I was! Hurry up and comfort me already!”

“You finally said it clearly. Just how long were you going to take to say something so simple? Jeez...”

“Your Highness, please don’t blame Master. As a man, I’m sure this is more difficult for him than we can imagine.”

“Well, I’ll praise you for honestly saying it instead of being stubborn, Veltlion.”

“M-Maki-chan, you should say something to Koutarou instead of crying.”

“But... But Satomi-kun just... Hic... I’m just so happy...”

“Oh? You seem awfully composed, Sakuraba-senpai. Since you were the last one, did you do something bold like give him a goodbye kiss?”

“I did not! I definitely didn’t kiss him! Are you even listening to me, Kasagi-san?!”

As the girl in the middle turned semi-transparent, a figure appeared from

each of the nine pillars around her. It was all nine of the invaders, equally transparent. By the look of things, it almost seemed to Koutarou like the girl in the middle was giving them life.

“E-Everyone, you’re okay?!”

Invaders of the Rokujouma

Tuesday, April 5th

When that existence first became conscious, the first thing it felt was that the world was cramped. Time stood still in an infinitely small world shared by only its consciousness and boundless energy. It left the existence with a vague sense of dissatisfaction.

But in truth, the concept of crampedness inherently involved a comparison to something else... something less confining. And what the existence was really feeling dissatisfied over was a lack of exactly that—anything else. It was only the existence alone in the universe, and all it could do was aimlessly exist there. It was profoundly disheartening. Rephrased in a way easier for humans to understand, the existence couldn't bear the loneliness.

But at some point, something changed. A boy and girl appeared from a fluctuation in the boundless energy. However, the world was far too small to accommodate them. Space was compressed to its utmost, and the boy and girl were fated to be reduced to energy immediately after appearing. Yet that didn't happen. The singular existence of the world took an interest in the two visitors and protected them so that it might better come to understand what they were.

And it was through this meeting that the existence learned that it was lonely. It came to understand the concept of loneliness from the boy's emotions and memories, and with that, it grew self-aware. Once it understood what had been bothering it all along, the existence examined the boy closer in order to find a way to escape it. And in studying the boy's memories, the existence came to define its sense of self.

Surprisingly, it seemed the boy had already encountered the existence in the past. Looking at his memories of it, the existence gave itself form. A delicate figure dressed in a unique outfit that looked like both a shrine maiden's garb

and traditional Japanese clothing. Hair that shimmered the colors of the rainbow. It was there—meeting Koutarou who'd been blown to the ends of the universe by the Super Space-time Repulsion Shell—that "the existence" became "she."

After sending Koutarou and Clan back to their world, she expanded her own and created the universe. Without that, not only would Koutarou and Clan be in trouble, but she would have no way of dealing with her loneliness.

However, her attempts didn't go so well. Ages after the universe was born, many civilizations had been born and then disappeared. Between them all had been a handful who were able to find her, but not a single one could save her from her loneliness. In the end, her omniscience and omnipotence got in the way. Those evil of heart only wanted her powers and never saw her for who she was. And those pure of heart rejected her powers, believing that they were too much for mankind.

Her greatest expectations had been with the Ancient Forthorthians. They were a just, fair, kind, and loving people. But even they had sealed away the sword of their own will and turned down a connection with her. She'd never felt as much sorrow over her omniscience and omnipotence as she did then. No one understood her loneliness.

After all that, the girl—who all alone bore the constant pain of her solitude and the repeated disappointment and despair of being rejected—had but one hope. The boy named Koutarou.

He was the only existence in the endless time and infinite space of the universe that had the potentiality of accepting her. He'd been caught in a timeslip and was fated to travel to the past. That created a sort of feedback loop, infinitely spawning parallel worlds, which in turn meant that he had infinite potential. The girl made a gamble. That of the endless Koutarous that would eventually come to exist, one might come to accept her. But there was something else about Koutarou. Something more than just the timeslip he'd been caught in.

When Kiriha mentioned this special quality, he cocked his head to the side.

“A special quality? I don’t have anything like that! I’m just a normal guy. When it all comes down to it, you girls are all way more special than I am.”

Koutarou didn’t think there was anything special about himself. Seeing his confusion, Harumi smiled at him and took over explaining.

“That’s not quite what she meant, Satomi-kun.”

“Then what did she mean?”

When Koutarou asked her that, the smile vanished from Harumi’s lips. She continued with sincere eyes and in a serious voice.

“Because of your experience when you were young... you were left unable to truly accept people. You’d given up, telling yourself that everyone would eventually disappear in the end anyway. That there was no point in letting them get close to you.”

As a child, Koutarou had lost his mother because he’d done something stupid. It had deeply scarred him. There was no way sweet Harumi could speak of such a thing with a smile on her face.

“For there to be someone you could find it in you to accept, it would have to be someone you were sure wouldn’t disappear.”

Koutarou couldn’t deny what Harumi was saying. Looking back on it, he now believed that way of thinking was a mistake. The past two years he’d spent with the invaders had taught him that. But there was no denying that was how he’d been in the past. Truth be told, it reared its ugly head even now in the form of doubt from time to time. It was difficult for people to truly change, but what would happen from here would change everything.

“However, all humans will disappear someday. For there to be someone who wouldn’t... they would have to be divine. In short, Satomi-kun, you needed a god by your side.”

It’s not like he needed omniscience and omnipotence. He didn’t care if it was a normal person, he simply wanted someone who could stay by his side forever. But that required divine power, even if it was just a means to an end. And so, one way or another, Koutarou was ready and willing to accept omniscience and omnipotence.

“That’s a special quality completely unique to you, Satomi-kun.”

Timeslips could happen both artificially and naturally, and Koutarou wasn’t the only person to ever get caught up in one. Throughout the universe, many people had been sent forward or backward in time. But of all those who’d made such a journey, Koutarou was the only one who had the special quality of being able to accept omniscience and omnipotence.

“To think I... But you’re not wrong...”

Koutarou’s eyes opened wide and he stood still with a blank look of surprise on his face. Harumi had made an extraordinary and unexpected point, but it was quite valid. Though Koutarou had convinced himself that everyone would eventually disappear, he hadn’t been able to abandon people completely. He feared solitude and, somewhere deep down, still sought companionship. The only one who would be able to fulfill his conflicting desires would be a divine being, just as Harumi had described.

“That might have been it...”

Koutarou felt like he had been splashed with cold water. Facing the true depths of his own heart was difficult. Knowing that, Harumi simply looked at him with gentle eyes. And so Ruth took over the explanation from there.

“But, Master, while you essentially desire someone who would never disappear, accepting a god is a difficult task.”

Regardless of what Koutarou desired, the almighty powers of a divine being were too much for man. Even if Koutarou possessed the potential to do it, actually doing it would be another matter altogether. The last hurdle that needed to be cleared in order to take the hand of a god seemed far too high.

“That’s why you needed to come to understanding and acceptance gradually. That’s why it all had to start with minor events. And once you acclimated to those, things went from there... slowly stepping up without being too overwhelming.”

Sports worked the same way. No one became a world-class athlete overnight. It took training and practice, and that was exactly what Koutarou had been going through. Practice to accept a god.

“W-Wait a minute!”

Everything had all been a rehearsal for this. And when Koutarou realized what Ruth meant when she said “minor events,” he couldn’t stay quiet.

“You’re saying that’s why you guys came to me?! To broaden my mind?!”

Koutarou—or any other human for that matter—didn’t have the capacity to accept a god. It would be like trying to fit the entire universe into Koutarou’s tiny apartment. That’s why he’d chosen never to let anyone in. There wasn’t enough room. To change that, she had sent him a minor event to make a minor change. And then a slightly larger one. By repeatedly doing that and increasing the scale each time, she’d been broadening Koutarou’s mind and heart. He’d gone from living in an apartment just barely big enough for himself to a universe-sized one that took him on a grand adventure across galaxies for the sake of his friends. And she felt that now he might really be capable of accepting a god.

“So it seems,” Theia replied with a wry smile and a shrug.

Not even someone who loved being flashy as much as Theia did would go that far. Though she’d been an integral part of everything that had happened, she was also surprised to learn the truth.

“Essentially, she divided her existence into nine parts and introduced them to you one at a time.”

She had vast spiritual energy like Sanae, the ability to alter the world with magic like Yurika, the wisdom to foresee the future like Kiriha, advanced combat skills like Theia, the swiftness to orchestrate even the most complex tasks with ease like Ruth, a powerful brain like Clan, the ability to manipulate minds like Maki, and the powers of creation and destruction like Harumi and Shizuka respectively. In other words, the nine girls together were almighty.

“That’s not all. She also divided her worries into nine,” added Sanae.

She was being unusually serious for once. Not even she could joke around about something that concerned the existence and fate of her friends like this.

“I was always alone, and Kiriha was looking for you. Nobody could understand Yurika, and Theia and Ruth had no one they could trust. Maki was frozen and in

need of someone's warmth, Harumi chased after you from a different world, Glasses was always concerned about the course of history, and Shizuka was protecting Corona House—our world—all on her own."

Her worries, just like her powers, had been divided among the nine girls. Worries she had been waiting forever to be saved from.

"But once we were split into nine, we butted heads. The mental problems and conflicts she'd been bearing materialized. And you were dragged into that, Satomi-kun," Shizuka said in a somewhat upset tone.

Different powers, different worries, different standpoints. Inside of the girl shining nine colors, there had always been a struggle. Once that took the form of humans, of course there would end up being conflict between them. That's why the invaders had fought with each other. Their spat had nearly burned down Corona House, so it was a particular point of contention with Shizuka. But things were different now. The invaders had come together.

"Then this girl is..."

Koutarou slowly began to understand just who this girl was and what she wanted.

"That's right," said Clan, affirming Koutarou's suspicions. "She's always been waiting. For the day when you would get us all to reconcile. For the day when you accepted all of us."

That was the truth of it.

"Since timeslips create feedback, you have infinite potential, Veltlion. She's waited endless time and crossed immeasurable distance, praying that you would come to realize that potential."

There was more than one universe. This wasn't the first. Far from it. Kiriha's prediction was correct. Of the infinite universes, there were countless Koutarous. Only one of them needed to unite the girls, resolve their problems, and wholeheartedly accept them. And this Koutarou had done it.

"So what?! You did all of this just to ask me what part of you I liked?!"

It was a devilish question that girls would ask boys from time to time. It was

trouble for the boy no matter how he answered. But this was unprecedented. And Koutarou had certainly been through more than his fair share of trouble over the last two years.

“That’s right. And you said that you loved all of it, Satomi-san!” piped up Yurika.

“Heehee, you said that you needed all of us in your life, Satomi-kun,” added Maki.

Koutarou was still standing there with a blank look of surprise on his face, but the two magical girls called to him cheerfully. Of all the possible Koutarous, theirs had accomplished everything. They were proud of that.

“Right now, you should not fear her,” said Ruth.

“How could I?! I can only sense you guys’ presences from her!”

When Koutarou faced the girl glowing in nine colors once more, he could tell why she seemed so familiar. Her presence was a mixture of all of the other girls’. That’s why he’d felt no apprehension around her.

“That’s true. It’s just like how you didn’t fear Nalfalaren.”

“Then this sword is...?!”

Listening to Ruth, Koutarou turned to look at the sword that was floating in the air. She was right. The presence he felt from it was the same. It was the combined presence of the nine girls.

“That’s right, Koutarou,” said Kiriha. “You didn’t fear the sword. Despite its power to shake the very universe, you didn’t hesitate to take it in your hand and use it. That was something you were able to do after accepting us.”

It was strange, just like she said. The sword had immense power. Under the right conditions, it might even be able to slice a planet in half. But Koutarou hadn’t been afraid to wield it. Not in the slightest. He knew it had come from the girls.

“And you returned here bearing the sword aglow with nine colors to meet her once more.”

His acceptance of the sword meant that the stage was completely set. That’s

why the girls had disappeared, and Koutarou was guided to this place. It wasn't just that his two-year wish had expired. The truth was hidden here.

"So it was all for this moment?! For me to understand your circumstances and solitude, and to face you without any fear?!"

"Bingo," said Sanae. "This girl granted your wish while secretly praying that you would come to love and need us. This girl is the first and final invader of room 106."

That was the reason why so much had happened around Koutarou over the last two years. All of it had been born from his wish. And from hers—a small wish to connect with someone. Love is all.

Hearing everything the girls were telling him, Koutarou had gained a rough idea of the situation. But that inspired a new question in him.

"There's something I don't get. You're all-powerful, right? Couldn't you just have made the world you desired from the beginning instead of doing all this?"

Koutarou wanted to know why she'd gone about things in such a roundabout way. It seemed horribly inefficient to him. Just one loop of Koutarou's timeslip took two thousand years. And if that had really been repeated endlessly, it was all a grand waste of time.

"I didn't want a doll in your shape. I wanted you to accept me—to accept us—of your own free will."

The girl's answer was similar to Maki's way of thinking. Since she was able to manipulate minds, she could easily make people think and feel the way she wanted. But they would only be dolls. And since what she desired was a real connection, that wouldn't work for her.

"But even then, you could have intervened more."

"That would have been the same as you travelling to the past. As I'm not bound by time or space, my intervention would only give rise to more parallel universes. And more reactive chaos."

"Chaos?"

“You should have seen it several times already. The massive whirlpool that absorbs malice and generates abnormal power. That’s a reaction from me creating the world. And it still smolders in the shadows.”

Creating a world out of nothing meant giving order to boundless energy. But pulling order from energy meant that what was left was chaos. When chaos and order came into contact, they annihilated each other and were reduced back to pure energy. The whirlpool of chaos was constantly trying to return the world to its primordial nothingness.

And the more the girl altered the world, the more chaos would be born from her meddling, making the endeavor unsafe and unwise. That was why, instead, she’d mostly relied on slower and indirect change, waiting for the world to change on its own.

“There’s no value in a doll and you didn’t want to make more chaos, which is why all you could do was keep your intervention to a minimum and observe. Basically, you were worried about the same things we were when we travelled to the past... You were literally worrying over playing god, huh?”

She wouldn’t go out of her way to exercise her omniscience and omnipotence. And if she did have to intervene, she would keep it limited and it would only be for the immediate needs right in front of her. Otherwise, she would only create more problems. There was enough chaos as it was leftover from the creation of the world. Adding to that was to be avoided. Indeed, her worries very closely mirrored Koutarou and Clan’s when they were travelling in the past.

“But if you’re omniscient, you should have already known what I would say and how I would act. Doesn’t that make this all like playing with dolls in the end anyway?”

Koutarou still had questions. The girl had said she wasn’t interested in a doll, but weren’t her powers a hindrance in that? She should be able to tell what Koutarou would say and do. There was no salvation here. She was just watching a puppet show play out with a plot she already knew.

“No, I can’t foresee your future.”

But strangely enough, the girl shook her head at Koutarou’s question. She

then narrowed her eyes in a smile, almost as if she were looking at something bright.

“What?!”

“That sword contains a portion of my power, which is what’s protecting you.”

“But your powers are stronger, right?”

“They are. But it’s much harder to decipher a code than it is to create one. I have no way of knowing your future—or your heart—at this very moment.”

“That’s one of the reasons I have this sword... To create a future that not even you can foresee?”

“Yes.”

Nalfalaren contained but a fragment of the girl’s power. If she gave it her all, she could override it and reveal Koutarou’s future and his feelings. But that would take some time, and any change to the cipher in the meantime would frustrate her attempt to solve it. Of course, if she took his sword, that would eliminate the problem altogether, but she had no intention of doing that. The sword was a connection to Koutarou. Cutting that was out of the question.

“You’re such a sincere and serious goddess. You’re definitely losing out more than the other gods... That is, if there are any...”

Ultimately, this was anticlimactic. The more Koutarou learned of her circumstances, the more affection he felt for her. This girl was clearly different from the supreme gods spoken of in myths and legends. She was too human, almost to a fault. But perhaps that was only obvious since she was the collective of the nine invaders.

“I don’t know of any other gods, but... you’re the only one I have, so I don’t want to do anything terrible.”

Now that he’d started feeling affection for the girl, Koutarou realized something.

I guess religion would normally get in the way of this kind of connection. Being put up on a pedestal can be a terrible thing. That’s why...

Right now, Koutarou could see past his own preconceptions. While it might

sound like a contradiction, the existence before him was both an almighty god and a simple girl. Just like the girls of room 106. And this girl had taken painstaking efforts so he could see that. Breaking through someone's preconceptions without forcing it was that difficult of a task. Believing that Koutarou would eventually understand, she had taken a long, hard road of uncertainty in order not to trample on anyone's free will.

"Speaking of other gods... Just out of curiosity, how many others have come before me?"

After talking with the girl, Koutarou began wondering how many versions of himself there had been. How many times the timeslip loop had repeated herself. He wanted to know just how roundabout this path she'd chosen really was.

"The number changes significantly depending on how you count them."

"So what if we just limit it to the mes that managed to make it back here?"

"You would be around the 5,670,000,000th. But you are the first to return with the sword glowing nine colors."

There were infinite Koutarous across infinite parallel worlds. There were some where he hadn't bonded with any of the nine girls, and plenty where he had only bonded with just one. There were also cases where the nine girls weren't necessarily the ones in front of him now. It could have been Elfaria standing before the green pillar, or Alaia or Ceilēshu before the white one. But of the infinite Koutarous that had existed, 5,670,00,000 had made it back here. It was a nearly unthinkable number, but the important part was that it was this Koutarou who was here right now.

"So my future is the only one you can't foresee?"

"Yes. Your heart and future are the only ones locked to me. You're a unique existence, so not even predicting your actions by looking at similar yous in different worlds is effective."

"So that's why it's only me... Hmm?"

"Teeheehee..."

“You seem happy.”

“Yes. This is the first time this has happened. I’m omniscient, but this is all new to me.”

Nalfalaren was an embodiment of the girl’s power. Missing one of its colors meant that the sword—and its protection—were incomplete, allowing the girl to read Koutarou’s thoughts and future. Looking at it the other way around, Koutarou returning here with the complete, perfected sword denied her that power. She was no longer truly omniscient.

“So let me ask you this... What is your third wish?”

“I don’t have one. I’ll fulfill my own wishes. I just want to take everyone home with me.”

“I see. Perhaps that is for the best...”

Hearing Koutarou’s answer, the girl smiled. He had returned with the completed sword. To wrap things up now, all she had to do was dissolve her own existence and give it to the nine girls he wished for. That way everyone would be happy. Even her.

“Koutarou, please take care of them.”

The girl didn’t wish for any more or less than that. After what she’d already forced on them, she had no intention of taking the girls from Koutarou, or Koutarou from the girls. They had a bond. He’d accepted the truth behind the girl who shimmered with all nine colors, and still said that he wanted to take the girls back home. The miracle she herself had wished for had finally happened. This very moment was the payoff for everything.

“Well then, everyone, let’s go home now.”

“Okay!”

At Harumi’s signal, the nine girls gathered around Koutarou. The girl standing in the center of the room watched them all with a satisfied smile before clasping her hands before her chest and beginning to pray. This would be her last job—to erase herself and divide her powers into these nine girls for good. But that was when the truly unthinkable happened.

“What are you doing? You’re coming too.”

Koutarou forcibly grabbed her hand and pulled her along with him as he headed for the exit. Perhaps because he was embarrassed, his voice was rather rough.

“Excuse me? Where are you taking me?”

The girl was bewildered at this completely unexpected turn of events. She had no idea what was happening. Koutarou had accepted the nine girls, so she only needed to assimilate her existence into them. She didn’t much care what form she took. But that wasn’t what Koutarou wanted.

“What are you talking about?! To Corona House, of course! Are you an idiot?! If you’re all of them put together, there’s no reason for you not to be with us!”

Koutarou was angry with the girl who didn’t understand anything. When he’d said “everyone,” he’d meant it. He had decided to accept the nine girls and everything about them, both good and bad. If this girl was really a part of each of them, then it automatically meant he accepted her too. There was no way he was going to leave her behind. He didn’t see any other way it could be. After all, when she’d asked him what part of her he liked, he’d said, “All of you.”

“Well, of course this would happen,” sighed Theia.

“Lay... I mean, Satomi-kun is the person who didn’t hesitate to save Forthorthe, Folsaria, and the People of the Earth, after all,” added Harumi.

“Satomi Koutarou’s awkwardness is dyed in the wool,” commented Kiriha.

“There’s no way the man I trust would leave her behind,” said Clan.

“If we’re going to add another, maybe we should connect room 206 and room 106?” suggested Shizuka.

“To think that Shizuka is making the big decision to remodel!” gasped Maki.

“In that case, expand my wardrobe while you’re at it, too!” demanded Yurika.

“Say, Yurika, has the idea of leaving the wardrobe never occurred to you?” mocked Sanae.

“Heehee, that might be like asking if any of us ever considered leaving Corona

House,” giggled Ruth.

Strangely enough, only the girl glowing nine colors was surprised. The invaders all seemed to have expected this. Indeed, they had expected it from the very beginning. After all, they’d known Koutarou for two years now.

“But I’m a god...”

“So what?”

“So what?! Things would become absurd!”

“I don’t mind that so much anymore.”

With a god added to their party, the lives of Koutarou and the girls would surely take a turn for the unusual. But Koutarou didn’t care. This was what he had to do.

“I mind!”

However, she had misgivings about it, so he decided to back off a little. That maturity was part of him that had developed over the last two years.

“Then why not take a break from being a god for a while and be human? You could do something like that if you wanted, right? You’re almighty, after all.”

“I could if I put my mind to it, but...”

“So just put your mind at ease and enjoy a vacation. Like for a hundred years or something.”

Since she didn’t like intervening in the world in the first place, her becoming human should have minimal consequences. If a whirlpool appeared during that period, Koutarou would take responsibility and deal with it. That way there shouldn’t be any problems.

“...Really, Koutarou?”

“Why would I lie to you? If you like, I could make that my third wish.”

“I’m definitely a troublesome woman, you know...”

“Yeah, I know. For better or worse, you’re these guys,” Koutarou said, pointing to the invaders.

“Objection! I’m not troublesome!” shouted Sanae.

“I’m self-centered and selfish, yet all I can do is wait!”

“Call it what you want, but I know the truth. You waited for someone else to wish for what you wanted for you. I know, because if you’d wished for it, you’d have it already.”

Koutarou continued walking towards the exit without turning around. He was too embarrassed to look her in the face as he said all that, but he stubbornly refused to let go of her hand.

“Ah, I... I...”

“You idiot, you just need to shut up and follow me. You’re overthinking things.”

And no matter her protest, she would never let go of his hand either. There was no way she could. Tears kept her from seeing. Her sobs kept her from speaking. Right now, the warmth of Koutarou’s hand guiding her down the path she should take was all she needed. It was everything.

The nine girls following behind them were smiling happily and whispering to each other.

“It’s not like Koutarou could have overlooked her in that state. He’s stupidly fixated on being a perfect knight. So much so that he’d pass up half a galaxy,” said Theia.

“Your Highness, I’m not so sure what to make of your expression, but I understand what you mean...” said Ruth.

“Even though she’s a goddess, she doesn’t seem to get it,” said Sanae.

“Maybe she hasn’t read enough shoujo manga?” said Yurika.

“We have nine wills and point of views. If she cannot see the future, that works in our favor. And besides, because of her abilities, she’s probably not used to imagining what people are thinking,” said Kiriha.

“If it’s anything like when I left Darkness Rainbow, she never dreamed Koutarou would take her with him. Like me, she probably felt like she wasn’t even allowed to have such dreams...” said Maki.

“That’s just the kind of guy Satomi-kun is. You can feel it in his aura,” said Shizuka.

“A knight’s benevolence does not discriminate, not even with the Goddess of Dawn... Satomi-kun always surpasses expectations. He did two thousand years ago, just like he is now, and just like he surely will in the future...” said Harumi.

Each of the invaders could understand how the girl felt. And they knew what would happen from here on, because they’d all travelled down that road in the past themselves.

Love is all.

It was just a matter of time.



Gently in Both Hands

Tuesday, April 5th

The setting sun greeted Koutarou and the girls upon leaving the underground shrine. The sounds of people talking and heavy machinery running could be heard from not too far away. With the school year about to start again, there were less part-time workers at the site these days and progress on the dig had slowed down some. To make up for that, they continued working into the evening.

“Jeez, we’re finally back to normal...”

Koutarou held his right hand up to block the light shining in his face. After being underground, even the evening sun was dazzling. With his eyes shielded, he took a good look around his surroundings. After he was done with that, he finally let go of the girl’s hand he was holding with his left.

“Hahh, what did I even get so worked up for? In the end, the tenth was hidden behind the others. Jeez, I feel stupid just thinking about it...”

Everything had been resolved. By Koutarou’s side were now ten girls, none of which were transparent or fading. The missing excavation site had returned. It all felt right, even the sunlight and the breeze. Things would be busy tomorrow onward, but he and the girls had their peace of mind for now.

“This is all because of you thinking stupid things.”

“Has your attitude changed?”

Bathed in the evening sun, the girl’s long hair shone in nine colors. But the brightest thing of all was her smile. It was like she had been purged of her sadness.

“Of course. You’re one of us now.”

Whap!

Koutarou smacked the girl's forehead with an open palm like it was no big deal. It was the same way he treated Theia and Sanae.

"Good. I'm very happy."

But despite being hit, the girl's smile didn't fade in the slightest. If anything, it looked even brighter now. Though they'd practically just met, it already seemed like they had a dynamic together. It was a charming sight, but one person in particular seemed to take issue with it.

"I won't forgive this! What's with this transcendent cheating?!"

It was Theia. She was a more mature person than she had been two years ago, so she'd chosen to stay quiet and wait for everything to settle down before letting her feelings erupt. And she was now staring at the girl in question with a glum expression.

"Now, now, Your Highness, she *is* the Goddess of Dawn. She has also been through a lot, and she's even a part of us..."

Ruth tried to calm Theia with something of a forced smile. In truth, she could understand how Theia felt. All of the hardships and anxiety they'd experienced over the past few days had been because of her. But in the end, they were connected to her. They *were* her. And Ruth couldn't help feeling that her stubbornness was reflected in Theia's personality. That's why she sympathized with the girl instead of blaming her. The same was true for the other invaders as well.

"No, I won't accept this! Koutarou belongs to me! I won't give him up to someone trying to steal him from the sidelines!"

"My, how troubling..."

Despite one of her facets rebelling and trying to usurp her, the girl in question seemed to be enjoying herself. Unable to foresee anything that was unfolding around her, she was thrilled with one unexpected thing after another.

"Besides, she's—"

"Theia-chan, if you want to get technical, aren't we the ones who came in from the sidelines?" asked Shizuka.

“Ugh... W-Well, no matter. Let’s say we’re even and start things over.”

Theia was primed to keep complaining, but she held back after hearing what Shizuka said. She couldn’t deny the vague feeling that she was the one in the wrong.

“Thank you, Theia. I’m sorry for making you endure needless hardships,” said the girl.

“Don’t force yourself anymore, all right?”

“All right.”

“Your Highness, saying something so outrageous to the Goddess of Dawn is...”

“I don’t care.”

Though a new member had joined their party, the atmosphere around the girls had completely returned to normal. But perhaps that was to be expected, since they were only welcoming one of their own. Nothing had fundamentally changed. Sensing that, Koutarou also finally calmed down and returned to his normal self too. When he did, something dawned on him.

“All right, let’s go home. After all this, I’m starving.”

“Me too! Me too!” cheered Sanae.

“Let’s have something delicious to celebrate!” shouted Yurika.

With that, Koutarou and the girls exited the grove. They no longer had any reason to remain here, and every reason to return to Corona House.

“This calls for that glorious sukiyaki dish. Let’s have it once more before it starts warming up,” suggested Theia.

“Agreed!” shouted Sanae.

“Yes! One with lots of meat!” chimed in Yurika.

“But Theiamillis-san, won’t you just put the air conditioner on max and ask to have it again when summer rolls around anyway?” asked Clan.

“Ignoring the temperature is how you get to enjoy it during all four seasons.”

Right now, the biggest of those reasons was food. The past few days,

Koutarou and the girls had been feeling more dead than alive from all the tension and worry. Their appetites had suffered for it, but with everything resolved, that was no longer an issue. Everybody wanted to get back to Corona House and fill their stomachs with good food. Everybody, that is, except for one of them—the new girl who was still being pulled along by Koutarou again.

“...Sukiyaki?”

“Have you never tried it? Well, I guess you haven’t, huh?”

“No.”

“Then this is a good opportunity. We can start beating proper table manners into you while we eat.”

“I’m eating too?”

“*That’s* where we have to start?! Holy moly... Listen, when in Rome, do as the Romans do. If you’re going to be human, you’ll have to act like one.”

“Act like a human... All right!”

Being a supreme divine being, the girl had never eaten before. She’d never experienced the need to. Of course, that went for many other things as well. Almost everything she’d be doing from here on out would be a first. Even walking on her own two legs was a new experience. It was all terribly exciting.

“So this is all totally new to you, huh? Wait, now that I think about it...”

Seeing the girl like this, Koutarou realized something. Something that would be a big problem for them in the future.

“Before you properly become human, why don’t you erase your memory and ours?”

“Why?”

“Because it’d be more fun if to forget all the unnecessary stuff. Especially during a vacation.”

She’d be taking a break from her job. It really was like a vacation. But remembering work on your time off was always a buzzkill. Moreover, she’d be able to enjoy relaxing and playing more if she didn’t have to worry about what

was ahead of her. There was no need to know what was happening behind the stage during a play.

“Are you planning on enjoying my vacation with me?”

“Yeah, well, I guess I will. As I think you already know, I’m bad at compartmentalizing things. The same goes for most of these guys. So it’s just in case. So the truth doesn’t slip out.”

“Of course. Thank you for your consideration, Koutarou. I’ll do just that.”

The girl put her right hand on her chest and smiled at Koutarou. She didn’t particularly look like any of the girls, but her smile reminded him of all of them. It affirmed for him that they really were all the same person. It was the truth, but forgetting it might be for the better. Thinking that they looked similar by coincidence would be more fun.

“It’s not just for your sake, either. It’s for all of us.”

“Heehee...”

With Koutarou having gathered all nine lights in Nalfalaren, the girl was no longer omniscient and could no longer see his feelings. But in return, there were other things she could now see clearly. For example, Koutarou’s awkwardness and how he tried his best in spite of it. Because of that, she decided to listen to Koutarou and erase her memories. She now understood that there were certain things people were better off not knowing.

“May I tell you my name?”

“You don’t have to. I’ll forget it anyways. Besides, knowing you, I’d bet it’s the same.”

With that, Koutarou glanced down at his waist where the glowing rainbow sword was hanging. When she saw what he was looking at, she flashed a brilliant smile.

“Heeheehee, that’s right!”

Even though he couldn’t read her mind, Koutarou understood the girl well. It was a proof of the deep bond between him and the nine girls. His connection with each of them also connected him to her, and that made her truly happy.

“Jeez... I guess we were all doing just as you expected, huh?”

“No. The one who has the most control right now is you. Right now, everything is within your reach.”

Koutarou still hadn’t made his third wish. She would do anything he asked her to, though that might still be true even if he’d already spent his three wishes. And since she’d be stepping down as a god for a time, the world was more or less in Koutarou’s hands. But that third wish would likely go unspent.

“Satomi Koutarou has managed to get the achievement for bringing the super-ultra goddess back home to tiny room 106! It’s a universe first! On top of that, he even boasts that he doesn’t need her maiden powers! Now that’s a real man for ya!” cheered Sanae.

“I’m supposedly doing something amazing, so why doesn’t it feel like that at all?” mused Koutarou.

“Probably because while its’s your wish, it’s also all of ours,” explained Kiriha.

“The legendary hero has chosen the ordinary, and the goddess has followed in your footsteps,” said Clan.

Koutarou and the ten girls shared the same wish. It went without saying. That’s why there was no need for a great power to make it come true.

“I see... This is a rare occurrence, but the whole thing has been set up so that, once it does happen, I can’t object. Well, it makes sense that her scheming would be on the same level as yours, Clan.”

“Don’t start with that again!”

“Maki-chan, it looks like Satomi-san hasn’t given up yet.”

“What can we do? That’s the kind of man we fell in love with.”

The small something within everyone’s hands had been slowly growing little by little every day. Koutarou and the others’ wish was a result of that. And once they reached the end of their lives and looked back on it, they’d realize just how big it had become.

“That’s right. Before you erase our memories, just tell me one thing. You said that there were infinite worlds earlier, but... are there any where my mom is

still living happily?”

“Yes, an infinite number of them. But sadly, this isn’t one of them.”

“I know. It’s okay.”

Somewhere, his mother was still alive and well. That was all he needed to know. In this world, he was surrounded by people who were precious to him. Demanding for his mother’s return would simply be selfish.

But the thought of the infinite possibilities of his other lives inspired him. Not only were there worlds he was still with his mother, there had to be one where Kashiwagi Shiori had dragged him all the way to nationals. Whether the Shiori he’d met before would be able to do it or not would be up to her, but it made him happy to think she could.

“Death isn’t the end, Koutarou. After everything you’ve seen, you know that too, don’t you?”

“Yeah... I understand that now.”

Koutarou put on a small smile and nodded before patting Sanae, who had jumped up onto his back like always, on the head. With that, he felt like he truly had nothing to object about here. Just like the girls had been over the past two years, he too had been saved. It had all been for this moment.

“Sakuraba-senpai, I’m thinking of completing the half-knit sweater that my mom left behind this year, so please lend me your strength.”

“You can count on me. But won’t we forget all about this tomorrow?”

“I’ll make sure to leave that part in if you want. That’s within my power.”

“Please do.”

“By the way, everyone, are you all fine with sukiyaki for dinner today?” asked Ruth. “I was thinking of heading to the shopping street to get the ingredients.”

“I have no objections. I’ve been wanting to steal Kiriha-san’s recipe for it,” replied Shizuka.

“I’m fine as long as there’s meat. I missed out on the beef stew, after all...” groaned Yurika.

“Beef stew? I wanted to try that too,” agreed Maki.

“It seems that we missed out on a lot, disappearing first...” added Clan.

“Ruth, I’d like to get some takoyaki while we’re out shopping,” said Theia.

“Ah, that’s unfair! I’m going too, then!” shouted Sanae.

“I would like to partake as well.”

“Uncle, you can’t eat too much, okay?”

“I know, I know.”

“That’s right, speaking of the shopping street... Kiriha-san, we ran into a girl who saw the hero show that said she wanted to see Black Rose. She was really worried about you.”

“She was worried? Then I’ll be sure to visit her while I’m out shopping.”

“You have to take good care of your fans, ho!”

“She’s a good little girl, ho!”

While carefreely chatting away, Koutarou and the ten girls returned to Corona House. Nothing special would likely happen from here on out. They’d head over to the shopping street together, take care of some odds and ends, then return to room 106 for dinner. After dinner, they might play games like normal, or they might watch TV and discuss plans for the net day. After all the commotion, they’d take turns taking baths, then have some ice cream together before brushing their teeth. And at last, after lecturing everyone who wanted to stay up late, they’d all retire for the night. It would be like any other evening in Corona House.

But that was exactly what Koutarou and the ten girls wished for. Each day that went by like that, that small something they held in their hands would grow. That something would take shape over a long period of time. All for the sake of a small, yet very precious miracle.




When you look back upon reaching the end... May there be many a colorful, twinkling light with you...
???
New!
April 5th, 2011

Afterword

Long time no see. It's the author, Takehaya. This time around I have some more room for the afterword, which is just perfect since there's a lot I want to talk about and I'm sure there's a lot on everyone's mind. As such, there will be spoilers in this afterword. Please read the book before you continue.

I'll choose not to touch on the actual content of the volume this time, however. There would be no end to it if I tried to answer everyone's questions right now (ha!). Instead, I'll stick to the biggest thing. And that is if this series will continue.

Skipping to the answer, yes. Like I wrote at the end of the first volume, this is a story about Koutarou's high school life. He's got another year of it to go, so the story will naturally continue. So I bet you're wondering why something this important happened now. I believe there are plenty of readers who think it would have been better to leave this development for the end of his third year. The reason I couldn't write it that way was because there was no guarantee the series would be that long.

Invaders of the Rokujouma!? started roughly ten years ago now. Back then, I was writing scenarios for visual novels, and I had only just debuted in HJ Bunko with the work *Ano Hibi wo Mou Ichido*. (It wasn't even that long after HJ Bunko first got started!) Of course, game scenarios aren't the same as novels. The only way for me to find out if I could make a living writing books was by actually doing it and seeing how it worked out. In that sense, I was just a beginner who was lucky enough to get his debut work published. It's not like I had the go-ahead for a long series back then, which is perfectly normal. I was just an amateur. I hadn't proven myself yet, so there was no reason for anyone to trust me with a major project.

Back then, it was also the trend for light novels to have shorter runs. Once upon a time, there were plenty of titles with over ten volumes, and it wasn't strange to see titles with more than twenty. But that started to change.

Nowadays lots of light novels end after just a few volumes, and even series with anime adaptations tend to end around the ten volume mark. So with shorter series being the trend, books written by well known authors and released by major publishers naturally had an advantage.

Because of that, the relatively new HJ Bunko making a big commitment with a fledgling author like me would have been a very risky move ten years ago. While taking *some* risk is a good thing, I don't think it would have been the right choice. But I'm the type of author who writes with big themes and foreshadowing, so I knew there was a good chance I wouldn't be able to do what I wanted in a shorter work. I wanted to make it longer if I could.

Of course, having no achievements under my belt at the time, I never would have gotten greenlit for a long-running series. That's where I had the idea of dressing up a long-running series as a shorter one. I'd spread out the foreshadowing and make it subtle enough that readers wouldn't notice it. That proved to be easier said than done. It was hard work. Of course, I didn't tell the editor this either (ha!). To that end, I used tropes because they were a good way to disguise the foreshadowing. The strong landlord, for example. The reason Shizuka is so strong is because of the Fire Dragon Emperor inside of her, but I couldn't have the readers realize that right away. She would only really get involved in the story staring with volume 8, so I needed to prepare something in case the series was cancelled before then. That's why I made her a cute girl. The cute landlord who's really strong when she snaps is a common trope, so if the series ended prematurely, it wouldn't feel unfinished if her story never got told. I disguised a lot of foreshadowing this way, playing off of tropes and readers' assumptions. (Including why so many girls gathered in one place, though that was finally explained in this volume.) As a result, the series looked like a simple comedy in its early stages.

But doing something so reckless also meant taking on a big handicap. I had to be able to adapt whether the series ended up being long or short, so I was unable to explore the minds of the characters too deeply in the beginning. I also had to be careful with the setting, since that would change depending on the lifespan of the work. As a result, volumes 1 and 2 were by far the most risky. Thankfully, I gained the support of the readers and was able to get through that

trial period. I got to make use of the foreshadowing starting in volume 3. Afterwards, I gradually gained a greater degree of freedom when writing, and eventually got the green light to go all the way when it was decided that the series would be getting an anime adaptation. I believe that was around volume 13 or 14, which set the precedent for how freely I write now.

But since that was how the story came to be, it left me with a big problem. How *would* it end? If the series was cancelled after the first volume, that would have been that. But I'd planned potential endings at volumes 3, 8, and 13 in case the series got canned at any of those benchmarks, meaning I created a total of four endings including this one. Excluding pure entertainment works, stories normally have two endings: the end of the thematic elements and the end of the events. The ideal would be to have both at the same time, of course, but I had no reason to believe I'd be able to do that. At the time, I thought the chances of me getting to this point were very low, and that I'd have to rely on—as Kiriha would put it—coincidences piling up on top of one another. To be honest, I thought the actual odds were less than 1 percent. And the odds of me being able to write through Koutarou finishing his third year of high school were even lower. That's why I decided to split up the two endings, and figured that it would be wise to at the very least show the thematic ending.

By altering the wording, depth, and development of the preceding volumes, the contents of this one could have come after volume 7, or between 12 and 13. It would have been harder to connect then than it is now with the rainbow sword, but I believed it would be possible to express the theme I wanted. But defying all odds with the support of the readers, this series was able to reach the longest possible goal. You're reading right now what I thought had less than a single percent chance of coming to life. As a result, splitting up the two endings backfired. But even then, I was able to express the theme I wanted and present this work in my ideal length and configuration. So I am very grateful to my readers. Thank you so very much.

The last conundrum was where to actually put this ending. With the appearance of the rainbow sword, all the actors were in place, so I had to wonder if I should really drag things out for another year. I can say so now, but the questionnaire I had everyone help me with was mostly concerning this.

After consulting all of your opinions and conferring with the editorial department, we decided to put it here. We concluded that we should put this episode where it fit most naturally, and then continue through to the end of the events. If I were to say, it's the same idea as with the famous ninja manga *Na——to*.

In the case of *Na——to*, I think the big theme there is having others acknowledge you, and the protagonist aims to become a leader in order to accomplish that. There are multiple thematic endings there, such as having his allies acknowledge him, or becoming a hero and having the nation acknowledge him. There's a difference in scale, of course, but by the time we get there, he's already been acknowledged and accepted by his friends and allies. Building on top of that, the events come to an end, and the story wraps up with him becoming the leader.

I think this volume would correspond to the part where Na——to is ultimately accepted by those around him. So from here on out, I will continue writing about the events coming to an end, including Koutarou graduating high school and how his relationship with the girls plays out.

Now that we're on the topic of the future, let's talk about that. The next volume, 30, will pick up with the diplomatic relations between Forthorthe and Japan. Koutarou and the others will begin spring and their third year of high school. Luckily, Sanae and Yurika manage to avoid being held back. And we also have two new girls on the scene. One is Kenji's little sister who's been mentioned from time to time, Mackinley aka Matsudaira Kotori. The other is the exchange student from Forthorthe, Nalfa Laren. I'm sure you're all familiar with Kin-chan, but the exchange student is a mysterious figure. This'll be Koutarou and the others' first time meeting her, so I'm sure it'll be your first time meeting her too. I know it'll be mine. I think it'll even be the editorial department's. Wait, this *is* the first time we've met her, isn't it? (Ha!) With his little sister, Kin-chan, now going to the same school, Mackenzie finds himself in hot water. Kin-chan is hearing all kinds of unsavory rumors about him. Moreover, with the appearance of Nalfa-san, the parties seeking to steal Forthorthe's technology begin making their moves. They gather in Kisshouharukaze City to get closer to Nalfa-san, but will Koutarou and the

others be able to protect her? And what can Mackenzie do to get Kin-chan to forgive him? Please look forward to volume 30, where all kinds of events will happen.

As for the volume afterward, 31, if we go at the current pace, it'll come out in March right around the series' ten year anniversary mark. So the editor in charge, S-kun, has been talking about doing something special. It's not set in stone, and if we do end up doing something, we don't know what it'll be yet. So now's your chance to make your requests known! The more voices we hear from, the more reassured we'll feel about deciding what to do.

And as for past 31, I was thinking that I might do the "what if" dating series that I've mentioned before. After all, out of the infinite Koutarous, there are lots who have settled on one girl out of the ten. There are even cases where he'd end up choosing someone else, like Elfaria. The idea of the series would be to take a peek into those relationships. As for how they'll be composed, I think they'd work nicely as the second half of a book with the first half being short stories. In other words, the *Hercules!* formula. So how about it? The possibilities are endless.

And just like that, I've run out of room. Finally, I'd like to give my usual thanks. My heartfelt gratitude goes out to everyone at the editorial department for their endeavors in publishing this book; Poco-san for their work on the cover illustration and for listening to my unreasonable specifications; and to the readers who have continued to support me to the thematic ending of this series.

Let us meet again—and to think we actually got there—in the afterword in volume 30.

June, 2018

Takehaya

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Invaders of the Rokujouma!? Volume 29

by Takehaya

Translated by Warnis Edited by Morgan Dreher

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