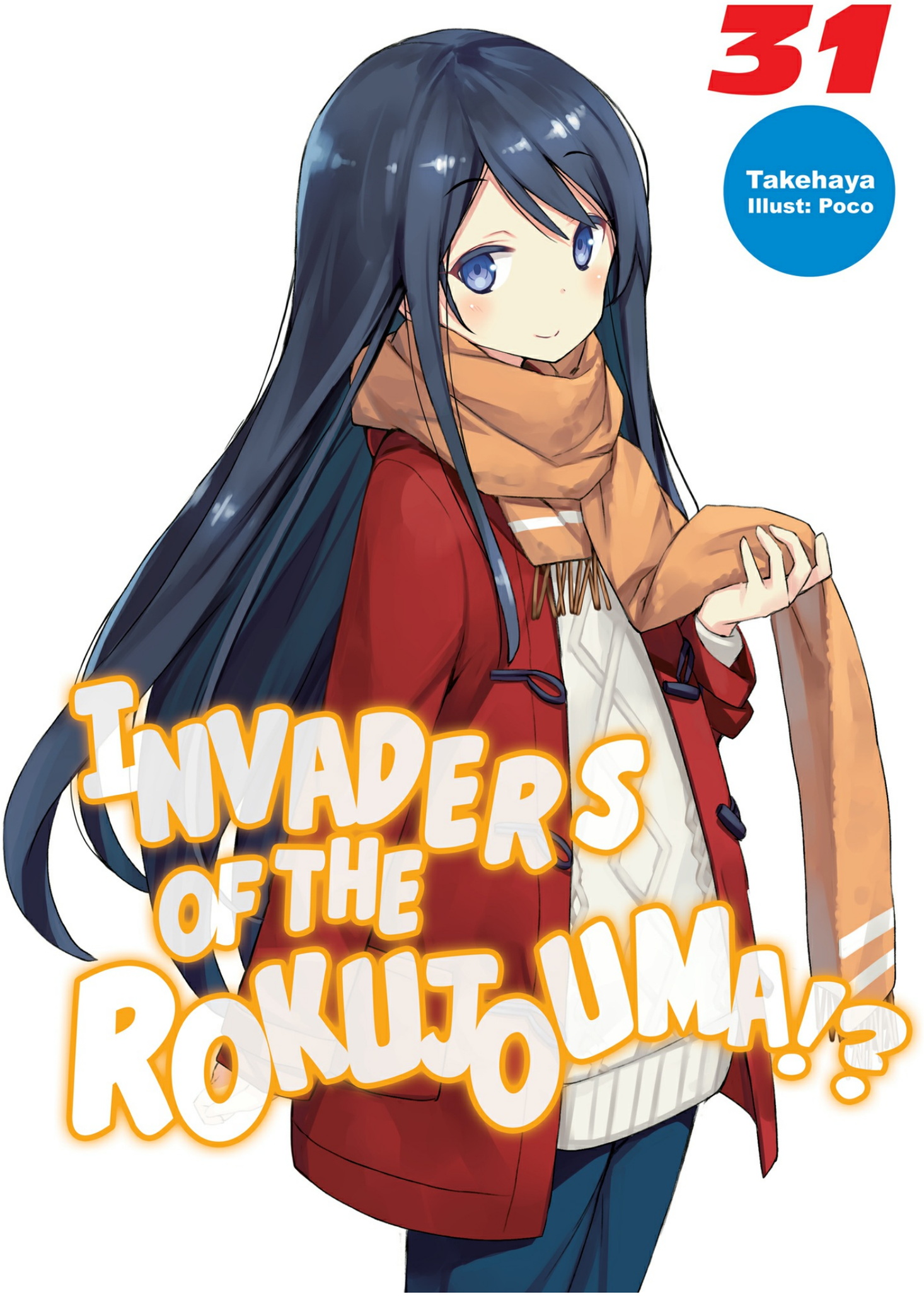

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Takehaya
Illust: Poco
INVADERS OF THE ROKUJOUMA!?



INVADERS OF THE ROKUJOUMA!? 31


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The Boredom Games: Four Match Showdown?
Harumi and Maki decide on some analogue training?
HOW WILL THEIR GAMING SKILLS HOLD UP?!



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FACTIONS MAP



KASAGI SHIZUKA
Koutarou's classmate and the landlord of Corona House. Alunaya the Fire Dragon Emperor resides within her.



KURANO KIRIHA
Heiress of the underground who's finally found her beloved. With her quick wits and big heart, she's a master of both tactics and love.

UNDERGROUND DWELLERS
(OF THE PEOPLE OF THE EARTH)



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

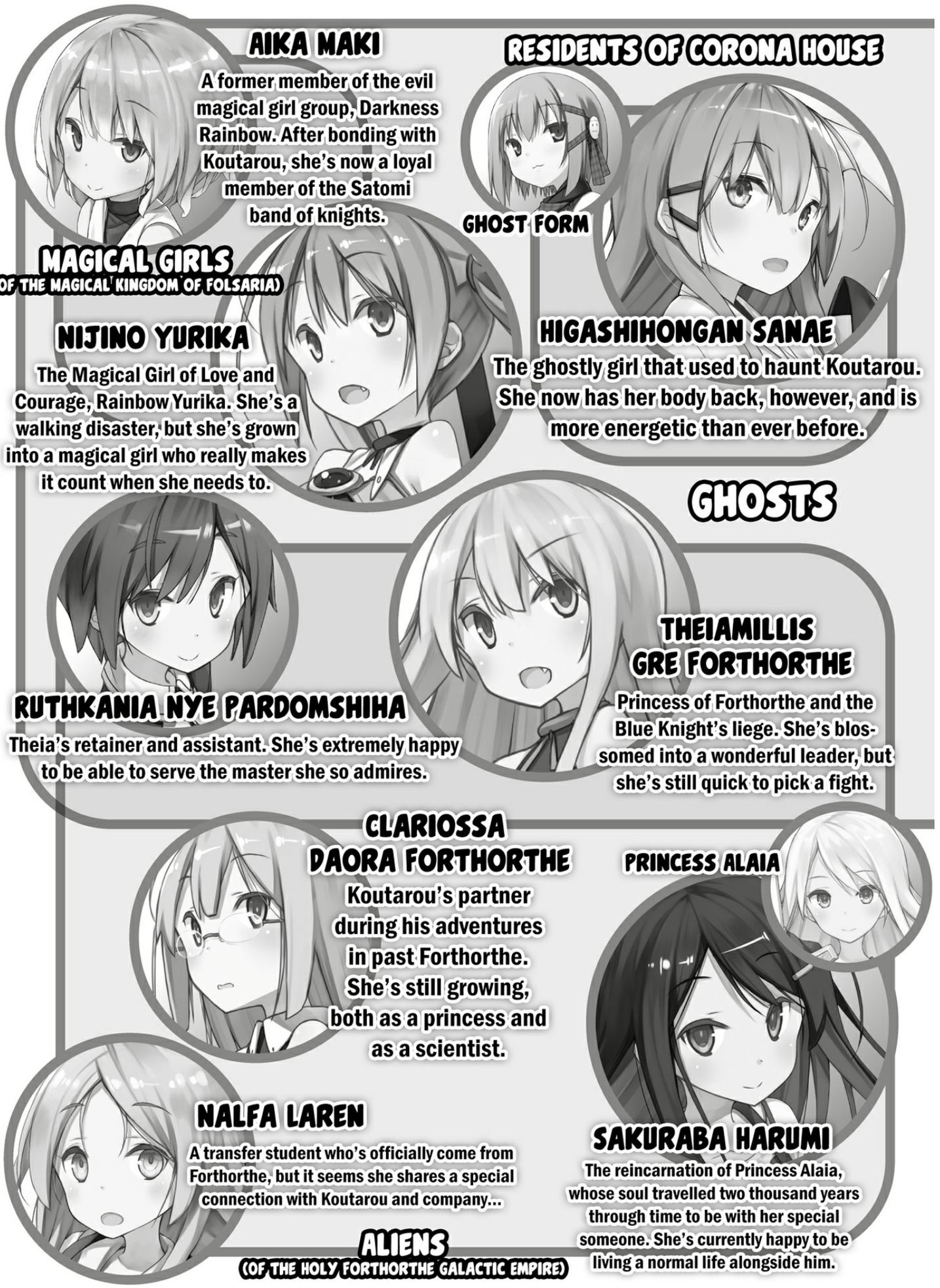


MATSUDAIRA KENJI
Koutarou's best friend-cum-partner in crime. He can be a bit tasteless, but he's a good guy at heart.

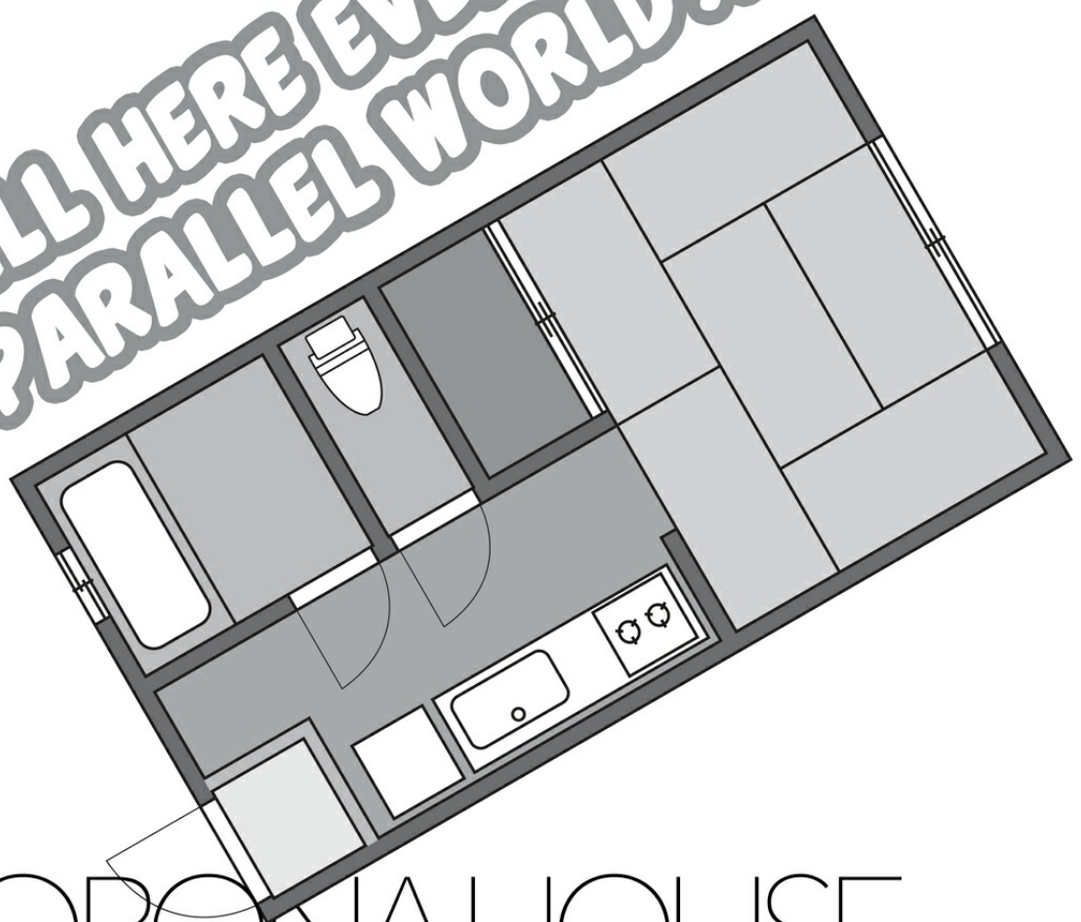


MATSUDAIRA KOTORI
Kenji's little sister, but you'd never know it. An introvert through and through. She's now enrolled at Harukaze High.

KOUTAROU'S CHILDHOOD FRIENDS


AIKA MAKI
A former member of the evil magical girl group, Darkness Rainbow. After bonding with Koutarou, she's now a loyal member of the Satomi band of knights.
RESIDENTS OF CORONA HOUSE
GHOST FORM
HIGASHIHONGAN SANAE
The ghostly girl that used to haunt Koutarou. She now has her body back, however, and is more energetic than ever before.
MAGICAL GIRLS
(OF THE MAGICAL KINGDOM OF FOLSARIA)
NIJINO YURIKA
The Magical Girl of Love and Courage, Rainbow Yurika. She's a walking disaster, but she's grown into a magical girl who really makes it count when she needs to.
GHOSTS
THEIAMILLIS GRE FORTHORTHE
Princess of Forthorthe and the Blue Knight's liege. She's blossomed into a wonderful leader, but she's still quick to pick a fight.
RUTHKANIA NYE PARDOMSHIHA
Theia's retainer and assistant. She's extremely happy to be able to serve the master she so admires.
CLARIOSSA DAORA FORTHORTHE
Koutarou's partner during his adventures in past Forthorthe. She's still growing, both as a princess and as a scientist.
PRINCESS ALAIA
NALFA LAREN
A transfer student who's officially come from Forthorthe, but it seems she shares a special connection with Koutarou and company...
SAKURABA HARUMI
The reincarnation of Princess Alaia, whose soul travelled two thousand years through time to be with her special someone. She's currently happy to be living a normal life alongside him.
ALIENS
(OF THE HOLY FORTHORTHE GALACTIC EMPIRE)

STILL HERE EVEN IN A PARALLEL WORLD?!



CORONA HOUSE
ROOM 106

Episode 1: Last Mudslinging Operations Under the Triathlon

For a high school student looking to have some fun, the biggest inhibitor was always transportation. There's a limit to how far you can walk on foot, the train costs money, and no Japanese teenager has their driver's license yet. With those restrictions, many kids ended up stuck at home even when they wanted to go out and play.

In that sense, Koutarou and the girls were lucky. Thanks to Theia and her Blue Knight, they could go wherever they wanted for free. And when it came to needing a place to stay while they were out, Kiriha and her connections always came through for them. It was the ideal situation for Koutarou and company, who had a long list of things they wanted to do over summer vacation. And today, they were checking visiting the beach off that list.

"The sun here sure is harsh..."

"Auuugh! I'm all sweaty already!"

However, not everyone was happy to be there. For the out-of-shape Clan and the whiny Yurika, being forced out into the summer heat wasn't exactly a pleasure. They'd much prefer staying cooped up inside with air conditioning and ice cream, lazing about studying or reading manga.

"All right, less complaining and more walking! Everybody else has left you guys in the dust."

That meant it fell on Koutarou to keep them motivated. They hadn't taken a single step after emerging from the gate, so he positioned himself behind them to push them forward.

"You know I'm not well equipped for activities out of doors," Clan said with a pout.

She was walking now, but clearly unhappy about it. Koutarou continued to corral her towards the road.

“I also know that you’ve gained weight since summer started because you’re not exercising.”

“H-How do you know that?!”

Surprised seized Clan’s face, though it quickly faded into a crimson blush.

“I have full authority over Blue Knight, you know? I know the weight of everyone who comes on board.”

“Ugh, how careless of me... To think using Blue Knight would backfire...”

“I mean, I don’t mind. I don’t really care about your weight all that much.”

“Then—”

“But I worry about what the citizens would think of having a chubby empress.”

“I know I’ve told you this before, Veltlion, but you’re not going to die a pretty death...”

“If it’s you killing me, I’m not too worried.”

“Ugh, that side of you is so unfair!”

Clan knew that Koutarou worried for her health, but deep down, she also wanted Koutarou to think she was cute. The athletic wear stuffed in her bag was proof she wanted to please him, but she found it incredibly irritating he wasn’t upfront about what he wanted from her. And so, dissatisfied and frustrated, she picked up the pace and chased after the other girls.

“Come on, Yurika. Even Clan’s ahead of you now. Stop dawdling and get going.”

“Whaaa?! But I’m only going to get hotter if I walk faster!”

The remaining problem was Yurika. She was sluggishly moving along, slinking from shady spot to shady spot. It seemed she’d failed to consider that she’d only be out in the heat longer taking such an indirect route.

“Did it never occur to you to just hurry to a cooler spot?”

“But if there isn’t one, I’ll have hurried for no reason!”

“You really are a pessimist, aren’t you?”

“I don’t want to hear that from you, Satomi-san.”

“...”

Koutarou was at a loss for words for a moment. Yurika’s casual remark had hit him in something of a sore spot, but he wasn’t about to let her off the hook for just that.

“A-Ahem! Anyways, Yurika...”

“Yes?”

“If you stay behind here, you’ll be even worse off.”

“Why is that?”

“I want you to slowly look to your right. Not too fast, okay?”

“Okay... H-Huh?”

Slowly turning to the right as Koutarou asked, Yurika spotted something dark brown. It stood out quite starkly against all the greenery around them.

“Now, what do you see?”

“Um... a wild boar?”

“Yup.”

“And it looks pretty mad...”

“It sure does, doesn’t it?”

Indeed, Yurika was looking right at a rather bristly boar with fearsome eyes.

“Now, can you tell who it’s got its sights set on?”

“Um... Probably not you in your plain summer clothes, but me in bright pink and red?”

“That’s exactly right. And do you know what’s going to happen next?”

“...Is it going to charge me?”

“Bingo.”

“Noooooooo!”

There, Yurika took off running. Considering how she'd been behaving just moments ago, one had to wonder where all that energy came from.

"Jeez, at least that got her moving..."

Watching Yurika dart into the distance, Koutarou fiddled with his bracelet—a comms device he'd gotten from Clan once upon a time.

"She's pretty fast when she wants to be, though."

After cutting off the wild boar hologram he'd conjured with the bracelet, he walked after Yurika like nothing had happened.

Koutarou and company had specifically come to the beach today for the local triathlon. There were some floated concerns about the less athletic members of the group participating, but fortunately it wasn't an especially serious or competitive event. A standard triathlon included a minimum of 400 meters swimming, 10 kilometers biking, and 2.5 kilometers running. This one, however, would be much shorter. The biking leg would be kept at 10 kilometers, but the more exhausting swimming and running portions were cut down to 200 meters and 2 kilometers respectively so that even younger participants could finish the event in just a few hours. It was intentionally designed to be family-friendly summer fun.

"At last, my time has come! Victory will be mine!" Theia, who was already in her bathing suit, boasted with a fearless laugh.

With her athletic prowess and naturally competitive personality, there was no doubt in anyone's mind that Theia was going to take the triathlon seriously even if it was meant to be for fun. Her goal was a clear and decisive victory leagues ahead of the competition.

"Not so fast, Theia-chan. If you want to win, you're going to have to make it past me first," said Shizuka with a smile as she approached.

Quite unlike Theia's simple sportswear swimsuit, Shizuka was wearing a fashionable bikini. But choice in swimwear aside, Shizuka was every bit Theia's rival when it came to brawn and athleticism. She would undoubtedly be her real competition today.

“I’m going to do my best too!” Maki chimed in. “I used to do things like this all the time during training!”

Once part of a militaristic organization, Maki had been through rigorous, daily physical training that wasn’t all that much different from preparing for a triathlon. While she might not be as strong as Theia or Shizuka outright, she was smart and knew how to pace herself. It was entirely possible that she’d come out on top if the other girls let their guard down.

“Koutarou, Koutarou! Let’s get some ice cream! We can split it!” called out Sanae.

“Not before the competition, Sanae. You’ll get a tummy ache.”

“Aww... Then later for sure, okay?”

“Yeah, yeah.”

“My... That’s a rather bold swimsuit for you, Ruth. Are you trying to catch a certain someone’s eye?” observed Kiriha, turning to Ruth standing next to her.

“Kiriha-sama! Th-That’s not what I—”

“No?”

“W-Well, maybe a little...”

“Don’t worry. Your secret’s safe with me. To tell you the truth, I’m doing the same thing.”

“I have to admit I’m a little envious, Kiriha-sama... Your swimsuit top looks so full it might pop if you just move the wrong way.”

Koutarou was wagering that Sanae, he himself, Kiriha, and Ruth would finish after Maki in that order. That prediction was purely based on physical ability, but of course there was always something to be said for luck too.

“Let’s do our best, Clan-san, Yurika-san,” said Harumi with a smile.

“I can’t imagine myself winning,” sighed Clan.

“Me either. I might not even make it to the finish line...” whined Yurika.

The three of them would likely be competing for last place out of the group, albeit for different reasons. Harumi was born frail, Clan was out of shape, and

Yurika was just plain gutless. But in spite of the odds against the three of them, spirits were running high. You see, coming in last place didn't necessarily mean walking away empty handed.

"But we'll still get a reward if we try hard!" exclaimed Yurika to motivate everyone.

"I think Veltlion just wanted to be nice to Harumi..." pouted Clan.

"That's not true!" objected Harumi. "So let's all do our best together!"

If he only offered a reward for the top position, Koutarou knew it would inevitably go to Theia or Shizuka. So instead of favoring either of them, he'd devised a system to reward the girls based on their efforts. If it was unanimously acknowledged that someone had tried their hardest, said someone would be able to ask anything they wanted from someone else in the group. That way everyone had the chance to earn a reward regardless of their physical ability.

"What was that about me?" Koutarou asked, walking over after he heard Clan mention him.

Unsure of what the girls were talking about, he had a perplexed look on his face. Seeing him, however, Clan frumped and tossed a biting reply his way.

"We were just talking about how you designed this system to give Harumi preferential treatment."

"You don't get it at all, Clan."

Now that he realized what was going on, Koutarou sighed and shrugged. Irritated by the gesture, Clan's tone turned even harsher.

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"I'd give Sakuraba-senpai preferential treatment even without special rules. She's a good girl, after all."

"Hahh... I can't deny that much."

"S-Satomi-kun?!"

Harumi blushed furiously at the unexpected praise. It was unclear whether

she was happy, surprised, embarrassed... or a combination of all three.

“So, really, I came up with the rules to give you and Yurika a fair chance.”

“I-It was for us?”

“Really?!”

While the odds were in Theia and Shizuka’s favor, there was still a chance Sanae or one of the other capable girls could luck out and end up taking the lead. But realistically speaking, Harumi, Clan, and Yurika didn’t stand a chance. Clan and Yurika in particular were in terrible shape, so Koutarou had largely devised the reward system for their sake.

“If you still think I’m being unfair, we can drop rewards altogether.”

“N-No one said anything about that!”

“I knew you were a nice person the day we met, Satomi-san!”

Now that they knew the truth, Clan and Yurika were inspired with new enthusiasm for the triathlon. There was a fire in their eyes that hadn’t been there before.

“For my wish, I’ll have you grovel before me, Veltlion!”

“C’mon, me! We can do it, we can do it! Yes, we can! Yurika, gooooo!”

More than the prospect of a reward, however, they were mostly pleased that Koutarou had given special thought to them.

“Good. I’m glad to see you’re both motivated now.”

“You know, Satomi-kun...”

“What is it, Sakuraba-senpai?”

“Actually, it’s nothing. Let’s all do our best out there!”

Harumi knew how her two good friends felt, and thought to take a moment to explain it to Koutarou. Upon realizing that it would put a damper on their mood, however, she thought better of it and decided to keep quiet for now.

The first leg of the triathlon would be the swimming portion, and a special

rule had been put in place regarding the setup: participants would be positioned according to their self-reported swimming skills. And since this was an all-ages, family friendly competition, there was a large discrepancy in the abilities of the participants. Staggering the starting positions was a way to take that into consideration while also reducing chaos at the start of the race.

“Clan-san, I can’t see the others all the way up there.”

“I think you mean they can’t see us all the way back here.”

According to the starting system, Yurika and Clan were placed in the bracket furthest from the water. They’d been practicing over the summer, so it wasn’t like they couldn’t swim at all, but they were still admittedly quite uncomfortable in the water. That landed them in a group with the weakest swimmers in the competition, which is why they were now surrounded mostly by the elderly and young children. Koutarou and the others had all ranked better and were placed much closer to pole position.

“Let’s try not to end up in last place, Clan-san.”

“That would be rather embarrassing...”

Their goal for the day was to have Koutarou and the other girls acknowledge their efforts. They didn’t know exactly how to go about doing that, but they knew there was one thing they couldn’t do—and that was finish last. If they lost to all the grandmas, grandpas, and kids around, it would be hard to argue they’d really tried their hardest.

“I know! Let’s not overwork ourselves in the water when we can’t swim well in the first place, and instead save our energy for later.”

“It’s true pacing is an integral part of long-distances races... But what’s the plan then? Catch up later in the cycling leg?”

If they wanted to finish strong, they would be better off conserving their strength at the beginning of the race. Having to drop out if they exhausted themselves while swimming would be quite an embarrassment, so they decided to play it safe and stake everything on the latter two legs of the course.

“I just hope we can reach the goal...”

“State of mind is also important in endurance competitions. So long as we believe we can finish, we should be able to.”

“I sure hope so...”

Bang!

Just as Yurika meekly slumped her shoulders, the starting pistol fired in the distance.

As they ran down the beach towards the water, Clan and Yurika lost a good bit of headway on the other competitors around them. But since they were intentionally playing it slow and steady, they didn’t lose their cool over it.

“Wow, the sea is so salty,” remarked Clan when they hit the water.

“Just being at the ocean is kind of magical. It’s like something out of a fairy tale,” commented Yurika.

Once they were in the water, Clan and Yurika glided away from the shore using breaststroke, which they’d intentionally chosen because it was low-impact and stable. It was slower than other strokes, however, meaning they were only moving at a crawl compared to the frontrunners using freestyle. They stuck to the plan, however, and tried to keep their cool and conserve their energy for now.

“The leading group... is already... on their way back...” observed Clan.

“Th... They’re so fast... It hasn’t even... been five minutes yet...” whined Yurika.

Since the swimming leg of the triathlon was set to 200 meters, there was a buoy set 100 meters out from the shore that they had to circle around before coming back. The leading group had only taken two or three minutes to reach it. That might have been considered a slow time in a swimming pool, but the waves and currents of the ocean made swimming in it markedly more challenging. In fact, Clan and Yurika had only reached the thirty-meter mark so far. The water was rougher than usual today, making the task especially time consuming.

“Don’t... get worked up over it...” encouraged Clan. “The more worked up we get... the slower we’ll swim...”

Both girls were doing their best to keep moving. Despite the rough waters, the high salt content of the seawater helped keep them afloat as they slowly made their way towards the buoy. The trip, however, was exhausting. By the time they hit the sixty-meter mark, they’d slowed down considerably.

“B-But Clan-san... It feels like no matter how hard we swim... we’re not getting anywhere...” Yurika gasped between breaths.

She was already near her breaking point. She was working so hard physically that not quite enough oxygen was getting to her brain. As her mind clouded over, she could barely remember why she was even out in the water in the first place. Her focus and willpower were waning, which was a dangerous prospect for the already weak-willed Yurika.

“Quit grumbling... and keep swimming! You can do it... if you try!”

Clan, meanwhile, had plenty of stubborn determination in her. Her real problem was stamina. Being a sheltered princess *and* a shut-in scientist was a recipe for fitness disaster. She was relying on sheer tenacity and spite—her nasty side, as Koutarou would say—to get her through this. It helped her keep her wits about her... and an eye on Yurika.

“Clan-san, Yurika-chan!”

“Oh, there you two are.”

On their way back to the shore, Shizuka and Theia crossed paths with the two struggling girls. Unlike Clan and Yurika, they still had plenty of energy to spare. Their casual, friendly greetings said it all.

“Y-You two... sure are fast...”

“C-Can you lend me... some of your strength? I’m just about... all out of steam...”

Both Clan and Yurika were actually quite surprised to see how well they were doing. They weren’t quite in first place, but they’d pulled well ahead of most of the pack. Not only that, but they’d barely put a dent in their stamina reserves.

Indeed, seeing Shizuka and Theia was a rather rude wake-up call.

“My strength is all I’ve got, so I can’t afford to lose!”

“In the name of Forthorthe, neither can I!”

But their encounter only lasted a brief moment, which was to be expected considering they were moving in opposite directions. Shizuka and Theia were gone just as quickly as they’d come.

“Seeing that is kind of a downer...” grumbled Yurika.

“Like I said, enough complaining! We’re doing this our own way!” barked Clan.

While Yurika was on the brink of losing her motivation, Clan was picking up momentum. Seeing Theia trying so hard had stoked her inner fire and natural sense of rivalry with her fellow princess.

“I dunno, Clan-san... I think it might be about time to give up...”

“Wait, what are you talking about?!”

“I feel like nothing matters anymore...”

“H-Hey! Yurika! Keep your chin up!”

Yurika was quickly losing speed. The taxing exercise and lack of oxygen to her brain took its toll as the strength was sapped from her limbs. Right now, all she wanted to do was let the waves carry her away.

“Ahh, what should I do?!”

“What’s wrong, Clan?”

While Clan was cradling her head, Koutarou swam up to her. He’d spotted her acting strangely from a distance and come to see what was wrong.

“Veltlion!”

Clan’s expression immediately eased up when she saw him. It was an unusually honest display for her, but that was just a sign of how flustered she was by Yurika’s condition.

“It’s bad! Yurika’s ready to give up!”

“It’s true, Satomi-san... I don’t feel like anything matters anymore...”

Even as Clan was explaining what was happening to Koutarou, Yurika was simply splashing about without going anywhere.

“I see. That’s too bad, Yurika. I’ll miss you.”

Now that he understood the situation, Koutarou turned a look of pity on Yurika. Confused, she looked up at him with wide eyes.

“You’ll... miss me?”

“That’s right. Think about it. If you give up—if you stop swimming now—what’s going to happen?”

“Uh... I’m gonna drown?”

“Yup, which means...”

“I’m gonna die?”

“So this is goodbye, Yurika. Like I said, I’ll miss you.”

“N-Noooooooo!”

The moment Yurika realized what Koutarou meant, she refocused her efforts and quickly swam away in a panic. She wasn’t quite matching Theia and Shizuka’s pace, but she was moving far faster than she had been at the start. It was almost like she was trying to outswim death itself.

“Veltlion... You really have it coming, you know?”

Koutarou was, of course, exaggerating. There was no way the lifeguard on duty and the event staff were just going to let Yurika drown. His plan to motivate her had relied entirely on the fact that she wasn’t thinking clearly right now.

“I don’t think I have anything to worry about with you around, Clan. I know you’ll protect me.”

“What?! You really think I’d protect you?!”

“You’re going to be the one to kill me, right? So if I’m going to die at your hands, you’re going to have to protect me until then.”

“Stupid! You really are stupid! Drop dead, you moron!”

In short order, Clan swam after Yurika. Granted, she wasn’t trying to catch up with her so much as she was trying to get away from Koutarou. She didn’t want him to see her bright red face.

Motivated by pure fear and a desire to live, Yurika paddled onward. Really, Yurika didn’t like exercise because she lacked discipline and confidence—not because she lacked resilience. Her technique was terrible and she wasted a lot of energy in the process, but somehow she managed to swim the full 200 meters and make it back to shore.

“I made it... I lived...”

Because she’d been swimming for her life, however, Yurika felt like she’d gone kilometers already. That coupled with the heaviness that beset her when she got out of the water made her feel several times more exhausted than she really was. Spent, she clumsily staggered towards the bikes.

“Yurika...! You were tricked...!”

Shortly thereafter, a winded Clan showed up. Unlike Yurika, Clan’s problem was simply that she was out of shape. Her swimming technique was just fine, so while she was tired, she wasn’t in the same sorry state Yurika was.

“Hwuh?”

“There’s a lifeguard on duty...! There’s no way you would’ve drowned...!”

“Aaaaahhh! And I fell for it!”

Yurika finally realized what Koutarou had done, but she was long out of the water now. It was too late to do anything about it.

“I’m gonna give Satomi-san a piece of my mind!”

Her cheeks puffed out indignantly, Yurika trudged towards the bikes. Her only goal now was to catch up to Koutarou and let him have it.

“If he actually planned things out this far, I’m rather impressed... God, why is he never this considerate with me?!”

Clan furrowed her brow and angrily followed after Yurika. She had a few choice words for Koutarou right now too. Incidentally, he hadn't anticipated getting Clan riled up as well... Not that he'd be unhappy about seeing them both in hot pursuit. In fact, he'd be quite impressed with his handiwork.

The only hitch was that neither Clan nor Yurika knew how to ride a bike. Naturally, then, the second leg of the triathlon would ordinarily be where they had to retire. Clan, however, had installed autobalancers on their bikes beforehand. They were small boxes only a few centimeters in size that stabilized the bicycles they were fashioned on to keep them from falling over. Essentially, they were high-tech training wheels. Such a handicap would be illegal in an official triathlon, but since today's event was only for sport, the organizers were allowing various modifications to help a few participants in the low-seed starting group. There were even a couple of people on tandem bikes and tricycles. As such, Clan and Yurika didn't feel guilty about using their own modifications in the second leg.

"This is my first time on a bike, but it's surprisingly fun," admitted Clan.

"I would have preferred doing this before swimming, honestly," said Yurika.

"I agree."

The bike course ran 10 kilometers along a cycling path parallel to the beach. It was a combination of flat terrain and a few gentle downhill stretches, meaning the girls could comfortably roll forward without exerting themselves too much. With a gentle breeze blowing against their faces and the lovely ocean scenery to take in, Yurika and Clan were actually enjoying the second leg.

"Clan-san, how much longer do you think this is gonna last?"

"According to Veltlion, the hard part starts once we reach the halfway point."

"Aww... So the second half is the hard part..."

"I just hope we can get a bit of a lead..."

Despite their trials in the first leg of the triathlon, they were still lagging behind most of the participants. If they had a chance to get ahead, it would be in the second half of the event when everyone else started to slow down. And

since they were nearly in last place as it was, there should be plenty of opportunities to pass people coming up.

“...Oh?”

“What is it, Clan-san?”

“Isn’t... Isn’t that Harumi?”

“Ah! It is! That’s totally Sakuraba-senpai!”

The two girls happened to recognize one of the competitors in front of them, however. It was their good friend Harumi.

“Harumi!”

“Sakuraba-senpai!”

Though they were still conserving their strength, Clan and Yurika picked up the pace some in order to catch up to Harumi.

“Yurika-san, Clan-san!”

When Harumi heard their voices, she glanced over her shoulder and greeted them with a smile as she slowed down a tad.

“We finally caught up!” cheered Yurika.

“You’re putting up a good fight, Harumi!” cheered Clan.

In a matter of seconds, all three girls were riding side by side. Once they were together, Harumi got back in her stride.

“I’m doing my best while pacing myself.”

“That’s amazing, Sakuraba-senpai.”

“It certainly is impressive, all things considered... Good for you, Harumi.”

Yurika and Clan were happy to have caught up to Harumi, but considering her natural handicap, it still wasn’t all that much of an achievement. Harumi was simply aiming to reach the goal with her limited stamina. Basically, she was tackling a speed race with an economy car. And, in that sense, she was doing as well as any of the frontrunners in the lead group.

“Oh, it’s nothing special... But it certainly looks like you two are giving it your

all.”

Bashful at all the sudden praise coming her way, Harumi turned the conversation on her two friends. It did indeed seem like they were really challenging themselves today.

“That’s because Satomi-san lied to me! I’m gonna catch him and give him a piece of my mind!”

“That’s right! If we try hard enough, we should be able to snag him on his way back!”

“Oh my.”

Hearing what had the two of them so motivated, Harumi couldn’t help giggling.

“Heehee... So in the end, this is all about Satomi-kun, is it?”

Both Yurika and Clan were so eager to lay into Koutarou that they were trying their hardest to get to him. Rather than retiring and waiting to catch him after the race, they wanted to see him right now. Harumi found that unbearably amusing.

“It’s only because he’s so mean! He told me I was gonna die, you know!”

“A-And what about you, Harumi?! Why are you trying so hard?!”

Furious as she was, Yurika openly acknowledged that she was after Koutarou. The bashful Clan, however, blushed at the implication and threw the question back at Harumi.

“I’m after the reward for doing my best,” she answered with a smile.

In order to encourage all the girls to do their best, Koutarou had promised rewards based on performance rather than placement in the triathlon. That way they’d be judged based on effort and not ability, meaning they’d all have a fair chance so long as they tried hard. And in Harumi’s case, she had her sights set on simply finishing the triathlon. It was a modest goal for many, but an ambitious one for her—one she was sure would be rewarded.

“So what are you going to ask for as your reward, Harumi?”

“That’s...”

Harumi had been forthcoming thus far, but suddenly fumbled for an answer. The “reward” for doing one’s best in the triathlon was being able to ask for something from any of the others. That left it up to the individual to decide what to ask for, and Harumi was thinking of making a rather bold request.

“What is it?” Yurika asked the silent Harumi.

“I was, um... thinking of asking a certain someone to spend the day holding hands with me...”

Harumi’s wish was just like her. There were a great many things she desired, but her passive personality often kept her from asking for them outright. She also tended to hold back out of consideration for the people around her. But if it was a reward she’d earned on her own, she thought it would be fair play to ask for something she really wanted.

“Holding hands for a day...”

“That sounds like something a couple would do...”

Dwelling on Harumi’s answer, both Clan and Yurika began daydreaming about holding hands with a certain someone.

Knowing him, he would still be a jerk... but I wouldn’t mind so much if he was holding my hand. Really, I bet he’d be the one uncomfortable for once... Aha, that’s brilliant! I’ll ask for the same thing for my reward!

A broad grin appeared on Clan’s face as she continued to imagine her future reward, unconsciously beginning to pedal faster.

Nothing really happened after Maki-chan and I kissed him on the cheeks other than him fussing at us. But I bet if we lovingly held hands like they do in shoujo manga, then... Teeheehee! Oh, I know! That’s what I should ask for!

Yurika too was feeding off of her imagination. Hers was a bit more rose-colored and dreamy than Clan’s, largely because it was overinfluenced by shoujo manga, but it drove her forward just the same.

“W-We have to make it to the goal!”

“Yeah! Let’s do our best, Sakuraba-senpai!”

“Heeheehee... Of course!”

Clan and Yurika were on fire when they’d first caught up to Harumi, but that fire was burning a little differently now. That change puzzled Harumi at first, but she was ultimately of a like mind and quickly began pedaling faster herself.

Yurika and Clan ended up parting ways with Harumi when the cycling path doubled back. Because she was going slow and steady, she wouldn’t be able to keep up with them from this point forward as they tried to pull ahead. She wished them luck, however, as they began tackling the uphill challenge.

“Are you sure it was okay to leave Sakuraba-senpai behind, Clan-san?”

“W-We had no choice...! We have to give this our all in order to get our own rewards...!”

“Y-Yeah! You’re right!”

“We should only be worrying... about ourselves right now!”

As total novices to cycling, neither one of them knew how to pace themselves on bikes or even effectively change gears. They ended up burning a great deal of time and energy just getting up the hills on the way back, which would cost them dearly when it came to the third leg of the triathlon—running.

The running leg of the marathon was a shorter-than-usual 2 kilometer course. Most would be able to complete it in thirty to forty minutes, but it shouldn’t take more than an hour even for the children and the elderly participating. Nevertheless, it would still be an extraordinary challenge for the out-of-shape Clan and weak-willed Yurika.

“C-Clan-san, it says we have... another 1.5 kilometers to go...”

“You mean... we’re only a quarter of the way done...?”

“It’s so faaaaar... I’m gonna dieee...”

“I’ve come this far... for you, Veltlion... If you say anything stupid, I swear... I’ll never forgive you...!”

Both girls were reaching their limits. After powering through the swimming

and cycling legs—neither of which they were good at—they had almost no stamina left. And now they were stuck running, or at least they were supposed to be. They best they could do was carry themselves at a forced zombie-like shuffle. They were only five hundred meters into the course, and they already looked like they were about to drop dead.

“W-We’re so close, Clan-san... We have to reach the goal...”

“And not finish in last place...”

“I want that reward...”

“We have to get it... after coming this far... or else...”

Even though they were just coasting on empty tanks at this point, the thought of the reward that awaited them kept them going. If they retired early or finished in dead last, it would be out of reach despite all their suffering. That’s why they weren’t willing to give up just yet. A sense of purpose drove them forward.

“Keep it up, ladies!”

“You’re almost there! Hang in there!”

Other participants were passing the girls left and right now. They’d done much better jobs at conserving their strength and pacing themselves, so they used some of their remaining energy to offer encouragement to the clearly struggling Yurika and Clan.

“I should really... exercise more...” huffed Yurika.

“I thought I’d gotten stronger with martial arts training... but it seems... I still have a long way to go...” huffed Clan.

Watching more and more participants pass by, the girls were growing desperate. Severe exhaustion took hold of them, making each step feel like a marathon of its own. But in spite of the struggle, they pressed onward. They summoned strength from their emotions... Emotions and desires deep down in their girlish hearts they were unwilling to let down.

When the goal was finally on the horizon, Clan and Yurika were barely able to

move. They'd fallen considerably behind in the rankings. Even Harumi, who'd they'd left in the dust halfway through the cycling leg, had long caught up and passed them.

"Clan-san, the finish line! I can see the finish line!"

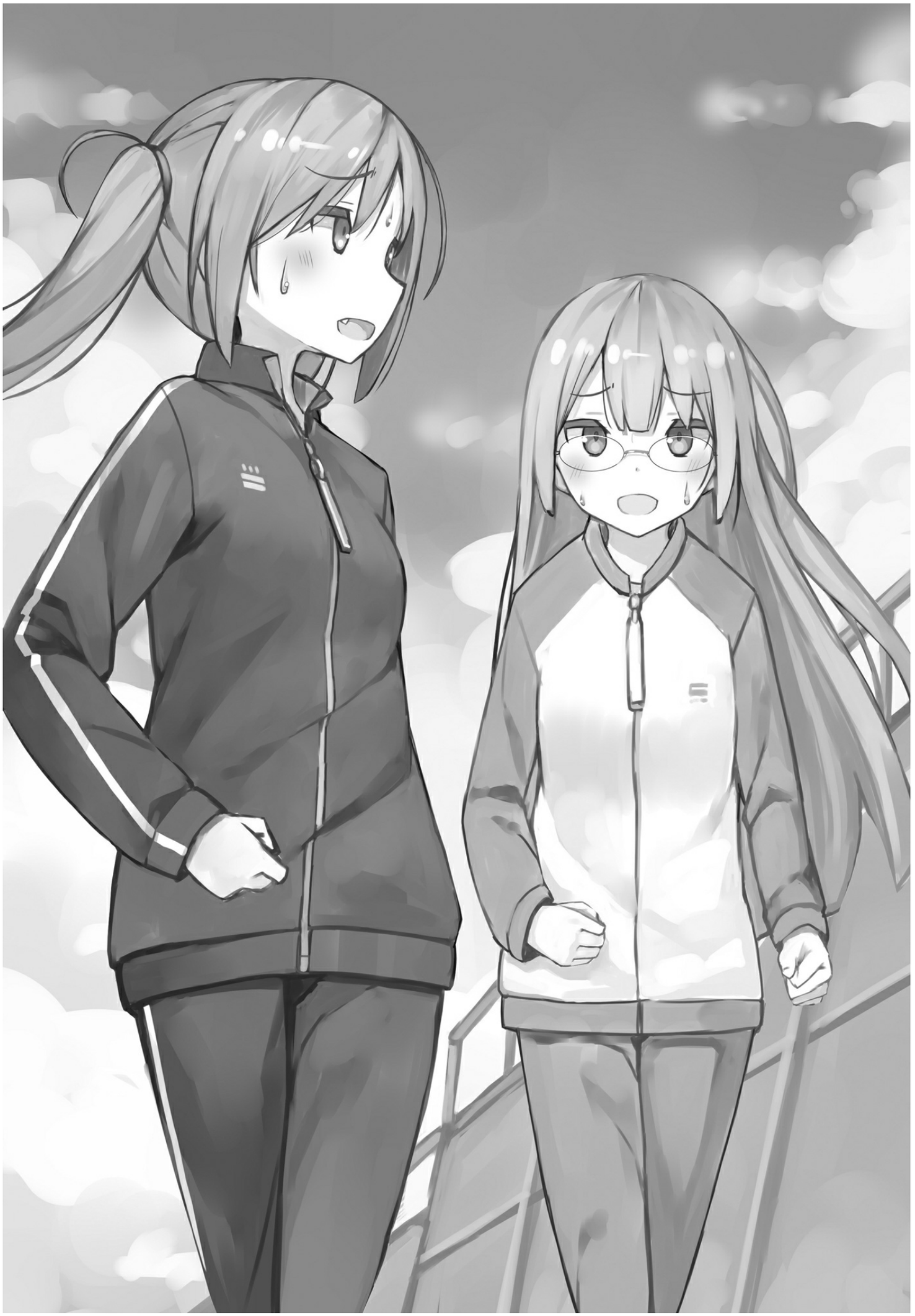
"Heh... Heh heh heh! A proud princess of Forthorthe... can truly do anything she puts her mind to!"

When they laid eyes on the finish line, a smile broke out on both of their faces. Knowing they were almost there brightened their mood immensely. They were too tired to even think at this point, so the sheer joy of the moment overtook them. Their pure smiles were so enchanting that any man who laid eyes on them right now was sure to have his heart stolen.

"Yurika, fight! Y-Yurika, fight!"

"Just a little further! I'll show you that I can do it!"

Now fueled by hope, Yurika and Clan mustered the last of their energy and took off running. The goal was just a stone's throw away. Seeing it was a relief. There was no longer a need to pace themselves. They could run to their heart's content and finish this.



“Yurika! Clan!” cheered Koutarou.

“You’re right there!” shouted Theia.

“Please bear with it a little longer, Clan-sama!” encouraged Ruth.

When Yurika and Clan got closer to the goal, Koutarou and the others who had already finished began calling to their friends. Clan and Yurika could hear them, but couldn’t manage the energy or lungpower to respond. It did put a little more spring in their step, however.

“If he can cheer for us like that... why isn’t he nicer normally?”

“Satomi-san... isn’t very honest with his feelings. His reaction when I kissed him... was pretty underwhelming too...”

“Y-You kissed him?!”

“Only on the cheek...”

“That’s not the point!”

Yurika and Clan continued to chat as they neared the finish line. It might have seemed like a waste of energy, but the truth is that neither one of them would have been likely to make it on their own. Having a comrade with a common goal helped inspire both of them. They’d only been able to keep going because they each had the other at their side, and in the end, the triathlon helped bring them closer together as friends.

“Look, Yurika... We’re almost at the goal...”

“I hope... we’re not in last place...”

At last, they were finally upon the finish line. Their results were terrible—while they weren’t in dead last, they were frightfully close. Only a handful of children and senior citizens were still behind them. They’d undoubtedly finished last in their age group.

“That... doesn’t matter...” huffed Clan.

“But...” fretted Yurika.

“Even if nobody else praises us... I know we did a good job.”

“Yeah... Yeah, we did.”

Perhaps no one else would praise them for their efforts. Their placement in the triathlon certainly wasn’t anything to be proud of. But deep down in their hearts, both Clan and Yurika knew they’d done their best. They acknowledged that both in themselves and in each other.

“We really did our best, didn’t we? Heehee...”

“Heh... Yes, we certainly did.”

Holding hands, the two proud friends finished the race they’d started together.

Neither Clan nor Yurika actually really remembered crossing the finish line. At that point in the race, their brains were so oxygen-deprived that the whole thing was kind of a blur. The next thing they knew, they woke up in room 106.

“...Yurika, are you awake?” Clan quietly asked Yurika, who was lying in the futon next to her.

“Yeah. I woke up just now from all the pain I’m in.”

The triathlon seemed like a distant dream to them now, but the exhaustion and soreness it left behind were very real. They could only assume the others had had to carry them back to the apartment after the race.

“We made it to the goal...”

“Yeah, we did...”

Staring up at the ceiling, they muttered to each other. Thinking back on it, it was out of character for either of them to try so hard when their lives weren’t at stake.

“I guess that’s how far pride will get you.”

“Men have their pride, but women do too.”

In the end, that was what had carried them through to the finish line. They both still wanted to give Koutarou a piece of their mind, but they simultaneously wanted him to dote on them. It was a complicated position to

be in, but the truth was that—even if they never forgave him—they would let him get away with just about anything. Perhaps it wasn't pride then, but an emotion called...

Nevertheless, the girls had accomplished what they'd set out to do, which put a big grin on both of their faces.

"Heh heh..."

"Heehee...

Grinning gave way to giggling, both girls breaking out into joyous laughter in celebration of their victory and their friendship. It left them a little disappointed their other friends weren't there to share in the moment with them.

"I wonder where everyone else went..." Yurika sighed.

"I'm sure they left us alone to rest," replied Clan.

"I see. Then—"

Grrrumble!

Just as they were wondering where their friends had gone, Yurika's stomach interrupted. After working so hard to accomplish her goal, she was now starving.

"Hahaha!"

"Auuugh..."

The old Clan would have found this all extremely improper, but after what she'd been through with Yurika today, she instead found it extremely relatable. Clan, of course, was rather peckish herself.

"We should go find Veltlion and the others. I'm sure they've gotten something to eat by now."

"Ooh, I agree! Good idea! Let's go!"

Seeing Clan's friendly smile, Yurika's embarrassed frown turned into a bright grin... at least until she tried to sit up.

"Owowow..."

“What’s the— Ouch!”

When Clan tried to sit up too, she felt the same exact pain Yurika did. All their exertion earlier had left them quite sore.

“Ah, I see... Of course this is the result of that much exercise without relying on science or magic...”

“Let’s take it easy, Clan-san.”

“Yes, let’s.”

Moving too quickly invited pain, so the girls agreed to take things slow. It still hurt, but not badly enough to keep them down.

“...Oh?”

Once Clan was up, she spotted a small piece of paper lying on the edge of the tea table.

“What is it?” Yurika asked.

Clan then picked up the paper and showed it to her.

“It looks like they left us a note. Let’s see here... ‘We moved over to Blue Knight so we wouldn’t disturb you. Please join us when you wake up.’”

“That’s Sakuraba-senpai’s handwriting.”

“Now that you mention it, yeah.”

The courteous, thoughtful Harumi had left her two good friends a note for when they awoke. It was very much so like her to do that instead of texting.

“Let’s get going, Clan-san.”

“Wait a minute, that’s not all. The bottom says, ‘P.S.- Satomi-san and the others all agreed that you two tried your hardest. Please think about what you’d like to ask for as your reward.’”

“Our rewards...”

“That was the deal, wasn’t it...?”

After hearing the postscript, Clan and Yurika looked up at each other. As they locked eyes, they both began grinning.

“Say, Yurika... For maximum effect, I was thinking perhaps we should combine our wishes. What do you think?”

“I think that’s a good idea. We’ve come this far together, so let’s see it through together.”

“Heeheehee!”

“Hahaha!”

After their little tête-à-tête, Yurika extended her hand to Clan, who was sitting at the tea table.

“By the way, Yurika, when you kissed him on the cheek, how did he react?”

“Like I said, it was underwhelming. But that’s happened with Satomi-san before. There was this one time...”

Clan took Yurika’s outstretched hand, and the two girls crossed through the gate to Blue Knight just like they had the finish line.

Episode 2: The Boredom Games: Four Match Showdown?

One pleasant autumn Sunday, Harumi had plans to go out with her parents. Unfortunately, however, one of her father's colleagues was in an accident and ended up in the hospital. Her father was then called to fill in at work in his stead, so the Sakuraba family had to take a raincheck on their playdate, leaving Harumi with some free time to herself. Her family plans had fallen through so last minute that it was too late to politely invite anyone else out. So instead, Harumi casually set out for room 106 to see if anyone was around. Even if they weren't, she thought, the trip there and back would be more fun than just lazing about at home.

"Why hello, Sakuraba-san."

When she arrived at room 106, Maki gave her a warm greeting from the tea table in the inner room. Harumi walked in and sat down opposite Maki as she greeted her warmly in return.

"Hello there, Maki-san. Teehee..."

"What is it?"

"Honestly, I was hoping someone might be home if I stopped by. I can't believe my luck."

"I see."

Maki was puzzled by Harumi's giggle at first, but her explanation made perfect sense. She just had one more question...

"That's right, Sakuraba-san. Weren't you supposed to go out with your family today?"

"I was... But unfortunately my father was unexpectedly called in to work."

"I'm sorry to hear that. Truth be told, though, something similar happened here. Heehee..."

Maki couldn’t help giggling, meaning it was now Harumi’s turn to ask the questions.

“Oh?”

“You see, I had plans to go out shopping with Yurika this afternoon, but she forgot that she had a council meeting today.”

“So now you’re here doing homework by your lonesome?”

“I guess I was hoping someone might stop by.”

“Teehee...”

“Heehee...”

Harumi had been hoping someone would be home, and Maki had been hoping someone might stop by. Crossing paths was a serendipitous encounter for both of them.

Harumi offered to help, but Maki continued working on her homework for a while. Without any specific plans, taking care of her studies seemed like the prudent thing to do. Maki was an excellent student, however, and Harumi was an excellent tutor. It didn’t take long at all for them to finish Maki’s homework, so they were now relaxing and enjoying a cup of tea together.

“Thank you, Sakuraba-san. You were a big help.”

“I don’t feel like I did much.”

“I don’t get stumped often, so it was a great comfort to know you’d be there for me when I needed it.”

“You’re very kind, Maki-san. I’m glad I could be of help.”

It was pleasant to get Maki’s homework out of the way, but now that they were done with it, the girls didn’t have anything in particular to do. Really, they were just enjoying some tea and chatting as a way to pass the time.

“Is there anything you struggle with, Sakuraba-san?” Maki asked Harumi after taking a sip.

Harumi gave off the impression she was good at just about everything, so

Maki was curious if there was anything that stumped her too.

“Anything involving exercise.”

“That’s just an issue of stamina. I know you’re really quite flexible and strong.”

Harumi was indeed quite lithe, but because of her health, she had very little endurance. It sort of gave the false impression that she wasn’t very athletic, but the truth was that her reflexes, dexterity, and reaction time were all above average. Maki hardly considered that a weakness.

“Then...”

Half-eaten rice cracker in hand, Harumi paused to ponder the question. In regards to what she was bad at, several things besides exercise came to mind.

Let’s see... I’m bad at being a bad girl, but that’s not really what she’s asking about. I still don’t have an intense relationship with Satomi-kun... but that’s not really it either. Then... Ah, I know!

Out of everything that went through her head, one point in particular stood out. Seizing on it, Harumi wrapped her left hand around her right hand holding a rice cracker and smiled.

“I’m bad at games!” she declared.

“At games?” Maki asked questioningly as she tossed a glance towards the TV.

Set up beneath it was the old game console that Theia and Koutarou loved so much.

“No, not video games. I mean the kind you all play together. I never stand a chance at those...”

Harumi meant she was bad at board and card games. She adored them because they were such a good way to have fun with all her friends, but she was hopelessly bad at them, mostly because of her lack of experience with them. Before she’d met Koutarou and the others, she didn’t have many friends she could play games like that with.

“I get that...” Maki said with a bitter smile.

Maki was actually quite bad at board games for much the same reason. Most of the games Koutarou and the others played weren't even available in Folsaria, Maki's homeland.

"Do you want to win more, Sakuraba-san?"

"Rather than winning... It just seems like it's boring for everyone when I lose all the time."

"So it's not about winning and losing... Now that you've said it, I feel the same way."

Harumi and Maki didn't care about winning; they just wanted everyone to have fun. And since one-sided games were boring, they were worried that their perpetually poor performances were affecting everyone's enjoyment of the games they played.

"Maki-san, why don't we practice some?"

"Practice?"

"Yes! I was thinking we could play some games together to try and get better at them!"

"What a wonderful idea!"

If Harumi and Maki both suffered for lack of experience, the simplest solution was clearly getting the experience they needed.

To begin, Maki and Harumi picked out a card game. Specifically, they chose one that said it was good for beginners on the packaging. Neither of the girls were ambitious enough to jump in to something complicated right off the bat.

"It says to sort the cards into an item pile and an event pile."

"...Done!"

Maki read the instructions out loud while Harumi went about sorting and placing the cards as indicated. That was their plan for setting up the game together.

"Next it says to deal five cards to each player from the item pile—that will be

our starting hand.”

“Five each? Okay. Three, four, five... Done!”

“Next, play rock, paper, scissors to determine turn order. On your turn, draw a card from the event pile and use the items in your hand to solve it. Earn points based on your success. At the end of your turn, draw item cards to replenish your hand.”

“It doesn’t sound too hard. Let’s give it a try.”

“Rock, paper...”

“Scissors!”

The card game they’d picked out was a horror-themed one that imagined the players stuck in a haunted mansion. The event cards represented the difficulties they faced while trying to escape.

“I’ll start,” said Maki, the victor of their rock, paper, scissors match.

“Good luck!” cheered Harumi.

“Okay, here I go...”

Maki reached out, drew a card from the event pile, and laid it on the table face up. Pictured on the card was a bunch of wooden furniture.

“Let’s see... ‘The furniture around you floats up in the air and attacks!’”

“So you have to survive with the cards in your hand, right? Do you have anything that can help you?”

“I have this big wrench. I think I should be able to protect myself with that.”

“I think so too.”

There were no clear rules for deciding which items worked for which events. A player could “survive” as long as they were clever—the real trick to the game was convincing the other players that you had a valid item to save yourself. In this particular case, Harumi didn’t have any trouble believing that Maki could protect herself from a flying chair with a wrench. Thus, Maki got points for the event.

“It’s your turn now, Sakuraba-san.”

“All right... Here I go!” Harumi boldly declared as she drew an event card. “It looks like an earthquake. ‘The entire house starts shaking, and you’re in danger of falling down the stairs!’”

“That sounds like a tricky one.”

“I don’t have any good cards for this...”

“Then why not try something you do have?”

“All right, then... How about this?”

Unfortunately, Harumi didn’t have any particularly helpful cards for the situation, so she decided to stake her bet on a long shot.

“A pot?”

“Well, I was thinking I could at least protect my head this way. Ahaha...”

The item card Harumi played pictured a large kitchen pot—the kind you’d see in restaurant kitchens. It was certainly large enough to protect her head, but the idea was so silly that Harumi couldn’t help laughing at herself.

“Hmm... I don’t think that’s such a bad idea.”

Maki didn’t think it was as farfetched as Harumi did. As a warrior, she knew the value of a helmet. Keeping your head protected was important, after all.

“You think so?”

“I do. I definitely think you’d survive that way.”

“Well, if you say so... I suppose that’s the nature of the game.”

“Yes, I think I’m starting to get it now.”

A player didn’t have to have the perfect item card to survive; they just had to have one that would conceivably work. More importantly, they had to have one that was convincing. They player could essentially ad lib their way through just about any situation. And now that the girls understood the real aim of they game, they slowly worked their way through it.

Though things started off somewhat trepidatiously, the game proceeded smoothly after the first couple of turns. All in all, it took the girls about fifteen

minutes to wrap up the round—almost exactly as the packaging had promised.

“I see... So you’re supposed to hold on to an item card to get you through the exit at the end.”

Maki had been the one to make it out of the mansion. The exit itself was possessed by a ghost and wouldn’t open without some kind of magical tool. Maki just so happened to have a crystal ball on hand, and used that to make her escape.

“Okay, let’s add up the points.”

Harumi peeked at the manual, reading up on how to calculate the points. In short, players were awarded one point for each event card they “survived” and three points for successfully escaping at the end of the game. The winner would be determined by the total number of points, so overall performance in the game was essential to victory.

“I’m holding nineteen event cards, so I think that’s it for me... Nineteen points.”

“I have fifteen cards and I managed to make it out, which is worth three points, so... Aw, I was so close. That’s eighteen points for me.”

Maki had been the one to escape, but victory was Harumi’s in the end. Luck of the draw had been on her side.

“Congratulations, Sakuraba-san.”

“Thank you, but... hmm...”

“What’s the matter?”

“It just doesn’t seem like the exit card is worth enough points. I mean, normal cards are worth one, so it feels like making it out alive should be worth more than two bonus points. It’s still an event, after all. Those three points in total wouldn’t be enough to turn things around at the end of the game.”

“You might be right about that...”

With almost twenty points at the end of the game, it was true two or three extra points wouldn’t make much of a difference in the results. The real problem, however, was that players weren’t meant to have that many points.

Harumi and Maki had been far more lenient with each other's plays than the game designers had expected, leaving them both with more than double the intended scores.

"Don't you think the exit should be worth five points, Maki-san?"

"Well, we know the rules now, so why don't we go with that next time?"

Not realizing the actual problem, however, Harumi and Maki simply adjusted the rules as they prepared for the next round.

The girls ended up playing the game three times. Since the rounds were short, only about ten minutes apiece, it took multiple hands for them to get their fill of the game. At the end of three rounds, Harumi was declared the victor. She'd taken the first hand, and after that she and Maki had each won a round, leaving the final score 2:1.

"People who have played this game before have an advantage, don't they?" Harumi wondered aloud as she cleaned up the cards.

Maki was in the middle of rummaging through the wardrobe for more games. As the loser, she was responsible for picking out the next one.

"I think so," she replied. "Knowing the range of items available would certainly give you the upper hand."

"So now we'll be in the know the next time we play."

"Teehee... Let's keep at it."

Maki continued chatting away with Harumi as she pilfered the wardrobe, but before long, she turned to Harumi with a game in hand.

"Let's play this one."

Maki was smiling, but it was a much bigger and brighter smile than usual. It was a sign she was enjoying herself, which was in turn a sign she was getting closer with Harumi. The game she'd picked out for them to play next came in a large box, which Harumi eyed curiously.

"What kind of game is it?"

“It’s a competitive game where players split up into phantom thieves and detectives.”

“So you’re either being chased or doing the chasing?”

“Perhaps. The rules do seem a bit like a game of tag.”

Maki had chosen a board game this time. The premise was a cat-and-mouse scenario between a phantom thief making heists all over Tokyo and a hotshot detective trying to stop them. The thief would win if they managed to get their hands on a certain amount of treasure, and the detective would win if they caught the thief before then. The detective’s goal was to box the thief in on the board using roadblocks and other obstructions, which the thief could escape via helicopter. It was an older game, but the rich variety of strategy players could use in their intense showdown made it quite popular even among gamers today.

“Maki-san, which role would you prefer?”

“Hmm... Of the two, phantom thief.”

As a former agent of evil, Maki related more with the phantom thief. She was also unfamiliar with detective work, so the idea of playing the thief appealed to her strengths more.

“Then I’ll be the detective.”

That left Harumi playing the detective, which was actually her first choice to begin with. Quite the opposite of Maki, she had a hard time imagining herself as a criminal and thusly related more to the detective in the story.

“Now,” Harumi said as she glanced over the instructions, “we decide our starting points by each drawing a card.”

“I’ll draw one... Then you draw four, Sakuraba-san. One for you, and one for each of your subordinates.”

“So it’s functionally four against one? That seems unfair...”

“The phantom thief can move faster than the detectives, so you’ll need at least four people to catch me.”

“I see... That makes sense.”

The two girls reviewed the rules as they set up the game. They spread the board out and arranged the pieces and cards. It was certainly more complex than the card game they'd been playing previously, but the detailed instructions helped walk them through it all. Fortunately, both Harumi and Maki were the type to thoroughly read the manual.

"I think this should do it," Harumi said with a nod.

Once everything was set up, she looked the instructions over one last time. Everything seemed to be in order, meaning it was finally time to play.

"Now I just need this," said Maki as she reached for something similar to a sun visor.

Once she put it on her head, both girls burst out laughing.

"Ahaha, what's that?"

"Heehee... It's supposed to hide where I'm looking."

"Ah, I see. The game would end pretty quickly if you could tell what the phantom thief was eyeing, after all."

The visor was meant to help the phantom thief player who, instead of placing a piece on the board, tracked their movements on a notepad. That was to keep their location secret, but if the detective players could see where the phantom thief was looking on the board, that would give the secret away all the same. The visor was meant to prevent that.

"I don't mind looking away on your turn," offered Harumi.

"That's not necessary. It's fun wearing this, anyway," replied Maki.

Maki didn't think Harumi would try and figure out her location by watching where she was looking in the first place, but decided to follow the rules and wear the visor nonetheless. It would be good practice for playing against other people and, moreover, it was funny.

"Doesn't it look good on me? Teehee..."

"N-No comment, heehee..."

With the two girls giggling over the visor, they certainly didn't seem like a

phantom thief and detective. The mood said this was all fun and games to them, which was quite natural considering neither one of them was really competitive. Things would be different with Theia and Sanae around.

“Now let’s begin.”

“I’ll do my best to escape.”

“And I’ll do my best to catch you.”

After exchanging one last smile, the two girls looked down at the game board seriously. Though neither one of them was playing to win outright, they wanted to do their best and learn from each other. And so began Harumi and Maki’s second game battle.

In the early stages of the game, neither Maki nor Harumi had a good grasp of the rules. They played around experimentally, wading through learning the game... But everything changed when Maki drew a particular event card.

“‘An ally has betrayed you! You lose one treasure and your location has been reported to the police. Tell the detectives where you are.’ What?!”

While Maki, as the phantom thief, didn’t have a piece on the board, she still had a location. It was simply kept secret from the detectives, which was simulated by Maki tracking her moves privately on a notepad. Harumi, the detective, only knew where Maki was after she struck a place. Her objective was to try and predict where Maki would show up next based on the board and Maki’s previous moves.

As such, an ally betraying Maki seriously jeopardized her stake in the game. If Harumi knew where she was, that might tell her where she was going next. She’d have to be careful.

“So, Maki-san, where are you?”

“Here.”

Maki abhorred dishonesty and loathed breaking rules she’d decided to follow. So, though reluctantly, she honestly revealed her location to Harumi.

“Oh, that’s not at all where I thought you were.”

“I was intentionally trying to move in ways I wouldn’t normally.”

“Ahaha, I see.”

Maki wasn’t anywhere near where Harumi had anticipated, so she wasn’t currently surrounded. The situation wasn’t nearly as bad for her as it could have been, which was something of a relief. But Maki’s shoulders still drooped in disappointment.

“What terrible luck...” she sighed.

“That’s too bad, Maki-san.”

Harumi honestly felt for her. Though her job was to apprehend Maki, she felt badly seeing her friend so down and cast a sympathetic look her way. Was Maki feeling sad about losing treasure, or was she worried for her long-term prospects? Harumi couldn’t help wondering as she watched over her.

“I don’t mind having my location exposed or losing some treasure... But I could never forgive a traitor that sold me out like that.”

“I know what you mean. How could you accept someone who only thinks about themselves? There’s honor even among thieves, you know.”

As it turned out, Maki was frustrated for a different reason altogether. Harumi understood, however. She couldn’t even imagine betraying Maki or Koutarou for her own gain. Just the thought of it broke her heart.



“I know, Maki-san! I’ll call off my search for a couple of turns so you can find the traitor.”

That was Harumi’s suggested solution. As an agent of justice and good, she also hated the idea that someone had betrayed Maki.

“What? Are you really okay with that?”

Maki’s eyes opened wide in surprise upon hearing Harumi’s offer. It was unthinkable to her that someone would make such a selfless play.

“Even if this is only a game, there are some things I just can’t abide. In return, please return to your original position when you’re done.”

“Sakuraba-san...”

“Wasn’t the point of playing to enjoy ourselves? So let’s have fun with it! Besides, this is a duel between the phantom thief and the detective. Traitors shouldn’t be butting in.”

“Yeah, you’re right! Thank you, Sakuraba-san. I’ll take care of this quickly.”

Harumi’s generosity left a deep impression on Maki. If she’d ever been in doubt before, she was now sure that Harumi was no ordinary person. In a sense, it could be said that Harumi won right then and there. But the game continued between the detective who trusted everyone and the phantom thief with a strong sense of justice.

Ultimately, Maki came out on top. Ignoring several event cards left Harumi at a disadvantage. Maki returned to her original location as promised, but by then Harumi was too far behind to make a comeback. So even though Maki won, Harumi had walked the nobler road. In the end, Maki felt like the game truly belonged to her.

“She’s not quite the same as Satomi-kun, but she’s just as wonderful...”

“Hmm? What was that?”

“O-Oh, nothing. I was just saying that the game was complex, but it was fun.”

“I agree. It was complicated enough that we should practice it some more

sometime.”

“Yeah.”

Once they’d cleaned up the board game, they took a load off with a second round of tea. After all the thinking and strategizing they’d done, it was a welcome break. As they carefreely chatted away, the mental exhaustion they’d built up slowly faded away.

“Would you like to keep training after this, Maki-san?”

“Since Satomi-kun and the others aren’t back yet, I would love to.”

Maki readily agreed, eager to spend more time with Harumi. She’d liked Harumi from the start, but their gaming session today had only brought them closer together. Harumi didn’t lie. She was earnest, thoughtful, and righteous—everything Maki thought an ideal woman should be.

“Okay, then I’ll pick the next game.”

“Be my guest.”

Unaware of Maki’s growing affection for her, Harumi tottered off to the wardrobe. She too was eager to spend more time with Maki. She thought it was incredibly sweet that she’d agreed to spend the afternoon playing games with her, and she was thoroughly enjoying their time together. She hoped it would last as long as possible.

“Okay, I’ve decided! I’d like to play this one!”

“Which one is that?”

“Well, you see...”

Right now, the girls were tied with one win each. The outcome of the day’s training was uncertain, but neither of them really cared about that. They just wanted to continue having fun with each other.

The game Harumi chose was a board game called “Landshark Paradise.” It had been the focus of game night plenty of times in room 106, but because Maki and Harumi weren’t part of the Corona House crew originally, they had less experience with it than the others. Thanks to that, someone usually won the

game before Harumi felt like she'd gotten the hang of things. That's why she picked it out now—she wanted a chance to play it at her own pace with Maki and thoroughly learn the rules.

"So you don't actually landshark? I see..." mused Harumi.

"I think the game is simply called that because that's what it feels like when everyone is trying to buy up all the properties."

"I see, I see. Then let's make it fun by turning this into a competition between honest companies."

"I agree. That would be much more fun."

Though Harumi wanted to play the game, neither she nor Maki were cut out for the landsharking the name of the game implied. Fortunately, however, gameplay didn't actually require anything underhanded. As such, the girls decided they'd be more comfortable playing the game if they agreed to be mutually above-board.

"We already know the gist of this game, so why don't we dive right in, Maki-san?"

"Sounds good to me. Here are the dice, Sakuraba-san."

"Thank you. Now... here I go!"

Since they'd played the game several times before, the girls already had a grasp of the rules and the general flow of the game. What they really wanted to focus on were specifics and strategy. They wanted to play a round with each other to get to know the game better.

"I got a two and a three, so I'll move five spaces."

"Let's see, that lands you on... the Izumino Shopping Street toy store. The deed is one million yen."

The game used two dice to move players around a circular board with no real endpoint. Instead of reaching a particular space, the objective was to move around the board and buy up properties. Players started the game with 20 million yen in play money, so Harumi could easily afford the first property she landed on.

“Well, why don’t I buy it then?”

“All right, let me get you your change.”

Harumi traded Maki some of the fake bills for a card representing the deed to the toy store, which included information on how much she could charge other players who landed on the space.

“In order for the toy store to pay for itself, you’ll have to land on it five times, Maki-san. It sounds like this game is going to take a while...”

“Really? I remember Yurika going bankrupt after landing on this very same space before.”

“Now that you mention it, I think there are rules about increasing the fees...”

Deed in hand, Harumi began scanning the manual. It wasn’t particularly thick, so she quickly found the information she needed.

“Here it is... Apparently if you buy all of the shops on the same shopping street, the properties can expand and the fee gets exponentially higher. Maybe that’s why it bankrupted Yurika-san.”

“Ah, I see. So that’s what the little houses on the properties represent.”

Once a single player owned all the properties on a particular shopping street, they could begin building to expand. As the properties expanded, they became more expensive for other players to land on. The key to ending the game quickly was to buy as many properties and expand as quickly as possible to bankrupt the other players.

“Which means... we should buy anything we can get our hands on and then trade, Maki-san.”

“That sounds like a good plan. Now that I think about it, people were trading deeds when we were playing with everyone too. They must have been trying to secure their shopping streets.”

After taking a few turns and a closer look at the manual, the girls were able to clear up most of the details they’d been vague on before. From there, they began playing more seriously and took turns rolling the dice.

About thirty minutes into the game, they'd successfully bought up half of the properties on the board.

"At this stage, it gets hard to land on the shops that haven't already been bought," Maki observed.

And it was true. With half of the properties already purchased, it was twice as unlikely to land on a space that was still for sale—and the odds would only get worse from here on out.

"I'm sure landing on the last one will be a tricky task, Maki-san."

"I bet it will be, heehee... Now, wish me luck! Hup!"

With an adorable shout, Maki rolled the dice. If any boys had been around to hear it, they might have fallen for her right then and there. It was a rare sign that Maki had let her guard down. She was completely comfortable around Harumi, and it showed.

Roll, roll, roll... D-Ding!

The dice she'd rolled went all the way across the table and didn't stop until they hit a cup. The dice read one and two, so Maki casually moved her space forward three spaces.

"One, two, three... Sakuraba-san, please hand me an event card."

"Okay, here you go."

"Let's see... 'You got on the wrong train. Move to the closest station.'"

"The closest one is behind you... That's too bad."

Rather than a property, Maki had landed on event space. That signaled to draw a random event card, which just so happened to send Maki to the train station five spaces behind her. The game awarded players money when they completed a lap around the board based on how many shops they owned. And unfortunately, Maki got sent backward just before crossing the line.

"Worse yet, it's a station you own, Sakuraba-san."

"Oh, is it?"

"Yes. Now what do I do? I don't have enough money to pay you."

Maki was now in dire straits. Since she and Harumi had been focusing on buying up properties, she'd already spent most of her money. She didn't have enough left on hand to cover the fee for the station. Upon realizing the trouble she was in, Maki's shoulders drooped.

"It's okay, Maki-san."

"What?"

"I'll buy one of your shops. Whenever you get the money, you can buy it back from me."

There, Harumi extended Maki a helping hand. Players were allowed to do business amongst themselves as they pleased, so Harumi offered to buy Maki out.

"...Are you sure?"

"Heehee... We're only just starting to have fun, so let's keep it going."

Anyone might have offered to buy a property off Maki to help her out, but there were very few Harumis in the world. Nothing in the rules said she had to let Maki buy the property back when she was ready. In fact, keeping it from her would be more advantageous. But Harumi had an innocent smile on her face. She was simply enjoying the game in her own way.

"Then I'll take you up on your offer, Sakuraba-san..."

"Here's your two million."

Maki handed a shop deed over to Harumi with a smile and then used the money she made to pay Harumi's station fee. Now all Maki had to do was cross the starting line again and make the money to retake her shop.

"All right, now it's my turn."

"Good luck... Oh, and here are the dice."

"Thank you, Maki-san."

Under ordinary circumstances, Maki would be skeptical about ever getting her shop back. But she knew a windfall was ahead and that Harumi was good for her word. If nothing else, she was certain right now that they'd get to enjoy

their game for a little while longer.

The turning point in the game was Maki's close encounter with bankruptcy at the station. After that, both girls did what they could to help the other out and keep them out of financial difficulty.

"Maki-san, why don't we go around the board a few more times to build up some capital before we expand?"

"That would make things go more smoothly."

They mutually agreed to hold off on expansions and build up cash before continuing. There were, of course, some unexpected hardships thanks to the random event cards, but they worked together to overcome and amass funds.

"Sakuraba-san, the bank is running out of 50 million bills."

"Maybe it's about time to expand our shopping streets then?"

Slowly but surely, as the bank was beginning to run dry, Harumi and Maki agreed to begin expanding. But even then, they were cautious. They'd move slowly so as not to put too much of a damper on their cash flows. And so, with Harumi and Maki financing each other, they slowly moved into expansion on an unprecedented scale. Before the girls knew it, they'd reached an almost unthinkable situation in Landshark Paradise— every property on the board had been expanded to the max. This, however, brought about an unexpected hardship of its own.

"Oh no, Maki-san..."

"What's wrong?"

"There's no more money left in the bank."

"Nothing at all?"

"Not a single bill. We won't be able to make any more money when we cross the start now."

At this point in the game, all of the money in the bank had been distributed to Harumi and Maki. Harumi took the very last bill when she crossed the start, but it only amounted to half of what she was owed. There was simply nothing left.

This was, of course, because Harumi and Maki's total assets far exceeded anything the game designers ever had in mind.

"What does this mean?" Maki asked, stumped about what to do next.

"I think," Harumi replied pensively, "that it means that you and I overcame the nightmare that is commercialism."

"How wonderful... I guess that means we won."

"I think so too. We did a great job!"

Landshark Paradise typically ended with one wealthy landshark and all the other players bankrupted. Harumi and Maki, however, had refused to throw each other under the bus for the sake of their own personal gain. Instead, they'd chosen to work and prosper together. This was the result—effectively, they'd broken the game. In a sense, that could be considered winning.

"What a lovely game," Harumi cooed.

"I agree. The person who designed it must have been very kind-hearted," followed Maki.

"I think so too. I hope we can find more cooperative games like this."

"Oh, Sakuraba-san, this one sounds like it might fit the bill."

Since Harumi and Maki agreed they both had won Landshark Paradise, their overall scores were now matched at 2:2 and their friendly competition carried over into the next game.

The fourth game the girls chose was a board game set in a fantasy world. Players could play as either warriors or mages as they explored a dark cave, which was filled to the brim with monsters and traps. The goal of the game was to collect the treasure hidden in the cave and make it out alive. Each piece of loot had an associated point value, and the person with the most points at the end was declared the winner.

"I think... I'll pick this one. She looks strong."

From the army of small figurines in the box, Maki selected a female character in a rather revealing outfit. It would be the piece she used during the game.

“Teehee! She looks a little like you, Maki-san.”

“I would never wear that outfit.”

“That’s not what I meant... If it were painted, I’m sure it would be in your colors.”

“Yeah, maybe so.”

Maki had picked a female ninja. If the metallic figurines the game used had come painted, Harumi was sure she’d be dressed in something fitting for a ninja like dark blue or black. Maki’s personal favorite color, indigo, was also a likely candidate.

“Now, which one should I pick? Oh, this one’s pretty cute.”

Harumi took a moment to pick out her own character. Rather than deciding based on functionality, she selected a figurine purely based on appearance—a woman wearing a robe and holding a bishop’s staff. Despite her modest outfit, the statuette was still quite feminine. It was almost like it had been made for Harumi.

“That’s the priestess,” explained Maki.

“I see. That must be why she’s dressed so modestly.”

“Ahaha! That’s so like you, Sakuraba-san.”

“I can’t deny it, teehee...”

Maki’s character was a female ninja, a warrior who specialized in stealthy combat and ninja arts. Harumi’s was a priestess, a mage that excelled in healing and defense, and wielded a holy power effective against the undead. In the end, they’d both chosen characters that were quite like themselves. With that decided, it would ordinarily be time for the game to begin—but the girls then began selecting a third piece.



“Maki-san, if you were to choose another character, what would you pick?”

“Well... we already have a scout and a medic, so I think a strong warrior would be a good choice.”

“So one of these tough-looking characters?”

The game was designed for a maximum party of six. It was possible to play with only two people, but the manual warned that the difficulty would be quite high. To counteract that, Harumi and Maki had decided to have a third “player” with them. One they’d pick out and move together.

The piece they ended up choosing was a male warrior equipped with a large sword and thick armor. They’d picked him because their characters were comparably lightly equipped. He was also featured on the box art for the game, so they were hoping he’d be strong.

“He did it, Maki-san!!”

“I knew a character in the official art would be strong.”

“Heehee, you were right.”

Their warrior cut a path through the cave while they supported him from behind. Normally the players of the game would split up to go about their own business, only banding together when particularly powerful foes appeared. But since Harumi and Maki were moving the third piece on the board by committee, they’d inadvertently ended up working together anyway. As such, they divided the treasure they gained as a group among them equally. At this rate, they were setting themselves up to end the game in another draw, but neither of them was particularly concerned about that. They were too busy having fun adventuring through the cave together, defeating monsters left and right in the name of love and justice.

“Wow, Sakuraba-san! That dragon had five treasure cards on it!”

“How will we divide five cards amongst the three of us?”

“Why don’t we take a look at them and see?”

“Yes, let’s.”

The dragon that their warrior had just slain was carrying five treasures, each represented by a different card. Treasures were typically gold or gems, but they could also be magical weapons or other tools to strengthen a character. As such, certain items were worthless to certain classes or playstyles. Players working together would often discuss loot to make sure equipment was distributed equitably. So, depending on the nature of the five items they'd just acquired, Harumi and Maki would hand them out accordingly.

"Restorative medicine... I think you should have this, Maki-san."

"Are you sure?"

"I have healing magic and our warrior is rather tough, so I think he'll be fine with just my support."

"All right, then I'll take the medicine."

"Next is..."

When Harumi flipped the second treasure card, she practically froze in place. Confused by this reaction, Maki peered at her face with a worried expression.

"Sakuraba-san?" she asked.

But there was no reply. Harumi simply stared silently at the card on the table. Not knowing what else to do, Maki glanced down at the card as well. When she saw it, she too froze a little.

"Ah..."

Maki knew exactly what was going through Harumi's mind, because the same thing was going through hers too.

"It's... a suit of armor..." she muttered in a daze.

"Beautiful blue armor..." Harumi muttered in kind.

Indeed, the treasure card Harumi had flipped was of an ornate suit of blue armor, but the girls' eyes were really transfixed on something beyond just the card. This would open up a whole new game in front of them.

"Why don't we give our knight this armor?"

"I agree. Knights should be properly armored, after all."

Without even realizing it, they instantly went from calling their third piece “our warrior” to “our knight.” And as powerful an item as the armor was, neither one of them hesitated to give it to him. It would actually go a long way to increasing survivability for either of their lightly-armored units, but that kind of logic didn’t matter to them right now.

“Sakuraba-san, what about this enhancement jewel?”

“Let’s use it to power up our knight’s sword.”

“Then what about this protective charm?”

“I don’t need it.”

“I can’t use it either, so let’s give it to our knight too.”

“Why don’t we just give him everything we don’t need?”

“I think that’s a good idea.”

This ended up being the turning point in Harumi and Maki’s adventure. Once their warrior became a knight in blue armor, their priorities shifted to protecting and enhancing him. As such, by the end of the game, the knight that monopolized all of the loot they earned was insanely powerful. Harumi and Maki’s characters had long fallen behind him, but they hardly cared. They were more than happy to see their knight succeed.

Outfitted to the nines, Harumi and Maki’s knight reached the darkest depths of the cave with their support. As new players to the game, however, they didn’t manage their other resources well and ended up running out of turns before successfully being able to beat the final boss.

“I can’t accept this outcome... Let’s try again, Sakuraba-san.”

“I can’t either. Let’s give it another try!”

Neither one of them was pleased with the results of their playthrough, so they immediately set the game up to play again. They were surprisingly bent on winning now.

“There’s no way our knight would lose,” Maki declared.

Currently, she was staring fixedly at the section of the game board representing the depths of the cave. She ran several simulations in her head trying to devise how they could play again and have their knight come out victorious.

“Let’s use whatever it takes to defeat the evil sorcerer!” Harumi declared.

She was equally zealous about seeing their knight victorious, though in her case, she was focusing on the flaws in her own performance and trying to figure out how she could do better in the future.

“Maybe we should be a little more reckless and take some more risks,” Maki suggested.

“I think that would work so long as we band together to protect Satomi-kun,” Harumi replied.

Though their personalities and approaches were different, their goal was ultimately the same. Rather than winning on their own, all they wanted was for their knight to defeat the evil sorcerer. That was all that mattered to them now.

“What about our characters, Sakuraba-san?”

“Why don’t we stick with the same ones as last time? We were so close.”

“But wouldn’t two priestesses be able to protect Satomi-kun even better?”

“I think we should try again as we were. And if that still doesn’t work, we can try with two priestesses.”

“Are we going until we win?”

“Aren’t we?”

“You’re absolutely right. Let’s keep going!”

And so the girls ended up playing the fourth game again and again as the hours ticked by. Since they were still learning, it took them until their third try to actually accomplish their objective. But at that point, a most unexpected result had come about. In the final match of Harumi and Maki’s gaming session, somehow Koutarou—who wasn’t even present—became the victor.

Episode 3: Kabutonga Dies at Dawn?!

Not long after summer vacation began, Shizuka was faced with a major decision: she was offered a part-time job she'd once performed in the past.

"Kasagi-san, is there any way at all I can convince you to accept?!"

"I'm sorry, I just don't want to cause a big scene again..."

Because her parents had left her Corona House, Shizuka was comfortably able to provide for herself and didn't need to work other than tending to the building and seeing to her duties as landlord. While Corona House was old, it was well maintained and it certainly wasn't hurting for tenants. There was the small issue of rumors circulating about a ghost haunting room 106, but even that didn't drive renters away from the otherwise charming property.

"Listen, that's perfectly okay! In fact, I was thinking of working it into the show!"

"Oh, I wouldn't want you to go that far... I'd feel bad."

"It's the least we could do for you, Kasagi-san. You're just perfect for the role; no one else can do it like you can! We've learned that all too well over the last year without you. Even when we have someone else in the suit, it's missing your flash and pizzazz! No one has moves like you do!"

You see, the part-time job Shizuka was currently being offered was a role in a hero show that performed occasionally at the local amusement park. She was actually quite flattered that the director had such an appreciation for her gymnastic abilities and her talent for martial arts. The neighborhood association had also recommend her for the job, which made it difficult to turn down. Moreover, Shizuka had gone a little over budget on her recreational spending this month. She could easily cover the difference with the money she took in from Corona House, but she hated using funds from her parents' keepsake that way. In other words, Shizuka had every reason to accept the part-time job offer.

"Please, Kasagi-san! We need you! The show needs you! You're the only one

who can play Kabutonga!”

“U-Um...”

Shizuka hadn’t been offered just any role in the show. She was being asked to return as the show’s star, Kabutonga. And there was a good reason for that. Since Kabutonga was supposed to be smaller than his companions and most of his enemies, it was nice to have a girl in his suit for the sake of keeping an accurate sense of scale on stage. But not just any girl could pull off all of Kabutonga’s moves and tricks, and without those, it wouldn’t be much of a hero show. That’s why the director had his eye on Shizuka. She was a trained martial artist who even had experience acting in school plays. She ticked all the right boxes, making her the ideal candidate for the role.

“All right... Then I accept.”

“Really?! Thank you so much, Kasagi-san! I’ve got to go run and tell everyone the good news!”

In the end, Shizuka capitulated to the director’s passionate pleas and agreed to take the role. She still had reservations about it, but she just couldn’t turn him down. Really, she had trouble saying no to anyone in need.

Shizuka’s primary concern about accepting the Kabutonga role was a certain someone’s hatred for beetles. It was a hatred so strong that even Shizuka feared inciting it. So, in order to prevent any mishaps, Shizuka wanted to complete her part-time job successfully without said someone ever finding out. She decided to consult with Sanae about how best to keep it under wraps, but Sanae had some rather unexpected words for her.

“Hmm... I think it might actually be okay if she finds out now.”

“What? Really?”

“Yeah. Nowadays when she sees beetles on TV, she only gets a little upset and it doesn’t last for too long.”

Thanks to her psychic powers, Sanae could read the emotions of others. That’s how she knew better than anyone else exactly how Ruth was feeling.

“Now that you mention it, there hasn’t really been any major commotion this year...”

Bugs—including beetles—were a part of everyday life, whether it was seeing them on TV, in the news, or in person. Especially during the summer. But remarkably, Ruth hadn’t had any serious episodes in recent memory. And when Shizuka realized that, she started to think Sanae might actually be on to something.

“See? That’s why I think you’ll be fine as long as you take things easy and break it to her gently.”

“Yeah, you’re right... Thanks, Sanae-chan. That’s exactly what I’ll do.”

“I think that’d be for the best.”

It would be better to just tell Ruth upfront rather than risk trying to hide it from her and having her find out the wrong way. It would also be better if the others didn’t have to cover for Shizuka and lie every time she slipped out to go to work. If Ruth’s hatred for beetles was really waning, then this would be a good opportunity for Shizuka to come clean with her as long as she was tactful about it.

“That said...” Sanae sighed with a bemused look on her face. “I gotta wonder what brought on this change in her.”

Though Sanae could read people’s emotions in real time through their auras, she couldn’t divine the source of said emotions. That left her wondering what had caused Ruth’s feelings to start to change.

“Maybe it’s because she’s been seeing beetles that have nothing to do with Koutarou?” she guessed.

“That might be part of it... but I think the primary reason is that she’s starting to understand Satomi-kun’s feelings. I think Ruth-san is also settling into her own feelings as well.”

Shizuka, however, had a pretty good idea of what was going through Ruth’s head. Ruth came to hate beetles because Koutarou had once sleepily mistaken her for a tree covered with them. She’d misread his intentions and, quite frankly, didn’t understand his feelings. But a lot had changed since then. She’d

even sworn to stay by his side, no matter what hardships might come. It would be a little hard to hold such an enraged grudge over beetles after all that.

“So love really is all,” said Sanae with a smile.

“Maybe. But her hatred of beetles stemmed from love in the first place too, you know?” replied Shizuka.

“Ahaha, that’s true.”

“Heehee.”

There, the two girls had a good laugh together. Shizuka had been worried about how things might turn out, but her worries now quickly faded into relief. It seemed things would be just fine.

After talking with Sanae, Shizuka decided to tell Ruth everything. About how the neighborhood association had recommended her for the hero show. About how the director had begged her to be in it. And then, without saying anything else, she simply handed Ruth a flier for the show.

“...”

When she saw it, Ruth’s eyebrow twitched. But other than that, she had no reaction. She spoke to Shizuka in the same calm tone of voice she always did.

“Since it’s a hero show, you’ll have to work hard for the sake of all the children watching. It would be terrible to disappoint them.”

“Y-Yeah, you’re right about that. But it might mean I’ll be coming home late some nights, so I thought I should let you know ahead of time.”

“How considerate. Thank you for telling me.”

If anything, Shizuka was the one acting strange. She couldn’t help feeling nervous, even knowing she’d be fine. Really, things were going even more smoothly than she’d imagined. Ruth wasn’t showing a single sign of freaking out, and Sanae was even giving Shizuka a thumbs-up under the table.

So Ruth-san really is getting over her hatred of beetles... Thank god.

Realizing things were all right, Shizuka heaved a sigh of relief. Like everyone

else, Ruth was maturing. It would be weird if she was the only one who hadn't been. The thought that she'd even considered that made Shizuka giggle a little under her breath.

"I don't want to inconvenience you over dinner, so I'll try to keep you updated on my schedule," said Shizuka.

"Thank you," replied Ruth.

"Don't worry. I'll just eat your share when you're not here," chimed in Sanae.

"That will mean double the green peppers. Are you all right with that, Sanae-sama?"

"That's fine. I'll just leave those to Yurika."

"That's not fine at all."

The three girls continued their casual, playful chatter over tea. Things would likely continue this way until it was time for dinner.

"I'm hooome!"

"I'm back too."

Before long, Yurika and Maki returned to the apartment. Maki neatly put her shoes away while Yurika kicked hers off and ran headlong into the inner room. Her intuition told her snacks would be waiting. After putting away Yurika's shoes too, Maki followed after her.

"Thank you for the snacks!"

By the time Maki entered the room, Yurika was already stuffing a hot springs manju into her mouth. Maki thought it was most unladylike, but she was also a little envious of how unashamed Yurika was to simply be herself. Maki found herself staring at her best friend with conflicted feelings...

"Yurika, can't you mind your manners at least a little while you're eating?"

In the end, Maki's sense of decorum won out. Yurika was eating so slovenly that she couldn't help saying something. Completely unfazed, however, Yurika stuffed the rest of the manju in her mouth and replied without even bothering to finish chewing.

“I don haf ane moneh so I can ea lunh nao.”

“What?”

Yurika’s reply was so unintelligible that Maki couldn’t make heads or tails of it. Thankfully, Sanae was there to translate.

“Yurika said that she’s broke, so she hasn’t been able to eat lunch. I swear... Week after week, she never learns.”

Hearing this, Maki shrugged. Sanae and Yurika had been spending a lot of time together over the summer, so Sanae knew good and well that Yurika had been eating at any chance she got.

“Week after week, you say?” asked Ruth.

That part of the conversation had piqued her interest. She couldn’t offhandedly remember anything Sanae and Yurika had been doing together every week.

“Yeah, we’ve been going out to hunt beetles with Satomi-san. His idea, of course. He’s just like a kid, isn’t he?”

“You’ve been beetle hunting? With Master?”

In that moment, the temperature in room 106 dropped several degrees.

“Ack! Oh no!”

Yurika suddenly realized what she’d done, but it was too late.

“Augh, how could I be so stupid?!”

“Y-You went beetle hunting without me... in secret?”

Ruth was speaking quietly, but her voice was trembling. The effect was terrifying, and it was only exacerbated by the fact that her whole body was quaking with rage.

“Yurika-chan, I was finally getting through to her!” shouted Shizuka.

“Please don’t be mad at me too, Shizuka-san! I didn’t say it on purpose!”

“I-I knew it... I have to exterminate the beetles... I have to exterminate *all* the beetles... I never should have shown any mercy, not even to the ones that had

nothing to do with this...”

Koutarou was secretly going out with Yurika and Sanae to hunt beetles. He’d left Ruth out on purpose... meaning he’d chosen beetles over her. And that was the one thing she couldn’t accept.

Crumple...

Ruth mercilessly balled up the flier in her hand, functionally serving as kindling for the fire in her heart.

“I know just who I’ll start with... Heh heh heh heh heh...”

“Eeeeek!”

Hearing Ruth’s dark laughter, the other girls in the room trembled in fear. In a physical sense, Ruth wasn’t scary. No one considered her a threat. Her hatred, however, was a different beast altogether. If she unleashed that to attack, Shizuka, Maki, Sanae, and Yurika wouldn’t stand a chance even if they fought together.



Ruth had been practicing swordsmanship for some time now. Originally she only meant to build up her stamina, but being from a family of knights, she'd gotten a little extra motivation along the way when she came into possession of family heirloom known in Forthorthian legend as the swords of light. And once she was conscripted into the Satomi band of knights, Ruth began training even harder to protect Koutarou's reputation as the Blue Knight.

"Take that! Hah! Hyah!"

But now Ruth was training for an altogether different reason: to defeat Kabutonga. Those accursed beetles were seducing Koutarou. Kabutonga, their leader, had to be destroyed. Ruth had found a clear target for her grudge, and as she focused on her goal, her sword practice became unusually intense.

I need an even swifter strike to be able to break through that hard carapace!

Swish! Swish!

As devoted and serious as Ruth was, her swordsmanship was now improving on a daily basis. Coming from a long line of knights, she was blessed with natural talent with the sword. But it was only now that she had a sworn enemy that she was prepared to put it to full, deadly use.

"Ruth-san, launch a combination attack from there!"

Koutarou was serving as her sparring partner. Of the Corona House crew, only he and Theia knew Forthorthian style swordsmanship. And between the two of them, Koutarou was the only one who'd learned the ancient techniques used two thousand years ago. That made him the best candidate to teach Ruth the way her ancestors had fought.

"Hyah! Take that!"

After blocking Koutarou's strike, Ruth looked down and threw a quick strike at Koutarou's lower body before feinting and launching into her main attack: a three slash combo. It all happened so fast that it was clear exactly how much Ruth had improved since she'd started training.

To think Ruth-san could fight like this... I guess I should expect as much from Flair-san's family.

Koutarou parried Ruth's lightning-fast attacks with complex feelings. Because of him, she had grown exceptionally strong for someone who disdained conflict. While that didn't sit right with him, he was still happy to see her become more and more like Flairhan by the day. But as those emotions tangled in his heart, he continued to instruct Ruth.

"Ruth-san, you raise your elbow too high on the third strike. You block your own field of view that way and it makes your movements more roundabout, so keep it lower."

"R-Right!"

Unaware of Koutarou's worries, Ruth earnestly kept at her training. But she wasn't the only oblivious one... Koutarou had no idea why she was training so hard now, which only complicated things further.

The most alarmed by Ruth's rapid progress in her training, of course, was Shizuka. Ruth's goal was to defeat Kabutonga—the very same character Shizuka would be playing in the hero show. And a very, very bad feeling overcame her as she observed Ruth's fanatical training from the shadows.

"My only saving grace right now is that she doesn't know that I'm playing Kabutonga... but it looks like things might be getting ugly."

Since Ruth had only been seriously practicing with a blade for about a year now, her skills were still no match for Shizuka's. Nevertheless, sword-wielding Ruth had an advantage over the bare-fisted Shizuka. She was confident she could still win in a fight, but if Ruth made another appearance during the hero show... Shizuka wasn't sure she could fight her off without ruining the children's image of Kabutonga.

"What are you thinking, Satomi-kun?! Why would you go and make her this strong?!"

Shizuka funneled her concerns into frustration at Koutarou, who she'd pulled aside after he told Ruth to keep training on her own. He should know better than anyone how important it was for Kabutonga to be a good role model and put on a good show for all the children who believed in him.

“Well, it’s not like I could turn her down when she asked me so sincerely.” Though apologetic, Koutarou knew he was at fault here. “If someone asked you to teach them karate, you wouldn’t hold back either, would you, Landlord-san?”

“Ugh, that’s true... but it’s clearly your fault that Ruth-san is so focused now.”

“I can’t argue there.”

Koutarou was the cause of all this in the first place. He was the reason Ruth hated beetles and ultimately the reason she was so focused on her swordsmanship. It was a combination that made her formidable both mentally and physically.

“If you understand that much, then the answer is simple,” piped up Theia.

She’d come along to check on things with Shizuka, and saw an immediate solution to the problem: if they knew what was causing it, all they had to do was get rid of the cause.

“Koutarou, go take Ruth’s swords from her and give her a kiss or two. That’ll fix everything.”

Right now, Ruth was motivated by a sense of inferiority. She believed that Koutarou loved beetles more than her, so she needed clear evidence to the contrary. A kiss should do the job quite nicely. After all, not even Koutarou would kiss a beetle.

“You idiot! I can’t do something that irresponsible!”

Koutarou objected to her solution so vehemently that it surprised even Theia.

“Why not?” she asked. “Surely it’s not like you hate Ruth or anything.”

“Of course I don’t! And that’s exactly the point! Ruth-san is the heir to the Pardomshiha family! Do you think Lord Pardomshiha would ever accept an alien like me?”

Koutarou had no intention of kissing someone he wasn’t dating, which meant that he would only kiss his girlfriend. Ruth was no exception, and Koutarou felt especially strongly about that after how close they’d been getting lately.

“If I, a princess of Forthorthe, allow it, then he should as well. There will be no issue there, Sir Blue Knight.”

Theia was Ruth's master, meaning she was the one who was entitled to decide what Ruth could and couldn't do. She also had the additional advantage of being her best friend, so she knew good and well how Ruth felt. Theia was confident about that much.

"Don't abuse your authority like that. Besides... it would be wrong of me to act on Ruth's feelings when I'm still unsure of my own."

Koutarou hated the idea of taking advantage of Ruth's feelings. He would only kiss her if he loved her. That was a rule he'd set for himself.

"You sure are bothered by the smallest things..."

Theia put her hands on her hips and sighed. In her eyes, Koutarou was simply refusing to take the quickest and most direct route to resolving things. Much to her disappointment, this would inevitably mean the problem would only be drawn out.

"This is nothing small," Koutarou argued. "I'd seriously regret it later, and that's not how I want to live my life."

"...It's not like I don't get that."

Despite herself, Theia understood how Koutarou felt. True rulers and proper knights shared a path in that they both walked in the way of righteousness. And in that sense, she was quite happy with Koutarou's response.

"But in that case, we'll need some other method... Kiriha, do you have any bright ideas?"

Conflicted, Theia turned to Kiriha for help. And with a pleasant smile, Kiriha answered Theia without missing a beat.

"If we're avoiding a direct resolution, then the most effective strategy is simply to let her achieve her desire."

"Achieve her desire? What do you mean?" asked Shizuka, cocking her head.

Kiriha's vague choice of words puzzled her, and Shizuka knew all too well that she would be the one to suffer the consequences without a very specific solution.

"Ruth wants to prove that she's better than beetles, which is why she now

wants to defeat the strongest of them—Kabutonga. I'm saying we should let her do exactly that."

If Koutarou wouldn't step in and put an end to Ruth's quest here and now, Kiriha believed that the most effective way to satisfy her would be to give her what she wanted. That meant Ruth would have to defeat Kabutonga—or Shizuka, as it were.

Thinking about it, before Shiori appeared, Ruth was the only one worried that someone else might take Koutarou from us... but now I understand how she felt. If she needs to be reassured, then the solution is clear.

Kiriha hadn't said it out loud, but she was convinced of the solution. There was already a precedent for it, after all.

"What?! Kiriha-san, I can't let her beat me! The kids will all be watching!"

Shizuka, however, was opposed to Kiriha's idea. If Kabutonga lost to Ruth on stage, what would the children think? Shizuka just couldn't accept it.

"Worry not. There's an episode of the *Kabutonga* anime that corresponds to this very situation," explained Kiriha.

"Huh? Really?"

"It's called 'Kabutonga Dies at Dawn.'"

There was only one episode in the entire *Kabutonga* series where its titular hero lost to his nemesis, Scarab King. But though he was felled, through the hopes and dreams of the children, he was miraculously revived in a powered-up form and ultimately went on to defeat the Scarab King, Kiriha explained all this in detail to Shizuka, elucidating her plan.

"Ruth will defeat Kabutonga, thereby achieving her goal. She'll then leave the stage, but the show will go on with Kabutonga's return and the subsequent defeat of the Scarab King. That way you won't have to worry about the children. They'll see Kabutonga rise and be victorious like he always is."

"Yeah, okay... If we just use that episode as a guideline, everything will play out."

Shizuka finally digested the situation. If there really was a *Kabutonga* episode

like that, then they could work Ruth beating Kabutonga into the script and everything would work out just fine. That was a plan she could get behind.

“If that doesn’t seem realistic, then you could borrow the Kabutonga costume and attack Ruth during her training, though that wouldn’t be as effective. Whichever method you chose is up to you and the director.”

“Okay, I’ll try talking to him!”

The ever-wise Kiriha even had a safer plan B in her back pocket just in case. Shizuka started to think she’d really be able to pull this off, which made her realize something else altogether.

“But still... What a shame, Satomi-kun,” she said with a bright smile.

There, Shizuka took a step closer to Koutarou and looked up at him.

“What?”

“If you’d kissed Ruth-san, I could’ve weaseled a kiss out of you too.”

She then planted her index finger on his lips. Because of that, his reply was somewhat muffled...

“I wouldn’t do that.”

“That’s why I said it’s a shame.”

Shizuka gave Koutarou a wink and moved her finger from his lips to her own. He knew he needed to say something, but words utterly escaped him in the moment. He was too captivated by Shizuka’s charm.

Just as Ruth was about to go out for her daily training, a letter arrived at room 106. She was putting on her shoes as it fell through the mail slot and landed on the floor right in front of her. Thinking it was just the day’s mail, she didn’t pay it any mind as she finished tying her shoes.

I’m very happy to have Master watch over me when I’m training, but... sometimes he just looks so wistful and lonely. He must be remembering Flairhan-sama...

Deep in thought, Ruth wasn’t paying any particular attention to what was

going on around her and didn't even look up to inspect the mail until she was done tying her shoes. It was only then that she realized what had arrived was no ordinary letter.

"What is this...?"

She picked up the envelope and flipped it over so she could read the front. It had no address or postal code written on it. All there was was a name: "Ruthkania-dono."

"It's for me?"

Indeed, it was Ruth's name penned in neat calligraphy on the envelope. Sensing something out of the ordinary, she began to open it. She would have normally used a letter opener, but feeling somewhat uneasy and hasty, she used her hands to tear open the envelope from the top.

"A letter and... a photo?"

Just as she observed, the enveloped contained a letter and picture. The moment she laid eyes on the picture, however, she froze stiff. She also began emanating a fierce bloodlust.

"C-Curse you, Kabutongaaa! How dare you send me something like this?!"

Crumple!

Ruth violently crushed the picture in her hand: a photograph of Kabutonga and Koutarou with their arms around each other's shoulders.

Letter of challenge for Ruthkania-dono:

I've heard word of your vendetta against us beetles. As we have no wish for needless casualties, I, Kabutonga No. 1, challenge you to a one-on-one showdown as a representative of my kind. Should I lose, I vow that we will never show our carapaces to you again. But should I win, I expect an agreement from you that you will let us roam free in peace. See the attached sheet for the time and location of our duel. I urge you to accept my challenge.

-Kabutonga No. 1

After Shizuka and Kiriha talked to the director, they decided that the

showdown between Ruth and Kabutonga No. 1 would be worked into the show. It would be sort of a test run for experimental productions and double as training for unexpected events on stage. Management had agreed to it with surprising ease. A live duel on stage was dangerous, but with the assistance of the shopping street's martial arts gym, a ring was constructed at the amusement park specifically for the fight. The idea was to hold the hero show in the ring and the walkway leading up to it while they awaited Ruth's arrival. If it just so happened that she didn't show up, Kabutonga would simply fight a guest martial artist or a costumed monster instead. It would make for a flashy event either way, and the idea pleased management. Thanks to Kiriha's negotiations, things were proceeding without a hitch. But there was still one thing bothering Shizuka.

"I wonder if sending a letter of challenge was really okay..." she said with a sigh as she began putting on the Kabutonga outfit in her changing room.

She was worried about the letter they'd sent Ruth. What would she do if it had only put more fuel on the fires of Ruth's hatred? Just thinking about it made her anxious.

"Shizuka, it's less about what was okay and more about what was necessary. And this was necessary," Kiriha said with a wry smile as she helped Shizuka don her costume.

Having come up with the plan in the first place, Kiriha was well aware of its risks. If Ruth got too worked up, things would be dangerous for everyone before she finally calmed down. But this gamble, as Kiriha had said, was necessary.

"What do you mean?" asked Shizuka.

"By doing things this way, all of Ruth's hostility is directed towards Kabutonga."

"That's exactly what I'm worried about!"

"But that's precisely what makes this plan work. If Ruth's hostility *weren't* directed specifically at Kabutonga, she would continue to hunt down beetles even after defeating you. And that would be bad."

"You're right..."

“I know this will be hard for you, but we can only put a stop to Ruth’s hatred by making Kabutonga the object of it.”

“Hahh... What a pain.”

Kiriha’s explanation was clear and simple, making it easy for Shizuka to understand. But it simultaneously gave Shizuka a sense of just how complex the situation really was. Nevertheless, if they were intentionally focusing Ruth’s grudge against a single target, Shizuka knew she’d be in for one heck of a fight. But she hardly knew the half of it...

Ruth arrived on site at the exact time specified in the letter. Even berserk, she was still punctual. It was 12PM on the dot—neither a minute too late nor too soon.

Pshhh!

She made her grand entrance on the elevated platform with a theatric burst of fog. She’d been dressed casually earlier in the day, but she was now clad in a rather villainous-looking outfit. It would have embarrassed her to no end under any normal circumstances, but Ruth was so fixated on her duel with Kabutonga right now that she hadn’t even given a second thought to what she was wearing. Her outfit was actually a projected hologram courtesy of Clan, which had allowed Kiriha and the others to change Ruth’s appearance without actually changing what she was wearing. As a result, the training sword in her hand also looked like a real one. And she pointed it right at Shizuka—dressed as Kabutonga—as she began shouting...

“There you are, Kabutongaaa!”

Ruth’s eyes glinted just like the blade of her sword, and she was emanating a powerful bloodlust that no one would have ever expected from the sweet, gentle Ruth. Moreover, she was lithe on her feet. As methodical as she was, she’d made sure to warm up before coming.

Oh man, what am I going to do?! Ruth-san looks like she’s ready to cream me!

Shizuka was an expert martial artist with real combat experience. There was nary an opponent she would cower before... But Ruth wasn’t really her

opponent; she was her friend. Shizuka couldn't help recoiling a little when it looked like her friend was really ready to kill her.

"Never will I run or hide, because I am Kabutonga No. 1! I will defeat you in the name of peace and freedom!"

Despite Shizuka's fear, Kabutonga's brave voice echoed across the stage in heroic fashion. You see, while Shizuka was playing Kabutonga inside the suit, another actor was behind stage playing Kabutonga's voice over the loudspeakers. Hearing him declare Kabutonga's resoluteness brought Shizuka back to her senses, and she assumed Kabutonga's signature pose that made her petite frame look much bigger and bolder than it really was. She was shaking in her boots right now, but Kabutonga looked like he was daring Ruth to do her worst.

"Bring it on! We'll settle this today!" Kabutonga's voice declared.

"Indeed we will! This will be the end for you, Kabutongaaa!"

Ready and raring to go, Ruth darted down the walkway from the elevated platform entrance and jumped up into the ring. She sailed right over the ropes and moved straight to attack Shizuka.

"Hyah!"

"That won't work!"

Clang!

Shizuka blocked the strike with her forearms. She had sturdy armor built into the costume to protect her, but even then the full weight of Ruth's wrathful strike was hard to take. It knocked the wind right out of Shizuka.

"Damn that carapace!" Ruth hissed.

"Now it's my turn!" Kabutonga shouted.

"I don't think so!" Ruth shouted right back.

Swish!

Shizuka unleashed a powerful high kick, but it only caught air. Because she was breathless, her movements were somewhat dulled and her reaction was

just a second too slow. Ruth had the range advantage thanks to her sword, and was easily able to step back to avoid Shizuka's close-range kick.

"Not bad for a human girl!"

"Don't think you can defeat me so easily, Kabutonga!"

With some distance between them, both fighters took the opportunity to watch their opponent and look for openings. But as the combat lulled, the audience erupted.

"Amazing! Kabutonga's way different from usual!"

"That bad guy's amazing too! She's scary!"

The crowd was thrilled by this exciting turn of events. The children all got chills when Ruth yelled, and they eagerly awaited the fierce battle to come with hope and courage in their eyes. They were certain Kabutonga would prevail.

Th-This is no joke! What's going on here?!

Shizuka, however, wasn't so sure. As an experienced martial artist, her brief encounter with Ruth just now was enough to tell her that Ruth was far stronger than she'd expected.

If neither of us had a weapon, I'd definitely win! Except Ruth-san has a sword and my goal's not to win! Can I really hold my own against her when she's like this?!

It was true that Shizuka's goal wasn't to win—the object here was to be defeated in a satisfying manner after a serious bout of combat, and that would be much more difficult than finding a single opportunity to exploit and seizing victory. Shizuka outclassed Ruth in terms of combat experience and skill, but Shizuka was at a disadvantage in her bulky costume. Moreover, Ruth had a sword and the motivation to use it. Her hatred had her all fired up, making her far more dangerous than usual. In Shizuka's eyes, they were on a fairly level playing field right now.

"Today is the day that I will bring you beetles to justice!"

Argh! I don't care what happens anymore!

Shizuka no longer had the luxury of wallowing in worry. Ruth was charging at

her again.

All according to Kiriha's plan, the production committee wrote a script for today's hero show where Kabutonga was on the ropes. Ruth would eventually defeat him, only for him to come back even stronger and achieve a comeback victory. The battle between Ruth and Shizuka was playing out according to the script so far with one rather unexpected exception: Ruth really did have Shizuka on the ropes.

"Hyah! Take thaaat!"

Clink! Clank!

There was no need for Shizuka to act like Ruth was getting the better of her when she went all out like this. Ruth had skill with a blade, though she still fought like an amateur. Kiriha's script had taken that all into consideration, but Ruth was in hyperdrive right now. Her hatred fueled her singular goal: defeating Kabutonga as swiftly as possible.

"Eeek!"

Swish! Wham!

But aside from Ruth's sheer hatred, the thing giving Shizuka the most trouble right now was Ruth's sword. It effectively doubled her reach and its heft added extra weight to every blow she struck. Shizuka knew she was the faster attacker, but Ruth had come in to the fight full-force and immediately put her on the defensive. And with the extra reach Ruth had on her side, she was out of the range of all of Shizuka's punches and kicks.

"Shizuka, would you like some help?"

"Shut up, Uncle! This is between me and Ruth-san!"

"It's not like I don't understand how you feel, but things are getting a little hairy, aren't they?"

"Changing gears right now would be dangerous! Not to mention what would happen to my weight!"

Shizuka still had an ace up her sleeve in the form of Alunaya. If she used his

powers, the fight would be over in an instant. But there would be complications, namely that it would hurt Shizuka's pride as a martial artist and that she would temporarily lose control of her strength when the much more powerful Alunaya took over. Worst of all, using Alunaya's power would increase Shizuka's weight because of the way he channeled his mana. She rued the very thought.

"I hear you, but even so, I think you're going to need a show-stopper or two."

"Eeeeek! Be quiet, Uncle! I'm busy right now!"

"If you say so..."

Even if they were talking in Shizuka's mind, having a conversation right now was distracting. Alunaya respected that and decided to pipe down so as not to get in her way. He knew that if he were in her position, he'd be struggling the same way.

"Hyaaah!"

Perhaps because of Alunaya, however, Shizuka's focus on the battle at hand momentarily wavered. She didn't react quickly enough, and accidentally let Ruth sweep her legs out from under her with her sword.

"Oh no!"

Thanks to the protective costume, Shizuka wasn't hurt by the blow, but it threw her wildly off balance.

Thud!

She tumbled to the ring floor with a glorious impact.

"I've got you now, Kabutonga!"

"Owowow... Yikes!"

Once Shizuka was on the ground, Ruth pounced on her like a wild animal. She was planning to use this opportunity to finish Kabutonga off.

"Hyaaaaah!"

Ruth held her sword aloft as she leaped, and swung it downward as she descended towards Shizuka. It was clear she intended to end things here.

“Not good! I can’t take that!”

Shizuka hurriedly rolled over in an attempt to avoid the attack.

Skrtch!

Fortunately, Ruth only managed to graze Shizuka’s helmet, but she still felt it. And the forceful impact of the blow made her realize something.

“Ruth-san is trying to kill me! She’s really trying to kill me!”

“She might just not know how to hold back due to her lack of experience.”

“But she’s still trying to kill me!”

Ruth was truly dangerous right now. If Shizuka let her guard down, she would be in real trouble. Realizing that, a cold chill ran up her spine. She’d have to give her all to defeating Ruth—not just to save the children’s hopes and dreams, but to save her own life as well.



The rest of the Corona House crew was watching the unexpectedly fierce fight unfold from the crowd. Unlike the other spectators who were excitedly cheering, they were nervously praying.

“You can do it, Shizuka! Put your spirit into it!” shouted Sanae.

“Ah, Ruth-san! Please don’t hit so hard! You should be more careful!” called Harumi.

“This isn’t good... Ruth is being more forceful than we anticipated, and Shizuka isn’t just acting anymore. This is a real fight now. If Shizuka makes one mistake, Ruth might just finish her,” observed Kiriha.

“It’s too bad it had to come to this. I just hope it ends safely...” sighed Theia.

Whether Ruth was intentionally going for a kill or whether she just didn’t know how to hold back, it was clear that she would finish Shizuka if she had the chance. In response, Shizuka had abandoned Kiriha’s plan and was now trying to take Ruth out without hurting her. But that was easier said than done considering the fight she was putting up. There was also the show to consider. The children were watching, after all. Everyone had good reason to be worried right about now.

“Is Kabutonga okay...?”

“Isn’t that bad guy this time too strong?”

“You can do it, Kabutonga!”

“Don’t give up!”

And that included the children. Ruth had Shizuka so cornered right now that even they could tell something was wrong. So they did the only thing they knew how to—they cheered for their hero and prayed for his victory.

“I’m impressed you can do this much, even with Landlord-san’s handicap...”

Only one person in the crowd didn’t seem to be worried. It was the man who was arguably the cause for all this, the man who’d taught Ruth how to use a sword—it was Koutarou. Out of everyone watching the unfolding fight, Koutarou was the only one with wistful tears welling in his eyes.

“Those are... Those are definitely Flair-san’s movements...”

Ruth was using all the techniques Koutarou had taught her—techniques he’d learned from Flairhan Pardomshiha two thousand years in the past. And seeing Ruth use them now, Koutarou realized that she’d successfully mastered them thanks to her diligent nature and obsession with defeating Kabutonga. She was still green, but the way Ruth was fighting took Koutarou back to the distant past... It brought tears to his eyes just to see it. He couldn’t help cheering for Ruth, despite knowing Shizuka couldn’t afford to lose here.

“That’s it, Ruth-san! Use the combination!”

Koutarou had been having Ruth practice her three-strike combo for a while now, and she put it to extraordinary use in the ring. She would first attack Shizuka’s lower body to get her on the defensive. Once she was, Ruth would threw in a feint to throw her off guard before unleashing her third and final blow. It was one of Flairhan’s signature moves.

I can do it! I can do it here and now!

Ruth was just about to unleash her combo attack when she heard Koutarou call out to her. They’d both read Shizuka the same way and come to the same conclusion—another testament to the success of Ruth’s training.

“...Master?”

But that was when something unexpected happened. Ruth took her eyes off of Shizuka and stopped moving. It was only for a moment and she quickly continued attacking, but even that split second was a golden opportunity to Shizuka.

“Take this!”

Ruth responded in kind, but it wasn’t fast enough. By the time she raised her sword, Shizuka’s fist was already closing in on her.

“Full Voltage Kabutonga Punch!”

“Kyah!”

It was one of Kabutonga No. 1’s signature punches, complete with special effects. Even though he knew all kinds of techniques, Kabutonga favored a

straightforward thrusting punch: a lightning-fast blow that could pierce the heavens and dispel evil. It was the very same move he'd used to defeat the Scarab King.

"You and your evil ways are no match for justice!"

Boom!

When Shizuka's fist connected with Ruth's solar plexus, there was a burst of smoke and light around the ring. An explosive sound burst from the PA loud enough to drown out the cheers of the children in the audience who were now convinced that Kabutonga was victorious.

Shizuka felt the match ultimately might have gone to Ruth if Koutarou hadn't shouted out when he did. She believed hearing him cheer for her was the only thing other than a kiss that could have satiated her.

Ruth was hell-bent on exterminating all beetles in order to prove she was superior to Koutarou. But hearing Koutarou call out to her—hearing him cheer for her in the fight—told her that he'd already chosen her over Kabutonga. She even got a chance to use the moves she'd been training so hard with Koutarou every day to learn. Hearing him shout to her in the heat of battle only reaffirmed the bond they'd been building together.

It was uncertain if Ruth had really processed all that in the moment, but the way she'd momentarily paused made it clear it at least had an effect on her. So while Shizuka was concerned about Ruth's wellbeing right now, that was strictly physical and not mental. And she was even more relieved when Ruth finally opened her eyes.

"...Oh?"

"Good morning, Ruth-san. I'm glad you're awake now."

"Ah, Shizuka-sama..."

Upon waking up in a hospital bed, Ruth looked around quizzically. She was radiating no sign of the bloodlust she had been a few hours ago. It seemed she was back to normal.

“Shizuka-sama, where are we?”

“The hospital. You were in a little accident and we brought you here.”

“So that’s what it was. Now that you mention it, I am feeling a little sore...”

“I think you should take it easy for a while.”

“Certainly. But what kind of accident was it?”

“You don’t remember?”

“It’s all a little hazy...”

Ruth cocked her head to the side and scanned back through her memories, but everything was fuzzy starting right around the time Yurika spilled the beans. It was like she’d been completely overtaken by her primal instincts. She’d effectively blacked out, motivated by pure hatred, so she had no way of knowing what happened when she didn’t remember it.

“Hmm... Well, you see, we all went to the amusement park and...”

Shizuka began explaining what had happened to the puzzled Ruth, although she made sure to leave out certain details. She told her they’d all gone to the amusement park and taken part in a hero show, during which there’d been an unexpected accident and Ruth had been knocked out.

“So that’s why you’re here.”

“I see...”

“How do you feel? Does your head hurt or anything”

“Oh, not at all. If anything I feel strangely refreshed, actually... I wonder why.”

“Ruth-san...”

Just as she said, Ruth was smiling with a rather refreshed expression. She had no idea why, but Shizuka had a hunch. She’d probably gotten over her inferiority complex.

“Thank god...”

After confirming that Ruth was okay and that she might even be over her hatred of beetles, Shizuka let out a heavy sigh of relief. Regardless of the

circumstances, she'd been the one to knock Ruth out and she felt a little guilty about it. That's why she was especially glad to see her well and smiling now.

"I'm very sorry for any trouble and worry I may have caused," Ruth said apologetically, her head lowered.

As conscientious as she was, Ruth knew there had to have been a fuss over her getting hurt and taken to the hospital. Shizuka had even been waiting by her bedside for her to wake up. She felt badly for troubling her friends so.

"Don't mention it. It wasn't your fault, Ruth-san."

"Thank you, Shizuka-sama."

"If anything, it's Satomi-kun's fault."

"Master's?"

There, Ruth's eyes went wide.

"Yeah. He was being such a kid, wanting to go see a hero show and all."

While Ruth had been the one to go berserk, her rampage was still ultimately Koutarou's fault for causing the whole situation in the first place. Moreover, he could have easily resolved it if he'd just been willing to kiss Ruth. But he wouldn't and therefore this was all his fault. It was a rather girlish way of thinking, which was exactly the kind of logic Shizuka subscribed to.

"Then I don't mind... Anything that pleases Master pleases me."

"Ruth-san, you're going to be taken in by a bad man if you're that blindly devoted."

"Shizuka-sama, do you think Master is a bad man?"

"Heh... I guess when you put it that way, there's not really a problem, is there?"

"Exactly."

Ruth only had eyes for Koutarou, and he was everything to her. She'd do anything he asked, even if it meant her death. That's why she couldn't accept the thought of him putting beetles before her. That was Ruth's own form of girlish logic.

“But don’t you think that everyone would be happier if Satomi-kun was just a *little* bad sometimes, Ruth-san?”

“Yes, I think so. Heehee...”

“Ahahaha.”

Fortunately, other than her hazy memories, Ruth was perfectly back to normal. And with her inferiority complex resolved, she was smiling as bright as ever. It made Shizuka smile just as brightly to see it.

Phew, I’m glad Ruth-san is okay. And she seems to be feeling better now... but I think I’ll need to put the Kabutonga act on hold for a while, haha!

And our Kabutonga came out victorious, but would go into a sort of forced retirement for a while. The suit had been considerably damaged and it would take some time to repair. But Kabutonga’s revival was just around the corner, and the children eagerly awaited his return.

Episode Harumi: Thoughts on the Length of a Muffler

The girl Koutarou had taken from the ruins in Kisshouharukaze City would turn from an almighty goddess to a mere human at the stroke of midnight on April 6th. On top of that, Koutarou and company would have any memory of said event wiped. The girl would also seal away her own memories until they were needed again. So without her powers or any idea she'd ever been a divine being to begin with, she would hypothetically be a perfectly normal girl—which was precisely what Koutarou and company wanted for her. But on April 5th, the evening before as they were all eating dinner together, she still had full knowledge of herself and all the powers that went along with it.

"Which way tastes better, Rainbow?" Sanae eagerly asked her.

"This is my first time tasting any of these dishes, but I feel a certain happiness clinging to Koutarou. So I have to say clinging to him makes the food better."

"Right?! But make sure you run when he eats something you don't like! He always tries to do that when I'm clinging to him!"

"Food you don't like...? Like what?"

"Like green peppers or the green onions today."

"So I run away from Koutarou when he eats green peppers or green onions... I see, I see."

"Sanae, don't go teaching a girl who doesn't know anything how to be picky!" fussed Koutarou.

"But if Rainbow starts to hate green peppers, she might erase them from the world."

"You idiot! Why would she remake the world over something like that?"

Whack!

“Eeheehee... See that, Rainbow? If you make silly jokes in front of Koutarou, you might get a little special attention.”

“You mean you don’t really want green peppers gone?”

“Nah, it’s fine. Without them, Koutarou wouldn’t come chasing after me during dinner. I guess you could call them a... Yeah, a necessary evil!”

“I see, I see... So green peppers are a necessary evil...”

“Sanae, teaching her that is even worse! If you want to pump her head full of stupid stuff, start with that tomorrow!”

“But...”

“No buts!”

Having taken a liking to the girlish goddess, Sanae was teaching her everything she could about being human. The only problem was that Sanae had a rather biased outlook on things, and Koutarou was worried that might end up having rippling consequences on the world at large.

“You don’t have to worry, Satomi-kun,” Harumi reassured the worked-up Koutarou. Unlike him, she was smiling as usual. “If changing the world were that easy, she wouldn’t have waited 5,670,000,000 lifetimes for you.”

“This might be her first time living as a human, but she’s exceptionally prudent. You don’t have to worry,” Kiriha agreed with a smile to match Harumi’s.

And if both Harumi and Kiriha were in agreement, Koutarou did genuinely feel better. He sighed a little and nodded to himself.

Thinking about it, she’s an amalgamation of these nine girls. She wouldn’t do something so serious over something so trivial... Probably the opposite, really. She’s missed out on a lot because she’s been so reserved, after all.

If she’d only been a composite of Sanae and Yurika, Koutarou might really have a problem on his hands. But with the serious Harumi, Kiriha, and Maki mixed in, nothing too ridiculous was going to happen. And once Koutarou came to that realization, he let Sanae do as she pleased. Perhaps that would be for the better for the girl who’d waited so, so very long... But it still wouldn’t be

enough. And as the person he'd come to be, Koutarou understood that.

"Now try these!"

"Kyah!"

Koutarou grabbed the girl's hand and began putting food in his mouth. He went straight for the green onions, of course. By sharing his senses with her, he was teaching her that green onions weren't bad.

"Oh? The green onion... isn't gross?"

The girl's eyes opened wide and she blinked repeatedly in surprise. She couldn't forcibly read Koutarou's heart, but she could sense what he was trying to convey. Since he didn't hate green onions, the sensation she was experiencing from Koutarou was different from how Sanae perceived it.

"Ack! Koutarou made a move before I could make her hate them!"

"Bwahaha! How foolish, Sanae! All I had to do was teach her that they were good before you could get to her!"

Much, munch, much...

The girl then tried eating a green onion for herself.

"These are good..."

Although the taste was somewhat different than what she'd experienced via Koutarou's senses, it certainly wasn't bad.

"Try eating the other vegetables and tofu too. People have to eat a lot of things."

"Very well."

Urged by Koutarou, the girl sampled the other dishes on the table as well. Since it was her first time trying them all, it was a rather slow and involved process because she stopped to take a close look at each and every one. But she seemed to be enjoying herself. And Koutarou, who was watching over, was enjoying himself every bit as much as she was.

"Satomi-kun seems to be in a good mood. Is it because of what's happened over the past few days?" Maki asked Harumi after observing him for a while.

She was whispering so as not to bother Koutarou and the others.

“That’s true, I think that’s a big part of it,” Harumi said with a nod back at Maki.

Over the past week, the girls of room 106 had slowly disappeared one after another, putting Koutarou in an alarmingly stressful situation. But now that it had been resolved, Koutarou was carefreely eating dinner again just like normal. Maki and Harumi both agreed that it was only natural that he’d be in a good mood after what he’d been through.

“I thought so,” said Maki.

“On top of that, I also think that... that knowing his mom is living happily somewhere is a big weight off his shoulders,” replied Harumi.

She believed that knowing his mother was safe and sound somewhere in another life had a profound effect on Koutarou’s mood. He’d learned from the girl in the ruins that there were infinite worlds and that his mother was alive and well in many of them. Harumi knew that information must be a comfort to him.

“Please spare me from that, Sakuraba-senpai. Having someone your own age bringing up your mom is embarrassing,” Koutarou said with a wry smile when he overheard Maki and Harumi.

Harumi, however, was absolutely right. Koutarou had learned firsthand just the other day when he encountered Kashiwagi Shiori after all the other girls disappeared that there were other worlds. And to learn after that that his mother was still alive in at least one of them, Koutarou felt somewhat redeemed. Yet even though Koutarou had started to mature into a man, he was still in his teenage years. Having to talk about his mom in front of all his friends was just too embarrassing. But he also wanted to be considerate of Maki. Her parents had sold her off as a child and she had no fond memories of them, so Koutarou tried to tactfully avoid conversations like this in front of her.

“But doesn’t it bother you? Don’t you want to know how she’s doing? Don’t you want to see her?” Maki pried.

She had a very gentle look in her eyes. She was a mind-manipulating indigo

magician, but she didn't need magic to tell that Koutarou was worried for her. It made her realize that she now had people who were far more precious to her than her family, which was why she had no problem talking about such matters now. So when Maki asked him about his mother so directly, he had no choice but to raise the white flag.

"I can't say it *doesn't* bother me..." he said, scratching his head and reluctantly baring his heart. "But even so... when she said she would grant any wish, it wasn't my mother I wished for. It was something else. Asking for my mom on top of that would just be too greedy."

Standing before the Goddess of Dawn herself, Koutarou had wished for the lost nine girls. They were the most important thing to Koutarou right now. Asking for anything more felt like too much. It would also break the rule he and Clan had once set for themselves to only use their powers to solve the problems in front of them.

"Master, even if you don't directly meet her or change history... can you not just take a peek?"

Ruth was more or less agreed with Koutarou, but she didn't see the harm in him just looking to see how his mother was doing.

"Would you like to see?"

There, the girl from the ruins stopped eating and looked up at Koutarou. With her powers, taking a peek into a different world was easy.

"No, that's..."

Saying that he didn't want to see her would be a lie, but his reserve pumped the breaks on his desires. His heart was telling him it wasn't fair.

"I think taking a peek is fine. You're way too serious, Satomi-kun," Shizuka said with a bittersweet smile.

Shizuka was of a similar disposition and had lost her parents at an early age. She understood better than anyone the desire to reconnect with lost loved ones and the guilt Koutarou must feel at being the only one who could. But even then, she believed it would be okay. She wasn't as thick-headed as Koutarou.

“Incidentally, I’ve met you 5,670,000,000 times in those ruins. You taking just a little peak into any of those lifetimes is well within the margin of error.”

“See? Even Rainbow says it’s okay, so just go ahead and give it a looksee.”

“But...”

“If taking a peek will help you face your lot in this life, Satomi-kun, then I’m sure we would all be happier for it.”

“Sakuraba-senpai...”

Harumi was suggesting that instead of living the rest of his life under such weight, he could shed the burden and use his newfound strength to change his life for the better... That made him feel differently about it. It wasn’t like he didn’t want to see his mom, after all.

“But even still...”

“Let me remind you of something, Satomi Koutarou,” interjected Kiriha. “Even if you take a peek at a parallel world right now, you won’t remember it.”

“What?”

“Did you forget? She’ll turn into a normal human at midnight, and when she does, all our memories of her and her powers will disappear. So even if you look tonight, you won’t remember in the morning. It will be like you had a dream.”

“...”

Harumi had reduced Koutarou’s resistance, and Kiriha dealt the finishing blow. Even if they broke their own rule, they’d go back to normal in a few hours. And in that case, why hold back? It was just like Kiriha to offer such sweet temptation.

So I take a peek at a parallel world where my mom is alive, then we all play around for a couple of hours before everything returns to normal tomorrow... Is that really okay?

“All right... Can I count on you?”

Between Harumi’s persuasiveness and Kiriha’s temptation, Koutarou eventually folded after some deliberation. The girls all giggled a little to

themselves about it, thinking he was being overly serious. But that was part of his charm. It was that side of Koutarou that convinced them all that he'd never betray their trust.

"Yes. Anytime after dinner," the girl from the ruins said with a nod and a satisfied smile on her face.

Things were turning out just as she'd hoped. Her way of thinking when it came to matters like this, after all, was the same as the other nine girls.

Koutarou would experience his vision of another world in the form of a dream. If the girl from the ruins shared her senses and memories with him directly, it would only invite confusion and complication. So instead the package would be nicely wrapped up into an easily digestible dream.

"So I should go to sleep?"

"Yes."

Koutarou pushed the tea table aside and laid down in the inner room. The girl from the ruins sat next to him, and the remaining nine curiously looked on.

"It's hard to fall asleep with all of you staring at me."

"I can help with that."

The girl put her hand on the troubled Koutarou's forehead. It should have been one of the first times they'd ever touched, but her warmth felt strangely familiar to him. Perhaps it was because he knew the other girls so well... Or so he thought as he began to drift to sleep.

"Did you fall asleep already, Koutarou?" Theia teased.

"I think he did," replied Clan. "Actually, if you're that loud, Veltlion might... Well, not wake up. He doesn't wake up for anything. But it might disturb his dream."

"That's true. Sorry."

"Maki-chan, why is Satomi-san grimacing?" asked Yurika.

"It's a very similar world, so maybe he's a little perplexed. I'm sure he'll

gradually get used to it," Maki replied.

"Looks like it. Koutarou's aura is becoming more stable," observed Sanae.

Led by the girl from the ruins, Koutarou had a dream of a parallel world. He was confused at first, which could plainly be seen on his face. But after a few minutes, he was dead asleep and snoring like usual.

"Kiriha-sama, is becoming accustomed to a different world so fast common?"

"You can experience hours of dream time when only a few minutes passes in reality. From Koutarou's point of view, an hour or more might have already elapsed."

"Well, Satomi-kun seems to be enjoying himself now," noted Harumi.

There, everyone turned to look at Koutarou. And just as Harumi has suggested, the corners of his lips were turned up into a wide grin. He must be having a good dream.

"Oh god, wait... What's with that face, Kiriha?"

Realizing that Koutarou was having a nice dream, all the girls smiled sweetly... All except Kiriha, who appeared troubled.

"I was just thinking about parallel worlds."

"Are they dangerous?" Sanae asked.

"It's nothing like that. I was just thinking that there's a parallel world I'd like to see too."

It turned out rather than troubled, Kiriha was simply thinking about something important. Something very precious to her. That was the cause of her pensive pause.

"What kind of world is that?" Sanae inquired.

"One where Koutarou and I are united."

The moment those words left Kiriha's mouth, the room froze over and fell silent. Her words weighed heavily on all the girls. It was something they'd each imagined at least once, after all. Something they were all still hoping might happen at some point. And now they wanted to see it too. Wondering what

she'd say next, the remaining eight girls wordlessly started at Kiriha.

"I can't say that this world isn't similar now that Koutarou has finally accepted us, but things will take time. Koutarou might even take a step backward after our memories are erased. That's why I was thinking I wanted to get a glimpse of a world where my wish came true. Besides, our memories will disappear after tonight too, so it's not like it would affect us moving forward."

The moment Kiriha revealed her true motives, the frozen, silent apartment erupted. The other eight girls of room 106 swarmed Kiriha, all talking over one another.

"That's it! I want to take a look at the future as well!" declared Theia.

"Kiriha, you really are a genius!" praised Sanae.

"Agreed! I want hope that it will happen someday!" pleaded Yurika.

"I supposed I have to agree. But only because everyone else is, you hear me?" hedged Clan.

"My lovey-dovey life with Satomi-kun, huh? I wonder if I'll move down here from room 206... Heehee, I wonder if I can balance being a landlord and a girlfriend..." giggled Shizuka.

"Does an agent of evil like me get to know normal happiness? I would love to know..." wondered Maki.

"I-It's still not real... but... Master and I being in l-love... Kyaaah! I don't know if I can!" squealed Ruth.

"I-I wonder if I could be a proper girlfriend to Satomi-kun... hahh..." sighed Harumi.

All the girls, their eyes sparkling, were in whole-hearted agreement. While Koutarou was having a dream of his own, they would each take a peek into a world where they were together with Koutarou.

Harumi was a very serious girl and worried that using an almighty power just to see into another world where she and Koutarou were a couple would be an abuse of power. It was completely different than Koutarou asking to see his lost mother again. She was still willing to look anyway, however, because she was

concerned about whether or not she would make a good girlfriend for Koutarou. She believed and hoped they might one day end up a couple in this world too, but she had reservations about whether or not she was fit for the job. Could she be his girlfriend, and more importantly, could she help heal his heart?

Most of the girls shared her worries to some degree. The only ones who didn't were the optimistic Sanae, and Yurika who had forgotten the problem even existed in the first place. But everyone else was quite serious about this, and they ran into trouble deciding who would get to go first.

"Rock, paper, scissors! Rock, paper, scissors!"

But things being what they were, the girls talked it out and ultimately decided that they would determine the order based on a simple game.

"Rock, paper, scissors! Rock, paper, scissors!"

After twenty-two rounds of rock, paper, scissors, they finally ended up with one of them throwing paper when the other eight threw rock.

"Harumi did it! She is victorious!" declared Theia.

"I-I won?!" Harumi stammered.

"Yes. Congratulations, Sakuraba-san," cheered Maki.

"I..."

She had prayed for her victory, but hadn't expected to actually win. Born with a weak constitution, Harumi had spent most of her life passively taking a backseat in things. She'd just naturally assumed she'd have to wait. So when Theia and Maki congratulated her on her victory, she looked around at everyone's hands in disbelief. She was indeed the only one holding paper.

"Congratulations, Harumi. I have no complaints if you're first," said Clan.

"This works out," added Sanae. "The only person nobody would complain about winning actually won."

"I certainly have no complaints with Sakuraba-senpai going first either," said Yurika.

The three of them were smiling at Harumi. All the girls. While they were disappointed that they hadn't won, this outcome pleased them. The reason for that was Harumi herself. She was the oldest, after all. Not to mention kind and thoughtful. No one was sorry to see her go first.

"Now, Harumi, please lie down over here," called the girl from the ruins.

She'd been watching over the whole affair and now calmly guided Harumi over to lie down next to Koutarou.

"O-Okay."

It was only now that it started to sink in for Harumi that she'd really won. She couldn't take her eyes off of the sleeping Koutarou.

I'll be going... to a world where we're lovers...

Harumi herself wouldn't be going so as not to affect anything in that particular parallel world. She'd only be seeing it in the form of a dream. But she couldn't help imagining that it would really be her as Koutarou's girlfriend, and as such, her emotions were running amok inside her. She was part uneasy, part hopeful. And as she wished to be able to be together with Koutarou in her own way, she laid down next to him.

"Let's begin."

Like she'd done with Koutarou, the girl from the ruins put her hand over Harumi's forehead and smiled. She was the hidden side of all nine girls, so she of course had no objection to them sneaking a peek into other worlds when they didn't.

Even if she takes a look now, in the end...

But she also had her own thoughts on the matter, which was why she was speaking in a casual tone with a casual smile. In contrast, Harumi looked to her and answered seriously.

"Yes! Please!"

This was, after all, a direly serious affair to her. She was determined to absorb everything she could about being worthy girlfriend.

"Sweet dreams, Harumi-sama."

“Thank you, Ruth-san.”

“Give us all the deets later, okay, Sakuraba-senpai?”

“I just hope it’s anything worth telling, Kasagi-san...”

All the other girls watched Harumi, their eyes full of anticipation. They were all waiting to see how things would go, and their actions would depend on that. The expectation weighed heavily on Harumi, but only for a few fleeting moments. The hand on her forehead was guiding her into the land of dreams.

While Harumi was witnessing a glimpse of a parallel world, the experience wasn’t much different from having a lucid dream. She fell asleep and the dream began from nothingness. But rather than a bunch of disconnected scenes, it was like she was watching a thoughtful movie of her life—or something close to it.

This is our school... but it’s different.

Harumi quickly realized what she was looking at was Kisshouharukaze High School. The school was currently undergoing an expansion, so there was scaffolding here and there all about campus. She could see no sign of it in her dream, however, indicating this was a vision of something that had happened in the relative past.

I wonder where I am here? And... I wonder where Satomi-kun is...

And just as Harumi began to focus on her objective, she heard someone cry out...

“P-Please stop! Let go!”

It was a troubled girl looking for help. That alone was enough to set off all kinds of alarms, but what truly got Harumi’s attention was the familiarity of the voice.

“It’s fine, right? You want members, and I want to go out with you. It’s win-win, don’t you think?”

“That’s not what this society is for!”

Harumi hurriedly turned to look in the direction it was coming from to see a male student grabbing a female student by the arm.

Th-That's me from two years ago!

Indeed, not only the voice was familiar to her. This was the same scene that had played out the day exam results for prospective students were announced. She was on campus that day trying to recruit new members for the knitting society, but things weren't going well. Since she was mostly standing quietly by herself, a sleazy male student had taken the opportunity to approach her unwelcomed.

When Harumi saw the situation and recognized it—remembered it—her point of view and feelings began overlapping with the Harumi of this world.

That's right... I was desperate and didn't know what to do...

The Harumi of two years ago was overwhelmed with surprise and fear. She was scared and desperate for a way out of the terrible situation.

"But you don't have enough members, right? Time to face facts."

"No! Let go of me!"

As Harumi's perspective continued to merge with herself in this world, she began sharing in her senses as well. She took a step back and tried to escape from the male student's grip. It was just as she remembered; she knew exactly how this Harumi felt. But of course she did—it was her, after all. And that was exactly why the present Harumi remained calm. She knew her knight would come save her.

"Ouch!"

Ouch!

A sharp pain suddenly shot through Harumi's right wrist. It was because she was struggling to wrest free of the male student's grip—something she hadn't expected. And accordingly, both Harumi's let out a yelp in surprise.

H-Huh? Did I hurt my wrist back then?

Harumi was perplexed. She couldn't remember ever hurting her wrist. She'd been so startled and scared in the heat of the moment that she didn't remember exactly everything with clarity, but she was quite certain that she hadn't hurt her wrist that day.

“Welcome! Oh my, aren’t you a cutie?”

Fortunately, however, the pain seemed to be the only thing that deviated from her memories.

Satomi-kun! I knew you’d come!

Everything after that moment played out exactly as she remembered it with Koutarou, who just happened to be walking by, scared off the student who was harassing her with a little flamboyance. At the time, however, Harumi was a little too shaken to appreciate that. She barely knew what was happening. It was only after the sleazy male student disappeared that Harumi finally realized that Koutarou had come to her rescue.

“Phew. There are so many idiots this time of year... I sure hope he’s not in my class.”

Koutarou was angry. He hated selfish and unreasonable people.

That’s so like Satomi-kun, heehee...

And Harumi understood that now. Rather than saving Harumi, he wanted the male student to check himself. He’d just had a very interesting way of going about achieving that.

“Um... Thank you very much.”

“Wha?!”

Koutarou was genuinely surprised when Harumi thanked him. He’d forgotten she even existed.

Satomi-kun truly didn’t expect anything from anyone back then...

He made sure he walked the right path and kept his promises. That was all. He never expected anything from anyone else and, because of that, instinctively kept them at a distance. He’d never even considered the possibility of Harumi thanking him.

“Ah, I’m sorry for startling you!”

“Oh, no, I’m sorry. I forgot you were here too.”

When Koutarou finally came to his senses and realized Harumi was standing

right there in front of him, he scratched his head bashfully and apologized. Seeing that, Harumi smiled.

Ah, I remember this... If Satomi-kun hadn't said that, I might have been scared of him too. It's almost like our flaws meshed together well...

Reliving her first encounter with Koutarou made Harumi realize how precarious of a tightrope walk it had been. One misstep and they never would've ended up the way they had.

A fateful encounter... There's no doubt we would've come together somehow, someday thanks to Alaia-sama, but to think this was all balancing on a razor's edge...

Harumi was more than happy with the way her relationship with Koutarou had taken form, but she had no confidence it would ever play out the same way again. The smallest altered detail, the slightest change... She was sure it might have led to something different.

"?!"

And just as Harumi was contemplating that, it happened. After Koutarou agreed to join the knitting society, Harumi pointed to the desk she'd been using to take applications and began to explain the process. When she did, however, there was another pang in her wrist.

"Is something the matter?"

"I seem to have twisted my wrist..."

And there, Harumi of two years ago said something the current Harumi never had. The reason for it was a trivial—she'd put a little too much force into trying to escape the male student, or perhaps he'd put a little too much force into trying to hold on to her. But that was the beginning of a story the current Harumi didn't know.

As it turned out, she was right. The way things had played out between her and Koutarou two years ago was unique. The smallest detail, the slightest difference... It *would* lead to something different.

Club recruitment began the day exam results were announced for prospective students. In other words, it was still in the middle of the spring break. So when Koutarou and Harumi arrived at the school clinic, there was no nurse waiting for them.

“Just wait right here, Senpai.”

“What are you going to do?”

“I used to get all banged up playing baseball in middle school. You could say I was a regular in the nurse’s office, so I learned a thing or two about first aid. Leave this to me.”

“I see. Then I’m in your care.”

Koutarou sat Harumi down in a chair and began scouring the clinic’s cabinets. Of course, all the medicines and specialty tools were behind locked doors. But Koutarou wasn’t after any of that. He just needed basic first aid supplies like bandages and salves.

I don’t remember any of this... And I don’t remember Satomi-kun telling me he played baseball, either. I only knew he was athletic.

The current Harumi was looking at Koutarou through the eyes of herself in this world. Their relationship was already off to a different start. The differences were minor—what Kiriha or Clan likely would have described as a result of quantum fluctuations. Just Harumi hurting her wrist wasn’t enough to generate a divergence in the river of time. But Harumi knew this wasn’t her past. She was witnessing something that took place in a different world, a different timeline. She was overwhelmed by what she was watching, but unable to take her eyes off of it... this somewhat different life of hers.

“All right, here we go.”

“Sorry for all the trouble.”

Once he had the tools he needed, Koutarou walked back over to Harumi and sat down in a chair facing her.

“Ah, don’t mention it. You’re the one who’s going to be looking after me from today on, you know?”

“Then I’ll be sure to take good care of you as thanks.”

“Haha, please do.”

After they exchanged smiles, Koutarou took Harumi’s hand.

Maybe this is just what you call a lucky break... They’re talking a lot and they seem a little closer than we were...

Watching the two of them, Harumi thought back on how she and Koutarou had never talked like this two years ago. It seemed injuring her wrist had given them this opportunity. Koutarou’s serious side, the one that couldn’t stand not to help those in need, overrode his desire to push people away. And, naturally, the longer he and Harumi talked, the closer they got. One small difference had paved the way for a totally different world.

But how am I going to handle this development? It’s so unexpected...

Harumi was pleased with this development, but it also made her nervous. Knowing how timid and shy she was back then, she was worried that she wouldn’t be able to keep up with how quickly things were progressing between her and Koutarou. While current Harumi anxiously watched on, Koutarou began examining her injury.

“I’m going to touch you a little, okay?”

“O-Okay.”

At first his hand hovered just above hers, but then, with the utmost care, Koutarou gently took Harumi’s wrist. When he did, she could feel his warmth... and it shook her world. Current Harumi, meanwhile, continued to watch over the two of them with a smile.

Of course you’d be shaken after a boy you don’t know touches you. And so suddenly... I know how you feel. Good luck, me...

It was some time yet from this point before the current Harumi had gotten to experience such a thing. She knew how intense it must be for her shy, younger self to go through it so soon. It was only a brief touch, but to an introverted girl like her, just getting first aid like this was a rather rattling experience. It was heartwarming to watch, really, and she prayed for the best of luck for her other

self... despite being a little jealous. This Harumi was getting along better with Koutarou, and faster too. She couldn't help but wish the same had been true for her.

"Does it hurt?"

"Just being touched isn't enough for it to hurt."

"What if you move it?"

"That does hurt, yes."

"Then let's fix it in place."

Koutarou applied a poultice to Harumi's wrist and then wrapped it tightly with a bandage to discourage her from moving it, similar to a cast or splint.

So she gets to see him make that face from day one... I really am a little envious...

Koutarou's expression as he was taking care of Harumi was a lot like the expression he wore while knitting in earnest—something that had charmed Harumi. She hadn't gotten to see it until they started club activities at the beginning of the semester, but this version of herself got to see it the day she met Koutarou thanks to her injury. She really was a little jealous.

"Okay, that should do it."

"U-Um... thank you very much," Harumi said, blushing.

Koutarou assumed that her red cheeks meant she was nervous after what had just happened, but that wasn't all. The truth was that she'd gotten flustered to see him put his heart into treating her.

Who wouldn't be interested in him after seeing that face?

She could read this Harumi's flustered feelings like a book—they were her own, after all.

And she knew that she would unconsciously start to look for Koutarou around school after this. In short, she was standing at the doorstep of love.

"Now make sure you get to the hospital right away, okay?"

"But I'm still in the middle of recruitment..."

“Right away, got it?”

“B-But... um...”

“I’m serious. My first aid’s just a stopgap. You really need to have a professional look at it.”

“Y-Yes, you’re right...”

Harumi had intended to go back to recruiting new members, but Koutarou’s strong insistence made her back down. When he looked at her with those serious eyes, she just couldn’t say now. Considering her personality and the budding love taking hold of her heart, it was only inevitable.

“Then at least let me write your name down in the— Ah, names! I never introduced myself, did I?!”

“Now that you mention it...”

Now that Koutarou had treated Harumi’s wrist, the interaction between the two of them returned to something familiar. Facing each other, they introduced themselves.

“I’m Satomi Koutarou. It’s nice to meet you.”

“I’m Harumi. Sakuraba Harumi. I’m the president of the knitting society.”

But it was only the introduction that was the same. Behind it were already very different feelings than what the current Harumi had experienced—feelings that would cause the paths these two Harumis had walked to diverge greatly.

After that day, Harumi and Koutarou didn’t see again until Sunday, April 5th—the day before the start of the new school year. Harumi remembered it well. With the new term looming, she’d gone to the hospital for a checkup. She wanted to make sure she was in good health, both for the sake of her academics and her extracurricular activities.

With a new member joining the knitting society, she was hardly even sure what to do. Her surprise encounter with Koutarou the day before school started, however, went a long way to shaking things up. It caught the timid and introverted Harumi completely off guard, and even now she could remember

how desperate she'd been not to let her emotions show.

So events are following the same pattern here... but I sure am shaken up. Satomi-kun probably didn't know since we'd only just met, but I'm sure he'd be able to tell right away now, heehee...

Harumi watched as the Koutarou of this world turned to show the bandage on the back of his head to the shaken Harumi.

"I'm not sick, just a little banged up. Here, look."

"Are you okay?"

She instantly looked worried, but the bandage was only covering a bump Koutarou had gotten in a little accident at his part-time job on the local dig site. Realizing that it wasn't anything serious, Harumi let out a sigh.

Ah, I see! This is the day Satomi-kun met that girl at the ruins!

Upon hearing Koutarou's explanation of what happened and realizing the date, the current Harumi was astonished. Today was the day everything began, and the Harumi and Koutarou of this world had no idea. Of course, the current Harumi hadn't realized it back then either. This day was a major crossroads for Koutarou and the girls.

"Doesn't it hurt?"

"It's still a little painful, but it doesn't hurt anymore when you touch it, Sakuraba-senpai."

"Oh, thank god..."

The Harumi of this world had reached out and gently stroked Koutarou's bandage. She was hoping to comfort Koutarou, hoping she could help heal him.

What?! Was I always this bold?!

Her actions took the current Harumi completely by surprise. She didn't remember patting Koutarou's head like that. And even though she was watching herself do it, she had no idea why. It startled her enough that it put any and all thoughts of the girl from the ruins out of her mind.

"What about you, Sakuraba-senpai?"

“Yes, I’m all better.”

But the reason soon became apparent. Harumi had reached out for Koutarou with her right hand... and when she did, Koutarou gently stroked the bandage on her wrist in return.

“Do you still feel any pain?”

“It doesn’t hurt even if I move it now.”

“I’m glad there were no lasting effects.”

“I owe it all to your first aid, Satomi-kun.”

Harumi was smiling and didn’t seem to be hurting in the slightest. In fact, she seemed quite happy... if not a little bashful.

Oh, it’s my wrist! Thanks to that, I can be a little bolder around injuries!

Putting the pieces together, the current Harumi began to see what was happening. Because Koutarou had treated her injury, she felt more comfortable trying to help him with his. It was only natural that she’d sympathize and want to return the favor after he’d helped her like he did. That much made sense.

“Hey! Her boyfriend’s back!”

“Wah! And they’re all lovey-dovey!”

That was when the children who’d spotted Koutarou came running over to him and Harumi. They knew her quite well because she’d often read them storybooks while she was at the hospital herself. They spent a lot of time together, and Harumi considered the children at the hospital very dear friends.

Huh? Did she say again?

And interestingly enough, they revealed a tidbit of information about what was going on here. In this world, Koutarou had met Harumi here before.

“He’s not my boyfriend! He only came with me to the hospital because he was worried about my wrist!”

“You see, Sakuraba-senpai was secretly trying to continue recruiting... I mean, trying to keep doing her job, so I brought her here myself.”

Apparently after Koutarou had left Harumi in the nurse’s office that day,

Harumi decided to put off her promise to him and go back to recruiting new members. Koutarou had spotted her on his way back from checking out the baseball team and dragged her to the hospital right then and there.

“That’s exactly what a boyfriend does!”

“Yeah! Are you sure you’re not her boyfriend?”

“I told you he’s not my boyfriend yet!”

“Not yet?”

“That’s right!”

“You mean he will be in the future?”

“E-Eeek! N-No, that’s not... That’s not what I meant, Satomi-kun!”

“...I wouldn’t mind.”

“Attaboy!”

“Not you too, Satomi-kun! Goodness!”

Harumi’s injured wrist was a small pebble tossed into the pool of her fate. The ripples that flowed outward from it crossed over each other as they bounced back from the shore, creating a completely different pattern on the water. The current Harumi, looking at those ripples now, couldn’t even imagine how things would be when it all finally settled. All she knew for certain was that, somehow out of all of this, she and Koutarou would be united. She patiently waited to see how as she felt her fate in this world change direction. Her heart was racing all the while, just like the Harumi of this world right now.

Harumi’s back-and-forth with Koutarou and the children wasn’t the only thing different about their encounter today. The way the current Harumi remembered it, she’d parted ways with Koutarou when Kenji showed up and called him over. But that didn’t happen here. Instead, Koutarou called Kenji over and introduced him to Harumi. It seemed Harumi’s feelings weren’t the only ones that were slightly different in this world.

“Sakuraba-senpai, this is Mackenzie. Matsudaira Kenji, or Mackenzie for short.”

“Yeah, I’m Matsudaira. Nice to meet you. And thanks for taking care of Kou.”

“Oh, no. He’s the one who’s been taking care of me.”

There, Harumi shook her head and glanced down at her right wrist.

Kenji wasn’t sure what that meant, but he could imagine it was something special. The look in Harumi’s eyes was wistful and she was blushing ever so slightly.

“Mackenzie, this is Sakuraba Harumi-senpai. She’s the president of the knitting society that I’ll be joining starting tomorrow.”

“Knitting society...?” Kenji muttered as he looked at Harumi’s face.

He knew why Koutarou might want to join a club like that. He knew about the half-knit sweater his mother had left behind.

Is Kou going to learn knitting from her so he can finish it? If she was able to convince him to do that, she must be something else...

Kenji quietly changed his evaluation of Harumi. His first impression had simply been that she was a frail, quiet girl. But with how well he knew Koutarou, he knew there had to be more to her than that. Just considering getting Harumi to teach him how to knit so that he could finish his late mother’s keepsake must have been a weighty decision for Koutarou.

“Yes. I’ll be serving as its president starting this year.”

“I see. Then please do take good care of Kou,” Kenji said with a bow of his head.

There was a great deal of meaning and feeling behind those words and that gesture, but the Harumi of this world didn’t realize the half of it. The current Harumi, however, did.

I’m already talking to Matsudaira-san here... In my case, that didn’t happen until after summer vacation. And it’s rare to see Matsudaira-san so serious... To think so much could change from just an injury...

The current Harumi was well aware of the circumstances with Koutarou’s mother and his relationship with Kenji. That’s why she could more or less guess what Kenji was thinking. It was a rather big deal, and she found it somewhat

vexing that the Harumi of this world didn't get it. The source of all this change was a mere injury. It had already healed, but the ripples were still shaking things up in her relationship with Koutarou... and this was just the start.

"Let's do our best knitting together, Satomi-kun."

"Yeah. I'm pretty clumsy, so I'm sure I'm not going to make things easy for you, but I'll do my best."

While the current Harumi watched on in wonder, this world's Harumi continued peacefully chatting with Koutarou. Things between them were clearly progressing much faster than they had with the current Harumi and her Koutarou. Their upperclassman/underclassmen relationship was well established even before the entrance ceremony. Moreover, another more intimate bond was in the process of forming...

"Wow, even a good looking guy came to see you!"

"Are you going to change over to him?"

"There won't be any changing!"

"So that big guy really is your first choice, huh?"

"So you don't choose based on looks! What a model woman!"

"Don't listen to them, Satomi-kun! I really don't have any ulterior motives!"

"That's too bad."

"Hey, you've got a chance!"

"Isn't that great?!"

"Satomi-kun, please stop making jokes like that with a straight face!"

More importantly, all the various bonds that were building between them would come together to strengthen each other into something altogether new: romantic interest. Their relationship was at the very least several weeks ahead of what the current Harumi had experienced. And at this rate, she felt it wouldn't be long at all until they became a couple.

The knitting society's club activities began the day after the entrance

ceremony: Tuesday, April 7. Koutarou stopped by after school and Harumi showed him the very basics of knitting. That much was the same as what the current Harumi remembered, but the situation played out a little differently.

"I'm sorry about what happened at the hospital, Satomi-kun. I'll be sure to scold those children."

"You mean I don't really have a chance after all?"

"Jeez, Satomi-kun! If you're going to be like that, I won't teach you how to knit!"

"Hahaha, I'm sorry."

With the events of the hospital behind them, the two of them continued to chat about this and that. The current Harumi could only remember them talking about knitting. Things like how to hold the needles and yarn, proper form and techniques, and various and sundry other knitting-related topics. She couldn't recall them just casually chatting like friends. The current Harumi had been too timid and shy back then; she hadn't had the courage to bring up anything else.

"Sakuraba-senpai, what do I do when I get to the end?"

"I won't be fooled by you trying to change the subject."

"Come on, don't say that. Please teach me."

"Only after you've reflected on your actions."

"I have and I'm very sorry, so please teach me what to do."

"Heehee. Very good."

But the Harumi of this world even had enough composure to make jokes. It wouldn't be until much later that the current Harumi managed that. It seemed her injury had helped her get feeling vulnerable and exposed in front of Koutarou out of the way, which helped her put her best foot forward otherwise.

I guess if I get that out of the way and be like this around boys too...

The current Harumi thought back to her own past and felt like she'd tried a little too hard to be Koutarou's senpai. As a result, their relationship hit something of a wall, leaving her to anguish over her one-sided feelings. It was

the school play that finally helped her break through that wall. Koutarou helped her when she was struggling with acting, which deepened their bond and moved their relationship to the next level. In the end what Harumi really needed wasn't to prove herself as his senpai, but to show him who she really was as Harumi. And she saw that more than ever right now.

"Do you mind if I ask you something?"

As if waiting for her to reach that conclusion, the Harumi of this world asked Koutarou a question. They'd been enjoying themselves so far, but she had a serious look on her face now.

"Of course not. Ask me anything."

"I-In that case..." Harumi gulped and then said, "Satomi-kun, why did you decide to pick up knitting?"

It was something current Harumi had also asked Koutarou, and she remembered his answer quite well. She recited it in her head as he said it aloud.

"Why? It doesn't suit me at all, right? Hahaha..."

"Why? It doesn't suit me at all, right? Hahaha..."

It was the same, word for word. It warmed her heart with a nostalgia so intense that Harumi was sure her sleeping body might even be crying right now.

"Th-That's not true! I was just wondering if this was boring for a boy..."

"I'll tell you because you don't look like the gossiping type."

"Satomi-kun...?"

"The truth is that I have a half-knit sweater at home."

"A sweater? I see..."

The conversation continued to play out as Harumi remembered it. Trusting in Harumi, Koutarou told her about the unfinished sweater. It was clear he hadn't knit it himself, so Harumi knew someone else—someone important to Koutarou—must have left it behind. She could tell it was something special, and she resolved to help him even more because of it.

"It's a keepsake from my mom. She passed away ten years ago, and my old

man... He’s still not over it, so I...”

“Oh my...”

Koutarou’s sudden confession floored both Harumis. The Harumi of this world was simply shocked to hear about the tragedy, but the current Harumi was shocked that Koutarou would even bring it up.

He only told me that there was a half-knit sweater... but now he’s telling me about his mother!

Koutarou had originally revealed the story of the sweater to Harumi in three steps. First was merely telling her that it existed, second was telling her that it was a keepsake from his mother, and third was telling her that he wanted to be able to finish in so that he could find closure. And at this juncture, Koutarou had already revealed the first two to the Harumi of this world. Even taking into account that he was only telling her the story to give her context for teaching him how to knit, it was still surprising.

I really might actually become Satomi-kun’s girlfriend in this world!

Harumi hadn’t doubted what the girl from the ruins had said. She was sure that there were worlds where it happened, but she still had to wonder if she and Koutarou had really become one in the truest sense. If they didn’t face each other and support one another, then in Harumi’s eyes, they couldn’t really be called partners. She was worried that they’d only connected in a superficial sense—that they were only *saying* they were dating. In short, she hadn’t trusted herself.

But this means I can do this one day too!

Seeing this play out right in front of her, however, was a ray of hope. The Harumi of this world was taking all the right steps—and rather quickly, at that—to build a relationship with Koutarou. At this rate, they might become the kind of couple that Harumi desired them to be. And if it worked out, Harumi could then use this as reference to help build her own relationship with Koutarou.

“I want to finish it with my own hands one day. Hahaha, but who knows how long it’ll take before someone as clumsy as I am can do it?”

“I understand, Satomi-kun. I’ll make sure... I’ll definitely make sure you’re able

to finish that sweater!”

Hearing Koutarou’s story made the Harumi of this world cry. She didn’t break down sobbing, but looked up at Koutarou with tears glistening in her eyes. There was an unusual power behind her words. She was surprised to learn that Koutarou’s motivation was to complete his mother’s keepsake, but it was more than enough to convince her. And she knew she’d regret it terribly if she didn’t give her all to helping him out.

That’s right! You have to see this through! For Satomi-kun’s sake and your own!

The current Harumi agreed with the Harumi of this world. Going into this half-heartedly wouldn’t bring them happiness even if they did end up becoming a couple. Both Harumi’s saw it as a necessity to go all-in. That would be how they moved forward.

“R-Really?!”

“Yes, absolutely!”

But that didn’t mean there wasn’t trepidation. Koutarou looked at Harumi with eyes full of trust, yet he was looking at her as a teacher and not a woman. The tearful Harumi of this world hadn’t realized that, but the current Harumi certainly did.

“Let’s do our best t-together, Satomi-kun...”

“I’ll be counting on you, Sakuraba-senpai.”

Those words summed it up well. Koutarou felt nothing but gratitude and respect for Harumi and her assistance.

Satomi-kun, those aren’t the feelings we’re looking for...

Looking at it in isolation, there was nothing wrong with that. But in the bigger picture, it was problematic for Harumi. Until Koutarou could move past his reverence for Harumi, his gratitude and respect for her, he would never make a move. For the current Harumi, Koutarou’s feelings for her and his reverence for her had come to terms with each other while their relationship was still in the process of forming. But in this world, Koutarou and Harumi’s relationship was

building so fast that Koutarou's reverence for her posed a very tall wall that he'd need to scale before things could progress any further. Realizing that, the current Harumi couldn't help worrying for them as she watched over the blossoming couple.

The obstacle marathon went more or less the way Harumi recalled it. Just like she had, the Harumi of this world began to see Koutarou more and more as a man. She also became friends with Yurika.

I see... I remember hearing about it, but to think all this happened behind the scenes...

Harumi had later learned about the secret battle taking place between the four invaders and Koutarou. She'd been oblivious to it while the marathon was taking place, so this was her first time seeing it in a different light. The fearsome encounter between Theia and Kiriha was especially stunning, but it was all endearing to see. It had long bothered Harumi that she hadn't been involved in things with the others for the first year or so of their friendship, and this gave her an insider's look into what had happened.

"Still, to think you and Yurika would win, Sakuraba-senpai..."

"I can't say I ever dreamed it would happen myself."

While the race went how Harumi remembered it, what happened afterward played out differently. In this world, Koutarou and Harumi were headed to the knitting society's club room together.

"I'd say it's a case of reaping your just rewards."

"Oh, it's nothing that special... I just got lucky..."

"The important thing is how much effort you put into it once you decided to participate. Without that, I don't think you could've won even if the opportunity presented itself. But you did it and seized victory with your own hands, Sakuraba-senpai."

The Harumi of this world was currently walking down the hall holding the marathon trophy in both hands. It was big and heavy, so Koutarou had offered to carry it for her, but she'd insisted. She was proud of it and wanted to carry it

herself as they walked back to the club room together.

“Here, let me get the door for you.”

“Satomi-kun, they key’s in my breast pocket. Can you get it?”

“Er, Sakuraba-senpai, that’s a little...”

“What are you— Oh! Oh my!”

Once they reached the club room, Harumi handed the trophy to Koutarou so she could get the key and open the door. She then took the trophy back and they entered the club room together.

“...”

“...”

Harumi’s face was beet red, which she tried to hide behind the giant trophy She was kicking herself mentally for asking Koutarou to go into her breast pocket.

Clack!

Because of the awkward silence looming between the two of them, the sound of Harumi setting the heavy trophy on the shelf sounded especially loud. But neither one of them said a word after that. There was only more silence. All Harumi could hear was the pounding of her racing heart.

“A-Anyways, Sakuraba-senpai!” Koutarou was the one to finally break the silence. He couldn’t stand it anymore. “Congratulations on winning.”

“Thank you very much. It was all thanks to your help, Satomi-kun,” Harumi replied in an equally eager tone.

She too was more than ready to escape the silence and happily followed Koutarou’s lead. And with that, things were quickly back to normal between them.

“I only taught you what I knew. You’re the one who did all the hard work, Sakuraba-senpai...”

“Satomi-kun...”

“That’s Sakuraba-senpai for you. I see now I wasn’t wrong to think you were

so amazing.”

Looking at the trophy, Koutarou glanced over at Harumi. He was no longer awkwardly shaken. No, now there was respect and confidence glinting in his eyes. Seeing that, both Harumis thought and said simultaneously...

I don’t want you to think I’m amazing...

“I don’t want you to think I’m amazing...”

Neither Harumi wanted Koutarou to see her as something untouchable. In fact, the Harumi of this world had only just become cognizant of it, but she only wanted Koutarou to see her as a girl. The current Harumi felt the same way, and she was unsatisfied with how Koutarou was looking at her. Their feelings overlapped perfectly.

“What?”

“N-Nothing!”

Harumi panicked and tried to hide those feelings, but they had at last taken a clear shape inside her heart. She didn’t want Koutarou to behold her with reverence. She wanted him to behold her with affection.

That’s right! We can’t go on like this! We need to break through that wall we just felt!

Watching over the Harumi of this world, the current Harumi cheered her on. She’d been puzzled by the differences between them at first, but she’d adjusted and now sympathized endlessly with her other self. It was still her, after all. Everything she said and did felt right in its own way, which led the current Harumi to believe more and more that this life really could have taken place. Moreover, that something like it still one day could... But for now, she’d pray for things to go well between her and Koutarou in this world.

Just as Harumi had feared, her relationship with Koutarou in this world had reached something of a standstill. Because they’d gotten so close so quickly, they’d hit a wall: becoming more than just schoolmates. Koutarou’s strong respect for Harumi got in the way of his other feelings, holding him back when it came to getting over that wall. Moreover, the events happening around the two

of them were conspiring to complicate things... like when they met at the beach during summer vacation.

“We’re club mates, right?”

“Yes, you’re always helping me out a lot.”

Koutarou had gotten into a fight with a friend and was looking for her along the beach. He wasn’t exactly sure what he’d done to hurt her feelings, and he wasn’t sure he’d be able to make up with her even if he found her. In the middle of his search, however, he stumbled across Harumi.

“But I could also say it like this... We’re complete strangers that just happen to be in the same club.”

“That’s...”

“The truth, in a way.”

After hearing what had happened between Koutarou and his friend, the sensitive Harumi knew exactly what was going on. She explained it to Koutarou as best she could—she had to. She wanted to guide him in the right direction, both as his senpai and as a girl who had feelings for him.

“If you had said that when we first met, I wouldn’t have thought much of it. But right now, it would make me sad, even though it might be the truth.”

“...”

“What about you, Satomi-kun?”

“...Yeah. I was a little shocked when you said it just now.”

“Then I think it’s the same for your friend too. ‘I know it’s the truth. At first I really felt that way, but as time passed, those feelings changed. I just hate thinking about it that way. There must be another way. I want there to be.’ Don’t you think that’s what she might be feeling?”

“She’s...”

“But if you were brutally honest, Satomi-kun, that’s like calling us complete strangers.”

“Ah...”

“I’m sure it was hard to hear. I also want Satomi-kun to think of me as a friend. I don’t want to hear you say we’re just complete strangers...”

“So that’s why...!”

Harumi loved smiling at Koutarou, but she could also admonish him when necessary. She gave him the best advice she could. And Koutarou was grateful for it. He looked at her with earnest, admiring eyes, completely oblivious of how Harumi truly felt.

“Satomi-kun...”

She watched him go with longing in her heart. Once he was out of view, she cast her eyes down and let out a sigh.

“Why did I say I wanted you to think of me as a friend too...?”

That was what she’d wanted when they first met. Really and truly. But right now, that wasn’t all. There was something more... At least, she wanted there to be. Before she knew it, her feelings had changed.

“I’m... a coward... and a liar...”

She was unable to be honest like she had told Koutarou to be. She couldn’t even follow her own advice, which was painfully disheartening.

That’s right. This is on me... I’m the one who has to climb that wall. I’m the one who needs to tell Satomi-kun how I feel.

The current Harumi knew what the Harumi of this world was going through. She’d been through it herself, after all. But the Harumi of this world was even closer with Koutarou than she’d been when it happened... That made it all the more painful, though the current Harumi knew that pain would become motivation to move forward. Forward, up and over that wall.

After her encounter with Koutarou at the beach, the Harumi of this world underwent a small transformation. She began wearing a white ribbon around her right wrist, which Koutarou noticed when the knitting society resumed club activities after summer break.

“What’s this? Did you hurt your wrist again, Sakuraba-senpai?”

“Oh, no. This is a ribbon, not a bandage.”

“Oh, my bad. It just happened to be in the same place...”

“Heehee. I forgive you, Satomi-kun.”

Harumi laughed it off with a giggle, but Koutarou wasn’t really all that far off. She wasn’t wearing the ribbon as a fashion statement, but as a reminder of a promise she made to herself—a promise to be more active in building the relationship she’d started with Koutarou the day she hurt her wrist.

“Maybe I should wrap a piece of cloth around my head like a headband or something too.”

“You shouldn’t. It really would look like a bandage.”

“Then I’ll make it a ribbon like yours.”

“I bet that would be very cute on you.”

“Hrm, I’m not sure I want that.”

“I don’t think I do either...”

“Why is that?”

“W-Well... I’d feel responsible for making a tough guy like you look so silly and girly. I’m the one who dragged you into knitting and all...”

“I consider myself the athletic type, yeah. But maybe it’s time for a new Koutarou.”

“Please no.”

Harumi had carefully selected the ribbon she was wearing, welcoming the idea that Koutarou might come to see a more feminine side of her. And since it had already struck up a conversation between them, it seemed to be doing the trick.

I was never this assertive... I could learn a thing or two from her.

The current Harumi gave the ribbon idea high marks. She could change up the color or the style for special occasions and the like, so it would turn into a frequent point of conversation. Moreover, Koutarou might start to look for it... Meaning he’d be looking her way more often. The ribbon in and of itself was a

very minor thing, but it might yet bring big changes—just like hurting her wrist had. Harumi decided she'd give it a try herself once she woke up from her dream.



After that, the Harumi of this world began switching up the color and style of her ribbon just as the current Harumi had suspected she would. Great minds think alike, after all. And on this particular day, Harumi was wearing a blue ribbon around her wrist. The horoscopes had said that would be the day's lucky color, but Harumi hadn't liked the look of the blue on its own, so she'd chosen a blue ribbon lined with white lace. It was a lovely, feminine choice for the lovely and feminine Harumi.

"You there! Would you like to become a princess?!"

"Huh?"

Harumi could only answer the drama club president with a dumb look, squandering the increased cuteness her ribbon afforded her. But her reaction was only natural. Anyone would respond the same way after being asked to become a princess out of the blue like that.

"Sakuraba-senpai can do it, President-san! She's perfect!"

"I know! She just looks like she was made for the job!"

Koutarou and the drama club president were going on about something so excitedly that they forgot to stop and explain anything to Harumi. Troubled, she decided to ask them about it.

"Um, I'm sorry, but I don't have any idea what you two are talking about..."

There, the drama club president turned to Harumi and began gesticulating wildly.

"You know that we're doing a play with Theia-san's manuscript, right?"

"I do. I came here today wondering if I might be able to help out..."

"That makes things easy, because we definitely need your help."

"All right, then what should I do?"

"Play the heroine, the Silver Princess."

"Pardon?"

Harumi went wide-eyed with surprise. She had no idea why she was being offered a major role in the play. She couldn't figure out how asking to help out

had led to this.

I know how you feel. I was just as startled... But don't be scared. This is your chance. Don't let it slip past you... You can do it.

The current Harumi anxiously watched over her other self. She'd been through the same thing, so she knew just how shaken she must be right now. But she also knew the school plays were a major influence on her fate. So, eager and hopeful, she mentally cheered on her other self.

"I said I want you to play the Silver Princess!"

"Shouldn't a member of the drama club be playing such an important role? Or, at the very least, Theiamillis-san herself?"

"I am convinced that you would make the best Silver Princess! Please, Sakuraba-san!"

"I... I can't imagine I'd be any good."

Harumi finally understood. The drama club president had read the manuscript and gotten an image in her head of what the Silver Princess should be like. Harumi just happened to be a close fit. That wasn't enough, however, to convince the shy and timid Harumi to accept the part.

"I want to see you be the princess too, Sakuraba-senpai. I feel like you're perfect for the role."

"Satomi-kun..."

So far, things were unfolding how the current Harumi remembered, so she could guess what happened next: the drama club president would wear her down, and she would eventually relent and accept the role. Of course, Koutarou encouraging her would also play a huge part in her decision. In the end, she just couldn't say no to him.

It's only a matter of time before... Oh?

But her other self surprised her. The Harumi of this world silently stared at her wrist before looking up at Koutarou and the drama club president with resolve.

"I-If Satomi-kun helps me practice... I'll do it!"

“Yeah, you bet. It’s the least I can do after recommending you for the part.”

“Well said, Satomi-kun! And thank you, Sakuraba-san!”

It was a difficult call for the bashful Harumi to make, but after what had happened at the beach, a newfound understanding of her own desires urged her forward. Moreover, she knew that being passive here would mean being left out. And so, with the extra courage her ribbon gave her, she made her choice.

Th-This version of me is offering to do it on her own?!

It was a most surprising development indeed. The current Harumi couldn’t even imagine making such a bold decision. She was sure that the drama club president would have to push her to do it, and even then, Koutarou would have to hold her hand the entire way. Yet the Harumi of this world was willing to jump right into it herself. The spark that had started it all was the ribbon, which was ultimately a result of her wrist injury. Just that small difference had a lasting impact on her life. It was impossible to tell what could change fate. That’s what the current Harumi thought to herself as she watched this unfamiliar situation unfold before her.

Harumi accepting the role of the Silver Princess of her own volition was a huge step for her, but she was still completely new to the stage. Acting was something both Harumis would struggle with.

“It’s not like you’re bad with Mackenzie, right, Sakuraba-senpai?”

“That’s... Yes, he’s much easier to talk to than most.”

“See? You two have talked plenty of times before.”

Script in hand, Koutarou racked his brain trying to find a solution to this unexpected problem. He and Harumi were currently in the middle of practicing for the play in the knitting society club room. When Harumi practiced alone with Koutarou like this, her acting was wonderful. But things went sour as soon as she got up on stage. It was hard to imagine the reason for it was Kenji. As Koutarou’s friend, he and Harumi were well acquainted.

Looking at it like this, it’s pretty clear... I really only could do it with Satomi-

kun...

The current Harumi hadn't really gotten the chance to know Kenji until they started working on the play together. The Harumi of this world, however, was already fairly close with him and felt comfortable around him. Yet even so, she still couldn't act with him.

I never really did appreciate the emotional aspect...

Skill was one thing, but when it came to emotion, Harumi had to be honest with her feelings. When she tried expressing herself while acting with Kenji, however, those feelings became twisted and jumbled. It didn't go well for her or her acting. But in that sense, despite what people thought, her earnest and honest nature was more inhibiting than her shy and introverted personality when it came to her performance on stage.

"If only the Blue Knight... were Satomi-kun."

It seemed the Harumi of this world had realized that, however. It wasn't Kenji's fault; she simply needed Koutarou. He was her one and only. She'd suspected as much before, but now she was sure.

"I guess we'll just have to keep practicing..."

Unaware of Harumi's feelings, however, Koutarou continued to rack his brain. It was his good-natured seriousness that had attracted Harumi to him in the first place, but right now, she rather resented it.

"Stupid Satomi-kun..."

"Hmm, you seem to be struggling, Sakuraba-san."

As if in answer to Harumi's muttering, a third person arrived in the knitting society club room. It was the drama club president.

"P-President-san?! What are you doing here?!" Harumi stammered.

"Well, I came to see how you were doing, Sakuraba-san," the president replied with a grin.

Seeing her smile, Harumi figured that she must have overheard her muttering.

“And it seems things are complicated.”

There, the president glanced over at Koutarou before flashing a knowing grin. Realizing what she was getting at, Harumi blushed.

“I-It’s nothing serious! I was just... I was just thinking that my acting is bad!”

“Hmm, I see...”

The drama club president’s sly grin remained unchanged despite Harumi’s desperate protest. She seemed to be enjoying herself.

“What’s the matter, Sakuraba-senpai? President-san?”

Koutarou had picked up on the strange atmosphere between the girls, but otherwise had no idea what was going on. He looked to both of them with a puzzled expression.

“It’s nothing! Nothing at all!”

“Yeah, it’s nothing big. We were just talking about making you the Blue Knight in Ken-chan’s place.”

“P-President-san, what are you—?!”

“M-Me?! The Blue Knight?!”

Harumi and Koutarou shouted out in surprised unison. The drama club president had just dropped a huge bomb, and rather casually at that. They were both still reeling in its wake.

“President-san, let’s not get ahead of ourselves!” declared Koutarou. “I have my hands full just playing Soldier A! Besides, I don’t even come close to having Mackenzie’s looks!”

“You’d still make a good Blue Knight. You’re far more serious and faithful than Ken-chan is. Besides, Sakuraba-san can only act when she’s with you,” argued the president.

“Even so, President-san! You can’t just change the casting for my sake!” rebutted Harumi.

“But after seeing your acting, I can’t bring myself to change you out. I’m sure the rest of the club feels the same way, so just consider this the utilitarian

solution.”

“I promise I’ll practice even more and—”

“Hold your horses and come over here for a sec, Sakuraba-san.”

The drama club president put an abrupt stop to Harumi’s protests and invited her over to the corner of the room so they could talk privately.

“What is it?”

Harumi followed, unsure of what was going on. The drama club president then turned and leaned in to whisper in Harumi’s ear...

“What do you think is more likely: Satomi-kun learning how to act, or you falling in love with Ken-chan?”

Harumi could act so wonderfully with Koutarou because she could be honest with her feelings around him. The drama club president had realized that after dropping in on them today, which was a few days sooner than what had happened with the current Harumi.

“That...”

But the Harumi of this world was at a loss for words upon hearing the president’s question. She blushed, her face turning so red that even Koutarou could see it from the other side of the room.

“Well, which do you think?”

That was all Koutarou could hear the president ask. Her voice was friendly and kind, but there was clear determination behind it.

“Satomi-kun learning how to act... would definitely be faster...”

“Then don’t you think there’s something you need to do?”

There, the drama club president put her hand on Harumi’s shoulder and spun her around.

“Good luck, Sakuraba-san!” she whispered in Harumi’s ear as she gave her a little push.

Stumbling a few steps forward, Harumi stopped just in front of Koutarou. Her face was as red as it had ever been.

“Sakuraba-senpai...?”

At this point, even Koutarou could tell something was up. And for some reason, seeing Harumi like this, his heart began to race. Something was definitely going on. He didn’t know what, but he found himself unable to look away.

“S-Satomi-kun, th-there’s something I’d like to ask you...” Harumi said, eyes downcast and cheeks flushed.

She was still hesitating about whether or not to say it... but something burning inside of her was pushing her toward courage. No longer seeing any other option, she finally looked up and stared right at Koutarou.

“Wh-What is it, Sakuraba-senpai...?”

He was entranced by her eyes. Right now, Harumi had an air of strength about her... and a warmth that seemed to embrace Koutarou.

“I mean to ask... Would you stand on stage with me?”

Harumi’s voice was demure but willful, just like a princess’s. Seeing and hearing her now, the drama club president gave a satisfied nod, certain she’d made the right call.

“If you’re the Blue Knight... I’m sure that I’ll be able to play my part!”

That’s it! Good job, me!

The current Harumi felt the same way her other self did. She couldn’t just keep waiting forever; sometimes she’d have to be bold and take the first step herself. It seemed the Harumi of this world had reached that conclusion first. Despite the differences in their fates, it seemed they were both Harumis after all.

“If you’re with me, th-then sure...”

Koutarou had his own thoughts on the matter, however. Not only did he think he wasn’t cut out for acting, he didn’t like the idea of stealing Kenji’s role as the Blue Knight. Yet when he saw Harumi look at him like that and heard her ask so earnestly, all his resistance vanished. There was no way he could turn her down. He felt a powerful, yet gentle pull to her... almost like she really was the Silver

Princess.

Once Koutarou agreed to play the Blue Knight, Harumi blossomed into her role as the Silver Princess. But just about the time that problem cleared up, another reared its head.

“Goodness, what am I doing...?”

Harumi peeked out at Koutarou on stage from the shadows. It was the day before the cultural festival, and Koutarou was doing some final performance checks in the armor Theia had procured for him. Right now, he was in the middle of going through the fight choreography. Since it was based on traditional swordsmanship from Theia’s homeland, Koutarou was unfamiliar with it. But thanks to all the effort he’d put into training, he made it work.

“I’m just like a child... I’m so stupid...”

Harumi knew she should be watching him from the front row rather than behind the curtain, but she just couldn’t bring herself to do it. Now that she was well aware of her feelings for him, it was all she could do just to keep calm when she was with him. Acting was easier. She could get into her part and see Koutarou as the Blue Knight rather than himself. But otherwise, Harumi’s feelings were running amok with her. She was now behaving like an ordinary teenage girl, and certainly *not* like a legendary princess.

It didn’t stop with stealing furtive glances at Koutarou, either. Whenever he spoke to her, her mind would go completely blank like she was spacing out. Whenever he was near, she would get nervous. Whenever she thought about him, her heart would start racing. Lately, it was even interfering with her studies.

So this is what things would have been like if I hadn’t realized my feelings in the middle of battle...

This was something the current Harumi hadn’t experienced. In her case, she’d come to terms with her emotions in a heated moment, essentially fast-forwarding past everything the Harumi of this world was now experiencing. This was her first time seeing it. But while the Harumi of this world was sure of how she felt about Koutarou, she wasn’t at all sure of how Koutarou felt about her.

Just thinking about it made her lose her cool around him.

“What are you doing over here, Harumi?”

“Eeek!”

Startled to hear someone suddenly talking to her, Harumi let out a wild yelp. Theia had stepped back to observe Koutarou’s performance from a distance, and had inadvertently bumped into Harumi in the process.

“U-Um, it’s almost time for the evening party to begin, so I came looking for Satomi-kun! B-But since he’s still in the middle of practicing, I didn’t want to interrupt!”

Harumi was actually there to invite Koutarou to the party. She was hoping he would agree to be her date. But when she reached the gymnasium and actually saw him, she lost her nerve. That’s when she’d taken to hiding behind the curtain.

“Well, his performance concerns you too, so come watch with me. What are you being so reserved for?”

“I-It’s fine! I-I’m okay right where I am!”

Harumi resisted like a criminal being dragged before a judge, but she was no match for Theia, who dragged her right over to Koutarou.

“Oh, Sakuraba-senpai. You’re here too?”

“It seems she came to invite you to the evening party, Koutarou.”

“D-Don’t worry about it! I can see you’re still practicing! In fact, I was just thinking of going home!”

Harumi desperately wanted to go to the party with Koutarou, but she just couldn’t bring herself to ask him. She was simply overwhelmed. Her head was a mess and she could hardly think straight. Her emotions were pulling her this way and that, and being dragged in front of Koutarou only increased the chaos. She reached her limit, and right now the only thing on her mind was how to get out of this situation.

“So there you have it. That’s enough practice for tonight. Go ahead and go to the party with Harumi.”

“Are you sure, Theia?”

“In exchange, I expect to see you bright and early for some morning training.”

“Jeez, you’re tough...”

“Of course I am! This play is my baby! Now then... I guess I’ll make my way to the party as well.”

“Th-Theiamillis-san!”

“Tomorrow’s the big day, Harumi. See you then.”

“P-Please wait! Don’t leave me here!”

Theia brushed off Harumi’s plea with a light wave of her hand as she left the gym. There was music and the clamor of excited voices coming from outside, and Theia was going to join the fun... leaving Harumi all alone with Koutarou.

“Oh, I could just die... I think my heart’s going to leap right out of my chest...”

Harumi reached a hand out as if to call Theia back, but it was no use. She wanted nothing more than to escape with her, yet she was somehow rooted to the spot. She had no idea what to do, but she knew that running away from Koutarou was the one thing she *couldn’t* do.

I know how you feel. I really do... You’re in love with him now. You can’t help it...

This development had even the current Harumi’s heart racing, but she was removed enough from the situation to see it with calmer eyes and a level head. She was sure she’d be behaving the same way if this happened to her, however, and it was fun to experience vicariously. Right now, she was very glad she’d come to this dreamlike world.

But...

There was one thing bugging her in the back of her mind. Now that her relationship with Koutarou had progressed this far, she couldn’t help wondering...

“Huh? Where did Theia go?”

“Sh-She said she was going on to the party now that it’s started.”

“Oh, yeah, I can hear the music now.”

“It’s... dance music...”

“Then why don’t we dance, Sakuraba-senpai?”

“What?!”

“I know... I am but a mere local knight. I am hardly worthy of the honor.”

“S-Satomi-kun... um... Even though I may look like this, I grew up roaming the fields and mountains of northern Mastir. I am quite qualified to be called a peasant girl.”

Originally, Koutarou had shared a dance with Theia here. And their relationship had grown stronger for it. But now Harumi had stolen the night, and the current Harumi felt a little guilty about that.

The play the next day at the cultural festival turned out to be a huge hit. Harumi’s performance as the Silver Princess received exceptionally high praise, and the emotional scene between her and the Blue Knight on the night of the harvest festival captured the hearts of all the girls in the audience. Meanwhile, the boys were all smitten with Princess Alaia herself. They couldn’t help dreaming about what it would be like to have a girlfriend like her.

Between the two, rave reviews poured in for Harumi and her performance. But she alone knew that she hadn’t *really* been acting. She’d recited her lines according to the script, of course, but the feeling she put behind them was her own. The love she was acting out for the Blue Knight—for Koutarou—was very real. In a sense, playing her part as Princess Alaia was just an excuse to practice confessing to him.

Harumi had gone into the play, however, knowing that. She knew that she could only act with Koutarou because her feelings for him were genuine. But now that others had seen it, now that others had acknowledged the warmth and love in her affection for Koutarou... That recognition only fanned the flames of Harumi’s heart.

“This is terrible. At this rate...” she muttered in a low, agonized voice as she threw herself on her bed.

When she was around Koutarou, her feelings spun her in circles. It was bad enough before, but it had gotten even worse since the play. Perhaps that was because she could now see the effect it was having. When she couldn't think straight, she behaved oddly. And it was happening frequently enough now that she was seriously worried Koutarou was going to start thinking she was strange. If she didn't do something to get herself in order soon, she might accidentally kill their relationship before it ever really had a chance to start.

You're right. If you let things go on like this, nothing good will come of it. So though it might be difficult, you have to do it the right way...

The current Harumi watching over her agreed with her. The Harumi of this world might be leaps and bounds ahead of the current Harumi in terms of her relationship with Koutarou, but the current Harumi had fully realized her feelings for Koutarou under great duress in a time of crisis. That gave her love a sense of purpose and direction, which was something the Harumi of this world lacked. Without a way to channel her feelings, they simply continued to run amok with her as they grew stronger. The current Harumi knew she'd have to get over that hurdle before it tripped her up completely. She was nervous for her other self.

"I have to tell Satomi-kun how I feel... If I don't, I'm going to go crazy."

Flopped on top of her bed, Harumi let out a heavy sigh. Whenever she was alone at school, she found herself always keeping an eye out for him. When she was alone in the club room, she always found herself staring at his empty seat. And when she was alone in her room, she even imagined Koutarou coming over to her house. So far, even though her head was in the clouds, she was only doing, thinking, and behaving like any normal girl with a crush. But if things continued this way, it could reach a head. That was why both Harumis wanted to confess to Koutarou before things got out of hand. It would be too late if she let it go on long enough that Koutarou's opinion of her changed.

"I have to call him... But what about the time? It's late, so Satomi-kun might get the wrong idea... W-Well, I guess it would be the right idea in this case."

Harumi sat up on her bed, picked up her phone, put it back down, paced around her room, sat back down on her bed, hugged her pillow, rolled around...

Rinse, repeat. She knew what she had to do, but her bashful nature was holding her back, keeping her from taking the necessary steps.

“When Satomi-kun picks up, I have to be subtle. How do I be subtle again...? Moreover, isn’t asking to meet him on Christmas Eve too blatant...? Auuugh!”

Pomf!

Harumi threw herself on her bed once more and buried her face in her pillow. She hadn’t even made the call yet, but she was already bright red from her neck to the top of her head. She’d brought Koutarou’s contact info up on her phone repeatedly now, but she just didn’t have the courage to press the call button. Her struggle continued as time ticked on. Before she knew it, it was closing on midnight. Calling at such an hour was even more likely to be misconstrued, which only stressed Harumi out further.

Ring-a-linga-ling!

“Eeek!”

Having spent so much time agonizing over what to do, Harumi dropped the phone in her hands out of surprise when it began playing a tune. It was one of her favorite songs. One she’d set as the ringtone for when a certain someone called.

“S-S-Sa— Sato-to-to—!”

Harumi frantically scooped up the phone lying on her bed. And sure enough, the screen read “Satomi-kun” while displaying a picture of Koutarou decorated with a snowflake and a blue star. Once she confirmed who it was, Harumi quickly accepted the call in hurry like she had no time to spare. It seemed her earlier hesitation was gone.



“Hello, this is Ko—”

“H-Harumi speaking!”

In her frazzled state, however, Harumi answered the call in a cracking voice, interrupting Koutarou. Surprised by her unusual reaction, Koutarou began to worry.

“Senpai, is this a bad time? Sorry it’s so late...”

Completely oblivious to what Harumi was really going through, he figured that he must have called her while she was in the middle of something, causing her to panic. It was also rather late at night to be calling a girl, even if she were a club mate and a good friend. He had apprehensions about that as well.

“No, not at all! I was only surprised because you called when I was about to make the call myself!”

Harumi’s frantic surprise was of her own design. She didn’t want Koutarou to feel apologetic for that.

“I see. Then I’ll call back tomorrow so you can call whoever you needed to. Good n—”

Koutarou didn’t realize that Harumi meant she was about to call him. He simply assumed she had other business to tend to, so he volunteered to hang up and let her do so. That, of course, wasn’t what Harumi wanted.

“Wait, Satomi-kun, please don’t hang up!”

If Koutarou ended the call now, Harumi knew she’d just get stuck spinning her wheels all over again. Calling out to him, she tried her best to stop him.

“Sakuraba-senpai?”

“You’re the one I was trying to call!”

“I see.”

“Phew...”

Fortunately, Koutarou didn’t hang up. Harumi let out a sigh of relief, and so did the Harumi watching over her. She was sure even her sleeping body must have done the same.

“What a coincidence, huh? Both of us thinking of calling each other and all.”

Harumi had been fretting over calling Koutarou for hours, so it didn’t seem like much of a coincidence to her. But Koutarou had no way of knowing that. To him, it was just serendipity.

“Funny, isn’t it...?”

But it was serendipity Harumi was grateful for. She didn’t know if she ever would have made the call otherwise.

“So what did you need from me, Sakuraba-senpai?”

“That’s...”

Harumi’s heart began pounding at that question. She’d forgotten all of her unrest from before, but now it suddenly came flooding back. Restraining her emotions on the verge of exploding, Harumi stared at herself in the mirror on her dresser. There was no real reason for her to check her appearance since she was on the phone, but she thought she’d be able to muster some courage by fixing herself up.

“Well... you see...”

But when the moment came to say it, she still hesitated. It was perfectly understandable, really, considering she was about to take the next step in their relationship.

But you’re not confessing yet. This isn’t the big moment...

Both Harumis were thinking the same thing. The Harumi of this world was encouraging herself, and the current Harumi was cheering her on. Right now, their hearts were perfectly aligned.

“What’s the matter, Sakuraba-senpai?”

“U-Um, Satomi-kun... I was wondering if we could meet up on the 24th? There’s something I want to tell you...” Harumi finally said, summoning all of her courage.

Her heart was racing as love and anxiety intermixed in a whirlpool of emotions. It only took Koutarou a few seconds to answer, but it felt ten times longer than that to the anxious Harumi. That was just how serious a situation

this was to her.

Satomi-kun, please!

The Harumi watching over her felt the same way. They were now in completely unexplored territory for her, so she had no idea what would happen next. She too prayed Koutarou would agree to meet her.

“I don’t mind. I have something I want to tell you in person too.”

“Ah...”

The moment Koutarou said yes, all the tension left Harumi’s body and a sense of relief took its place. With all of the tension holding her up suddenly gone, however, she looked like she was going to fall right over onto her bed. But she had to hold on—their call wasn’t over yet.

“Thank you, Satomi-kun! Then I’ll see you on the 24th!”

“Sure. Should we meet in the club room after school?”

“That’d be lovely!”

And so Harumi and Koutarou promised to meet on December 24th. It would be the last day of school before winter break, and to Harumi, it would without a doubt the biggest battle she’d ever faced.

Preparations for the occasion began several days in advance for Harumi. She not only took care of her hair and skin, she had her uniform cleaned, picked out her underwear—which she of course had no plans of showing—and much, much more. Each and every detail was carefully planned. She was like a thorough pilot going through her preflight checklist. And the results showed. On the day of, all the girls at school could tell Harumi was glowing. Something was definitely up. The real question, however, was if Koutarou would be able to tell. Harumi didn’t particularly mind either way. In her mind, her preparations had primarily been to give herself confidence. If Koutarou noticed, that would just be a bonus.

You’ve done what you can. Now all that’s left is to wait for Satomi-kun...

While things had already taken a very different turn from the life she’d lived,

the current Harumi perfectly understood how her other self felt. It was her first time revealing her feelings to a boy she cared for. If it were her, she would've been just as thorough with her preparations. Yet despite feeling completely prepared, Harumi was still anxious as she waited for Koutarou to arrive at the club room after school. The current Harumi felt the same way.

Knock, knock.

"...Come in!"

Thanks to her anxiety, Harumi was a bit delayed in responding to the knock at the door. She stood up from her chair and looked herself over one last time. Nothing was amiss. She had her feminine charm turned up to full blast like never before.

"It's me, Satomi."

"...Hello, Satomi-kun."

After taking a quick breath, Harumi smiled at Koutarou as he entered. She worried that her expression might be too stiff or that her voice might be trembling, but there were no do-overs. The show must go on.

"I'm glad it's warm today. The club room's been like a fridge the past few days."

"I'm not too good with the cold, so I cranked up the heater to the max."

Harumi strayed away from her chance to get on topic. Koutarou had brought up the past few days, giving Harumi the perfect segue into talking about today. But in her nervousness, she'd started talking about the heater instead. Realizing what she'd done, she only grew more nervous and impatient.

Don't give up! You'll get another chance!

Whether it was what the current Harumi was thinking or what the Harumi of this world was muttering to herself, it made no difference. Right now, their minds were one and the same.

"I prefer it warm myself, but the cold is nice when it comes to winter sports."

"Winter sports? Like skiing, skating, and bobsleighing?"

“Yeah. Well, I’m not too into bobsleighing,” Koutarou laughed.

Harumi thinking of bobsleighing over snowboarding was just too funny.

“Pshhh...”

Harumi blushed as Koutarou laughed. She then exhaled a sigh, causing a strange sound to escape her lips. It wasn’t her intention to lighten the mood. Quite the opposite, which only made her grow even more impatient still.

“But then again, it’s great to have it warm indoors for things like knitting.”

“That’s quite true. You don’t really move around much when knitting.”

Suppressing her impatience, Harumi tried her best to get the conversation back on track in a natural fashion. Considering her goal, she wanted to avoid forcing the issue. Things weren’t going well so far, however, causing complex, vexed feelings to swirl behind the smile she gave Koutarou.

“Actually, I wanted to talk to you about knitting today, Sakuraba-senpai...”

When Harumi fell quiet, Koutarou took the opportunity to bring up his business. It wasn’t until he did so that Harumi remembered he’d said he had something he wanted to talk about too.

“O-Oh?”

Harumi cast her eyes downward and blushed. She was embarrassed that she’d only been thinking of herself.

“I mentioned this once way back when... but I have a half-knit sweater that’s a keepsake from my mom.”

In contrast, Koutarou was more serious than usual. He started straight at her with those earnest eyes she so loved, which help calm her down a little.

“I believe you said you wanted to complete it yourself one day. Isn’t that right, Satomi-kun?”

“Yeah, but I only told you half the story back then. I figured it’s about time I tell you the rest.”

Unlike Harumi who was letting her emotions drag her around by the nose, Koutarou was cutting his own path. When she realized how pathetic she was

being, she slowly collected herself. She sat up straight, ready to listen. If she was too frantic to really hear what he had to say, she was sure she'd regret it.

"The truth is... I'm the reason my mom died. I carelessly walked into the street as a kid... I nearly got hit by a car, but before I even knew what was happening, my mom had jumped in the way to save me."

"Satomi-kun..."

Tears welled in Harumi's eyes. Hearing Koutarou's story, she grieved for his loss like it was her own. Seeing that, Koutarou realized that he hadn't been wrong to tell her.

"After that, things got pretty ugly between me and my old man. Neither of us were really able to get over it."

"..."

Harumi was silent, but she recalled that something like this had come up before when Koutarou mentioned the sweater. Completing it wasn't for his father's sake, but his own.

If Satomi-kun is bringing this up now, is he...?

The current Harumi had a little more perspective on the situation. She knew what the sweater meant to Koutarou, and she knew it wasn't easy for him to bring up. It was deeply personal, and just about the last thing he wanted to share with anyone else.

"That's why I want to complete the sweater. I want to get my feelings in order, and the same goes for my old man. He seems to have found a nice partner, but he's still hesitant to remarry."

"He still loves your mother."

"Yeah. But I don't think things are going to work out for anyone at this rate. Even me... I seem to have a side of me that keeps trying to push other people away too."

"Satomi-kun..."

Koutarou bared his heart to Harumi. Everything he said came as a big surprise, but she was happy he was sharing it all with her. It made her feel needed.

That’s why she nodded with tears in her eyes.

“I understand. Please, I’d be honored to help you complete that sweater...”

Koutarou was revealing his tragic past to Harumi and asking for help. She had no reason to say no. She would give her all to help him... She loved him, after all.

“Thank you, Sakuraba-senpai. Really. And th-this isn’t exactly because of that... but...”

There, Koutarou suddenly started stumbling over his words. With a troubled expression on his face, he looked somewhat embarrassed. He repeatedly glanced at Harumi’s face before finally continuing...

“Sakuraba-senpai, you’re going to be a third-year and graduate next year... But I’d feel better knowing I could always come see you.”

Koutarou now looked almost as shaken as Harumi had earlier.

Satomi-kun, are you...

But only the Harumi watching over them noticed. With an inkling of what was happening, her heart began to beat faster.

“Always, as in how long?”

“Always, as in... always.”

“Until the sweater is complete?”

Harumi knew that if they didn’t finish the sweater in the following school year, it would be hard for Koutarou to finish it on his own. That’s why she was assuming he was asking to stay in touch after she graduated. However, he shook his head.

“I think that’ll be pretty soon.”

“Then how long?”

“Until you get sick of me... maybe?”

Koutarou looked away from Harumi and eked out those words.

Satomi-kun’s hands are shaking... He’s desperate...

At last, both Harumis caught on. It seemed today was a decisive battle for Koutarou as well.

“That’ll be... a pretty long time...”

Harumi couldn’t even imagine getting sick of Koutarou. It would be decades, maybe even centuries before that happened. She was sure she’d die of old age first. In other words, Koutarou’s “always” really meant “forever.” He was asking to stay with her, and after thinking about it, Harumi realized the feelings behind his roundabout words.

“But... why?”

Yet even so, she wanted to confirm things. For herself, for her desperate heart, she wanted Koutarou to be direct. She wanted reason to believe in his forever.

“D-Do I have to say it?”

But Koutarou’s desperate heart wanted to skip that part. He wanted Harumi to understand without him saying it directly. They’d have forever to get there, after all.

“If you do, I will too... so...”

Hands clasped in front of her chest, Harumi looked eagerly up at Koutarou. Sincere emotion bubbled up within her, so much so that even the thickheaded Koutarou could see it.

“I think we both know how the other feels!”

“I still want you to say it! Please, Satomi-kun!”

Koutarou hesitated. He was still conflicted, but he understood what Harumi meant. It was something she needed to hear—and also the essence of the problem he needed to face.

“Ugh...”

“You can do it, Satomi-kun.”

Agonizing over his dilemma, Koutarou stood up and paced around the room until finally making up his mind. He couldn’t really do this to her. If he took

advantage of her kindness and weaseled his way out of saying it... That wasn't what he wanted.

"I love you, Sakuraba-senpai!"

Those three words were something Koutarou hadn't said once in the last ten years. But finally, at last, something had changed. It was idiosyncratic to this world and the way his relationship with Harumi had played out. In the end, Harumi's wrist injury had brought the two of them together and accelerated their feelings for one another. It had made all this possible.

The current Harumi hadn't been able to develop her relationship with Koutarou at the same rate... And before she knew it, he'd ended up in a timeslip that would change their fates in a much bigger way. It would take something much more simple and common—like an injured wrist—to get Koutarou to face her like a normal boy.

"I love you too, Satomi-kun!"

The Harumi and Koutarou of this world, however, had no way of knowing all that. But that was fine. All they needed right now was to look each other in the eye and feel the love building between them.

"Listen, Sakuraba-senpai... I have a bad habit of trying to push people away before things get too serious, so I might end up saying something that hurts you. I want you to know now that I don't mean it. I know it's not fair, but know that what I said just now is how I really feel..."

Koutarou and Harumi would have to acknowledge their own flaws and accept them. They would have to share them with each other, and then support each other.

"I know. I'll become a woman that can forgive that."

"I'm sorry for being difficult."

"I could say the same. My body is weak, so there are times I won't be able to do things you might want me to... but even so, I want to do everything together with you."

"You're not gonna catch me complaining about that... So, uh, what do you

say? Should we call it even?”

“I think so.”

Fortunately, both Koutarou and Harumi were already ready to accept each other. Surely things would be smooth sailing from here. That didn’t mean they wouldn’t hit rough patches from time to time, but there would always be happiness on the horizon.

“Phew, I’m glad that all worked out...”

“Thank god...”

With the hard part out of the way, both Koutarou and Harumi felt a weight lifted off of their shoulders. After carrying it around for so long, they were exhausted. They both took the opportunity to sit down and rest a bit, but they kept their eyes locked on each other.

“Man, now that it’s all said and done, talk about stupid...”

“We were both so needlessly nervous even though we felt the same way...”

“It’s so much easier to talk now.”

“Aren’t you glad you came out and said it? Teehee...”

“Ha, you can say that again.”

There the two of them shared a good laugh. Now that they’d done everything they felt like they needed to, all that was left was to relax and enjoy the moment together.

Good for you... I’m really happy for you two...

Only one person in the room was crying, and it was the current Harumi watching over the young couple. Her tears were happy ones, however.

“By the way, Sakuraba-senpai, what did you want to talk about?”

“Heehee, can’t you tell?”

“Is it about next year’s play or something about the knitting society?”

“See, this is why I made you say it clearly. It just leads to misunderstandings otherwise.”

“Then please be clear with me too.”

“I was going to confess to you, Satomi-kun. But before I could summon the courage to do it, you confessed first.”

“So when it comes to courage, I win, huh?”

“I won’t argue there. But I’m sure I’m winning when it comes to love.”

“I’m sure. That’s why I was thinking of making up the difference.”

“What do you mean?”

“With this.”

“A muffler?”

“I tried making my practice piece into a muffler, but it’s a little long.”

There, Koutarou leaned over and wrapped the muffler around Harumi’s neck.

“Heh, it is pretty long... Heehee...”

“Wow, look at how much is left over. Ahahaha!”

Even after wrapping the muffler around Harumi’s neck two, three times... there was still almost a meter of it dangling over her shoulder. Nevertheless, she looked happy. Holding the end of the muffler in her hand, she smiled at Koutarou.

“It’s okay. I’ll just wrap the rest around you.”

Harumi carefully wrapped the excess around Koutarou’s neck, connecting the two of them with a single muffler. It was more than long enough, even though they were seated a little bit apart.

“That should do it.”

“Senpai, this is really embarrassing...”

“This is only the beginning.”

“Really?”

“Of course. So please get used to it, Sir Knight.”

“That’s embarrassing too.”

“I did it on purpose.”

Koutarou and Harumi both looked over the moon. It was enough that even the current Harumi watching over them was able to share in their joy. But after it all sunk in, something dawned on her.

My Satomi-kun gave that muffler to Theiamillis-san and the others too... But in this world, I got all of it...

Koutarou had given her a properly sized muffler because he’d divided up the longer one to share with Theia, Yurika, and the others. Now this Harumi had gotten it all, leaving her to wonder why.

Harumi wanted to make the first shrine visit of the new year with Koutarou. While they were only a new couple, she wanted to start things off right. Koutarou agreed to go with her, but not first thing in the morning like she suggested. His argument was that it would be warmer if they went closer to noon, making the trip easier for the frail Harumi.

“You’re being too mindful, Satomi-kun. You’re treating me like something precious. A little cold isn’t going to hurt me.”

It was currently 11 AM and the sky was crystal clear. According to the forecast, it would hit over 10 degrees Celsius. That was enough to satisfy Koutarou, so he agreed to make the trek to the shrine with Harumi. She wasn’t entirely pleased with this, however, and couldn’t help pouting.

“That’s because you *are* precious to me. And I take good care of things that are precious to me, like my bat and glove. And you’re a very special case at that, Sakuraba-senpai.”

“You mean I’m more precious than your bat and glove?”

There, the air slowly leaked out of Harumi’s puffed-up cheeks. She knew that baseball held a special place in Koutarou’s heart, so she wasn’t displeased with this development.

“Of course you are.”

“Then I forgi— No, I still don’t forgive you!”



Harumi purposefully started pouting again. She'd already forgiven Koutarou, but her girlish side was telling her not to let him off the hook just yet. She wanted him to dote on her more.

"But I came all the way to your place to pick you up this morning."

In return for shooting down the shrine visit at dawn, Koutarou showed up at Harumi's house a little after nine o'clock. He greeted her parents and introduced himself. They welcomed him, their daughter's first boyfriend, warmly and with open arms. They'd always worried that Harumi was missing out on things in life because of her compromised health, and they told Koutarou as much when Harumi went up to her room to get ready to go.

"It was really hard to keep my mom and dad from trying to give you sake..."

"Well, that aside, I'm glad they were so welcoming."

"Really, I have to wonder why they were so elated. I've had friends over a couple of times before..."

"Maybe they knew I wasn't just a friend? It's the first day of the new year, after all."

"You think so? This... This is the first time I've gone out with a boy on New Year's Day..."

Harumi looked down and put her hands over her cheeks to keep Koutarou from seeing how embarrassed she was. Thinking about it in hindsight, she'd formally introduced her boyfriend to her parents. She was happy her parents had accepted him as such, but putting that together now made her blush furiously.

"So if I don't take this seriously, your parents might kill me."

"Maybe waiting to come to the shrine was the right choice after all..."

"So you finally forgive me?"

"I already had. I just wanted to be a little selfish..."

"I know, haha. It was kinda funny."

"Teehee."

Harumi looked back up and smiled at Koutarou, who smiled right back at her. Just then, a cold breeze blew between the two of them.

“The forecast said it would get warmer, but the wind’s still pretty chilly. You’re not freezing, are you, Sakuraba-senpai?”

“I am.”

Harumi answered without hesitation. Yet though she claimed to be freezing, she was still looking up at Koutarou with a bright smile.

“Then take my muffler and—”

Koutarou naturally offered her his muffler before catching notice of the glint in Harumi’s eye. It was warm, but unusually impish—the kind of look she’d only started giving him a week ago.

“Er, um...”

While looking into her eyes, Koutarou began thinking of how to respond. As he pondered his options, something dark crossed his mind.

No, I’ve gotta learn to stop doing that...

Koutarou knocked on his head as if to purge the idea. Instead, he’d do the complete opposite. It was something that he never would have even considered a week ago.

“...”

Bashfully scratching his cheek with one hand, he extended his other to Harumi. She took it without missing a beat, smiling even brighter than before.

“Teehee, now it’s not so cold.”

“Funny... I feel like its getting pretty hot.”

Harumi happily leaned on Koutarou, her fingers entwined with his. Koutarou had to use his free hand to cover his face. He wasn’t ashamed, just embarrassed over something he wasn’t used to.

Good... I’m really happy to see this...

Tears once more welled in the eyes of the Harumi watching over them. They’d formed a special bond over Christmas, and now they were closer than ever

before. Not just emotionally, but physically as well. The current Harumi was happy to see it. It gave her hope that she and her own Koutarou could end up the same way.



After wrapping up their shrine visit, the young couple headed downtown to get lunch. After that, Koutarou was planning on walking Harumi home. She figured her parents would probably abduct him when he did, but she wasn't exactly planning on sharing that information. He might escape if she did.

"What's so funny?" Koutarou asked with a quizzical look when he caught her giggling to herself.

"Oh, it's nothing. I was just thinking it was funny that I'd pray for something like that."

Since she wasn't going to bring up her parents, she brought up their shrine visit instead. It was mostly to skirt the issue at hand, but it was true she was amused with herself.

"Like what? What did you pray for?"

"That our relationship will continue to develop in a favorable direction and reach new heights."

"That's a pretty complicated thing to pray for."

"Right? I couldn't help but find it funny... I knew that, but I couldn't stop myself from wishing for it."

Harumi wanted her relationship with Koutarou to last forever, but she wanted an even stronger, deeper bond with him. Just a matter of weeks ago, she would have been praying for him to realize her feelings or something equally passive. She really couldn't help smiling to herself, all while thinking how self-interested she was becoming.

"Do we really need to reach new heights?"

"Of course we do. I won't stand to let things stagnate here."

"I'll... optimistically consider it."

"Very good. But I won't let you think on it forever."

"No?"

"Not going to happen. I have needs too, you know."

"Rats... Guess I'm in trouble."

“Teeheehee.”

The winter wind was still chilly, but with their hands and hearts connected, the atmosphere between Harumi and Koutarou was warmer than ever. It was just warm enough, in fact, that it might eventually start to melt away the ice still holding back Koutarou inside. That’s what he and Harumi both hoped for.

“By the way, what did you pray for, Satomi-kun?”

“Good health, for both you and me.”

Hearing Koutarou’s answer, Harumi’s expression clouded over and she puffed out her cheeks again.

“Couldn’t you have prayed for our relationship too?”

She was honest-to-goodness pouting now. She and Koutarou finally had a special relationship, and she wanted him to be as mindful and protective of it as she was.

“I figured there was someone else I should pray to for that.”

“Like who?”

“You, Sakuraba-senpai.”

“Th... That’s...”

Harumi’s cheeks suddenly deflated. Koutarou had a point. If they really wanted their relationship to develop, that would start between the two of them.

“Yes, you’re right... I’m sorry for acting like a child, Satomi-kun.”

“Don’t sweat it. You’ve always held back in that regard, so I really don’t mind seeing this side of you when you feel like cutting loose once in a while.”

“Thank you, Satomi-kun.”

Harumi’s face turned red. She’d been embarrassed over her childish outburst, but Koutarou accepted her as she was. That made her happy, but even more embarrassed. It was a complex push and pull, which was essentially how things had been going for the past week.

“So I hope you’ll take care of me too, Sakuraba-senpai.”

Koutarou prayed to Harumi and made a promise to himself. He was aware of his own flaws, which made him all the more aware of how momentous this step forward was.

“And how should I do that, hmm?”

Koutarou had no idea if Harumi understood his intentions or not. A woman’s heart was still an utter mystery to him. But when he looked up at Harumi, she was giving him that elfin grin again.

“Something not too rough, please.”

“Let me see... Then how about this?”

Harumi took half a step forward and got up on her tiptoes, bringing her face closer to Koutarou’s. It took him by surprise, but she simply smiled and closed her eyes.

Th-This is...

Seeing that, Koutarou was at a loss. It was all too clear what she wanted—a signet of their relationship, something that would take it to the next level. He knew it must have taken considerable courage for her to ask for it, so after thinking on it, he decided to give in and answer her.

“Heh...”

“?”

Hearing him giggle, Harumi opened her eyes. But only for a moment. When she felt his hand on her chin and his warmth approaching, she knew what was coming. He was granting her heartfelt wish.

It was at that very moment that Harumi woke up. Still stuck in a dreamlike moment, however, she was drowsy and disoriented. Her heart was still in perfect unison with her other self.

“Mm, Satomi-kun...”

Fortunately, she soon found exactly what she was looking for. Koutarou was sleeping right next to her, and she slowly crawled over to him.

“Look, everyone! Harumi woke up!”

“How was it, Sakuraba-senpai?!”

In her current state, Harumi paid no mind to the noise around her. She was focused on one thing and one thing alone—making her wish and Koutarou’s come true. And she could do that all with one little...

I finally caught you... We’re finally side by side...

Once she was at Koutarou’s side, she paused for a moment to look down at his sleeping face.

“Hmm? Is Harumi still half-asleep?”

“I believe so. It doesn’t seem like she can hear us.”

“Harumi-sama! Goodness... You’re right. She’s not reacting at all.”

“Aika-san, what do you think Sakuraba-senpai is trying to do?”

“To give Satomi-kun, um, you know...”

“Shouldn’t we be stopping her? Harumi! Hey, Haru— Wait, what are you all doing?! Kyah! Mmh mmph!”

Oblivious to the scene unfolding around her, Harumi reached out and ever so gently stroked Koutarou’s cheek.

It’s okay. I’ll take care of you from here on out...

She then slowly leaned in closer and closer, to the point they could feel each other’s breath. Harumi’s bangs even fluttered when Koutarou exhaled. She then turned her head a little to the side so the angle was perfect. Now, just a few millimeters closer and...

Harumi was in utter bliss. This moment had played through her mind countless times, and now it was really here.

Even in my dreams, I... My dreams... Wait, my dreams?

Harumi’s mind latched on to that particular word, rapidly waking her up from her daze. Her five senses fully operational again, she quickly looked around and took in the situation.

“H-Huh? What was I... was I... Eeeeek!”

That was when she realized what she was just about to do.

“I-I-I was about to k-k-kiss Satomi-kun?! Nooooo! Kyaaaaah!”

That’s right. In this world, Harumi and Koutarou weren’t a couple yet. If she tried to kiss him now, she’d be off to a false start. One-sidedly pushing her feelings on him wasn’t what she wanted. She would never be able to forgive herself for that.

“Aww, you were so close! Why did you have to wake up there, Harumi?!”

“The setup and the mood were perfect. Sakuraba-senpai is just so serious.”

“If it were me, I’d keep going and just pretend I was half-asleep.”

“That’s pretty gutsy, Kasagi-san. I could never do that. I would want him to be awake...”

Harumi’s biggest problem now was that the other nine girls were in the room, and they’d seen everything.

“N-N-No, it’s not like that! I had no ill intentions! Kyaaah! Please tell me it was all a dream!”

Harumi hurriedly crawled away from Koutarou and into the corner where she curled up into a ball and buried her face in her knees. All the other girls had seen her heart’s deepest desires... What a huge blunder. She just wanted to crawl into a hole and die, but alas, there wasn’t one available. She’d have to settle for the corner.



“Say, Kiriha, what do you think of this result?” Theia asked.

“If I had to say... while she may have been half-asleep, for the introverted Harumi to go so far, she must have had a wonderful dream.”

“Excellent news!”

“Your Highness, please don’t be so rough while restraining Clan-sama. She might die.”

“Mm! Mrrrrrmf! Mmph!”

“Oh, sorry. I forgot.”

“Blech... Ack, hack! H-How dare you forget about me?!”

“Whatever! It’s my turn next!”

“That’s unfair, Theia-chan! Let’s play rock, paper, scissors again!”

“Being Satomi-kun’s girlfriend in a wonderful dream... Heehee...”

“Oh? I see you’re getting pretty interested, Aika-san.”

“Ack, ack... Personally, I don’t...”

“What’s that? Are you going to sit this out, Clan-dono?”

“That’s not what I’m saying! It’s research! For science!”

“If there’s a world where Master drags me away from my engagement, I would love to see it...”

Fortunately for Harumi, the girls’ interests quickly shifted away from her. Seeing how she’d enjoyed her dream, they were all anxious to experience their own. Thanks to that, Harumi was successfully able to hide in the corner for a little while.

At first Harumi was ready to die from embarrassment, but after cooling her head a little, she was able to compose herself. With a little more clarity of mind, she began thinking over what she’d experienced in the other world.

Satomi-kun and I did end up united... but I feel like a lot of things were sacrificed because of it...

She was thinking about everything that they and the others had missed out on because of it, which was a thought that helped sober her up immensely.

In that world, both my and Satomi-kun's friendships with the other girls were weaker... I guess that's only inevitable.

When he invested more time and energy into Harumi, she noticed that the time and energy he invested in his other relationships decreased. So while her wrist injury had led to a deeper bond with Koutarou, she felt like it had stolen away opportunities with the other girls.

Like the dance with Theiamillis-san... Satomi-kun also gave the entire muffler to me rather than sharing it with everyone...

Koutarou was only one man, and if he invested himself in Harumi, of course their relationship would grow. But that came at a cost. The muffler he gave Harumi for Christmas was a good example. In this world, he'd divided it into seven parts because Maki and Clan weren't part of their circle yet. But in the parallel world she'd seen, Harumi got almost all of it. He'd taken smaller pieces to give to his landlord, Shizuka, and a couple of other friends, but that was it. It was a symbol of the way he was dividing himself, focusing almost entirely on Harumi to the exclusion of all others.

I didn't become good friends with the other girls either... That's why I only had eyes for Satomi-kun.

Something similar had happened with Harumi. By spending the majority of her time with Koutarou, she didn't put as much of herself into developing friendships with the other girls. That in turn made her focus on Koutarou more, and the cycle continued. In another year's time, she most certainly would've had a deep, stable, and strong relationship with Koutarou. But at that point, she would've sacrificed her other friendships for it.

If that world continued on to today... I wonder what would have happened.

Harumi wondered if it was possible for things to go the same way they had in this world, but with those kinds of lopsided relationships, it was likely impossible. She and the other girls never would've shared the same close bond they did now.

And then there's Alaia-sama... If my relationship with Satomi-kun changes, it affects her too...

Would the Koutarou in the parallel world she saw ever become the Blue Knight? And if he did, would he still turn Alaia's offer down and return to the present day? She knew Koutarou only had in this world because of the promise he'd made to all the girls... It left her wondering if the same thing would have been possible if she were his one and only connection. Really, there was no end to the list of questions she had. And the more she thought about it, the more she realized there was no way that world could have ended up like the current one.

So... is that really happiness? Do I think it is?

When Harumi asked herself that, she glanced behind her.

"The results of rock, paper, scissors are too random!"

"Then what should we do, Glasses?"

"We should play other games. You're all okay with that, right?"

"If I'm going to lose anyways, I'd just as soon play rock, paper, scissors..."

"Ha! Bold of you to challenge me at another game, Clan!"

"I... I have no intentions of standing down this time either."

"I'm surprised, Ruth... Or that's what I'd like to say, but I know how you feel. In my case, however, I still haven't decided what kind of parallel world I'd like to see."

"Ah, going out to eat something delicious with Satomi-kun might be pretty good!"

"I'd just like to go somewhere quiet... with just the two of us..."

The other eight girls were discussing who would go next. Nobody had any intention of passing on the opportunity, so it was something of a heated discussion. They were only able to be so open and honest with each other, however, because of the strong bonds of friendship that had been forged between them.

Maybe waking up before kissing Satomi-kun was for the best... I never want to give up on this friendship.

That was Harumi's conclusion. In the end, the happiness she'd attained in the parallel world wasn't complete. Just being with Koutarou wasn't enough. She knew, in the end, that she needed the other girls just as much. That was what it would take to make her truly happy.

The other Harumi was happy in her world, and this Harumi was happy in hers. Things were fine this way. All was as it should be. That was what Harumi ultimately felt after her dream.

"Heehee."

But when Harumi finally came to that conclusion, she heard a small giggle from next to her. Turning to look, she saw the girl from the ruins smiling.

"I thought that's what you'd decide, Harumi."

"You thought...? You mean you knew?"

"Yes. That's what allows me to be here, after all."

"That's true. It's what we all wished for, so there's no way we could find this happiness anywhere else."

"Heehee... But it was still fun to see, right?" she asked with a smile.

"I-Indeed, it was a good reference..."

Meanwhile, Harumi blushed. Blazing ahead in her relationship with Koutarou was out of the question, but there was one thing she wanted to give a try: the ribbon around her wrist. It likely wouldn't change how Koutarou felt about her in this world, but it might give Harumi some of the courage she needed.

"So I'd be happy if you'd let me remember just that part."

"Of course. I'll make sure of it."

"Oh, and I have a question..."

There was one more thing on Harumi's mind, and she wanted to use this opportunity to ask about it. But the girl in ruins gently smiled and nodded before she could even get a word in.

“There are.”

“Pardon?”

Harumi was confused by the girl’s answer. She didn’t understand what it meant, but the girl cheerfully continued.

“There are worlds where Princess Alaia and Koutarou are together.”

There wasn’t even a need for her to read Harumi’s mind. In the end, they were one and the same. To the girl from the ruins, it was only natural that Harumi would wonder about such a thing.

“So there are? Thank god... Someday I would love to hear about them.”

“Certainly. But right now...”

The girl pointed over Harumi’s shoulder. When Harumi turned to look, she saw the other girls looking at her.

“Harumi, you pick the game!”

“Game? What do you mean?”

“We decided that everyone would accept the game you picked, so please bring a civil end to this, Harumi.”

“I see.”

She finally understood. Harumi, having already seen her dream and therefore being a neutral party in the fight for who would go next, was the most diplomatic and unbiased choice when it came to choosing a game. That was the conclusion of the girls’ heated discussion.

“Now go, Harumi. Your precious friends are waiting for you.”

The girl from the ruins put her hands on Harumi’s shoulders and gave her a gentle push forward. She looked like she was enjoying herself, but that was only natural. The girls getting along was directly connected to her own happiness.

“I know, but...”

However, Harumi didn’t immediately run off. Instead, she turned around and took the girl’s hand.

“Harumi...?”

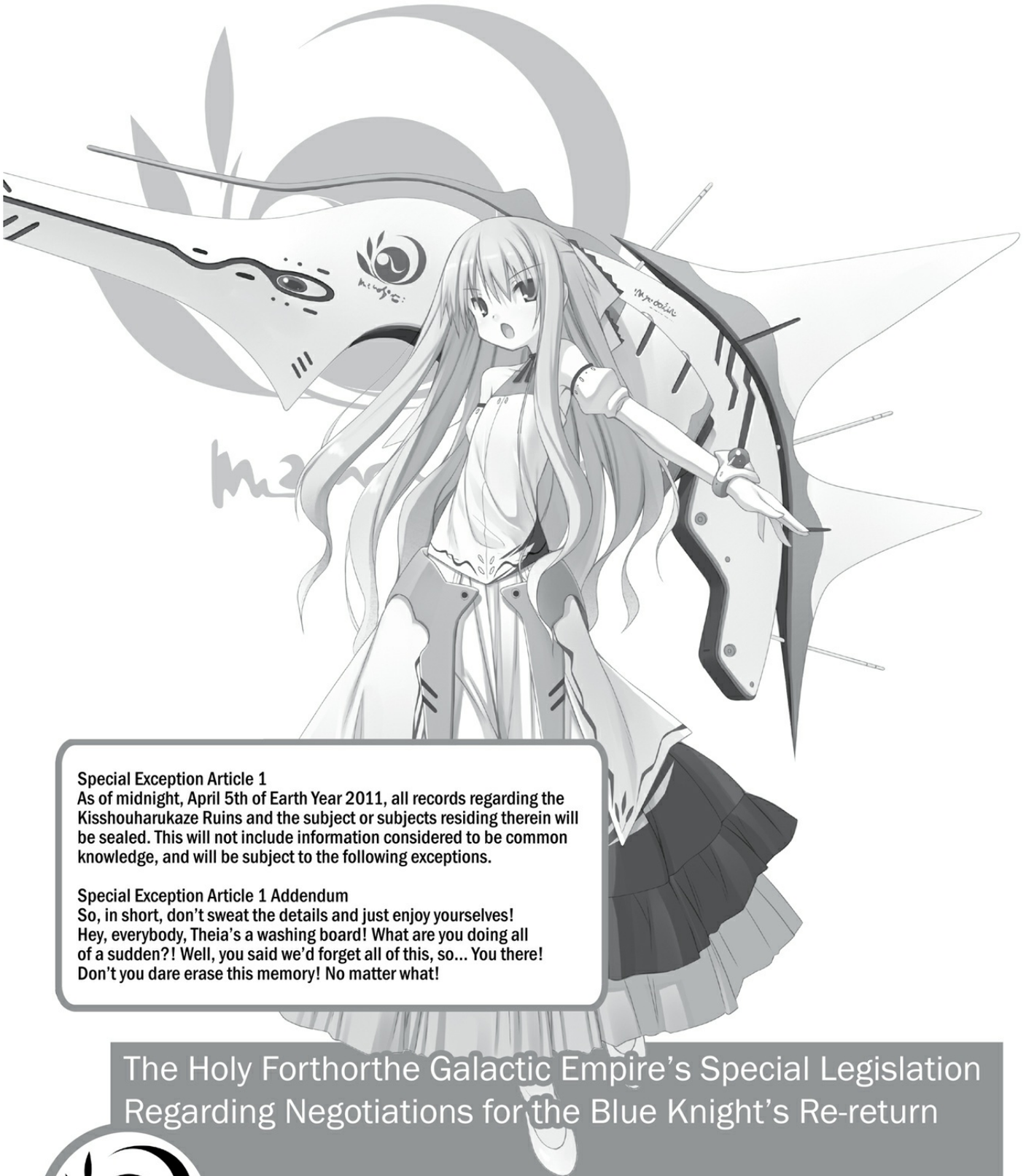
“You’re coming too.”

“But...”

“That’s would Satomi-kun would want. He’d say something silly like, ‘Your circumstances don’t matter.’”

“Yes... You’re right.”

With the girl from the ruins in tow, Harumi rejoined her circle of friends. The ruckus in room 106 only grew louder after that. You’d think no one would be able to sleep with all the noise and excitement, but Koutarou continued to dream soundly. Because that, in and of itself, was the essence of his wish. And so night fell on the warm, happy, peaceful, and loud room 106.



Special Exception Article 1
As of midnight, April 5th of Earth Year 2011, all records regarding the Kisshouharukaze Ruins and the subject or subjects residing therein will be sealed. This will not include information considered to be common knowledge, and will be subject to the following exceptions.

Special Exception Article 1 Addendum
So, in short, don't sweat the details and just enjoy yourselves!
Hey, everybody, Theia's a washing board! What are you doing all of a sudden?! Well, you said we'd forget all of this, so... You there! Don't you dare erase this memory! No matter what!

The Holy Forthorthe Galactic Empire's Special Legislation Regarding Negotiations for the Blue Knight's Re-return

New! April 5th, 2011

Afterword

Long time no see. It's the author, Takehaya. This is rather sudden, but I have an announcement to make.

It's *Invaders of the Rokujouma!?*'s tenth anniversary! The first volume of this series was published on March 1st, 2009. This volume will come out on March 1st, 2019, so it's exactly ten years to the day. A light novel seeing continuous serialization over ten years is very rare, so I'm over the moon. I am also very grateful to all you readers who've stuck it out with me. Ten years is no small amount of time, no matter how you look at it. And I am deeply grateful to everyone who's stayed with the series all this time.

Now then, as this is the series' tenth anniversary, there are several anniversary projects underway. The first of which is the first part of the "going out with X" series, which is the latter half of this book. It's an irregular episode where Harumi takes a peek into a world where she and Koutarou are together. The story is, of course, about their journey and how they ended up as a couple. There's also a little bit of a bonus after that. It's a celebratory episode, rather fitting of our tenth anniversary if you ask me.

There's something else I wanted to share about the "going out with X" series as well. In this episode we saw two Harumis, the Harumi we know and the Harumi of the world she's looking into. This was to convey why and how she ends up seeing the parallel world. As we move forward, however, everyone will be familiar with the setup. That being the case, the "current" perspective won't be necessary unless it's for a special reason. In other words, the episodes from here on out will be written in the usual style. Long story short: don't be surprised when the writing changes next time (ha!).

Now, as for the second project... Those of you who've already bought this volume are probably aware, but there's a special edition that comes with a drama CD. BOOKWALKER is also selling a digital version of it for a limited period of time. Things sure have gotten convenient over the past ten years! As for the

drama CD, it too contains an episode of the “going out with X” series—and the heroine is none other than Princess Alaia. The title of the episode is “Powder Snow in Harukaze,” and it features Princess Alaia being brought from two thousand years ago to the present day. Modern Japan is a world of wonder to Princess Alaia, so I hope you all get to enjoy a new story featuring her.

The drama CD is set in one of countless parallel worlds, just like “Episode Harumi” is. Just think of it as being one of the worlds the girl from the ruins mentioned to Harumi—that’s the connection.

I started off writing a short story for the contents of the drama CD. I handed it over to Mr. Yasukawa Shougo, the anime’s scriptwriter, who turned it into a script just like he did with the anime. The sound production team and even the voice actors reprised their roles. And, just as I did during the anime production, came to watch bearing gifts in the form of snacks (ha!). I think the drama CD will have the same caliber quality the anime did, so you can rest assured knowing it’s in good hands. If anything’s different this time, it’s that the actors have gotten even better. Listening in on the recording, I could really tell they’ve grown these past four years.

As for why Alaia was chosen as the star for the drama CD, that was me. I figured that she would rank highly if we polled the readers. Moreover, while Harumi might be her reincarnation, Princess Alaia has made her exit from the story, so revisiting her for the tenth anniversary felt rather fitting. As for those of you who wanted a drama CD about another character, fear not! That’s where the third anniversary project comes in.

The third anniversary project is a character popularity poll. It’s sponsored by BOOKWALKER, so you’ll need an account with them to vote. There are no requirements otherwise, so even those of you who swear by physical books can participate as long as you make an account. Voting will open on March 1st when this volume is released.

Now, the *really* exciting news is that the winner of the popularity poll will be featured in the next drama CD(!!). That means that there will be another drama CD within the year, or possibly the first half of next year. And while the first place winner might not be directly next in line, I believe the rankings will influence the order of these half-volume stories too, so get out there and vote!

Also, depending on how this one sells, we might have *even more* drama CDs down the line, so please let me know who you want to hear and read about next.

There is something I should say, however. Since we've already had Episode Harumi and Episode Alaia (on the drama CD) now, their results won't influence the order of drama CDs and short stories until we've gone a full round with everyone else. That said, I wouldn't want voting for them to be meaningless, so I'm thinking of doing something special if either one of them takes first place. I think it'll be something like including the short story I wrote for the drama CD as a half-volume side story, or maybe even continuing their respective episodes. Something along those lines. But there are plenty of fans of other characters (previous winners of popularity polls were the characters who had a chance to shine the volume before—I think that this means that the story that time played a big part, so there aren't much of a difference between them), so I ask for your understanding.

I had a lot to write about this time, so I'm out of space in the blink of an eye. It pains me that this was practically just one long announcement, but I need to wrap things up here.

I would like to give my heartfelt thanks to the editorial department for their assistance in the production of this book and drama CD, to Poco-san for the many illustrations, to all of the voice actors as well as the production team, and finally to all of you readers who have come along on this ten year long journey with me. This is a major junction for the series, but I aim to keep on going just as I always have.

Let us meet again in the afterword of volume 32.

January, 2019

Takehaya

Bonus Short Stories

Side: Maki

Maki first noticed Koutarou doing something strange upon returning to room 106 after attending the cosclub meetup. He was sitting at his usual spot at the tea table, doing something with a small, rod-shaped tool in his hand.

“I’m back.”

“Welcome back, Aika-san.”

“What are you doing, Satomi-kun?”

“Cleaning my ears. You gotta do it every now and then.”

Koutarou was indeed cleaning his ears; the tool in his hands was an ear pick. Since he didn’t live alone, he’d recently been made aware that he should be keeping up minimum standards when it came to cleaning his ears, clipping his nails, and such.

“Hmm... Like this?”

But between not being able to see his own ears and his naturally clumsy hands, cleaning his ears was a difficult task. Knowing you should do something and having the skill to actually do it, after all, are two entirely different things. Maki couldn’t help giggling when she thought about how very Koutarou-esque the whole scenario was.

“Heehee...”

“What is it?”

“Oh, I just had a good idea.”

Maki was partly bluffing, but she had indeed come up with an idea on the spot. She proceeded to walk over to Koutarou, take a seat next to him, and extend her hand.

“Hand me that, if you will. I’ll do it for you.”

“What? You don’t have to do that.”

“I won’t charge you.”

“But I’m almost done.”

“Please let me do it, Satomi-kun.”

Koutarou really was almost done, but he felt bad about refusing Maki when she looked at him so earnestly. In the end, he acquiesced and handed her the ear pick.

“...If you insist.”

“Great. Now just lay your head here.”

Ear pick in hand, Maki patted her lap to encourage Koutarou. He hesitated for a moment, but then...

“Fine.”

Maki looked so happy right now, and Koutarou didn’t want to take that away from her. So, reluctant as he was, he laid his head in her lap rather than arguing.

Satomi-kun is so close...

Maki was moved. It was obvious already that she loved Koutarou and that he treasured her, but the simple gesture of laying his head in her lap reaffirmed it in a special way for Maki.

And he’s so defenseless...

Contrary to its harmless appearance, cleaning your ears was a delicate task that could potentially damage the eardrum. Letting someone else do it inherently required a certain amount of trust, and Maki was happy that Koutarou considered her worthy of the job.

“Is something the matter, Aika-san?”

Koutarou grew worried when Maki fell still and silent, but calling out to her returned her to her senses. She quickly wiped her eyes and smiled, despite knowing that Koutarou couldn’t see it.

“It’s nothing... I was just thinking about how wonderful it is to take things so easy with you.”

“Yeah, we’ve been stupid busy this year.”

“Also... it makes me all the more aware how much I love you.”

“H-Hey... You can’t just go saying embarrassing stuff like that.”

“But it’s true.”

There, Maki smiled again and stroked Koutarou’s cheek. Since she hated lies, she was always honest and played things straight. And with that out of the way, she faithfully began cleaning Koutarou’s ears.

Jeez, Aika-san is just so...

Koutarou considered himself fortunate that he couldn’t actually see Maki right now. She’d said something so bold and embarrassing that his face was beet red. And that wasn’t the only reason for it. Maki always looked composed, but she had a surprising weakness. Koutarou knew exactly what he needed to say, but the words were very, very hard to say...

“...”

So he whispered them in a low voice that only Maki could hear, even though it was just the two of them in the room. And when she heard what he said, her hand slipped.

“Ow...”

“It’s your own fault for saying that so suddenly. Jeez...”

Things were quiet after that. There was nothing more to be said between them, really. But, more than anything, Maki was simply content and Koutarou was simply embarrassed.

Side: Harumi

One particular morning, Koutarou noticed something was amiss on his way to school with Harumi. She was strangely looking to the right, but all Koutarou could see in that direction was a stationary garbage truck. Confused as to why

that had caught her attention, Koutarou decided to ask her about it.

“Sakuraba-senpai, is something up with that garbage truck?”

“Huh? What garbage truck? Oh, that one... No, there doesn’t appear to be anything unusual about it.”

“Yeah? Weren’t you just staring at it?”

“A-Actually, I kind of slept in an awkward position last night and I seem to have sprained my neck... ahahaha...”

Apparently Harumi had pulled her neck in her sleep, so she was looking to the right because it was the only position that was comfortable for her. It had nothing to do with the garbage truck. The misunderstanding had her red with embarrassment.

“That sounds awful. How is it feeling now?”

“It’s not as bad as when I first woke up, but it still hurts a little.”

Curious, Koutarou looked over and observed the cloth bandage wrapped around Harumi’s slender, porcelain neck. Realizing he was staring at her neck, Harumi began blushing for a different reason. Fortunately, Koutarou didn’t seem to notice.

“You’ve got a poultice under the bandages, right?”

“Yes.”

“Then it should probably be fine. Make sure not to move your neck too much until the pain subsides though, Sakuraba-senpai.”

“Satomi-kun, you sound like you know a lot about this kind of thing.”

“You pretty much treat all sprains the same. Oh, and you gotta watch out for the inflammation.”

“I guess you had a lot of sprains on the baseball team, huh?”

“You could say that.”

Koutarou and Harumi continued walking towards the school together. Harumi had already graduated, but Harukaze High was having a special event today and the Sun Rangers had asked for help guarding some Forthorthian officials.

Chances of an attack were low based on their intelligence, but they wanted a magic user on hand as something of an insurance policy.

“Hey, Kou!”

Eventually, Kenji rolled up on the two of them. Since he was on his bike, it didn’t take him long to catch up.

“Hey, Mackenzie.”

“Good morning, Matsudaira-san.”

“Good morning— Wait, did you have a fight with Sakuraba-senpai, Kou?”

Kenji looked between Koutarou and Harumi with a perplexed expression on his face.

“Why?”

“You two always have this chummy aura about you, but today she’s not even looking at you.”

Koutarou and Harumi were normally so friendly with each other that it was easy to mistake them for a couple, but today Harumi appeared to be looking away from him on purpose. Seeing that, Kenji naturally assumed that Koutarou had done something to upset her.

“Yeah, she’s still upset that I stole her fried chicken. I tell you, man, girls and their grudges over food...”

“Satomi-kun, please stop making weird jokes!”

“See? Scary, right?”

“Oh, you! He’s joking, Matsudaira-san. I just slept in an awkward position last night.”

“So it’s a lover’s spat either way, huh?”

“Not you too, Matsudaira-san! My goodness!”

“Ahahaha!”

“Wahaha!”

Despite her anger, Harumi wasn’t even looking at the boys. The humorous

sight tickled them just the right way, and their laughter only made her angrier. Her puffed up cheeks told them she was really mad now.

“Now, now, Sakuraba-senpai... You can just change where you’re standing.”

Realizing Harumi was actually mad, Kenji immediately moved to smooth things over. His ability to read women and act accordingly was one of his trademark qualities.

“People will get the wrong idea if you’re looking away, so we can clear this all up if you just stand here.”

“I see...”

Harumi moved over to where Kenji suggested. She was just left of Koutarou, so he was standing right where she was looking now.

“Wahahahaha!”

But seeing her cheeks still slightly puffed out, Koutarou couldn’t help bursting into laughter when he saw her adorable face up close.

“Oh, Satomi-kun! I’m really going to get angry!”

“I-I’m sorry, Sakuraba-senpai... You’re just too cute.”

“You won’t fool me like that!”

“Pfft! Ahaha!”

“Satomi-kun!”

In the end, Koutarou really did do something to upset Harumi. You see, it would be some time yet before he stopped laughing.











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Invaders of the Rokujouma!? Volume 31

by Takehaya

Translated by Warnis Edited by Morgan Dreher

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