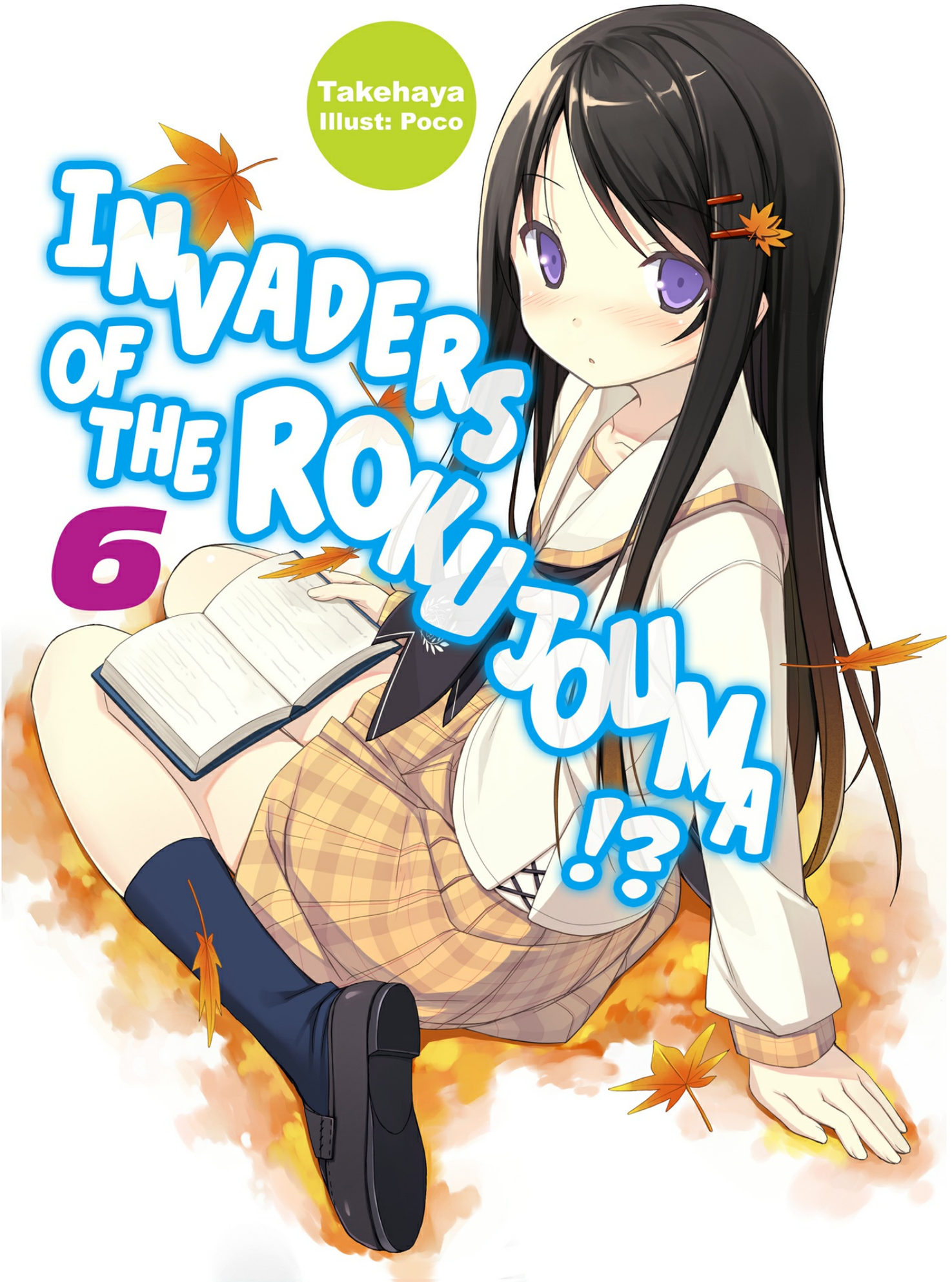
Takehaya
Illust: Poco

Invaders of the Rokujouma!? 6




"IT'S A DATE! THERE'S NO DOUBT ABOUT IT!"
INVADERS OF THE ROKUJOUMA!? 6


STAND UP, WARRIORS OF JUSTICE,
AND PROTECT THE SURFACE FROM THE UNDERGROUND EMPIRE!
IT BEGINS!
SUN RANGERS OF THE SUN SQUAD
VS
THE EVIL UNDERGROUND EMPIRE


KIRIHA GRABBED KOUTAROU'S HAND AND HOPPED INTO THE GONDOLA.
HUP!



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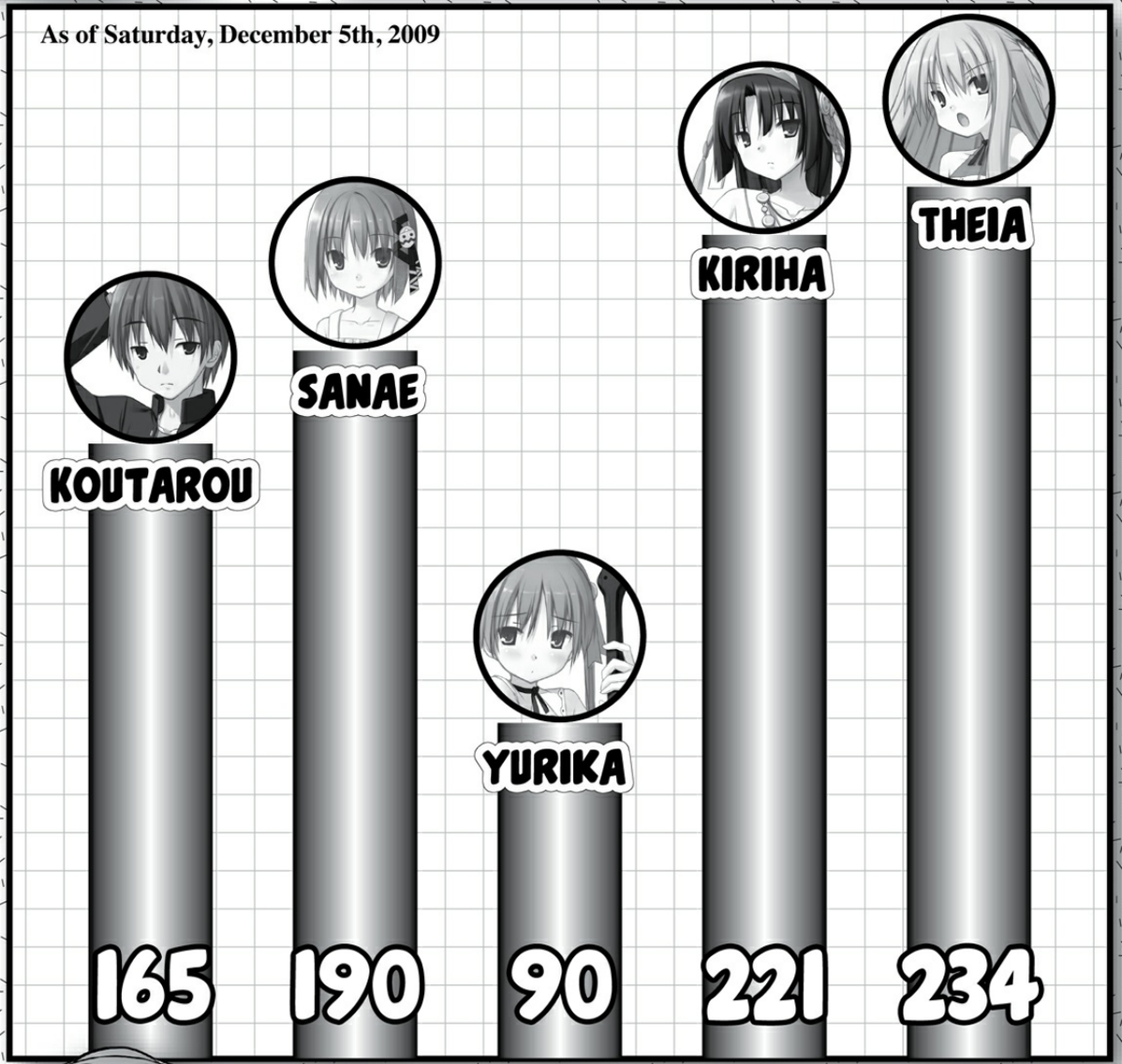



HIGASHIHONGAN SANAE
A ghost with an attachment to Corona House room 106. She's planning on monopolizing it for herself.
Ghost
KURANO KIRIHA
An underground dweller seeking control of room 106 so she can use it as a base for a surface invasion.
Underground Dweller
THEIAMILLIS GRE FORTHORTHE
An alien princess trying to take over 106 as part of a test to succeed the throne.
Aliens
RUTHKANIA NYE PARDOMSHIHA
Theia's retainer and assistant.
NIJINO YURIKA
A self-proclaimed magical girl who believes room 106 is in danger.
Cosplayer?

At a glance

Room 106 Power Distribution Graph

As of Saturday, December 5th, 2009





HOW TO READ THE GRAPH!

One point equals one centimeter of tatami.
Each player starts with 180 points,
one tatami mat's worth.
Altogether, there is a total of 900 available points
(or five whole tatami mats).
One tatami is reserved for furniture.

The first person to collect all 900 points gains control of room 106.

Signs of the Radical Faction

Saturday, December 5th

Higashihongan Sanae was in a great mood.

“Ohohohoho!”

She flew circles above Koutarou and the others while laughing loudly. Her practically perpetual smile was beaming brighter than ever.

“Hmph...”

“Sanae-chan is victorious!”

Sanae landed in front of Koutarou, holding up her index and middle fingers in the shape of a V.

“Yeah, yeah. Good job.”

“Eeheehee...”

Koutarou patted the giddy Sanae on her head, making her smile even brighter.

“Sanae-sama, your tennis skills are quite impressive.”

“Heehee! That’s because papa and mama have trained me ever since I was little,” Sanae proudly responded to Ruth as she circled around to Koutarou’s back.

“Hmm, then your parents must be really good,” Shizuka commented.

“That’s right!”

Shizuka complimenting her parents pleased Sanae even more. She clung to Koutarou’s back in the usual fashion before cheerfully declaring that it was time to go.

“Let’s get home before it gets cold!”

It was now around 3 PM. They still had some time before it got dark, but now that it was December and winter was in full swing, the sun going down meant that it got cold immediately.

Koutarou and the others had used their Saturday to go to a nearby sports park and play tennis. The participants were Koutarou, Sanae, and Shizuka, plus the princess and her attendant from Forthorthe for a total of five people. Aside from Ruth, they were all athletic. Being a boy on top of that, it was only natural that Koutarou was good at it, but surprisingly enough, the strongest player out of the girls was Sanae. She seemed to have some experience.

Even as they headed home, Sanae was still in a good mood. It was a good walk from the sports park to Corona House, but Sanae had more than enough enthusiasm to last the journey.

“Praise me more, you jerk!”

“Splendidly done, my lady.”

“Mm, it wasn’t a big deal.”

Sanae wiggled and kicked her legs as Koutarou carried her down the sidewalk. That adorable gesture, fitting for a girl her age, brought a smile to everyone’s face.

“Splendid or not, Koutarou did all the work.”

Everyone, that is, except for Theia, who was still in a foul mood. She simply couldn’t accept having lost to Sanae.

“Your Highness... Heehee...”

Seeing Theia like that, Ruth’s cheerful grin changed into the gentle smile of someone watching over their younger sister.

“Don’t be such a sore loser, Theia. It may have been Koutarou’s body, but I was the one moving it, so I’m the real winner!”

“If I could do the same thing, I wouldn’t have lost either!”

What ruffled Theia’s feathers was that Sanae had possessed Koutarou in order to participate, similar to when they played Jenga. She could use her

psychic powers to wield a racket, but it was exhausting and inaccurate. A ghost's telekinesis was somewhat of a rough ability, and it wasn't suited for precise tasks or use over a long period of time.

And so Sanae had used Koutarou's body to play tennis. She'd gone undefeated, and that was what left her in such a chipper mood. However, it could have been said that the reason for her victory was a combination of her skills and Koutarou's athleticism. If, for example, Sanae had played against Shizuka or Theia before she became a ghost, she may not have stood much of a chance. Theia knew that, and was quite unhappy about what she perceived as an unfair advantage.

"That might be true, but that just means this victory was thanks to the bond between me and Koutarou! Right, Koutarou?"

"Yeah, yeah. Sure thing."

"Hmph..."

But what bothered Theia the most was Sanae and Koutarou's relationship. Sanae was able to manipulate Koutarou's body relatively freely, and that was because Koutarou had accepted Sanae into his heart. If he resisted, she probably wouldn't be able to control him. Or, if she could, only with a great deal of awkward difficulty. Playing an active sport like tennis would be impossible. But the two of them working so well together seemed to mean that Koutarou had indeed accepted Sanae on a deep level. In Sanae's words, they had a strong bond. That's why seeing them get along so well left Theia feeling a little unsettled.

If I were a ghost, would Koutarou treat me the same way he does Sanae?

Theia didn't really know how Koutarou thought of her. She didn't have the ability to tell just by looking like Sanae did, and that uncertainty made her anxious. And since she just couldn't let it go, those feelings continued to brew inside her.

"Koutarou, say it more lovingly."

"How would I even do that? Hey, what's wrong, Theia?"

"Huh?"

Hearing her name, Theia was surprised at how close Koutarou's voice sounded. When she looked up, she saw him looking back down at her with a concerned expression.

"You look a little down. Are you tired?"

"No, I, um... Of course not! I'm fine!"

"Really?"

Koutarou nodded but kept watching her face. Such an earnest, intense stare sent Theia's heart racing. As if to escape his eyes, she looked down on the ground.

Yeah, I thought so. Something seems to be bothering her.

After observing her for a while, that was the conclusion Koutarou came to.

"Here."

And so he presented his right hand to her.

"Koutarou?"

Not understanding the gesture, Theia looked at Koutarou and then at his hand. Her brain was working overtime to try and decipher the situation.

"...U-Um..."

When she finally figured it out, she reached out and took Koutarou's right hand with both of hers.

Th-This is... This is what he meant...

Theia could feel Koutarou's warmth through his hand, and the heat where their hands touched was only more intense. But Theia was undeterred and showed no sign of letting go. She only held on tighter.



“Theia, what are you doing?”

After suddenly grabbing his hand, Koutarou looked at Theia with a confused expression. She’d taken his offer the wrong way.

“Huh?”

“Your bag. If you’re tired, I’ll carry it for you, so hand it over.”

Koutarou thought that Theia looked tired, so he wanted to carry her bag for her.

“Er...”

Theia now realized why Koutarou had held out his hand, that she was holding his hand for seemingly no reason, that the misunderstanding was ultimately her fault, and that this was probably all very confusing for Koutarou.

“Wuh... I... This is... Um...”

After everything clicked for her, Theia panicked and quickly let go Koutarou’s hand.

“W-Wait, Koutarou! You’ve got the wrong idea! That’s not what I meant!”

Theia spat out excuses to try and smooth things over. She was desperate to hide that she’d misread his intentions.

“So you aren’t tired?”

“Th-That’s not it! Well, I am tired, but...! But...!”

Theia was so embarrassed that she couldn’t even look at Koutarou. She just frantically kept talking while staring down at the ground.

“In that case, here.”

And almost as if he had planned for it, Koutarou held out his hand to Theia again.

Koutarou’s hand...

When she saw it, Theia recalled what it felt like to hold his firm, warm hand. Just thinking about the sensation, her cheeks grew hot.

“I can’t take it anymore, I... I...!”

And right as Theia was about to say something, Shizuka opened her mouth.

“Satomi-kun, Satomi-kun! Isn’t that Kiriha-san?”

“Where, Landlord-san?”

“Over there.”

“Ah, you’re right!”

As Koutarou turned around, Theia could see his broad shoulders and Sanae clinging to them.

“I...”

The sight instantly cooled her heated emotions like the whole thing had never happened.

“Where?”

“Over there, Koutarou.”

“Oh, I see. Yup, that’s definitely Kiriha-san.”

Sanae was literally between Theia and Koutarou.

“...”

Mortified, Theia bit her lip as a new set of emotions began springing up inside her.

Just what am I so disappointed about...? What is this unsatisfied feeling...?

Theia was deeply disappointed, and she didn’t care if Kiriha was there or not.

“Your Highness...”

However, unlike her master, Ruth was smiling.

You’ll realize how you really feel at any moment now, Your Highness...

Up until now, Theia had never once let a stranger near her. She had never opened up to anyone other than Ruth. Seeing Theia finally desire someone else’s companionship was something Ruth had always hoped for.

Unaware of the complex feelings between the master and servant from

Forthorthe, Koutarou, Sanae, and Shizuka were all three watching Kiriha.

“What’s she doing?”

“Looks like she’s... cleaning?”

They’d spotted Kiriha in front of city hall. Lots of people from the neighborhood association were gathered around, and Kiriha was standing with them. She was wearing her native kimono-like outfit that she normally only wore in private, and she was in the middle of sorting large plastic bags that appeared to be full of garbage. It looked like she was helping the neighborhood association clean up.

But why is she picking up garbage? And why is she wearing that outfit in front of other people?

Something seemed odd to Koutarou. For starters, he didn’t understand how Kiriha had gotten involved with cleaning up the city. She was an invader. Why would she be doing something like that?

On top of that, her outfit raised another eyebrow. Normally when Kiriha went out in public, she would wear her high school uniform or fashionable clothing from the surface. She cared a great deal about disguising herself to blend in, but for some reason, she’d chosen not to today. She was openly wearing her native outfit.

“Look, Satomi-kun. There are other people wearing the same outfit as Kiriha.”

Sure enough, several men and women were now exiting city hall. Although the specific details were different, they were all dressed in outfits similar to Kiriha’s. They walked over to Kiriha and talked a bit before joining in with the neighborhood association to help carry the garbage bags.

“Which means... they’re all Kiriha-san’s allies?”

Seeing them together like that, Koutarou assumed they were all friends, but his words made Sanae’s face turn pale.

“This is bad, Koutarou! If they’re Kiriha’s allies, they’re all from underground, right?! They’re here to invade the surface!”

In her own words, Kiriha’s ultimate goal was to invade the surface. And now

that her allies had appeared, it must mean they were finally putting their plans into motion. Sanae panicked at that thought.

“Hmmmm....”

However, that line of thinking didn’t quite seem right to Koutarou. He tilted his head as he looked at Kiriha and her allies curiously.

“What’s wrong, Koutarou?! If we don’t hurry and do something about them, our home... The whole city will be in danger!”

Irritated by Koutarou’s reaction, Sanae emphatically pointed her finger at Kiriha and her apparent allies. She tried again to tell him that they were dangerous, but Koutarou just kept tilting his head and staring.

“Is that really...”

“What are you just standing there for?!”

“Now, now... Just calm down, Sanae.”

“As if I could calm down at a time like this! The invasion has already begun!”

“...I don’t think it has though.”

Koutarou didn’t share Sanae’s reaction because he wasn’t convinced this was an invasion.

“It has to be! Look! They’re definitely invading!”

“But Kiriha-san and the others are just cleaning up, you know?”

That was Koutarou’s primary reason for assuming this wasn’t a hostile takeover. No matter how you cut it, Kiriha and her allies were volunteering for the benefit of the city. The only remarkable things about the situation were their outfits and the fact that they were actually working in harmony with the neighborhood association.

“They’re only trying to make it look like they’re cleaning! Behind the scenes, they’re definitely...”

Sanae was still persistent, but...

“Definitely...”

Her voice trailed off mid-sentence. Even to her, it really did look like they were just cleaning up. She just couldn't imagine how filling bags with garbage could further some nefarious scheme for the sake of invading the surface.

"See?"

"Yeah... Hey, Koutarou."

"Yeah?"

"Why are they cleaning up, anyway?"

"I don't know either."

"Really... why are they cleaning...?"

Koutarou knew that it wasn't to invade the surface, but then again, he couldn't actually say why they were doing it.

That night after dinner.

The lingering questions from that afternoon continued to bother Koutarou, so he decided to ask Kiriha outright.

"Heh, you're ten years too late to try and beat me!"

"Curse youuuu! In that case, Yurika, let's combine!"

"Eek, no way! I'd rather lose than be possessed!"

"You wimp!"

Fortunately, Yurika, Theia, and Sanae were glued to the TV playing video games, leaving only Kiriha and Ruth sitting at the tea table with him. With the three noisier girls occupied, Koutarou saw his chance.

Ruth set three cups on the table. Listening to the distinct sound of tea being poured, Koutarou finally spoke up. Although he was curious, he didn't think it was a big deal, so he decided to approach the whole thing casually.

"Kiriha-san."

"Yes, Koutarou?"

"On our way back from playing tennis, we saw you with some other people.

You were cleaning by city hall, right?”

“If you saw me, you could have just come up and said something.”

Kiriha didn’t deny it. Instead, she smiled at Koutarou. Ruth then passed a tea cup each to Koutarou and Kiriha. After thanking Ruth, Kiriha picked up hers, and after picking up his own, Koutarou continued talking.

“I’ll do that next time. So, Kiriha-san, why did you volunteer to help clean?”

“Does it bother you?”

Kiriha smiled and placed her lips to the rim of the cup. When she did, she looked at Ruth with surprise.

“Ruth, this isn’t the tea we usually get. What’s happened?”

“Actually, when I went to the shopping street yesterday, I got this as a sample.”

“You must mean from the teahouse... Hmm, let’s get this from now on.”

As Kiriha stared at the tea cup in her hands with a delighted expression, Koutarou’s doubts began growing.

Does Kiriha-san really intend to invade the surface?

He couldn’t imagine how cleaning up the neighborhood or caring about tea could be a critical part of a surface invasion.

“Well, yeah, it does bother me. You’re from underground, but you’re bringing your allies up to clean up the city. Anyone would wonder the same thing.”

“Heh, now that you mention it, I suppose you have a good point.”

Kiriha tilted her head and looked down a little.

“Lately, I’ve almost been forgetting that I’m an invader.”

Koutarou found that feminine gesture desirable.

“Then forget it completely.”

“I can’t do that. Actually, Koutarou, helping to clean up is part of our invasion.”

And with those unexpected words from Kiriha’s gently smiling lips, Koutarou

reflexively spat out the tea in his mouth.

“Wh-What?!”

“Oh my!”

Even Ruth, unable to hide her surprise, stared at Kiriha with wide eyes.

“You’re kidding, right?! What could cleaning possibly have to do with invading?!”

Right now, Koutarou was mostly shocked, but also a little disheartened.

That’s weird. Why am I disappointed...?

While he still had his doubts about the situation, he was puzzled by his disappointment at what she’d said, even though he’d known it was her goal to invade the surface all along.

“Could it be that you’re only pretending to be cleaning up so you can get close to the water supply and poison it?!”

“Of course not. We are simply volunteering to help clean some.”

“Huh?”

Koutarou was so confused now that he was slack-jawed. Kiriha easily read his expression.

“Heehee, look at you, Koutarou. Is it really so strange that I would volunteer around the city?”

Kiriha laughed spiritedly and revealed a bright, feminine smile as she looked at Koutarou’s confused face.

“No, I mean, that’s not it... I just can’t see what invading and volunteering have to do with each other.”

“They are indeed related, Koutarou. Actually, that’s a great deal of the point.”

As Kiriha wiped away a tear from laughing too hard, she began explaining the plan in further detail to Koutarou.

“You can’t just use violence and force your way when you invade.”

“You can’t?”

Koutarou, however, was only further puzzled by this explanation. Surely an invasion would at least involve some guns or something.

“In fiction, people certainly rely on force in these situations, but reality works differently. Ruling through fear and power only leads to revolt.”

“...If I’m not mistaken, several decades ago a country called Germany began a series of invasions, but the countries it invaded still had very active resistances, right?” Ruth asked.

Ruth had been quiet up until this point, but she was right. It had now been eight months since she first arrived on Earth, and in that time, she’d started to get a grasp of Earth’s history.

“That’s correct. By invading without the support of the local people, a rebellion is only inevitable. And you can imagine how that would go.”

In the end, the locals cooperated with the Allied forces and regained their freedom by repelling the German army. The moral of the story in this case was that attempts to dominate the domestic population against their will bred resistance.

“So there’s a limit to how long you can keep things under control with force alone.”

“Yes. Especially for a minority like us, it wouldn’t be easy to maintain rule through power. It’s just not practical.”

“And that’s why you were helping clean up the city?”

“That’s right. If we don’t become familiar with the locals and get closer with them, we’ll never be able to invade in the way we intend. We have nothing to fall back on, so we have to make sure this succeeds.”

The People of the Earth were unable to put a halt to their emigration problem and subsequent decline in population. Their solution to that was coming to the surface and spreading their influence there instead. Accordingly, Kiriha was proceeding with what they thought was the safest and surest way to invade.

“What we fear the most is that you surface dwellers will label us a dangerous group, like terrorists or guerillas. That would make the invasion impossible and

ultimately mean that we would be forced to face our ruin underground. I just can't let that happen."

If the People of the Earth earned a reputation as terrorists or guerillas, it would stick with them in the mind of the public for several decades whether it was true or not. During that time, the People of the Earth would only decline even further. That was why it seemed like the best approach to ingratiate themselves with the surface dwellers before making their move.

"Hmm, so there's more than one kind of invasion..."

"We've spent time carefully examining the history of the surface, so we've had a great deal to consider."

In reality, anti-government guerilla forces that do things like create hospitals, schools, or wells for the populace are extremely difficult to deal with. Because the locals cover for them, they're near impossible to completely wipe out. With that knowledge, Kiriha had decided against the use of force, and instead focused on making peaceful contact with the locals. The volunteer job with the neighborhood association was the first step to that.

"Well, that's troublesome."

Finally understanding what she meant, Koutarou let out a heavy sigh. Even though he knew what was going on now, he was still somewhat perplexed.

"What's so troublesome?"

Kiriha cheerfully smiled. She already knew what Koutarou was thinking about.

"Even though your invasion has already begun, I can't stop you. You're not doing anything bad after all."

"Koutarou, that's what a true invasion is. If you could tell it was an invasion at first glance and immediately think of a way to stop it, that would be child's play."

And with those words, Kiriha lifted her tea cup, drained its remaining contents, and nodded approvingly as she presented the empty cup to Ruth.

"Excuse me, Ruth, but may I have another cup?"

"Yes, right away."

At Kiriha's request, Ruth immediately poured her more tea. Koutarou watched the two of them and continued to think to himself.

If Kiriha asked me to hand over the room now, what would I say?

Eight months ago, Koutarou had emphatically refused her demands, but what would happen if she asked him again now? Koutarou didn't have the confidence that he could refuse her as confidently as he had before.

Beneath Corona House was the secret base Kiriha had built for herself. The tatami mat closest to the entrance of the inner room in Koutarou's apartment lifted up to reveal a tunnel that led to the underground lair. The tunnel had been completely paved with concrete, and there was no trace of soil in sight. There were lights at regular intervals illuminating the tunnel. It was so well made it wouldn't have been difficult to mistake it for an underground shopping center.

The hour was now late as it neared midnight, and Kiriha was passing through the tunnel on the way to her base to retire for the night. The clack of Kiriha's shoes echoed throughout the tunnel rather jarringly. If there was any fault to be found with the tunnel, it was the ominous sound of Kiriha's footsteps.

The tunnel itself was roughly fifty meters long. After turning a couple of corners and descending two sets of stairs, Kiriha arrived at the entrance of her base, a metallic door. She opened it in an accustomed manner and entered.

Inside was a clean and orderly room. It was roughly three times the size of Koutarou's apartment and had three doors: one that led to room 106, one that led to Kiriha's underground hometown, and one that led to her bedroom. The other things in the room included a station used for maintenance on her haniwas, an armory, and several computers. Once Kiriha stepped inside, the two haniwas accompanying her headed straight for the maintenance station.

"Ho! Goodnight, ho!"

"Ho, ho! See you tomorrow, Nee-san!"

Out of everything in the room, the maintenance station took up the most space. Although it was only used for servicing the two small haniwas, the bulky

machine was fully automated. It was where they slept in addition to receiving repairs and upgrades. The haniwas bounced over to it, pressed a switch to open a hatch, and hopped right in.

“Goodnight, Karama, Korama.”

After watching the tempered glass hatch shut, Kiriha walked over to the computers, passing by the armory on the way. The armory contained weapons for Kiriha as well as various attachments for the haniwas. The last time Kiriha went into it was when she fought against Theia the day they met. In order to break through Theia’s powerful barrier, she’d had to equip the haniwas with spiritual energy weaponry.

But since that incident, Kiriha hadn’t gone into the armory even once. Although she appeared to be the one most intent on invading, she was actually the most pacifistic of the residents of room 106. Possibly even more so than Koutarou. And so she walked by the armory without so much as glancing at it.

Apart from monitoring the base and controlling the maintenance station, the computers in the room could be used to communicate with her hometown and beyond. Before going to bed, Kiriha’s last job for the day was to confirm that there were no abnormalities with the machinery or otherwise.

“Hmm, a message.”

When she looked at the monitor, Kiriha saw the notification. She touched it and opened up the message.

“From the chief, I see.”

It was indeed a message from the chief—her father. Despite their familial relationship, ever since Kiriha was selected as the commander for the surface invasion, she’d started addressing him as the chief. Kiriha read through the message, which requested for her to contact him directly with a status report.

“Heh...”

Kiriha cracked a small smile. Whenever her father wanted to see his daughter’s face, he would send a message along those lines. After Kiriha’s mother passed away ten years ago, her father raised her on his own. It left them with a lasting bond. They were close enough that Kiriha knew he was

worried about her. Still smiling a little, she opened a program on the computer to call him.

“Is that you, Kiriha?!”

It only took a few seconds for the call to connect before a middle-aged man’s face appeared on the screen. Although he was sporting a beard and had a dignified appearance, his eyes were sparkling like an excited child’s. This was Kiriha’s father, Clan Chief Kurano Daiha.

“It has been a while, Chief.”

Kiriha revealed a mischievous and happy smile. One she rarely showed the residents of room 106.

Based on how quickly he’d answered, Kiriha suspected that he had been waiting for her call.

“Again with the chief bit... You can just call me father, you know. It’s just the two of us right now.”

“But I was contacted for a status report. This isn’t a personal conversation.”

Kiriha continued smirking while stifling her laughter. It was a side of her she only revealed to those she truly trusted. And although Kiriha was clearly enjoying herself, Daiha gave her an exaggerated frown after being teased like that.

“You know, you look more and more like her every time I see you, but lately you’ve even started to take after her too, you meanie...”

“Then let’s get the official part over with.”

“All right, all right.”

Daiha stopped pouting like a child. He corrected his posture and put on a serious expression. His piercing gaze gave him the impression of a man of strong will. That was how he presented himself as the chief of the People of the Earth. Following suit, Kiriha put on a more serious expression herself. Right now, they were chief and subordinate rather than father and daughter.

“So what’s your status?”

“Plan A is progressing smoothly, and stage one is complete. We’ve moved on to stage two and are building up trust with the surface dwellers.”

Kiriha had come up with a two-fold strategy for their surface invasion. Plan B involved Kiriha overseeing problematic room 106 directly, but Plan A was complex enough that it had been divided up into several stages. The first was simply securing a base of sorts. In order for the People of the Earth to come to the surface, they needed somewhere to stay. After selling off the rare metal they had been hoarding, they bought up a good deal of real estate in the city. And once that was done, stage two was initiated.

The second stage was developing a rapport with the surface dwellers. To that end, Kiriha and the other underground dwellers had begun participating in civic events and were volunteering around the city. Really, they were trying to demonstrate that they were good neighbors. This was the trickiest part of Kiriha’s plan. It wasn’t something that could accomplished overnight, and a single misstep could compromise the entire plan. They had to proceed with utmost care, and that’s exactly what Kiriha had been doing when Koutarou and the others found her in front of city hall.

“And what kind of response are you seeing from the surface dwellers?”

“Great, for the most part. Those that have found employment in local industries seem to have had a significant influence.”

Infiltrating local businesses was also a part of the second stage of Plan A. Other underground dwellers had gotten jobs in enterprises like local agriculture, fishing, and welfare. Once they assimilated themselves into the industries and became a key part of the workforce, they would at least have something to fall back on if all else failed.

“I see. So things are progressing smoothly.”

“Yes. At this rate, we’ll have this entire region under our influence within a decade.”

The third stage would involve advancing up the social hierarchy of political and financial circles. Without the right kind of influence, they would have trouble acquiring any real power. They needed to integrate into the region even more, but Kiriha remained optimistic. She was definitely getting a good

response so far. Without any major debacles, it seemed like the People of the Earth would be able to survive on the surface after all. That's what Kiriha had begun feeling as of late. Perhaps it was living with Koutarou that had gotten her to start thinking that way.

"And what about Plan B?"

"That's proceeding smoothly as well. Rather, that's what I'd like to say, but it's up and down as usual."

"It seems to be a rather complex ordeal."

"Yes. There are several other factions targeting the location."

Plan B concerned occupying Corona House room 106. If the People of the Earth were able to gain control of room 106, they would be able to rebuild their ancestral altar. Since the altar also served as an efficient way to gather spiritual energy, they would be able to mass produce spiritual energy weapons like Karama and Korama once it was built.

"That said, with Plan A on track, I don't believe there is any reason to worry about the delays in Plan B."

In the end, Plan B was only a failsafe. It was a backup in case Plan A fell through or a surface army attacked them first. Because of that, since Plan A was proceeding without a hitch, there was no need to rush Plan B. Moreover, hurrying Plan B might actually damage their chances of succeeding with Plan A.

"I am of the same opinion. However, Kiriha, the radical faction has been stirring lately."

"As we feared, they're acting on their own?"

"Yes."

Daiha nodded with a frown. Kiriha's expression was equally stern.

The People of the Earth were not of a united front in regards to the surface invasion. There were several clans that held power, and they didn't all agree on how the matter should be handled. Among the clans, there was a radical faction that favored a swift, forceful takeover of the surface. Kiriha's methods were much too naive for their tastes.

“If we can’t keep them in line, Plan A may all be for naught. In that case—”

“Plan B would be a necessity.”

“That’s right. We’ll try to keep the radical faction in check for now, but you should keep an eye out for yourself. There might be those that would target you directly.”

“I understand.”

Kiriha nodded at Daiha. She now understood why he was so anxious to get in contact with her. He wasn’t just a doting father that wanted to see his daughter’s face. He was genuinely worried about her safety.

So in the worst case scenario, I might need to defeat them myself...

The faces of the residents of room 106 popped into Kiriha’s head. Sanae, Theia, Ruth, Yurika, and Koutarou all. If the radical faction caused a scene, the People of the Earth would need to reconstruct the altar as soon as possible to prepare for battle. With their inferior numbers, it would be a losing fight without a large amount of spiritual energy weapons, and that might mean the time could come that Koutarou and the other invaders needed to be taken out of the picture.

But could I do it...?

They had spent a lot of precious time together over the past eight months. And that troubled Kiriha. She couldn’t imagine pointing a weapon at Koutarou and the others now.

“Kiriha.”

When he said her name, Daiha’s expression loosened up. He was no longer the chief, but a concerned father.

“Yes, father?”

Sensing that, Kiriha responded accordingly.

“Won’t you come back and take a groom?”

“A groom? You’re asking me to get married?”

“Yes. If you do, our influence will grow, and that includes over the radical

faction. You'll be safe, and you won't have to fight against anyone you don't want to."

Daiha's idea was simple. He wanted to put the reigns on the radical faction through a political marriage. It didn't really matter who she married; as long as they had influence, Kiriha's influence would also grow, and that would in turn detract from the radical presence. But that was just a front. First and foremost, Daiha didn't want his daughter in any danger.

"I... can't."

Though she understood her father's feelings, Kiriha shook her head.

"You've become just as stubborn as your mother was. She refused the same thing."

"That's not... Father, if I leave the surface now, I won't be able to do anything about the radical faction. We need to avoid that no matter what."

Even if she were to take a groom, it wouldn't resolve the situation right away. They would still need to lay the right groundwork and adjust the schedule for the invasion. Especially if her marriage was a political one. And knowing their tactics, the radical faction might make a move while Kiriha was away. There would be no point in marrying if the radical faction used it as a chance to cause a scene.

"I see. So even if you were to marry, we would still need an immediate answer for dealing with the radical faction..."

"I believe so."

Once Daiha came around, Kiriha let out a small sigh of relief. She took out a single card from her pocket. It was an aging card with a worn metallic sheen, but it was special to her. It was the other reason Kiriha didn't want to marry. Before she could fulfill her heart's desire that the card represented, she knew getting married wasn't an option for her.

Dawn, 7 AM.

Sunday mornings in room 106 started, as always, with Ruth. Though the days

were starting later with the season, the sun began shining into the apartment by 7 AM. However, the winter sunlight wasn't enough to warm up the chilly room. Today, it was even cold enough for Ruth to see her breath when she arrived.

"Satomi-sama is..."

The first thing Ruth did was look around for Koutarou. Since his sleeping habits were quite literally all over the place, he would often end up sleeping next to the wall with the gate leading to Blue Knight. Consequently, it wasn't unusual for Ruth and Theia to step on him as they entered the room.

"Ah, good, he's sleeping over there."

Ruth had learned the hard way to poke her head through the gate first. Only after confirming where Koutarou was sleeping did she actually enter, careful not to make a sound. She knew it would take a lot to actually wake up Koutarou, but Ruth always did her best to be polite and considerate.

"You're going to catch a cold sleeping like that, Satomi-sama..."

Koutarou always laid out his futon in the center of the room, but right now he was asleep in front of the wardrobe without so much as a blanket. He was lying on his back in just his pajamas. After entering the room safely, Ruth considered it her second job to cover Koutarou with a quilt.

"Eeek!"

But when she walked over to him, she nearly screamed.

"...I'll never get used to seeing that..."

Managing to hold it back, Ruth smiled wryly as she tucked him in from the waist down.

"Zzzzz..."

Sanae's blissfully sleeping face was sticking out of Koutarou's chest. It was almost as if Koutarou's pajamas had an image of Sanae in her nightcap printed on them, but it was indeed the real Sanae. She was just sleeping inside of Koutarou's body. That was the startling sight that had almost made Ruth scream.

“ZZZzzz... ZZZzzz...”

“Zzzzz...”

Koutarou and Sanae’s snores rang out in a strange harmony. Lately, Sanae had been complaining about feeling cold, so her solution was to sleep inside of Koutarou. This was a new thing, but apparently it was quite comfortable. Ever since she first tried it, it had become her favorite place to sleep.

Although Sanae was fond of it, her new sleeping spot didn’t sit well with the others. The only thing sticking out from Koutarou’s body right now was her face, but her limbs would poke out every now and then. It was a disturbing thing to see, almost like Koutarou had suddenly grown an extra set of girlish arms or legs. Koutarou was also sometimes startled by the sight when he woke, and he made sure Sanae knew it. Of course, Sanae showed no sign of doing anything about it. Whenever she saw an opening, she would enter his body to sleep.

“This is a little better than normal, but this is still bad for my heart...”

After she put the quilt back over him, Ruth smiled again and headed into the kitchen.



Normally Kiriha would arrive shortly after Ruth did, and then the two of them would prepare breakfast together. However, for one reason or another, Kiriha hadn't shown up yet, so Ruth was fixing it on her own.

"Hmm, so you made breakfast alone today? It looks delicious."

"Thank you very much, Sanae-sama."

Ruth smiled at the praise as she served the meal to the tea table. Rice, miso soup, broiled fish, and natto—all of Sanae and Koutarou's favorites.

"Yeah, it looks great. So why don't you get out of me so I can enjoy it too, Sanae?"

"Nuh-uh!"

Even though it was time to eat, Sanae refused to leave Koutarou's body. She playfully giggled with her face sticking through his chest.

"Come on now..."

"If you hate it that much, then chase me out! Come on, I dare you!"

Sanae reached her arm out from Koutarou's body and poked his face. She was only able to enter Koutarou's body after the two of them had started getting along. She knew it wouldn't be possible otherwise, especially if he really hated it, and she used that as ammunition to tease him.

Heeheehee, Koutarou loves me after all!

If Koutarou had truly accepted her, then going all out was only courtesy. Sanae's actions were merely an expression of her love.

"I agree with Koutarou, Sanae. Can't you at least cut it out during breakfast? Seeing you like that makes me lose my appetite."

"Yeah, Sanae-chan, at least give us a break with the paranormal phenomena this early in the morning."

However, Sanae's affectionate gestures were unpopular with Theia and Yurika. Seeing a face sticking out of someone's chest was rather unappetizing.

"That's right, Sanae. Do you want me to get sick while eating?"

“Ew, that would be gross.”

While Koutarou wasn’t as intent to kick her out as the others were, his desire to eat was also in jeopardy. And since Sanae always shared Koutarou’s senses while he was eating, if he felt ill, it wouldn’t be a pleasant experience for her either.

“So come on out.”

“Okaaay.”

Sanae reluctantly came out from Koutarou’s body and appeared behind his back.

“Sorry for making a fuss during breakfast.”

After apologizing, Sanae clung to Koutarou’s back like she usually did during meals.

When I’m not sleeping, I guess this is better anyway...

As she held on to him, Sanae couldn’t help thinking about it. It was comfortable inside Koutarou, but if she stayed there, she couldn’t have as much fun with him. In the end, she decided she would rather stick to him and mess around with him.

And with Sanae on Koutarou’s back, Yurika’s stomach began growling. Now that the paranormal phenomena had passed, her appetite had returned.

“You really are a pushover, Yurika...” Koutarou said, pointing at her and laughing.

“I-I can’t help it! It’s morning! I’m hungry!” Yurika blushed and frantically made excuses.

“You’re just a glutton,” Sanae interjected in a matter-of-fact tone.

“I guess it’s true you can’t help it, but... Bwahahaha!”

“S-Sorry for you keeping you waiting, Yurika-sama.”

Stifling her laughter, Ruth served Yurika breakfast. Yet even with food in front of her, she was pouting.

“You’re all terrible, treating me like some starved animal...”

“W-Well, you know... If you’re hungry, eat. You can have as many extra helpings as you’d like today.”

“Really?!”

But after what Koutarou said, Yurika’s eyes lit up. Her attitude did a complete one-eighty. “As many extra helpings as you’d like” were magical words to her.

“Bwahahahaha!”

“See? She’s just gluttonous.”

“Y-Yurika-sama, w-would you like a double portion?”

Koutarou was in stitches, Sanae was behind him grinning, and Ruth was nearly frozen trying to keep herself from bursting into laughter. The wooden spoon in her hand was trembling because she could barely contain herself.

“I-It’s not that funny! And I’m not gluttonous! I’m just a growing girl!”

With her pride and her stomach at odds, tears welled in Yurika’s eyes as she did her best to defend herself. It was just another noisy morning in room 106.

Watching the commotion out of the corner of her eye, Theia ate her breakfast in silence. In the eight months that had passed since she first came to Earth, she had gotten quite deft with chopsticks. She gracefully lifted tiny bites of food to her mouth.

“Th-Then there’s no need to hold back! Grow all you like! Wahahaha!”

“The way you’re laughing makes me not believe you!”

“Koutarou, I’m a growing girl too! Let’s eat!”

“R-Ruth-san, I’m also a growing boy, so please give me an extra large portion too.”

“Of course, heehee! Right away!”

However, Theia wasn’t even paying attention to what her breakfast tasted like. Ever since Sanae had gotten on Koutarou’s back, that was all she’d been able to focus on.

I wish...

Theia imagined herself clinging to Koutarou's back. She fantasized about being the one smiling cheerfully and entrusting her defenseless body to Koutarou. And the more she thought about it, the more restless she began feeling.

J-Just what I am thinking...?

When she came to her senses, she looked down in a panic. She couldn't believe she wanted to behave like Sanae.

He's just a vassal! I only need him to swear loyalty to me for my trial! No more, and certainly no less!

Ever since the second princess, Clan, had attacked during the cultural festival, Theia's feelings had begun changing. When she first arrived at room 106, she only thought of Koutarou as a Neanderthal on some backwater planet. She'd just wanted him to swear his loyalty to her so she could return to Forthorthe as quickly as possible. That was all.

Yet as time passed, she found herself truly wanting Koutarou as her vassal. She even smiled on him from time to time at the thought, but she was slowly growing to expect even more of him. Vassal or otherwise, he was always on her side when she needed him to be. It was the first time anyone had ever treated her that way, and that was cause for great confusion. She no longer knew exactly what she wanted from Koutarou.

Theia was lost in thought on the matter and only snapped out of it when one of the tatami mats in the direction she was staring suddenly began moving. It slowly rose up, and a person appeared from underneath it.

"Good morning."

Coming out from under the tatami was none other than Kiriha.

"Good morning. That said, you're awfully late today," Theia said somewhat quietly as she packed her thoughts away for the time being.

"Actually, I had some work this morning."

Kiriha flipped up the mat and entered room 106 with a light step. The two haniwas shortly appeared from behind her.

“Ho! Good morning, ho!”

“How is everyone doing? Ho!”

The haniwas cheerfully greeted everyone as they put the tatami mat back in place. They’d done it so many times, this was now part of their morning routine.

“Good morning, Kiriha-san.”

Koutarou welcomed her, and after everyone had said their greetings, Kiriha sat down at the open spot at the tea table.

“I’m sorry I wasn’t here sooner, Ruth.”

“Not at all. It was a good opportunity for me to test my cooking skills.”

“But why are you late today?” Sanae asked. “You didn’t oversleep, did you?”

If Yurika had been the one late, she wouldn’t have even bothered asking. However, to Sanae’s knowledge, Kiriha had never once overslept. And Sanae wasn’t the only one interested in finding out what had kept her. In fact, everyone except Yurika had stopped eating and was expectantly looking at Kiriha.

“Actually, there’s been some trouble in my hometown, so I spent the morning dealing with that.”

Kiriha was late because she was formulating countermeasures to handle the radical faction after discussing the matter with her father. There was a lot for her to do, including contacting the People of the Earth’s surface branch and giving orders to her direct subordinates.

“By your hometown, you mean the Underground Empire, right?”

“Calling it an empire is a little misleading... but yes, that’s correct.” Kiriha nodded at Koutarou as she accepted a cup of tea from Ruth.

“So something bad happened?”

Koutarou knew that if he asked about the specifics, it would probably be mostly over his head if she answered him at all. So instead, he tried asking something more vague. Kiriha responded with a smile.

“Does it interest you?”

“Well, yeah. If there’s trouble with the Underground Empire, it’s not like it has nothing to do with me,” Koutarou replied with a shrug and a nod.

She seems a little down...

As they talked, Koutarou couldn’t help noticing the look on her face like she was somewhat tired.

“I’m afraid I don’t see how it has anything to do with you.”

“Kiriha-san, you’re not forgetting that you’re also an underground dweller, are you?”

“Ah, I see,” Kiriha said with a smile.

That’s right. I am trying to steal this room from Koutarou for the sake of the People of the Earth, aren’t I?

Kiriha had been so preoccupied with keeping the radical faction from getting out of line that she had nearly forgotten about her original objective. She was invader too, after all, and that’s how Koutarou knew her. Just as he said, trouble in the underground very well may affect him too.

“There’s no need to worry, Koutarou. Nothing will come of it.”

“Then that’s good.”

Kiriha smiled, but Koutarou felt it was different than usual. Her normal smile was much more sly.

I wonder what’s going on...

In truth, Koutarou wasn’t as concerned about what was going on underground as much as he was about how it was affecting Kiriha.

I just hope nothing bad is happening...

Although he found it a little strange to be worried about Kiriha like this, he just couldn’t ignore the way she was acting.

After that morning, Kiriha was busy for the next several days. She often missed breakfast and sometimes didn’t even show up for school. But because she wasn’t explaining what was going on, all Koutarou could do was watch on from the sidelines.

The Muffler and a Part-time Job

Thursday, December 10th

Koutarou awoke that morning to the familiar sound of a kitchen knife chopping and the wafting fragrance of miso soup.

If I'm not mistaken, this is...

When Koutarou opened his eyes, he was in front of the window in the inner room. It seemed he'd grabbed his pillow and rolled over there in his sleep, but like always, he still had a blanket over him.

"Kiriha-sama, it seems we're about to run out of natto."

"All right. I'll buy some more on my way back tonight."

Koutarou could hear Ruth and Kiriha's voices coming from the kitchen. They were no doubt responsible for the chopping noises and pleasant smells.

I see. Kiriha-san's here...

When he turned his head, Koutarou could see the two girls. The past few days, Ruth had been preparing breakfast on her own. Kiriha had only been absent a week, but Koutarou was happy to see her.

"By the way, I finished copying the notes you took while I was away. I'll return them to you later. Thank you."

"There's no need to thank me, Kiriha-sama."

I guess whatever was troubling her has passed...

All Kiriha was doing was standing in the kitchen, but Koutarou was still relieved at the sight for some reason. Things seemed back to normal, and that was enough for him.

"Koutarou... breakfast already...?"

The next thing Koutarou saw was Sanae's face entering his field of vision. She

was sleepily rubbing her eyes.

“No, not yet. You can sleep a bit more.”

“Mm...”

Sanae stretched and sunk back into Koutarou’s body. However, just before she completely disappeared into him, she whispered his name.

“Yeah?” he answered.

“Can you keep your feelings like that for a while? They’re so warm and comfortable...”

“Yeah, I’ll try.”

“Mm...”

And with that, Sanae sank into Koutarou’s body as if she was melting away.

Warm and comfortable, huh?

Thanks to what Sanae said, Koutarou realized he was just welcoming the normal Kiriha back.

Yurika was surprisingly sensitive and had a hard time getting to sleep these days. Allowing a cockroach to invade the wardrobe once had left her deeply traumatized. However, once she did fall asleep, she wasn’t easy to wake up. She and Koutarou had that in common. She could even sleep through everyone else having breakfast and getting ready for school. They often had to leave without her because of it. She had a hard time falling asleep and an equally hard time waking up, much to her roommates’ chagrin. While the former was her problem, the latter was quickly becoming theirs.

“Zzzzz... Zzzzz... Zzzzz...”

“What to do...?”

Koutarou stared resentfully at Yurika, who was currently dead asleep with her mouth wide open. He meant to get her up for breakfast, but no matter how much he shook or poked her, she showed no sign of waking up.

“Why don’t you just leave her be? She’s sleeping because she wants to.”

“No can do. She’s been late to school enough as it is. At this rate, she’ll be have to repeat a grade.”

Up until now, Koutarou had mostly ignored Yurika’s tardiness. It was only after hearing a teacher say she might be held back a year that Koutarou had made it a habit to wake her up in time for school.

“I guess you’re right... So how are you going to wake her up this time, Koutarou? Are you going to slap her again?”

“Hmm...” Koutarou crossed his arms and began thinking.

He’d literally had to slap her awake before, but Yurika had vehemently objected and forbid him from waking her up with violence after that. She’d cried and told him that he would have to marry her if he messed up her face that way, which was enough to give him pause before doing it again.

“If hitting her is out the question, I don’t know what else we’re supposed to do.”

“Me either.”

“Zzzzz... Zzzzz... Zzzzz...”

Oblivious to Koutarou’s dilemma, Yurika was still huddled into a ball fast asleep. Theia, who was peeking into the wardrobe next to Koutarou, poked his face with a handheld fan.

“At least now you understand just how hard it is for us to wake you up in the morning, Koutarou.”

“Shut up, Theia! You have absolutely no problem stepping on me with those heels of yours!”

“Of course I don’t! Without that, you’d never wake up! Besides, a knight being woken up by his princess is unheard of! You should be thanking me!”

“Who said you’re my princess?!”

“You know, someone would normally wake up with this kind of argument going on practically in their ear...”



“Ha-aah... I-I can’t eat any more... Zzz... Zzz...”

But the sleeping Yurika was unfazed. She didn’t so much as twitch at Koutarou and Theia raising their voices. She was still out cold with a contented look on her face.

“So what are you going to do, Koutarou?”

“Zzzz... Zzzz... I-I’m so full it hurts...”

“It hurts, huh? Wait, that’s it!”

Suddenly struck with an idea, Koutarou reached out for Yurika.

“What are you going to do?”

“Just watch and learn.”

Sanae curiously looked on as Koutarou put his hands on Yurika’s face. Of course, that alone wasn’t enough to wake her.

“You’re on your own.”

“Ugh...”

Koutarou used his left hand to pinch her nose and his right to cover her mouth.

“Good plan! This might just work!”

“I don’t think this is that much different from being stepped on with high heels though...”

“Mhm, mmmh, mhhmmmmm!”

Unable to breathe, Yurika began struggling for air. Her expression twisted into a pained grimace and her face began turning blue, but even then, she still wasn’t coming around.

“She’s still not waking up...”

“Wake up, Yurika! You’re gonna be late!”

“At this rate, she’s literally never going to wake up.”

After keeping it up for half a minute or so...

“Hmmmh?!”

Yurika’s eyes shot open wide and her arms and legs began swinging wildly.

“Mmmmmmmm, mmmmmph! Mmmhhmhhmmm!”

“Whoa, don’t flail around like that. Just hurry and wake up, Yurika! You’re gonna be late again!”

“Mmmmm!”

“Koutarou, don’t you think she’s already awake?”

“You think? Are you sure? If she was awake, she’d have said something by now.”

“Then let’s keep it up a while longer just in case.”

“Mmmmm! Mhmmm-mmmmm!”

After that morning, preventing Yurika from breathing was also added to the list of forbidden techniques for waking her up.

“Satomi-san, you have no sympathy!”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t realize you couldn’t speak because your mouth was covered.”

“How could you not realize that?!”

Yurika slammed her fists down on her desk. Normally she was timid and gentle, but with her life at stake, she couldn’t help getting worked up. She was being loud enough that her angry voice echoed through the classroom. Wondering what was going on, several of their classmates stared at Koutarou and Yurika.

“You should just wake up easier.”

“Couldn’t you just find some other way to wake me?!”

“No. That’s why I did what I did. Or would you rather be late next time?”

“Ugh...”

That put an end to Yurika’s protesting. She honestly wasn’t sure if she’d

rather be suffocated or be late to school.

“If you miss any more classes, you might have to repeat a year, right?”

“Ughhh....”

Th-That’s unfair! Satomi-san is unfair!

Yurika understood that Koutarou was seriously worried about her. He didn’t remember it, but not too long ago, he’d sincerely told Yurika that he wanted to graduate with her. That’s how she knew now that Koutarou’s intentions were good. Yurika was convinced of that. She had no problem with his motive or goal. Just how he was going about achieving it.

“Satomi-san, no matter how worried about me you are, there are some things you just can’t do! That was just too much!”

Recently, the feelings that Yurika projected around Koutarou had started to change. In the past she had no problem voicing complaints and being selfish, but now all of that was tempered by something else.

Satomi-san, even though you’re kinder than anyone I know, you’re just not being honest!

She was unhappy with Koutarou always hiding his true feelings.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry.”

“I’m not saying you should apologize! I just want you to be more honest!”

Koutarou and Yurika’s loud argument continued. Watching the two of them from afar, Kenji leaned over and asked Shizuka about it.

“Kasagi-san, what’d Kou do this time?”

“Well, you see, Satomi-kun and the others were worried about Yurika’s tardiness, so Satomi-kun tried to get her up for school by covering her mouth and pinching her nose...”

Shizuka neglected some of the finer details, including that Koutarou and Yurika lived in the same apartment.

Now that I think about it, it’s a little strange that nothing indecent has happened... Well, I guess that’s Satomi-kun for you.

Shizuka looked at the two of them arguing and smiled.

“He never changes, does he?”

After Shizuka’s explanation, Kenji recalled a school excursion back in middle school where Koutarou had gotten up in the middle of the night to play pranks on his classmates. In addition to pinching people’s noses, he would draw on their faces or strip them. And when Koutarou finally went to bed, he rolled around the room in his sleep. It led to full-blown pandemonium.

“Then how am I supposed to wake you up?”

“Ugh...”

“If I can’t hit you and I can’t plug your nose, then all that’s left is to pour a bucket of ice water on you.”

“Wouldn’t boiling water work? Kiriha and Ruth boil water when they’re making breakfast anyways, so we could just use that,” Sanae volunteered.

“I’ll take the ice water! Anything but boiling water!”

“You sure are picky, jeez...”

Koutarou looked at Yurika with an exasperated expression. She’d started crying.

“Satomi-kun, Nijino-san.”

Kiriha approached the two of them with a small smile on her lips as she tucked her phone back into her pocket.

“There’s something I’d like to ask you to do,” Kiriha said in a tone of voice conducive to the model student act she put up at school.

“I don’t mind.”

“Wh-What is it?”

Koutarou jumped at the chance, but Yurika had to rub her eyes to hide her tears from Kiriha.

“Actually, on Sunday—two days from now—I was wondering if you could help me with a part-time job.”

“A part-time job?”

It was a most unusual request.

The youth department of the neighborhood association was planning a hero show starring the local heroes Harukaze Man and Kisshou Lady. It was taking place as part of a series of events for the anniversary of Harukaze Kindergarten. Pulling it off, however, would require a lot of volunteers. There was plenty of work to be done: everything from creating the stage, outfits, and props, all the way down to managing the staff and the event itself. Because of the manpower required, the youth department alone wasn’t enough, and they were looking for volunteers.

That led them to Kiriha, who had been actively helping out the community as of late. After hearing she’d participated in a play during a school cultural festival, she sounded like a godsend. They turned to her for help, and since Kiriha was eager to ingratiate herself with the locals, she happily accepted. The only hitch was the timing. It was such short notice that Kiriha couldn’t gather enough of the underground dwellers stationed on the surface to help out, so she ended up having to ask Koutarou and the others.

“So you want us to appear in a hero show?”

“Yes. I’ve asked my acquaintances, but most of them have no stage experience... In that respect, you all have the play from the cultural festival going for you.”

Kiriha had an apologetic look on her face. She felt badly for springing something so sudden on them.

“I see. Yurika-chan in particular acts like she lives in a hero show, so she’s perfect for the job,” Shizuka said while nodding emphatically.

Before Koutarou even realized it, the usual group had gathered around him and Yurika. The master and servant from Forthorthe as well as Shizuka and Kenji had come over, and Sanae had been clinging to Koutarou’s back from the start. That made for everyone, and they all listened in on what Kiriha had to say.

“All right! Mission accepted! You just leave it to us, Kiriha!” Theia loudly announced.

Her eyes lit up and she proudly pounded her chest. Although it might only have been a hero show for kids, a play was a play. It was the perfect chance for her to train Koutarou some more.

“Koutarou and I will leave those children speechless with our magnificent acting!”

“J-Just wait a moment, Theia! You’re helping too?”

“Rejoice, Koutarou! We’ll begin more special training starting tonight!”

Theia’s eyes sparkled as she stared down Koutarou. Seeing that, Koutarou remembered his hardships preparing for the cultural festival.

“Special training?! I have relive that nightmare again?!”

With the first round of “special training,” he woke up to Theia’s face every morning, and she dominated his life. The bathroom was his only sanctuary. Not allowed to rest for even a moment, he spent his days being hounded by Theia until he passed out from exhaustion. Theia, however, was unrelenting and would stay with him from the moment he woke up to the moment he passed out. Her special training was so harsh, it made even the athletic, energetic Koutarou feel like his life was a living hell.

“There’s no need to worry, Koutarou.”

Theia had an angelic smile on her face as she spoke—one that was sweet enough to enchant the frightened Koutarou and give him hope. But it was short-lived. It soon faded into the twisted grin of a demon.

“Whether you’re a gentle soul or evil incarnate, I will personally train you! You’ll blow away everyone on that stage two days from now!”

“I don’t want to! *I’ll* be blown away before then!”

“There’s no need to be scared, Koutarou.”

Theia approached Koutarou with a glint in her eye. She grew closer and closer, her fingers wiggling as she plotted how best to grab Koutarou.

“I won’t appear in the show!”

“I won’t let you refuse!”

Koutarou shook his head vigorously, but Theia wasn’t going to back down. And she certainly wasn’t about to let him.

“I don’t want to! I’ll be knitting instead!”

“I just said I won’t let you refuse!”

Theia’s willful insistence overwhelmed Koutarou and silenced his protests. When she got close enough, her twitching fingers finally snatched ahold of him.

“Everything—down to your smallest bone and your last drop of blood—belongs to me! I won’t accept any argument! You won’t have a single day of rest until you step onto the stage as the Blue Knight once more!”

“Noooooooo!”

The Forthorthe Galactic Empire’s seventh princess, Theiamillis Gre Forthorthe, was again smiling in a graceful manner befitting of interstellar royalty. Almost everyone present was in awe at her majesty.

“...If she could just be honest with herself normally, it would be much easier...”

Only Ruth, who had grown up alongside Theia, was watching over them with a cheerful grin.

As Koutarou pushed the button a second and then third time, a red flame appeared inside the old kerosene heater. The aged machine had been used by the knitting society for several years. It was vastly inferior to newer models, but it was more than enough for a club currently only consisting of two memebers. And with winter in full swing, it was a necessity for their club activities these days.

Koutarou turned a dial on the heater and adjusted the output. As he did, the flame changed from red to blue, and the amount of smoke reduced drastically. After making sure everything was in working order, he returned to his seat.

“Thank you, Satomi-kun.”

“It sure is cold today.”

“It really is. The mornings have been especially cold recently.”

Koutarou and Harumi smiled at each other. They were sitting close together in front of the heater. Knitting got much harder when it was cold enough to make your fingers stiff, so the two of them naturally inched closer to stay warm by the heater.

“You sound like an old lady when you say that, Senpai.”

“Satomi-kun, jeez...”

Harumi’s knitting needles clicked away as she worked, and she smiled happily. Although she was normally uncomfortable around men, she had no problem being close with Koutarou. And it wasn’t just being physically close. She also felt like they had gotten closer relationship-wise.

“We are knitting, you know.”

“That’s true. This makes us both look like old ladies, heh heh...”

They laughed together as they showed each other their work. In the winter cold of December, most of the other clubs had lightened their activity schedules for the season, so their laughter echoed throughout the mostly empty club building. When she regained her composure, Harumi stared at Koutarou’s hands.

“Now that I think about it, that muffler certainly has gotten a lot longer.”

Koutarou was hard at work knitting a muffler. At first he’d only been working on it to practice, but once it reached a certain length, Harumi suggested he turn it into a wearable piece.

“It’s all thanks to you.”

“Would you mind letting me see it?”

“Not at all.”

Koutarou set down his needles and presented her with a plastic bag containing most of the muffler.

“It might be a bit too long to use practically.”

Harumi pulled the muffler out from the bag and spread it out on a desk. Just as Harumi said, it had gotten quite long. Koutarou had been working on it since spring, and it was now almost ten meters from end to end.

“Not too much of it useable though.”

However, the quality of the muffler varied. Since Koutarou had started it for practice, the first part of it was made from all kinds of knitting techniques. His skills left a lot to be desired back then, so that end of the muffler stood out in a bad way.

“Only the last part of it could actually pass as a muffler.”

That said, after knitting for eight months, even clumsy Koutarou had managed to improve. The last meter or so of the muffler was quite beautifully made.

“Oh, that’s not true.”

Koutarou didn’t think highly of his craftsmanship, but Harumi saw it differently.

“I love this first part.”

Harumi smiled as she gently patted the beginning of the muffler.

“It shows, more than anything, just how hard you’ve worked.”

When Koutarou first began knitting, he moved his needles in an awkward fashion, but he was desperate to do his best. The beginning of this muffler was the result of that determination. Harumi, who had been watching him from the start, couldn’t imagine it being worthless. Rather, she felt quite the opposite. To her, it was the most precious part.

“You’re the only one who would say that, Sakuraba-senpai.”

“Heehee... I know you did your best, Satomi-kun.”

That’s right. I’m the only one who understands the true value of this muffler. It holds my and Satomi-kun’s memories...

The real reason Harumi prized the muffler so highly was all the memories that had been knitted into it over the months.



Just looking at a specific part of the muffler reminded Harumi of the days it had been made. The very first part called to mind meeting Koutarou and him joining the knitting society. She remembered how happy she was to have found a companion. When she touched the next part, she remembered the sports festival. She and Koutarou had entered together and actually won. The next part brought to mind summer vacation when she'd run into Koutarou at the beach by chance. At that point, Harumi had started to develop feelings for Koutarou.

Starting with the next part of the muffler, Koutarou's skills had improved and he started trying out various techniques. By then, the cultural festival was upon them and they were practicing on stage together. That was about the time Harumi became certain of how much Koutarou meant to her, and things had only gotten better since then. With Yurika's help, she'd even gotten to go out and play with Koutarou the other day. To Harumi, the muffler was a symbol of the time she'd spent with him.

"Mackenzie keeps telling me I should be ashamed of myself as a man for this," Koutarou said as he looked at his knitting.

"Well, it's true that most normal men wouldn't understand it."

Seeing Koutarou's shoulders droop despondently, Harumi began giggling.

"...Are you saying I'm not a normal man?"

"No, that's not what I meant. Really..."

But I understand, Satomi-kun.

While Harumi was amused at the potential misunderstanding with Koutarou's best friend, she also took pride in that fact that only she knew the true value of his work.

"I guess I'll have to pull a fast one on Mackenzie and give him this first part of the muffler as a Christmas present."

"Y-You can't, Satomi-kun! That would be such a waste!"

Koutarou and Harumi's laughter again echoed from the knitting society's club room. The distance between them had shortened by the length of the muffler.

After a good laugh together, Koutarou began knitting once more. Harumi took up her needles again too, but they continued to talk as they worked.

“And then Yurika started crying.”

“Nijino-san wanted a different role during the school play too.”

When he had first started in the spring, Koutarou couldn’t even knit and talk at the same time. But after a few months of hard work and practice, he managed to get better at multitasking. Harumi had used that time to get used to being alone with Koutarou and get better at striking up conversation.

“That said, she made a pretty good horse.”

“Teehee... Oh, poor Nijino-san. It’s a shame that her desires and her talents don’t match up better.”

Currently, Koutarou and Harumi were talking about the part-time job offer that Kiriha had presented. Yurika was a mutual friend, so talking about her naturally led to the hero show since she was going to be involved too.

In the end, Kenji, Koutarou, and the rest of the Corona House crew were all recruited for the hero show. Since the youth department was obsessed over the star of the show, Harukaze Man, they hired a professional actor for his part. That left the remaining roles to Koutarou and the others.

Kiriha, who had brokered the arrangement, would be playing the lead female villain, Black Rose. Her tall stature and good looks made her perfect for the part. Koutarou would be playing her subordinate, Baron Demon. He was a charismatic but cruel man who committed all kinds of nefarious deeds alongside his horse, Jet Black King. Since the only two boys they had were Koutarou and Kenji, Koutarou had gotten the part because of his larger build.

And as for his loyal steed and partner in crime, Jet Black King, that job fell on Yurika. She’d already mastered the part of a horse’s rear during the school play, so they were sure she would be great to try playing a whole horse. She pleaded for a different role, but since there was no one else to take up the horse, she ended up stuck with it. She was praised for a job well done during the cultural

festival, but she was still in tears at this development.

Theia landed the role of Princess Devil. She was the evil mastermind plotting world domination behind Black Rose and Baron Demon. Since Baron Demon had to swear his loyalty to her, Koutarou vehemently protested against her casting. He wanted Shizuka and Theia to trade roles, but since it would be hard to replace Shizuka, his request was denied. Shizuka was set to be Harukaze Man's partner, Kisshou Lady. It was a choreographed role, and Shizuka had the most experience with martial arts. There wasn't really another option, and so Theia ended up playing Devil Princess. Koutarou cried.

Ruth would be playing a random civilian. While it sounded like an easy job at first, she had to shriek when Baron Demon showed up, deliver a few lines, and then help get the crowd fired up for Harukaze Man's appearance. It turned out to be quite the technical role, and Ruth was chosen for her fastidiousness and politeness.

Kenji would be playing the host of the show, both because his charming persona would go over well with the kids and their mothers, and because he was quite sure Koutarou—the alternative—would be terrible at it. Improvising and getting a crowd's attention were both strong suits of Kenji's. Koutarou complained about this casting as well, but again, nobody listened.

As a ghost, Sanae would be in charge of special effects and helping Koutarou with his lines. Since nobody else could see or hear her, she made the perfect prompter.

"So what role did you get, Satomi-kun? The lead again?"

"No, this time I'm a bad guy. I'm playing a heartless villain called Baron Demon."

Koutarou pulled out a script from his bag and flipped through the pages.

"Satomi-kun as a heartless villain...?"

Harumi tilted her head to the side. She didn't see Koutarou as a villain. He was a bit mischievous, but she just couldn't imagine him doing anything evil. This piqued her interest in the hero show.

“I’m free on Sunday, so maybe I should come watch.”

“You’re more than welcome to. Everyone—”

Koutarou was about to invite her, but he was interrupted by a playful grin creeping across his lips.

“Or instead, Sakuraba-senpai, why don’t you come participate in the show too?”

“Me?!”

Harumi was shocked by the unexpected proposal.

“Yes. We’re actually still short-handed, so the script has to be adjusted. If you joined us though, I think we’d finally have enough people.”

In the original version, there was one more character. The civilian Ruth was playing had a boyfriend. But because they were lacking people, Kenji had to act as the host instead since it was a more important job. That left the boyfriend role unfilled, so the script had to be rewritten accordingly. However, if Harumi joined in, they could fill all of the roles. Harumi and Kenji would play the civilian couple, and Ruth would become the host. That way, they could still use the original script.

“B-But Satomi-kun... you can’t just spring something like that on me.”

Harumi, shy by nature, was perplexed at the sudden offer to appear in front of a crowd. She’d only had the courage to get on stage during the cultural festival because she was acting with Koutarou.

“You’ll be fine. We all just heard about it today too. And if I’m not mistaken, the role I have in mind isn’t that hard, Sakuraba-senpai.”

Giving the puzzled Harumi a moment to think it over, Koutarou merrily flipped through his script. In the original version, the civilian girl’s main job was mostly just to scream as she was being kidnapped. It wasn’t a very complicated role. It was only when the boyfriend character was cut that she had to take all of his lines, making it a more complex part. But with Kenji playing the boyfriend, Koutarou wasn’t all that worried.

“B-But... I don’t know if I could do it...”

Despite Koutarou's reassurance, Harumi just couldn't picture herself getting kidnapped and screaming. She was worried she might come down with a terrible case of stage fright again.

"What is this popular actress saying?" Koutarou laughed and teased the hesitant Harumi.

After the cultural festival, her popularity had skyrocketed. People originally thought she was cute, but after her masterful performance during the play, she became something of a celebrity at Kisshouharukaze High School. Since she wasn't all that fond of the attention, it actually made her life a little harder. In fact, the other students obsessed over her so much that they completely overlooked Koutarou, who had played the lead alongside her, and his life had carried on like normal.

"You only need to flirt with Mackenzie a little before being kidnapped by me. Then you just need to scream some."

"Screaming after being kidnapped by Satomi-kun..."

After hearing that Koutarou would be the one to kidnap her, Harumi began fantasizing.

"Gahahahaha, what a good woman! I'll make you my wife!"

"Noooooooo! Someone save meeeee!"

Wearing dark, spiked armor, Koutarou would laugh as he kidnapped her in front of everyone.

That sounds a bit fun...

Unconvinced until now, Harumi began changing her mind. After imagining it, it might be fun after all, as long as Koutarou was the one kidnapping her. Besides, she often read books to the children at the hospital, so her performing in a hero show at the kindergarten would be like a dream come true for them.

"If that's all, then I should be able to..."

"Really? Please say you'll help us out!"

When Harumi agreed, Koutarou jumped out of his chair in excitement. He then whipped out his phone and called to give Kiriha the good news right away.

“A hero show, huh? Heehee...”

Harumi smiled as she watched Koutarou on the phone. She was unsure about the whole thing mere moments ago, but now she was looking forward to the show just two days from now.

The Intentions Behind the Invasion

Sunday, December 13th

The morning of the performance was blessed with lovely weather, and with that, the anniversary celebration for Harukaze Kindergarten began. The events being held for it included class visits and a game tournament. The hero show was scheduled as something of a halftime show during the tournament, which meant that Koutarou and the others wouldn't appear until that afternoon.

"Now then, everyone, it's time for what you've been waiting for! Harukaze Man!"

Ruth's voice sounded out from the speakers. But there was still no one standing up on top of the stage the youth department spent an entire night building.

"Let's all call for him together! Haaaruuukaaazeee Maaan!" Ruth encouraged the children.

"Haaaruuukaaazeee Maaan!" they all cried in return.

The next moment, there were a couple of small explosions at the sides of the stage that filled it with smoke. When it cleared, there were now three people standing on stage: Koutarou, Theia, and Kiriha, all in costume.

Koutarou was wearing a suit of pitch black, spiked armor with a mantle. Theia was wearing a formal black dress with bat wings on her back. Kiriha wore a kimono similar to her usual outfit, but this one was embellished with flashy black roses on it, and her hairpiece was fashioned after the thorns of a rose. The three costumes were courtesy of the high school's cosplay society, and they had each been designed with their respective villain in mind.

Theia stood in the center of the stage, her arms crossed and her head cockily thrown back. Koutarou and Kiriha stood on either side of her. The children of the kindergarten had been impatiently waiting for their hero, but these three

mysterious people had appeared instead. Many of the children stared on with their tiny mouths gaping in awe. Theia smirked as she looked out over the children and waved around a long cane.

“Too bad, kids! Your beloved Harukaze Man isn’t coming! That’s because we, the Underground Empire, have defeated him!” she shouted loudly.

After hearing what Theia said, the children were shaken. Their hero had been defeated. That was impossible. They wanted to believe it was a lie, but right in front of them where their hero was supposed to be instead stood the evil trio. The children were stricken, and quite a few began crying.

However, one courageous boy stood up.

“That’s a lie! You’re lying!” With tears in his eyes, he pointed at Theia and shouted, “I won’t fall for a lie from some tiny little shrimp like you!”

“What did you just say, you brat?!”

Tiny shrimp. Hearing that phrase, Theia lost herself and got angry for real. Since she was self-conscious of her height and sex appeal, those words were humiliating to her, even if they were only coming from a kindergartener.

“Do you have any idea who you’re talking to?”

Theia’s hair wildly bounced back and forth as she stamped her foot and threatened the boy with a sharp glare. The boy who was the target of her aggression froze and gulped hard.

“This is bad, Koutarou! That’s not acting!” Sanae, who had memorized everyone’s lines, warned Koutarou.

“Hey, what are you doing, Theia? He’s just a kid. Calm down,” Koutarou whispered as he lightly pulled on her dress to get her attention.

“Shut up!”

But it was too late. Theia had really lost it. She ignored Koutarou and swatted his hand away. Her attention was entirely focused on the young boy in the crowd.

“I’ll show that rude little twerp—”

“When we get home, I’ll play games with you for as long as you want.”

Fortunately, Theia was much more receptive to Koutarou’s second attempt. Her temper tantrum ceased and she slowly turned towards him.

“Y-You better not be lying...”

“Of course not.”

Jeez, just how offended were you...?

Seeing the tears that had started to form in Theia’s eyes, Koutarou thought it would be best to do whatever she wanted to placate her.

“All right. But you’d better not go back on your word.”

Theia held her anger in and returned to normal. Sensing that, Kiriha ad-libbed a few lines to get the play back on track.

“Princess Devil, leave this to your faithful servants Black Rose and Baron Demon. We’ll show this kid that there are no heroes.”

“Very well. I’ll leave it to you.”

“Understood. Go, Baron Demon! Show these kids that Harukaze Man is no more!”

“Leave it to me, Princess Devil and Black Rose!”

Thanks to Kiriha’s quick wit, the quickly derailing show was now back on track. Koutarou let out a sigh of relief, then and jumped off the stage according to his stage directions and approached the seats reserved for the children’s guardians.

“You there! Come with me!”

He grabbed the arm of a girl who was sitting there and pulled her out of her seat. It was Harumi.

“Kyaaaaaaaah!”

She let out a terrified scream, but she couldn’t help the soft look of affection in her eyes as she watched Koutarou.

“Harumi-chan! Let go of my girlfriend, you villain!”

As Koutarou was dragging Harumi away, Kenji—pretending to be her

boyfriend—jumped up from the seat next to hers and flew at Koutarou at just the right time. It was exactly like they'd practiced it.

"Pipe down!"

Koutarou threw out his heavily-armored arm, making a grand display of his mantle. When he did, Kenji was sent flying backwards and landed on his rear. Koutarou and Kenji's coordination was perfect, and everything went just as smoothly as their rehearsal had.

"Kenji-kun!"

"Wahahaha! Too bad for you, youngster! I'm going to make this cute girl my wife!"

I'm going to make this cute girl my wife. Even though she knew it was just a line from the script, Harumi couldn't stop herself from blushing. She became both embarrassed and happy. Her heart was throbbing.

"Argh, is there no justice in this world?!"

"That's right! Justice died alongside Harukaze Man! Come, Jet Black King!"

"Neigh!"

Impersonating a black horse, Yurika came running in from the side of the stage while neighing. She was playing Baron Demon's companion, Jet Black King, and she was doing it perfectly. To the kids there, she looked like a real horse.

"Today marks the beginning of the age of evil! Harukaze Man is a thing of the past!"

"Save meee, Kenji-kuuun!"

"Harumi-chaaan!"

"Jet Black King, to the wedding hall!"

"Neigh!"

"How cruel! What atrocious injustice! How could this happen?! Is Harukaze Man really gone?!"

Ruth's voice echoed throughout the kindergarten. The children were sweating

and waiting with bated breath for the conclusion. From here, the supposedly dead Harukaze Man would appear and vanquish Koutarou and the other bad guys. That was the plot of the show. However, for some reason, the hero that appeared wasn't Harukaze Man.

"Let go of that woman, underground people!"

A powerful voice supported by a powerful diaphragm rang out from the back of the venue. It carried through the audience and reached Koutarou and the others on the stage.

Here comes Harukaze Man. Wait, what?

Realizing the voice had come from somewhere different than what they'd rehearsed, Koutarou was confused.

"Koutarou, something's wrong. Look."

"Uh..."

According to the manuscript, Harukaze Man was supposed to appear through the pyrotechnics in the center of the stage while Koutarou was kidnapping Harumi.

"As expected from the underground people. They certainly have unique outfits..."

"Do you have any good looking, manly leaders?!"

"It looks like there's a young one, Nee-chan."

"Is there anything good to eat around here?"

"Why don't you get some of that candy they're handing out over there?"

And what's this? There's five of them...

What further confused Koutarou was the number of supposed heroes that appeared. According to the script, there were only supposed to be two: the man acting as Harukaze Man, and Shizuka as Kisshou Lady. The supposedly defeated Harukaze Man borrowed Kisshou Lady's power to revive, and they would arrive on stage together. But for some reason, now there were five

heroes standing there. And what's more, they were dressed in something more like police uniforms than hero costumes.

"...Satomi-kun, who are those people?" Harumi whispered to Koutarou, equally confused.

"Let me try asking," Koutarou whispered back. He then turned to the newcomers and shouted, "Who goes there?!"

In the original scene, this was where Koutarou was supposed to ask for their identity.

"We have no name to give to the likes of you who would attack a kindergarten! Let's go, everyone!"

"Yeah!"

However, the five declined to answer. Instead, they rushed towards the stage.

"Even though it's our first battle, there's no need to fear! Justice is on our side!"

"Senpai, I don't really get it, but they seem to be heroes," Koutarou said as he turned back to Harumi.

Based on their behavior, that was the conclusion Koutarou had come to. The way they were talking and acting certainly lined up with what you'd expect from a hero in a show like this.

"I wonder if it's some kind of surprise..."

"Maybe there was some unexpected trouble and they had to call some standins?"

Locked in an embrace, Koutarou and Harumi stared at each other. Normally they would be blushing, but in the midst of all the confusion, neither of them had taken the time to appreciate the position they were in.

"This isn't in the script."

"Hmm..."

When Koutarou looked around, he saw that both Theia and Kiriha were just as confused as he was. He then looked to Ruth. As the host, she should have been

told what was going on beforehand, but she just looked back at Koutarou and shrugged her shoulders.

So Ruth-san doesn't know either? Yurika... obviously wouldn't know. I guess the show must go on.

Koutarou ultimately decided to press on with the performance. He couldn't imagine that heroes arriving at this point in the show was unintentional. As long as they had the villains and heroes on stage together now, the show could proceed mostly as planned. Whether this was supposed to be a surprise or it was a last-minute substitution, calling off the show now would only disappoint the children.

"All right, let's continue, Sakuraba-senpai."

"Okay."

Koutarou nodded at Harumi, then winked at Theia and Kiriha. Understanding what he meant, they both nodded in return.

"Mackenzie."

"I know. Leave it to me."

Koutarou was about to signal Ruth and Kenji as well, but the two of them had already taken action.

"Justice hasn't died! Look, everyone! Evil will never prosper!"

"With the absence of Harukaze Man, this mysterious group of five has appeared! Are they messengers of justice, or have they gotten ahead of themselves? For the time being, let's all cheer for them!"

Kenji and Ruth rallied the spectating children. Thanks to them, the kids were able to overcome the shock of Harukaze Man's defeat and cheer for the new heroes.

"You can do it!"

"Beat up those bad guys!"

"Leave it to us! Justice always wins!"

As the group of five ran through the center aisle to get to the stage, they were

showered with cheers from both sides of the crowd. And as they approached, differentiating the five of them got easier.

“I’m all fired up!”

The one running in front was a short-haired young man. Based on his appearance, he seemed to be the athletic type like Koutarou.

“Let the games begin!”

Behind him was a shorter boy who looked even younger than Koutarou and the others. He had a round face and large glasses.

“Where are the handsome leaders?!”

The third was the only lady in the group. She gave off the impression of being a strong-willed woman with her long, black hair and thick eyebrows.

“This candy isn’t all that good.”

The fourth was much heftier than the others. As someone might guess from his appearance, he was a man of voracious appetite. Even as he ran, he was holding on to a bag of candy. It was the same kind that was being handed out to the children during the event.

“So this is a fight!”

The last one was a man with long hair and shades, but both his hairstyle and sunglasses seemed a little outdated. He looked like the overly-motivated teacher type that would appear in old shoujo manga.

“They all seem to be old-fashioned characters, but I guess that’s just about right for a hero show.”

“Did you say something, Satomi-kun?”

“It’s nothing, Senpai. Let’s get up on stage too. You got that, Yurika?”

“Okay.”

“Neigh!”

Koutarou, Harumi, and Yurika hurried back on to the stage from the crowd. If they weren’t there before the heroes made it, it could really throw off the dialogue.

“Hooo!”

The group of five cheered and climbed up to the stage in a theatrical fashion. Koutarou held Harumi in front of him like a human shield and taunted the arriving heroes.

“Wahahaha, it doesn’t matter how many of you there are! There’s nothing for us to fear now that Harukaze Man has been defeated!” he blustered.

“Noooooooo! Somebody save meeeee!” Harumi screamed out with perfect timing.

In reality, she personally didn’t want anyone to save her, but she wasn’t going to let her personal desires get in the way of her acting. Her desperate plea for help resounded throughout the venue.

“Curse you! Unhand that woman!”

“Very well. It’s not my first choice to use my future wife as a hostage anyway.”

Following the script, Koutarou put a shackle on Harumi’s ankle and bound her to a nearby pillar. Harumi then tugged on the chains repeatedly to show that she had no way of escaping.

“But it’s not as if I, Baron Demon, need hostages in the first place! I’m the one who defeated Harukaze Man!”

The overconfident enemy relinquishing his hostage was a necessary development for the heroes to turn things around.

I’ll leave the rest to you, heroes!

Now that the stage had ben set, all that was left was for the heroes to shine.

“Go, Baron Demon! Crush this impudent bunch!”

“Baron Demon, let us present their heads to Princess Devil!”

“Understood!”

Right on cue, Koutarou and Kiriha stepped forward while Theia stayed behind them and smiled arrogantly. The decisive battle was about to start.

“All right, everyone, let’s transform!”

“Yeah!”

The group of five seemed to know the drill as well and began their transformation scene.

“Oooh... So they’re going to transform here!” Sanae said, watching in admiration.

Unlike in a TV show, transforming live on stage was a difficult task. They either needed to use a smokescreen or make clever use of their set pieces in order to switch out the actors or have a quick costume change. It took quite a bit of coordination and several people to pull off. The youth department was understaffed for this show as it was, which is why Harukaze Man was supposed to appear on stage already transformed. Despite that, these five new heroes were going for a live transformation. Sanae really was impressed.

“Could it be real actors helping out?”

“That might be it.”

Also impressed, Koutarou and Kiriha stared at the group of five as they all raised their right hands.

“Traaansfooorm!”

They waved their right hands in the air while using their left hands to push a button on their belts. From that position, they moved both of their hands together in a large arc, finally ending up pointing to the right.

“Oh!”

It was a transformation pose so skillfully done that it amazed Koutarou. As someone who was considerably fond of transforming heroes, he had no complaints with their perfect posing.

There was a sudden burst of white smoke that concealed the five heroes. Through it, only their unique silhouettes could be seen moving. And once the wind carried away the smoke, five warriors wearing round helmets appeared. Their outfits were completely different than before. It wasn’t just some clever superficial change. It looked like they’d actually changed costumes. It was a splendid transformation for a hero show. There was just one problem.

“Red Shine!”

“Red Shine!”

“Red Shine!”

“Red Shine!”

“Red Shine!”

“And together, we’re the Sun Rangers of the Sun Squad!”

For some reason, the group of five heroes now posing with background music and pyrotechnics were all wearing the same color.

“Wherever there is love, there is justice! In this world—”

“Quit messing around!”

The moment he saw the transformed heroes, Koutarou abandoned the script and dashed forward. His face was red with rage, and he smacked the Red Shine standing in the center right on the head.

“Wh-What are you doing, Baron Demon-san?!”

“I don’t care! How can you do everything so well and then screw it up at the very end?!”

“J-Just wait a moment, Baron-san! What are you so angry about?!”

“No way! Seriously, what’s going on here?! Do we have five more Yurikas on our hands?!”

“What are you saying, Satomi-san?!”

Of course, Koutarou was angry about their costumes. It was an unwritten rule, or really just common sense for a kids’ show, that each costume should be a different color. And for all five of them to show up wearing red was in such flagrant disregard for the true spirit of a hero show that Koutarou was enraged. It was an especially infuriating surprise after their transformation scene was so well done.

“Why would you ruin all of our hard work like that?! Are you amateurs?!”

“S-Sorry, Baron-san! I’m not really sure why you’re so angry! This is our first time, you know!”

“As if I’d forgive you for just that!”

“Oh no, this isn’t good! All five Sun Rangers are wearing red costumes!” Ruth announced to the crowd, still trying to do her job as the host.

“That’s it, Kenichi!” the female Red Shine whispered to the leader Red Shine. “Baron-san is angry about these suits!”

“I see!”

Thanks to Ruth’s narration, they finally understood why Koutarou had gotten mad. The kids in the audience felt the same way and were now watching the Sun Rangers rather skeptically.

“Sensei, why are those Sun Rangers all red?”

“Which one is which?”

“Maybe there’s only one real one and the rest are fakes?”

“It’s just the worst when you end up wearing the same thing as someone else.”

There was a growing criticism rumbling in the crowd, and the Sun Rangers were quickly losing their support.

“What do we do, Koutarou? The show’s turning into a mess.”

“How should I know? If you have any complaints, let these idiots have it!”

Koutarou was still incensed. Having grown up a fan of hero shows on TV, he couldn’t forgive them for cutting corners(?) on such a critical part of the show. He knew some sacrifices had to be made to pull off a live performance, but the hero costumes certainly shouldn’t be one of them. He couldn’t accept five red Sun Rangers.

“...Despite everything you say, you’re quite picky when it comes to cosplay, Satomi-san...”

Yurika gave Koutarou a dirty look from inside the paper mâché horse, but it was short-lived and soon faded into a smile.

“It looks like Satomi-san might cosplay together with us if it’s from a hero show. I have to tell everyone in the cosclub!”

Yurika’s relationship with the cosclub had been improving recently. In order to graduate from high school, she had to keep her identity as a magical girl hidden. And after the initial trauma of it all, it wasn’t like she hated cosplaying, so she’d finally started to warm up to the idea of it.

“It looks like we should be tempting him with an ancient hero!”

Despite everyone around her being confused, Yurika was having fun now.

“Get lost! I can’t fight with failures like you!”

“Whaaat?! Y-You won’t even fight us?!”

Koutarou’s harsh words shook the five Sun Rangers.

“I don’t even want to talk to you! Scram!”

Shaking with anger, Koutarou turned a cold shoulder on the heroes as he scolded them. When he turned away, the leader Red Shine desperately tried to stop him.

“P-Please wait, Baron-san! We only formed a year ago, and this is our first sortie! If there’s anything wrong, we’ll work hard to fix it!”

“Then go home and fix your suits! Only the leader should be red! I have my pride as a villain, you know! I’m not going to stoop to fighting some loser group like you!”

“But we can’t fix our suits right now!”

With the drama unfolding on stage, a few giggles could be heard in the audience. It soon caught on and the whole crowd erupted into laughter.

“Sun Rangers, hurry up and change! With the wedding looming, Baron Demon is getting impatient!”

Sensing the change in the crowd, Ruth decided to try and play the whole thing off comically. Her quick thinking helped get the crowd fired up again.

“Everyone! Let’s cheer for the Sun Rangers! It’s only a matter of time before Baron Demon loses his temper completely!”

“You can do it, Sun Rangers!”

“Hurry up and change!”

“I don’t know which one’s the old man with sunglasses anymore, but you can do it, old man!”

“Can it, kid! Who are you calling an old man?! I’m only twenty!”

A Red Shine reminiscent of the long-haired man in shades started shouting at a child who began crying loudly in response.

“Waaaaah! M-Meanie Sun Rangers!”

“Oh, that’s not good, Sun Rangers! A hero can’t argue with a child!”

“You idiot!”

Koutarou swung his fist at the tall Red Shine who made the child cry.

“You guys don’t understand anything! You’re scum worse than third-rate heroes! How dare you make a kid cry?! You’re ruining their dreams! You don’t have the right to call yourselves heroes!”

Koutarou reached his limit with the heroes that were ignoring every convention of heroism. It was a nostalgic sore spot for him. Recalling his own childhood admiration for heroes, he couldn’t forgive the Sun Rangers for their completely lacking hero act.

“Baron-san, please wait!”

“Jeez, it’s all your fault he got so angry again, old man.”

“I’m not an old man, Koutaro!”

“Wonderful, Baron Demon-sama! Just wonderful!”

“It looks like Megu-chan’s illness is kicking in again, you guys.”

Seeing the Sun Rangers struggling so hard, Yurika slowly began to feel a sense of closeness with them.

I wonder what this feeling is...

After being yelled at by Koutarou and making kids cry, the Sun Rangers no longer had any heroic dignity left to speak of. Yurika related with the

disheartened aura they were now projecting, but since she'd been growing more positive as of late, she didn't realize it was because that's what it felt like to be a loser.

"Children in the crowd, answer me this! Are these the heroes you wanted?! Or is there someone else?!"

Koutarou's mantle fluttered behind him as he turned and shouted to the children in the audience.

"Is this all that justice has to offer?! Tell me, children! Who should I be fighting?!"

A small child stood up in answer to Koutarou.

"Harukaze Maaan! Help us, Harukaze Maaan!"

In spite of his small size, the young child shouted with all his might. The other children took heart at his courage and began to cheer too.

"Harukaze Man!"

"Hurry up and save that lady! Please, Harukaze Man!"

"The Sun Rangers are no good, Harukaze Man!"

Their cries flooded the venue, and as if their prayers were answered, fireworks exploded on the stage. Two silhouettes appeared through the white smoke and struck poses to introduce themselves.

"Courage! The power of hope within you!"

"Love! The indestructible heart that supports courage!"

"We are soldiers of courage and love!"

The breeze carried away the remaining smoke, fully revealing the two figures.

"Harukaze Man!"

"Kisshou Lady!"

"Evil will never prosper while we still stand!"

Two heroes, a man and a woman, appeared in suits that were quite obviously handmade. The costumes put together by the youth department were of visibly

lower quality than those of the Sun Rangers.

“Harukaze Maaan! Harukaze Maaan!”

Nevertheless, the children cheered for them at the top of their lungs. They were screaming several times louder than when the Sun Rangers had appeared. Even they knew there was more to a true hero than just a costume.

“It looks like you’ve been having your way, Baron Demon!”

“Wahahaha! Have you come to get done in again, Harukaze Man?!”

And with arrival of a true hero, evil could shine. Koutarou composed himself and got back to the script.

“I have returned from hell to defeat you! This time, you’ll be going there!”

“Wahahaha! Telling a demon to go to hell is a funny joke! It seems that you’ve at least gotten funnier after reviving, Harukaze Man!”

Now that Harukaze Man and Kisshou Lady had arrived, the show could go on as planned. By the end, it was a complete success.

“Thank you, Harukaze Man! Kisshou Lady!”

Carried away by her parents, the last child waved her hand as she left. Shizuka and the man playing Harukaze Man waved back and saw the child off.

“Well, this was a huge success thanks to all of you, Kiriha-san, Koutarou-kun.”

Once the children were all gone, the neighborhood association member in charge of the show walked over to Koutarou and the others. Most of them had taken off their costumes and makeup by now, so they had stayed backstage until the coast was clear.

“Yeah, I wasn’t sure what would happen when Harukaze Man couldn’t show up on time, but you managed to keep things going. You were a huge help.”

“What took so long anyway?”

“It’s a bit embarrassing, but the suits being handmade worked against us. When it was almost our time to come out, we realized one of them was torn.”

The man who played Harukaze Man slumped his shoulders. He then removed

his chest piece and showed the back of his suit to Koutarou. The hole had been taped up and covered with the armor—a desperate solution to say the least. They'd caught it just before they went on stage, which was what had delayed their appearance.

"I see," said Kiriha, who was standing next to Koutarou and saw the tear too. She smiled and nodded, then said, "But really, it wasn't us. It was all thanks to the substitutes you sent out."

"Yeah. Those Sun Rangers were a big help."

Koutarou nodded in agreement with Kiriha. The only reason they'd been able to buy enough time for Harukaze Man to appear was thanks to the Sun Rangers. In the end, Koutarou and the others were amateurs, and they weren't confident that they would have been able to fill that much time on their own.

"Huh?" The man playing Harukaze Man looked dumbfounded.

"Weren't the Sun Rangers your friends?"

"What?"

"We were certain you got some of your friends to come help."

"Didn't the neighborhood association recruit them?"

Koutarou and the rep from the neighborhood association each seemed to think the other was responsible for calling in the Sun Rangers. Koutarou and the others assumed that the neighborhood association had prepared standins in case of an emergency, but the neighborhood association assumed that Koutarou and the others had asked more of their friends to help out. It left everyone wondering where they had really come from.

"What does this mean?"

"Your Highness, wouldn't it be best if we asked them directly?"

"That's true."

Koutarou and the others went looking for the Sun Rangers, but they were nowhere to be found on set.

"Mackenzie, do you know where they went?"

Once Harukaze Man appeared, Kenji's character had practically nothing to do, so Koutarou was hoping he might have seen where the Sun Rangers had gone. However, Kenji just shook his head.

"The last time I saw them, they were sneaking off the stage so they wouldn't get in the way of the fight with Harukaze Man and Kisshou Lady. I don't know where they went after that."

After his role was finished, Kenji had enjoyed the hero show alongside the children.

"What about you, Sakuraba-senpai?"

"I don't know either. Sorry."

Harumi shook her head too while blushing slightly. She was staring at Koutarou for the entire fight scene, so she hadn't paid any attention to the Sun Rangers.

"Just who were those people?"

Kiriha finally asked what everyone was wondering, but it left them all scratching their heads.

Meanwhile, the Sun Rangers in question were in the middle of an evaluation meeting. They were trying to sort out the problems they'd encountered during their mission.

"First off, I believe the biggest failure this time was blindly trusting a kindergartener."

An old man with a white beard and lab coat wrote what he had just said on a whiteboard. The whiteboard had been borrowed and brought into the small office for their meeting, which the old man seemed to be leading. There were five other people present, each sitting at a desk and watching the old man at the whiteboard with a serious expression on their face. These were, of course, the Sun Rangers.

"As a result, we ended up intruding on a hero show that had nothing to do with the underground people."

The old man circled the words “hero show” with a red marker.

That’s right. As hard as it might be to believe, the Sun Rangers were real heroes whose actual mission was to fight against the underground dwellers. The Sun Squad was established as a first line of defense against unknown foreign threats, and with the appearance of the mysterious underground dwellers, they finally had their chance to step out from the shadows and into the spotlight.

The Sun Rangers were led by an old man known as Professor Roppongi. Although the Sun Rangers were an elite, secret government task force, they were under civilian control on principle.

“But professor, the detector showed a reaction indicating underground people.”

The shortest out of the five rangers showed a device something like a handheld game system to the old man. The boy’s name was Koutaro, and he was the youngest member of the team.

“About that... This detector doesn’t indicate underground people, but rather the technology they use. It would be rare, but that does mean there’s a chance it might react to something completely unrelated.”

“Which means that not only did we blindly trust a kindergartener, but the detector was also, unfortunately, wrong?”

A second member continued where Koutaro left off. His name was Kenichi, and his short haircut and sharp eyes made him look like a healthy young man. He was also the first Red Shine that Koutarou had hit.

“Precisely. It looks like we’d better reconsider the accuracy of our intel and our detector.” Roppongi nodded at Kenichi as he messed with the detector. “However, regarding the detector, it must be said that its utility has been proven in other districts. Even though there’s a chance for a false positive, we should continue using it.”

In truth, there were squads other than the just the Sun Rangers established to deal with unknown foreign threats. The Sun Rangers just happened to be in charge of this region, but there were several more squads stationed all over the

country. They'd all had success with the detector, which in turn helped them suppress attacks from the underground people in their early stages. Currently, the only reported malfunctions and false readings had come from the Sun Rangers.

"Professor, can't we solve both of those problems with the same method?"

"What do you mean, Hayato-kun?"

The man that Roppongi addressed, Hayato, was a tall guy with long hair and sunglasses. As one might guess from the fact that he was wearing glasses despite being in a dimly lit room, he was a bit of a narcissist.

Hayato smirked and spread out his arms as he answered Roppongi's question, "Instead of taking a child's word for it or trusting in the detector, we should confirm things ourselves."

"I see. That's a reasonable opinion. Very well. In the future, let's double and triple check our results to be certain."

The group of five nodded at Roppongi's words. Seeing that, Roppongi erased what he'd written on the whiteboard. He was planning on moving on to the next topic.

"Now then, as for our next subject..."

"Baron Demon-sama! It's about Baron Demon-sama, right?!"

Interrupting Professor Roppongi was the only woman in the room. Her name was Megumi. She was in her late teens. Her long, black hair and thick eyebrows gave off quite an impression. She looked quite willful even at first glance, but right now she wasn't exercising even the slightest bit of that willpower. Her eyes were sparkling, her fingers were entwined, and her hands were clasped.

"W-Well, yes, but..."

"Ahh, I want to see him again! I want him to scold me with that manly voice of his!"

"M-Megumi-kun?"

Roppongi was a little bewildered by Megumi staring off into space so excitedly. In order to explain, the last of the five rangers finally spoke up.

“Professor, it’s Megu-chan’s illness again. It seems like that villain at the show was just her type.”

And with the last word, the man put another curry-flavored chip in his mouth. This was Daisaku, the largest member of the Sun Rangers. That said, since he was always eating, his body had mostly grown in width rather than height.

“Call it what you want. I’ll have you know that despite Baron-sama’s cool appearance, he had a fire burning inside of him! And even though he was a villain, he was refreshingly reasonable!”

As Megumi sighed and stared off into a daydream again, she fondly recalled her meeting with Baron Demon. She remembered his intense anger as he hit one of the Red Shines and when he severely scolded another one of them for making a child cry. That said, she was remembering these events much more romantically than how they’d really gone down. But she couldn’t help it. The image she’d burned into her memory of Baron Demon was quite different than the real thing. She remembered him with sparkling white teeth and a background of roses blooming behind him.


ホテ

“...Honestly, I can’t keep up with Megumi when she’s like this.”

“Same here. But, fortunately, she’s not the only woman on this planet.”

“Thank god...”

Kenichi and Hayato were of the same opinion on the matter. They both judged Megumi as they looked at her from across the room and nodded at each other.

“Can’t we just leave Neechan to Daisaku-oniichan?”

Koutaro pointed at Daisaku, who was in the middle of handing a handkerchief to Megumi.

“Aaah... I want to get carried away in a bride kidnapping!”

“Megu-chan, your nose is bleeding.”

“Thank you, Daisaku-kun.”

Megumi took the handkerchief from Daisaku and blew her nose. She had gotten overly excited and ended up with nosebleed.

“Do you love Baron-san that much, Megu-chan?”

“Of course! There aren’t many good men like that, I’ll have you know!”

After blowing her nose, Megumi began explaining all the good points to Baron Demon. Daisaku smiled and listened to her without any complaints.

“Daisaku really is good at taking care of others...”

“Yeah, well, you know what they say about nice guys and finishing last.”

Kenichi and Hayato looked at Daisaku with pity in their eyes. He was earnestly listening to Megumi. This pleased Megumi, and her expression brightened up as she continued talking.

“I actually think those two would get along well together.”

“Really...?”

Koutaro believed that Megumi and Daisuke would make a good couple, but unfortunately enough, nobody else agreed with him.

The next topic Roppongi wrote on the whiteboard was only indirectly about Baron Demon. The Sun Rangers were painfully aware now that what they'd walked in on was just a show. What Roppongi wanted to address after the fact were problems that Baron Demon had pointed out.

"Holding back on the costs and rushing the completion of the suits for fear that the underground people would show up soon was a mistake."

His hand moved as he talked, writing "the problem regarding the coloring of the suits" on the board. This was the initial problem that had gotten Baron Demon so angry. The Sun Rangers of the Sun Squad had battle suits made with the most cutting edge technology available. Just by wearing them, their strength was increased fivefold. They could run as fast as any beast and their defenses rivaled steel armor. It was a new era of personal equipment superior to all kinds of bulletproof vests.

However, because of its performance, they weren't exactly cheap or easy to produce. The Sun Rangers had only just received theirs before their first mission. They hadn't had time to customize them yet, so they'd each gone out with the default red suit. That was the real reason there were five Red Shines, and they'd only realized the error of their ways once Baron Demon had pointed it out.

"Thinking about it, with everyone wearing the same color, it's hard to even tell your allies apart," said Kenichi. He waited for the professor to finish writing before he spoke up, but he'd been thinking rather seriously about the problem.

"That's true. Everyone looks the same that way. If, for example, someone got into trouble, it would be hard to tell who needed help at first glance," Hayato said, nodding in agreement with Kenichi.

Since they were government issue, all five suits had the same design. And because they were intended for combat, each ranger was required to wear a helmet that covered their face for protection. That made it even harder to tell each other apart when they were geared up.

The only one they could differentiate at first glance was Daisaku thanks to his large frame. Kenichi and Hayato had similar builds, so it was easy to confuse them, and Koutaro and Megumi were almost the same height. There was a

possibility that not being able to tell each other apart during an important battle could become a big problem.

“Why didn’t you notice something like that right away?!” Megumi demanded with a raised eyebrow and a raised voice. Now that she was done daydreaming, she was back to her normal self.

“You didn’t notice either, Neechan.”

“Megu-chan, you were only able to see Baron-san so angry because we were all wearing red.”

“Hmm, yeah, that’s true...”

However, thanks to Daisaku, Megumi’s stern expression was replaced with a smile.

“Aaah, Baron-samaaa!”

Her anger spent, Megumi withdrew into her own private dream world again.

“Well, Megumi-kun aside, is anyone against coloring the suits to tell them apart?”

“It should be fine. Baron-san and the kids said it would be easier to follow that way too.”

“That’s true. Thinking of our future, it would be great to have the children cheering for us.”

Countries with powerful police forces were always trying to improve the image of their officers. If they could make a good impression with the kids, it would go a long way for public approval. If children even aspired to join the profession, it was surely a sign that their goals to protect the public and maintain peace really resonated with the populace. And while the Sun Rangers weren’t police officers, they worked off a similar mentality.

“But professor, if we can’t tell each other apart, the same is true for the underground people, right? Isn’t it dangerous to distinguish ourselves?”

“Hmm, that is a potential problem. You’re clever, Koutaro,” said Kenichi, a little impressed.

“Heh heh,” Koutaro giggled proudly.

If they could be differentiated by color, their enemies could theoretically devise countermeasures against them individually. Being able to tell the rangers apart was an advantage for both friend and foe alike.

“Then why don’t we change colors from time to time? That way, it won’t matter what kind of plans they come up with.”

However, Hayato easily solved that problem. By swapping colors if necessary, they wouldn’t have to worry about the enemy recording data about them individually. It was a simple but effective strategy.

“Yes, let’s go with that, Hayato-kun. It’s a good method that makes sure only we can seize the advantage.”

And so it was decided that the Sun Rangers would color their suits differently.

“Now then, all that’s left is deciding who gets what color.”

The only problem left was the coloring itself.

“If I’m not mistaken, Baron-san said that the leader is supposed to be red.”

“Okay, so I get red.”

“Wait, Hayato. I should be red.”

Kenichi and Hayato butted heads over who would be the leader. Kenichi wanted it because he was the hot-blooded leader type, and Hayato want it because it was cool. Neither one of them was willing to let go of the title.

“What are you saying? It’s important to remain calm during a fight, Kenichi. That’s practically impossible for a hot-headed idiot like you!”

“Look who’s talking! You think you’re all cool and calm? Did you forget that you made a child cry during the show and made Baron-san angry?!”

That said, the truth was that neither of them had any discernable leadership potential. Regardless, however, they continued to debate the matter without ever reaching a conclusion.

“I didn’t forget! That’s why I won’t make the same mistake again! I’ll show you that I’d make a splendid leader that even Baron-san would recognize!”

“I never would’ve made that mistake to begin with! You’re a narcissist! All you can think about is yourself!”

“Hahh...”

As Kenichi and Hayato continued arguing, Koutaro let out a small sigh. Normally Kenichi and Hayato got along well, but once they didn’t see eye to eye to something, they would never agree. And with the position of leader at stake, Koutaro couldn’t imagine either of them backing down any time soon. Koutaro looked looked to the one with the most common sense for help: Megumi.

“Megumi-neechan, say something to stop them.”

“The forbidden romance between a heroine of justice and a leader of evil! It’s perfect! Just sublime! And in the end, after he’s awoken to the power of love, Baron-sama becomes an ally of justice!”

“Megu-chan, you’re drooling.”

“And then Baron-sama will say, ‘Megumi, you’re so cute!’ Kyaaah!”

However, despite what Koutaro had hoped, he wasn’t able to get any help from Megumi.

“Megu-chan, you’re a lady, so you should at least be a little concerned about your appearance.”

“...This is hopeless.”

“What to do...?”

At that point, Koutaro and Roppongi felt that Daisaku would be good enough as a leader.

Once they had finished cleaning up after the show, Sanae and Yurika dashed out of the kindergarten.

“Come on, Yurika! Hurry, hurry! If we don’t book it, *Magical Girl Love Love Heart* is going to start without us!”

“I know, I know! But this is as fast as I can run!”

They were in a hurry to get home to watch an anime that started at six in the

evening. However, since Yurika wasn't a strong runner, they weren't certain if they would make it in time for the opening theme.

"If you want, I can possess you and force you to run faster."

"N-Noooooo! Anything but that!"

"...So you *can* run faster with the right motivation!"

And yet despite what she'd said, Yurika suddenly took off at an unprecedented speed. The two girls soon left Koutarou, who was seeing them off, in the dust.

"I just hope Yurika doesn't get hit by a car on her way home..."

Yurika's tunnel vision was rather obvious, and Koutarou couldn't help worrying about her as he watched her turn the last corner and lost sight of her.

"Koutarou."

"Satomi-sama, good work today."

"Yeah, you too."

That was when Theia and Ruth approached. Noticing that Sanae and Yurika were already gone, the two girls looked around a little for them.

"Satomi-sama, I can't seem to find Sanae-sama and Yurika-sama anywhere."

"They already went home. Something about an anime."

"...I see. So they're not here..."

Theia cast a glance in the direction of Corona House before turning towards Koutarou.

Koutarou is alone...

Recently, either Sanae or Yurika was always at Koutarou's side. Sanae had been like that for a while, but now Yurika had gotten a lot closer with Koutarou as well. Theia didn't know exactly why, but it seemed Yurika's feelings for him were changing. But between the two of them, it was rare to see Koutarou alone these days.

"When we get home, I'll play games with you for as long as you want."

Theia recalled what Koutarou had promised her during the show. She started to lose her composure thinking about it.

I-If things go well, Koutarou and I could be playing g-games all alone...

Theia was envious of Sanae and Yurika who were a lot closer to Koutarou than she was, so she had no intention of letting this kind of chance slip past her. Right now, there was no Sanae and no Yurika. It was just her and Koutarou. There mere thought of it made her heart pound wildly.

But wh-what should I say in this situation? How can I express my feelings without inviting a misunderstanding?

However, Theia herself didn't fully understand her romantic feelings for Koutarou, and was thusly uncertain how she should act on them. She only had a vague idea about wanting to get along with him. Claiming that her relationship with him was all for the sake of her trial was starting to get in the way of her true feelings. And without a clear goal, there was no way to come up with a clear plan of action.

Your Highness...

Seeing Theia struggle, Ruth flashed a small smile and decided to lend a helping hand.

"Maybe you should try playing games aboard Blue Knight, Your Highness."

"Huh?"

Theia's eyes suddenly snapped wide open. Startled out of deep though, she had completely missed what Ruth had said. Seeing Theia's reaction, Ruth's smile only grew larger.

"Sanae-sama and Yurika-sama are using the TV at home, so you can't play video games in the apartment right now. Instead, you should play games in your room aboard Blue Knight."

It was true. With Sanae and Yurika occupying the TV in room 106, they had no choice but to visit Theia's ship if they wanted to play games together. Theia just couldn't process why Ruth had suggested it.

"Y-Yes..."

Despite her hesitation, Theia nodded, encouraged by Ruth's smile.

Ruth?

Seeing the question in Theia's eyes, Ruth nodded to her and then quickly glanced at Koutarou. Theia followed Ruth's eyes.

"All right. Then I'll come over once I've finished buying food for dinner."

After listening to their conversation and thinking it over for a moment, Koutarou agreed. If he had to play games with Theia and she was aboard her ship, he didn't really have a choice about going. He'd been there countless times for Theia's special training in preparation for the school play and the hero show, so he wasn't especially resistant about visiting.

"Ah..."

Theia finally realized what Ruth had been getting at all along. She quickly turned to look at her, and was met with the sight of Ruth's gentle smile.

As expected of Satomi-sama. He always keeps his promises.

Ruth silently thanked Koutarou in her thoughts over and over again. Ruth was quite sure Koutarou would agree to come aboard once she put it the way she did, but she was still thrilled that things had worked out. Ruth was from a famous family of knights, the Pardomshihas, and was raised to value an oath upheld over all other things. She was elated as it was, but getting to see the radiant smile of her princess was the most joyous reward of all.

If he stays by Her Highness's side, I'm sure he'll be able to protect her...

Looking at Koutarou as a knight, he still had a long way to go. He hadn't learned manners or etiquette yet. However, when it came to his behavior, Koutarou was a man of his word. More so than any knight Ruth had ever met.

To break a sword is nothing compared to breaking the oath sworn upon it. It was a well known knight's proverb from Forthorthe, but Ruth believed it applied to far more than just swords. Even a low-born, common man could be knightly in his honesty and sincerity. Anyone could be trained to become a knight, but honor was another matter altogether.

Satomi-sama, please accept Her Highness...

Ruth's wish wasn't just for Theia's sake, but also for her own.

"In that case, I'm going to go on back now."

"You really do love games, don't you, Theia?"

"That's Princess Theiamillis to you!"

"Yeah, yeah, my dear Princess Theiamillis."

The image of Koutarou and Theia sitting next to each other playing games popped into Ruth's mind. At times they would swear at one another, and sometimes they would try and cheat by messing with each other's controllers. Ruth only wished that she had a place next to them.

Kiriha and Harumi walked over to Koutarou a few minutes after Theia and Ruth had returned to Blue Knight.

"Oh? Where's Landlord-san?"

Since Koutarou was planning on going home together with Kiriha and Shizuka, he was curious where she might be if Kiriha had shown up without her.

"Satomi-kun, it seems Kasagi-san was offered another part-time job," explained Harumi.

"A part-time job?"

Koutarou finally spotted Shizuka in the kindergarten's main office. She was talking with a person from the youth department and a man he hadn't seen before. He was apparently the one that had offered Shizuka the job.

"It seems that a pro was watching today's show," Kiriha said, and from there took over for Harumi and explained in more detail.

Today's show was enjoyable, even in the eyes of a professional. What impressed him the most was Shizuka's work as Kisshou Lady. Knowing martial arts, Shizuka was able to pull off some pretty intense fighting choreography, despite her girly looks. Because of that, she was offered a part in another show that would serve as an audition of sorts.

"Wow, that's amazing, Landlord-san."

“If everything goes well, she’ll be an action star.”

After hearing what had happened, Koutarou was impressed. Harumi threw a few shadow-boxing punches and smiled at him.

“Fighting probably isn’t up your alley, Senpai.”

“I have a knight to defend me, so I don’t need to fight.”

“Leave it to me, Princess Alaia.”

“Teehee...”

“Anyway, that’s why Kasagi-san told us to go on without her.”

“I guess we don’t have a choice then.”

Koutarou giggled a little more with Harumi and then turned to look back towards the office. It didn’t take a whole lot of brainpower to imagine what they were discussing might take a while. Since he needed to stop by the shopping street on the way home, he also knew he couldn’t wait around for her to finish up.

“All right, let’s go home, Senpai, Kiriha-san.”

“Okay.”

“Yes.”

And so the three of them left the kindergarten.

“Well, Satomi-kun, Kurano-san, I live over there, so this is where we part ways.”

Just before the shopping street, Harumi bid farewell to Koutarou and Kiriha. She lived in a different neighborhood, so this was as far as they could go together.

“Okay. I’ll see you tomorrow at school.”

“Goodbye, Sakuraba-senpai.”

“Goodbye, you two!”

Harumi smiled at them and turned to walk down a different street. Koutarou

and Kiriha stopped to see her off. After she waved at them one last time and turned the corner, they began walking again.

“Kiriha-san, what were we going to buy today?”

“Eggs, natto that’s on sale, transparent garbage bags, and vegetables.”

Once it was just the two of them, Kiriha began acting like her usual self. Seeing that, Koutarou felt slightly relieved. Kiriha’s honor student act didn’t quite sit well with him.

Kiriha was normally formal and strict, but she went out of her way to be friendly at school and around other people. Even so, Koutarou preferred the usual Kiriha. He felt more warmth from her that way. He didn’t realize it, but Koutarou had an easier time talking to Kiriha when she was just being herself. And so at times like this when they were alone, he inadvertently became a lot more talkative.

“That’s right, vegetables. Yurika’s skin has been getting rough lately, so let’s feed her lots of vegetables.”

“It’s because she eats all those instant noodles.”

“I know. But when there’s meat on the table, that’s all she eats.”

“Heehee, then let’s try to change things up to make sure she gets her vegetables.”

The same was actually true for Kiriha too. Once Harumi was gone, her face became much more expressive. There were only a few people on the surface she could talk to without hiding her true self, and it wouldn’t be an exaggeration to say that it was limited to the residents of room 106. She couldn’t show any weakness to her subordinates, and she couldn’t express her true feelings to the surface dwellers. In a strange way, she might only have been able to reveal her true self to Koutarou and the others exactly because they were her rivals.

“Oneechan!”

But there was an exception. Kiriha had no problem revealing herself to the children. Perhaps because of their youth and innocence, she felt no need to

hide anything from them. She was honestly herself with them too.

“Today’s Harukaze Man show was amazing!”

“Thank you. I’m glad you liked it.”

“Yeah!”

Kiriha squatted down and patted the head of the young girl that had run up to her. She was the only child of the man and woman that ran the produce stand at the shopping street. Her father was part of the youth department, and she had met Kiriha through her volunteer work. She was also one of the kindergarteners at the school where they performed today.

“I kept it a secret from everybody! That Kiriha-oneechan is part of the evil secret society!”

“Heehee, if you tell anyone the truth, I’ll eat you up!”

“Ahaha, you’re so funny!”

The young girl and Kiriha cheerfully chatted together. Watching her like that, Koutarou’s doubts about Kiriha grew.

Did she really come here to invade the surface?

But Koutarou suddenly found his eyes locked with the young girl’s.

“Hey, Oneechan, who is he?”

At the young girl’s question, Koutarou abandoned his train of thought, squatted down next to Kiriha, and smiled at the girl.

“Now who might I be?”

“Oneechan’s boyfriend?”

“Do I look like it?”

“You don’t!” the girl declared with a smile before bursting into laughter.

Meanwhile, Kiriha glanced over at Koutarou and flashed a mischievous grin.

“He really is my boyfriend though.”

Kiriha grabbed Koutarou’s arm and rested her head on his shoulder. As she did, the smell of fresh flowers tickled Koutarou’s nose. It was the distinct aroma

of the scented oil Kiriha used on her hair.

“Really?!”

The young girl, however, was indeed both young and a girl. The mere mention of the word “boyfriend” made her eyes sparkle. Koutarou, who had caught on from Kiriha’s smile, winked at the girl.

“It’s true. Lucky me, huh?”

“Yeah! Oneechan’s compromising skills are amazing!”

“Compromising?!”

The girl nodded emphatically at the stunned Koutarou.

“Oneechan is so beautiful, why should she settle for such an uncool guy? Is this volunteer work too?”

“Sharp kid...”

Koutarou smiled bitterly at the girl’s harsh appraisal and patted her on the head again. Kiriha, looking quite pleased, cleared her throat.

“Heehee. You see, it’s neither compromising, settling, nor volunteering. Once you become an adult, you’ll understand.”

“You’re so grown up, Oneechan!”

“Just a little bit more than you.”

Kiriha patted the girl’s head with a smile as she stood up. Still holding on to Koutarou’s arm, she pulled him up with her.

“Now then...”



“Are you shopping, Onee-chan?”

The young girl scratched her head. Kiriha nodded at her and pointed towards the shopping street with her free hand.

“Yes. We need to buy some ingredients for dinner.”

“Hey, then come buy something from us! We’ll give you a deal!”

“I was planning on doing just that.”

“All right! Then hurry up, you two! It’s almost time for the evening sale to start!”

“*Really* sharp kid...”

The young girl pulled on Koutarou and Kiriha’s hands, leading them into the shopping street.

As of late, it had been Kiriha and Ruth’s job to do the shopping, so it had been a while since Koutarou last went shopping with Kiriha.

“Oh, Kiriha-chan! Brought your boyfriend with you this time, I see!”

“Kiriha-san, we just stocked some nice tea. If you don’t mind samples, take some with you.”

“Today’s hero show was great!”

“Don’t look at her like that, dear! Sorry about that, Kiriha-san.”

“That’s right! Let those young ones that came with you to volunteer know that I’m looking forward to working with them again!”

As Koutarou walked along with Kiriha, various shop owners and patrons were greeting her. The last time he went shopping with her, he didn’t remember it being like that.

“Thank you very much,” she said and bowed politely to each one of them.

It looked to Koutarou like Kiriha had welcomed this change.

Hmm...

Koutarou watched over her with a mysterious feeling brewing inside of him.

These people being happy to see her was proof that she was blending in well on the surface. Thanks to her volunteer work around the city, she was becoming something of a regular fixture in people's lives. If things continued as they seemed to, Kiriha might someday reveal her true intentions to them as well.

Kiriha called this her preferred method of invasion. At first, Koutarou was stumped about how to go about stopping an invasion like this, but now he truly wondered if it counted as an invasion at all.

Does she really intend to invade the surface?

Koutarou's doubts resurfaced. It only looked to him like Kiriha was peacefully emigrating to the surface. She'd legally obtained a dwelling, bonded with the locals, and formed genuine relationships. Yet when they'd first met, Kiriha was pretty specific about hinting at a hostile takeover by the People of the Earth. She said she wanted to secure their shrine to mass-produce spiritual weapons like her haniwas. That was the whole reason Koutarou objected in the first place. If she'd told him this was what she was planning from the start, he might have cooperated with her.

I'm not even sure if she actually wants that shrine or not...

Koutarou's biggest doubt concerned why Kiriha hadn't seized room 106 yet. Kiriha was smart enough to easily outwit Koutarou. There weren't many girls her age that clever, if there were any at all. If she put her mind to it, she would probably be able to wrap up the fight for room 106 in an instant. It would be easy for her to steamroll Koutarou, Sanae, and Yurika. And when it came to Theia, her approach to everything was so simplistic that there were plenty of ways to take advantage of her. Whether she was scheming or fighting fair and square, Koutarou thought it was odd that she hadn't already come out victorious.

Yet for some reason, Kiriha wasn't getting serious about it. In fact, she even helped Koutarou and the others from time to time. She was there to lend a hand when Sanae was captured by ghost hunters and when Theia was attacked by Clan. Kiriha claimed that she knew the pain of losing something important, but she was more than just sympathetic with her enemies. She straight up went out of her way to help them.

“I was just about to throw away the unsold stuff. Feel free to take it with you.”

“Thank you very much.”

“Rather than throwing it away, I’d be happy if a beautiful girl like yourself ate it! See you later, miss!”

“Koutarou, I got some takoyaki. But we still haven’t had dinner, so could you eat half of it?”

“Yeah, thank you, Kiriha-san.”

Kiriha smiled and presented the styrofoam plate full of takoyaki she’d just gotten to Koutarou. He accepted it from her, but he kept turning the same thought over in his head.

She really doesn’t have any intentions of invading the surface, does she?

What shook Koutarou more than anything was Kiriha’s smile. He just couldn’t believe the smile on her face when she was talking to the children or the people at the shopping street was anything other than genuine. And he certainly couldn’t imagine Kiriha raising a weapon against any of them.

“Hey, Kiriha-san...”

“Yes, Koutarou?”

Koutarou finally decided to talk to her about it. If he asked her seriously, she would definitely answer. Over the past eight months, Koutarou had grown to trust Kiriha enough to believe that.

“Do you mind if I ask you about something that’s been bothering me?”

Kiriha, who was walking next to Koutarou, was stuffing her mouth with takoyaki. When she looked up at Koutarou, her smile suddenly seemed to vanish.

“That depends on what it is, but I’ll answer as best I can.”

As sensitive as she was to other people’s feelings, Kiriha already realized that Koutarou had something important on his mind.

“All right,” Koutarou said with a serious expression on his face. “You never

really intended to invade the surface, did you?”

“Kou—”

Kiriha was so surprised that she couldn’t even finish saying his name out loud. Her eyes shot wide open and remained that way for some time before she slowly began smiling again.

“That’s quite something to ask all of a sudden, Koutarou. To say that I don’t wish to invade the surface...”

As Kiriha spoke, she reached into her pocket with her pale, supple hand.

“Well, you don’t, do you?”

“What makes you think that?”

When Kiriha pulled her hand back out of her pocket, she was holding a small card. It was faded with age, but there was still a hint of a metallic sheen to it that made it look like the kind of promo that would come with a package of candy.

That’s the card I saw her with at the beach, isn’t it?

“You’re far too gentle to do something like invade,” he answered as he stared at what she was holding in her hand.

Kiriha was gentle. She was gentle with everyone. She would try to deny it, but in the end, she just wasn’t the type to hurt others.

“...?!”

Kiriha was speechless for a moment. And after glancing at the card in her hand, she stared at Koutarou.

“What makes you think that I’m not just acting that way to earn your trust?”

Kiriha smiled, but Koutarou could see emotion in her eyes that he never had before. He couldn’t imagine what feelings she might be hiding behind those eyes, but he answered her question without hesitation.

“I feel like I get fooled by words like that all this time. You say things like that from time to time to scare me. And because I’m an idiot, I kept falling for it.” Koutarou smiled wryly. “...Could it be that it would be bad for you if I really

started to trust you?”

Koutarou didn’t have any particular reason to believe that was the reason. He wasn’t clever enough to hash it out for himself. It was more of a gut feeling. Something of a hunch from having gotten to know Kiriha over the past eight months. But Koutarou had faith in his intuition.

“...”

Kiriha looked at him blankly and didn’t answer right away. She stayed silent and looked down her card. Koutarou wasn’t going to try forcing an answer out of her, so the two of them continued walking silently along like that for some time.

“Koutarou.”

Only after they passed the arcade and the sun went down did Kiriha finally open her mouth again.

“Yeah?”

“Can I have some of your time next weekend?”

Countless stars twinkled in the beautiful winter sky.

“There’s somewhere I’d like to show you.”

Lit up by the stars above, Kiriha’s smile shone too.

Reminiscence (Part 1)

Saturday, December 19th

The following Saturday was a beautiful day with clear skies and no wind. Thanks to that, it felt surprisingly warm despite being the dead of winter.

“Koutarou, what about your coat?”

“I don’t need it. It’s hard to move around in, and besides, it’s plenty warm today.”

Koutarou shook his head at Kiriha, who was reaching for his coat. Instead, he picked up a nearby jacket. He was planning on going out in something comfortable.

“I see. Then I’ll do the same.”

As she helped Koutarou put on his jacket, Kiriha smiled gently.

It was now officially the weekend, and because of their promise from last Sunday, Koutarou and Kiriha would be going out together today.

Five pairs of eyes stared at Koutarou and Kiriha as they got ready to go. They belonged to Sanae, Yurika, Theia, Ruth, and Shizuka who had come over to play. None of the five girls were quite sure what they were watching unfold.

Sanae, Yurika, and Theia sat in front of the TV playing a game, but instead of concentrating on the game, they were stealing glances at Koutarou and Kiriha. Ruth and Shizuka sat across from each other at the table having tea. Ruth, however, seemed to be in a bad mood. Her lips were lightly pursed into a frown. In contrast, Shizuka was in a great mood. Her eyes were sparkling as she pretended to drink tea while watching Koutarou and Kiriha.

“All right. Then let’s go, Kiriha-san.”

“Yes. Well then, everyone, we’ll be going now.”

After finishing getting ready to leave, Koutarou and Kiriha moved towards the

front door. None of the remaining five girls so much as moved. Even Sanae, who normally would have made a fuss and asked to go too, was sitting still in front of the TV.

“Kiriha-san, do you need the shoehorn?”

“Thank you. Heh, Koutarou, the heel of your shoe looks like it’s collapsed.”

“That’s why I won’t need the shoehorn.”

However, once they were sure Koutarou and Kiriha had reached the front door, all five girls made a move. They gathered at the other end of the hallway leading to the front door, and one by one, their heads peeked around the corner like an odd totem pole. From the top to bottom was Sanae, Shizuka, Yurika, Ruth, and finally Theia.

“Koutarou, you haven’t forgotten anything, have you?”

“You handed me my cell phone, handkerchief, and wallet just a moment ago.”

“Right, of course. It’s just a habit that kicks in whenever I’m about to leave.”

“That sounds like a really roundabout way of telling me how forgetful you think I am.”

What the group of five saw as they peered around the corner was Koutarou and Kiriha happily getting ready to leave together. And at that sight, four of the five of them were glaring. But the next moment, each of them hurriedly pulled their head back. Koutarou had put his hand on the door and turned around to say goodbye.

“I’m off!”

“See you later!”

It was a close call. If they hadn’t pulled their heads back when they did, they would have been caught.

“Bye!” all five girls called in harmony.

If Koutarou or Kiriha had been paying more attention, it would have been pretty obvious the girls were up to something based on their voices. But neither Koutarou nor Kiriha seemed too concerned about it as they turned back

towards the door.

When they did, five heads reappeared in totem pole fashion again. They watched Koutarou and Kiriha leave the apartment. The twenty-five year old door creaked slightly as it shut behind them. As it did, the five girls lost sight of Koutarou and Kiriha, but they remained where they were for a few more moments, motionless and silent.

“It’s a date! There’s no doubt about it!”

The first one to speak up was Shizuka, the only one of the five that was smiling. As a teenage girl, she had a vested interest in this sort of thing, and her eyes were sparkling with excitement at the prospect.

“When did they end up in that kind of relationship? I’m dying to know!”

She then began muttering her suspicions about Koutarou and Kiriha’s relationship.

“I won’t forgive him for this betrayal when he has Sakuraba-senpai! Th-This is an offense to Sakuraba-senpai *and* me!”

Shizuka was thoroughly enjoying herself, but just below her was Yurika, shaking with anger. The gentle Yurika was—unusually enough—quite outraged. Both her trembling fists were clenched in resentment.

“He’s going on a date with the wrong person! Satomi-san should be going out to play with Sakuraba-senpai and me!”

Yurika felt that if Koutarou was going to date someone, it had to be Harumi. Yet when Yurika imagined Koutarou and Harumi on dates together, she was always with them for some reason. Yurika, however, thought nothing of it and ultimately didn’t understand half the reason she was so angry.

“Koutarou, you stupid idiot! How can you not see all this is part of that woman’s trap?!”

Sanae was also angry that Koutarou had gone out with Kiriha, but unlike Yurika, she was mostly concerned about his safety. She was worried that Koutarou had fallen for her temptations.

“Now that it’s come to this, I have no choice but to expose that woman for

who she really is and protect Koutarou!”

The whole reason Sanae hadn’t gone with Koutarou was because she knew if she did, Kiriha wouldn’t show her true colors. Instead of getting the tail, she wanted to make sure she got the head.

“Ruth, can you track them?”

“I already am. I’m tracking them with Blue Knight’s firing control system.”

The two bottom heads of the totem pole had already jumped into action. They were using Blue Knight’s monitoring systems to keep tabs on Koutarou and Kiriha.

“What’s their current location?”

“They’ve left Corona House and are heading east. I believe they’re heading towards the station.”

Theia was the one who had a tendency to go overboard, but right now Ruth was just as eager. Normally, she would call something like this an invasion of privacy and prevent Theia from going astray, but this time was different.

“Her Highness’s knight is meeting with a woman in secret... This kind of scandal cannot be tolerated!”

With bloodshot eyes, Ruth gave command after command to Blue Knight. In her mind, Koutarou had to be Theia’s knight. He had to be a noble, strong, just, and true hero. Naturally, something like problems with other women would get in the way of that. To Ruth, the most important thing right now was setting Koutarou back on the right path. And to that end, privacy was hardly an obstacle.

“Curse that Koutarou! Conspiring with the enemy is a serious crime! Does he not even understand that much?!”

Despite what Theia was shouting, she didn’t really think that Koutarou was conspiring with the enemy. He wasn’t that kind of man, and Theia knew that better than anyone.

You’re acting too much like a knight this time! You have to look the other way and say no to people sometimes!

That was Theia's hunch. Based on Kiriha's behavior over the last couple of weeks, Theia had a vague idea that she was going through something. Koutarou was just getting himself involved. If Kiriha had a problem, there was no way Koutarou could just ignore it. That was her hunch as a princess, and her desire as a woman.

"That fool! He really is a fool!"

Worry and a bit of jealousy tugged at Theia's heart. However, above all else, she was actually happy.

"Koutarou and Kiriha are heading towards the station, right? They must be planning on hopping on a train to go somewhere!"

"Taking the train from here, you can either get to the city or the beach. I wonder which way they're going..."

If they were planning on shopping, bowling, or any other kind of urban amusement, the closest place would be to head into the city. But if they took the train in the other direction, they would end up at the coast where there were seaside resorts and large-scale entertainment venues. Since it was now winter, it was unlikely that they were heading for a seaside resort, but there was still the possibility that they were going to the nearby aquarium or amusement park. Either way, based on which train they took, the girls would be able to narrow down Koutarou and Kiriha's destination.

"Nothing will come from waiting here! We're heading for the station too!"

"Here we go!"

"W-Wait for meee!"

Theia dashed out of the room. Sanae quickly followed suit, and Yurika scrambled after them both in a panic.

"Then I shall go too."

Ruth hurriedly stood up and headed for the front door. She had to give Theia backup.

"See you later then, I guess," Shizuka said with a forlorn sigh.

Hearing that, Ruth stopped and turned around just as she was about to reach

the hallway.

“Aren’t you coming along too, Shizuka-sama?”

“Nah, I have to work today.”

“Ah, you did mention that you would be helping out at another show.”

Shizuka was also interested in what Koutarou and Kiriha were doing, and she would have loved to join the other girls in their investigation. But alas, there was a scheduling conflict with the new part-time job she was offered last week. She’d be starting this weekend, so she had to get ready to go in any minute now.

“Aaah, if I’d known this was going to happen, I never would have accepted this job!”

Shizuka gritted her teeth in frustration, but Ruth just smiled wryly.

“I’ll have a report for you about what happened when you get back.”

“Really?”

“Yes. Just leave it to me!”

Ruth smiled at Shizuka as she sighed.

“Then what are you still doing here?”

“Yes, of course! Very well then, Shizuka-sama! I will take my leave!”

“Hahh... See you later then.”

And so Theia and the other girls left the despondent Shizuka behind in room 106 to chase after Koutarou and Kiriha.

Koutarou and Kiriha boarded the train headed towards the coast. Once they did, Theia and the others got on the next express train to chase after them. Because of that, Theia and the others actually arrived at the station where they believed Koutarou and Kiriha were going to get off first.

“Your Highness, as we expected, Satomi-sama and Kiriha-sama got off at this station.”

“I thought so...”

Hearing Ruth’s report, Theia nodded.

“This is a definitely a date.”

“Grrrrr, if we don’t do something fast, Koutarou will fall prey to Kiriha!”

Theia, Ruth, Yurika, and Sanae hid in a small alley and kept an eye on the entrance to the station.

“However, it seems the two of them have entered a roofed area, so the unmanned craft has lost track of them.”

As the four girls followed them, they had an unmanned craft from Blue Knight follow Koutarou and Kiriha from above. The only problem was that once Koutarou and Kiriha entered the station building after getting off the train, it was no longer possible to track them from the air.

“No problem. They’ll have to leave eventually.”

“But with that many people, how are we going to spot Satomi-san?”

Yurika pointed her finger at a huge crowd leaving the station. Since it was the weekend, there were plenty of people out and about. Even if Koutarou and Kiriha appeared, they would be hard to pick out of a crowd.

“Heh, leave this to Sanae-chan!”

But Sanae stepped forward full of confidence and volunteered to handle the situation. She stood in front of everyone and squinted her eyes.

“Don’t forget that I, Sanae-chan, have a special bond with Koutarou!”

Sanae was looking for Koutarou’s aura in the crowd. Since she was always clinging to him, she knew exactly what it looked and felt like. And it paid off. Sanae was quickly able to spot Koutarou and Kiriha without any problems.

“I found them! They’re over there! Just in front of the convenience store!”

“Ruth!”

“I’ve got a lock on them! The unmanned craft is following them again!”

Thanks to Sanae, the unmanned craft began tailing Koutarou and Kiriha once

more. With that, Theia and the others didn't need to worry about accidently losing him.

"Sanae-chan, that's amazing!"

"Praise me some more, you jerk!"

Sanae boasted proudly as Yurika complimented her. However, since Koutarou wasn't there to pat her on the head, she didn't feel as fulfilled as she normally did.

"Satomi-sama and Kiriha-sama are on the move."

"Where are they going?"

"Let's see... According to the map, there's a zoo in the direction they're heading."

Once Koutarou and Kiriha left the station, they continued in the same direction. Further that way still was the Harukaze Zoo, the largest zoo in the prefecture. Going right after leaving the station would have taken them to an amusement park, and on the left would have been an aquarium. The area was so crowded because all of those attractions were so close to each other.

"All right, let's keep following them at a safe distance."

"Don't we need to get a little closer?"

"The zoo is mostly open air, so we should be fine with the craft, right?"

"Aaahh! H-How could this be?!" Ruth loudly stammered just as the other girls started to follow after Koutarou and Kiriha again. She sounded like she was about to scream.

"What's wrong?!"

"They're holding hands!"

Smack in the middle of the footage relayed by the unmanned craft was the image of Koutarou and Kiriha holding hands as they walked.

"Wh-Whaaaaat?!"

"Satomi-san! Are you serious?!"

“You’re being tricked, Koutarou! Tricked, I tell you!”

In reality, Koutarou and Kiriha were only holding hands so they wouldn’t lose each other in the crowd, but that’s not what it looked like to the other girls.

“We’re going to close in! I want to know what they’re talking about!”

“Roger!”

“I’m glad we followed them... I never imagined it would turn out like this...”

“Once we get home, he’s going to be punished. This behavior is shameful and unworthy of a knight!”

Having entered a rather incredible misunderstanding about Koutarou and Kiriha’s relationship, the four girls chased after them in hot pursuit.



Although the streets were quite packed, once they actually got inside the zoo, the crowd thinned out. There was no longer any risk of losing track of each other, so Koutarou and Kiriha let go of each other's hands.

"Koutarou, there's a giraffe over there."

"Oh, hey."

And because Kiriha tended to walk off on her own, there wasn't even another chance for them to hold hands anyway.

"What's up with her today...?"

Koutarou scratched his head as he chased after her.

Normally Kiriha gave off the composed impression of a mature woman. She was by far the most mature of the residents of room 106.

"Koutarou, is it true that giraffes sleep standing up?"

"Supposedly. I hear they have no problems standing and sleeping for short periods of time."

"I see."

However, as Kiriha stared at the animals, she had none of her normal mature appeal. In fact, rather the opposite, she seemed like an innocent child.

The answer to that question might be around here...

When Koutarou had asked Kiriha about her intentions regarding the surface invasion, she'd said there was somewhere she wanted to go with him. This was where they'd ended up, and here Koutarou was seeing a whole new side of Kiriha. Not even Koutarou was dull enough to think they were unrelated.

"Koutarou, where are the penguins?"

"The penguins would be in the aquarium section."

She had an honest smile, her eyes darted back and forth as she looked at all the unusual animals, she spoke her mind without hesitation, and she had her hands pressed together in childlike excitement.

I guess I'll play along for a while.

Seeing Kiriha like this, Koutarou was overcome with a feeling of gentleness. He wanted to let her do as she pleased for now.

“Even though the flamingos are there?”

“Yup, they’re still in the aquarium. The polar bears should be in there as well.”

“I see... Their classifications are surprisingly vague.”

“Do you want to go to the aquarium later?”

“Please! I really want to go!”

Today was the first time Koutarou really felt like he and Kiriha were the same age.

“So this is how it tastes...”

Kiriha had a satisfied look on her face as she bit down on her red candy apple. Koutarou was sitting next to her on the bench as the two of them had lunch.

“Is this your first one?”

Koutarou stopped eating his yakisoba and looked at Kiriha. She nodded in response as she munched on her candy apple.

“Yes, this is my first time eating one. I saw them once here in the past, and I’ve been interested in trying one ever since.”

Koutarou and Kiriha were sitting in a resting area located in one of the corners of the zoo. There were snack shops, stalls, and candy stores lining the area, which gave it the feeling of a festival. They’d even gotten Kiriha’s candy apple from one of the small stores.

“Hmm, so how is it? Is it as good as you thought? Or is it disappointing?”

“If it’s just the one, it’s delicious.”

“Hahaha, that’s true for most street food like this.”

“Including the yakisoba?”

Kiriha looked at what Koutarou was holding as he laughed.

“Yeah. Want a taste?”

“Please. I’m quite curious.”

Kiriha had an intrigued look on her face as she borrowed Koutarou’s chopsticks and lifted some of the noodles to her mouth. And after chewing on it for a while, she looked back at Koutarou.

“It’s greasy and sticks with you... but it’s not bad.”

“Yeah, you can’t eat too much of it at one time.”

“Heehee, I understand now.”

The yakisoba had been altered in order to make it cool slower and so that the taste would remain unchanged even if it did get cold. They used plenty of oil and cooked it at a lower temperature to keep it from drying out, but it definitely affected the taste and made the dish heavier. It was fundamentally different from yakisoba that had been made fresh and was meant to be eaten that way. But lots of street and carnival foods were like that, and the bottom line was that it was difficult to eat so much of it.

“So it’s only meant for special occasions...”

Kiriha smiled and went back to eating her candy apple. Meanwhile, Koutarou nodded and lifted some more noodles to his mouth.

“Thaht’s rhight.”

“Mind your manners, Koutarou.”

“Ith’s fhine aht thimes lhike thish.”

Kiriha took a bite of her candy apple.

“Heehee, thath’s thrue.”

And just as Koutarou and Kiriha were laughing at each other...

“I found you, underground people!”

A familiar voice echoed through the area.

“What?”

“Koutarou, over there!”

Koutarou looked up from his yakisoba, and right in front of him was a lone man wearing a red outfit.

“Fate brought us together here today! This time—”

The man in red was in the middle of his speech, but he stopped halfway through. Koutarou’s eyes met the man’s through the visor of his helmet.

“Wait a minute, aren’t you...?”

“Oh? You’re that guy from the other day...”

They were practically talking over each other.

“Baron Demon-san and Black Rose-san?”

“You’re a Sun Ranger, right?”

The Sun Rangers of the Sun Squad were the five-man hero group Koutarou and the others met at the Harukaze Man hero show last week.

“I am terribly sorry for intruding on your hero show last weekend!”

After recognizing Koutarou, Red Shine bowed deeply. Remembering how angry he’d made Koutarou on stage, Red Shine used this chance to formally apologize.

“No, no, you were hardly intruding!”

Compelled by the man’s gentlemanly and proper apology, Koutarou and Kiriha hurriedly stood up and bowed their heads respectfully back.

“At the time, Harukaze Man had gotten into some trouble, so you guys appearing and buying time really helped us out. Thank you.”

“I’m glad to hear it, but I’m still sorry for leaving without apologizing then.”

Having both been raised to be respectful and polite, Koutarou and Red Shine made a connection and smiled at each other.

“By the way, Baron-san and Black Rose-san, based on the way you’re dressed, are you two enjoying some private time?”

“Yes. We wanted to talk some things out.”

Koutarou and Kiriha were in casual streetwear now. Seeing that, Red Shine

assumed that they had come to the zoo for fun.

“And are you in the middle of work?”

“Hahaha, I’m afraid so.”

Red Shine was wearing his red suit. Seeing that, Koutarou assumed they were holding a hero show somewhere at the zoo.

“But it seems this mission was for naught.”

Red Shine smiled dryly as he shook and smacked a small device that looked like a handheld console of some kind.

“I see.”

I guess the show was a bust.

Based on what Red Shine said, Koutarou assumed that he meant they’d had a show that didn’t go well.

“Well, if underground people really were to appear, that would be a problem too, you know? Ahahaha!”

“That’s just how it is for heroes.”

Red Shine and Koutarou had a good laugh together. Neither one of them seemed to realize they weren’t on the same page.

Did he say underground people? And that device... The group that showed up last week mentioned something about underground people too. Could it be...?

Only Kiriha picked up on what Red Shine had said, and her expression grew serious as she thought about it.

“Kenichi!

“Kenichi-kun!”

But before long, two more Sun Rangers appeared from behind an animal cage: a woman and a fat man. Koutarou remembered seeing them at the show too.

“Oh! They’ve...!”

Seeing the other two rangers emerge, Koutarou’s eyes began sparkling.

“Hey, Red Shine!”

“That’s right, Baron-san!” Red Shine boasted proudly as he saw Koutarou getting excited. “Behold Pink and Yellow! They’re properly colored now!”

The two Sun Rangers running up to them, unlike last time, were not also Red Shines. Their suits were colored pink and yellow, making them Pink Shine and Yellow Shine respectively.

“See? You can do it if you try, Sun Rangers!”

Getting worked up, Koutarou forgot his manners and began slipping into Baron Demon’s character as he slapped Red Shine on the back.

“That’s right! We took what you said into account and got different colors to make it easier for the kids to tell us apart!”

Pink for the girl, and yellow for the curry lover. Their colors fit their personalities perfectly.

“Yeah, that’s more like it! Now I’m sorry for being so hard on you last week, Sun Rangers!”

“No, this is all thanks to your guidance, Baron-san!”

“Damn, I wish I had an outfit too!”

Yes, this is it! This is how heroes should be!

Compared to last week, the Sun Rangers were starting to look like real heroes. Even Koutarou was getting more excited for them.

“Wait, no way! Daisaku-kun, isn’t that Baron-sama?!”

“Looks like it. Oh, is that girl next to him holding some yakisoba? I want to eat some too...”

When Pink and Yellow noticed Koutarou and Kiriha, they picked up the pace as they ran over.

“Baron-sama! It’s been a while!”

“Kenichi! Kenichi!”

Pink ran straight up to Koutarou, while Yellow ran over to Red. They then

each started talking before they'd caught their breath.

"Look, Baron-sama! I've gotten cuter, right?!"

Pink spun around in front of Koutarou and showed off her suit. Seeing that, Koutarou complimented her like he thought a villain might.

"Wahahaha, you're looking a lot more like a hero now, Pink Shine. However, all that's changed is your appearance. Without your allies, you will only fall prey to my powers!"

"How wonderful! I'm prepared for anything you'll do to me!"

Pink's pupils turned into hearts as she wiggled with giddy excitement. Normally, Yellow would tell her to not be so shameless, but he was too occupied to notice her.

"Kenichi! I want some yakisoba too!"

"Yakisoba?"

"Yeah! That girl is holding some, see? They must be selling it around here somewhere!"

Yellow pressed himself up against Red as he eagerly pointed at Kiriha, who was holding Koutarou's yakisoba for him. Red answered Yellow while pushing back his gigantic body.

"C-Calm down, Daisaku! There don't seem to be any enemies here, so you can go buy some if you want!"

"Really?!"

Hearing those words, Yellow backed off and immediately began scanning the area for stalls selling yakisoba.

"Hahh... Jeez..."

With Yellow off his case, Red slumped his shoulders in a sigh of relief. As Yellow looked around, he stretched his hand out in front of Red.

"The wallet, the wallet!"

"Here."

“I’ll see you later!”

“Don’t forget to get a receipt!”

Once Red placed the wallet he’d pulled out of his pocket into Yellow’s hand, Yellow ran off to a nearby snack shop.

“Jeez, what a troublesome bunch...”

Red couldn’t hide his uneasiness as he looked at Pink still wiggling in front of Koutarou, and then at Yellow as he disappeared into a snack shop.

“Oh well. There doesn’t seem to be any threat here...”

“Niichan, is it true that there are no enemies?”

“Oh, Koutaro.”

While Red was sighing and rubbing his shoulders, a fourth Sun Ranger came over. His suit was green. Although he didn’t stand out much because of his short stature and green outfit, he’d actually chosen the color exactly because he thought not standing out was safer.

“So about there not being any enemies...”

“Yes, well, I came all this way chasing a reaction on the detector, but there aren’t any underground people around. As you can see, it’s the very definition of peaceful here.”

“You’re right. It seems to be indicating a reaction somewhere nearby, but all I see are zoo guests.”

Green Shine pulled out his own device and looked at the screen while scratching his head. It was definitely showing a reaction to the technology the underground people used, but the enemies they were looking for were nowhere to be seen.

“Surprisingly, the only ones I found were Baron Demon-san and Black Rose-san. They have today off and came to have some fun.”

“What good will finding the underground people from a hero show do us?”

The only people at the location the detector had indicated were Koutarou, Kiriha, and several other visiting families.

So that really is what's going on...

Watching Red and Green, Kiriha understood the situation. This Sun Squad wasn't staging hero shows for children; they were actually a real combat squad. On top of that, they were working to prevent a surface invasion by the underground dwellers. And it even seemed like they had a device capable of detecting their spiritual energy technology.

Maybe I should test them now...

Kiriha's demeanor suddenly changed to that of a leader of the People of the Earth, and she made a swift decision.

She looked down slightly, hiding her face from the Sun Rangers and whispered, "Karama, Korama, Class II Stealth Mode."

"Ho! Understood, ho!"

"Roger!"

She got an immediate response from the two cloaked haniwas next to her. They whispered back quietly enough that only Kiriha could hear them.

Normally what Karama and Korama used to conceal themselves was a function called Class I Stealth Mode. This obscured electromagnetic radiation and visible light, making them invisible to radar and the naked eye.

Compared to that, the Class II Stealth Mode that Kiriha had just ordered additionally concealed their auras. By doing that, the haniwas disguised the spiritual energy their generators were emitting, making it so that they could no longer be tracked by spiritual energy sensors. Such precaution was usually only required when fighting against other People of the Earth, so Kiriha had never had the occasion to use it until now. In Class II Stealth Mode, Karama and Korama's performance dropped dramatically, so Class I Stealth Mode was usually preferable.

"Ah, it vanished, Niichan."

"Same here."

It seemed that when Karama and Korama changed their stealth mode, the devices Red and Green were using stopped reacting to them.

“I’m starting to doubt whether or not this thing actually works.”

“It was a little dubious from the start.”

As I suspected, they were detecting spiritual energy. Has our technology been leaked somehow? No, the accuracy of their detectors is too poor for that. Maybe they’ve produced their own spiritual energy technology, or perhaps they analyzed and reproduced ours. It’s probably one of the two...

Kiriha was able to read the situation based on how Red and Green reacted. The technology they were using was vastly inferior to what Kiriha and the underground dwellers used. Even though they were using Class II Stealth Mode, not being able to detect Karama and Korama from this distance made that much pretty obvious. Regardless of whether they’d developed the technology on their own or managed to reproduce it, they were still only taking their first steps into spiritual energy technology.

But even so, Kiriha couldn’t let her guard down. If they’d managed to analyze and reproduce the People of the Earth’s technology, that could be problematic. It would mean that the Sun Rangers, or some other part of their organization, had come into contact and engaged in combat with the People of the Earth.

I just hope the radical faction hasn’t accelerated their plan...

What Kiriha worried about the most was the faction of the People of the Earth that wanted to invade the surface using force. It wasn’t too hard to believe they may have appeared on the surface to pick a fight. In the worst case scenario, they may have even leaked spiritual energy technology to the surface by doing so. If they had been branded as combatants by the surface dwellers and compromised their proprietary technology in the process, Kiriha’s plan for a peaceful invasion was in jeopardy.

“Oh, hey, where’s Hayato?”

“He’s still not here? He left chasing after the reaction before I did.”

No, I’m just overthinking it... I’ve been a bit too suspicious lately...

In the end, Kiriha decided that she was worrying too much. Seeing how casually the Sun Rangers were acting, she couldn’t imagine they really felt like they were in danger.

Suddenly, a man's voice rang out from above Koutarou and the others.

"Sorry for keeping you waiting, Kenichiii!"

It was a cool, deep voice coming from the top of a nearby cage.

"Of course Hayato-niichan climbed up to a place like that..."

"That idiot. What's he doing up there?"

On top of that cage stood a lone man.

"Is he one of your friends?"

"That's right, Baron-sama! Hayato loves to stand out!"

Koutarou couldn't really make out the color of his suit because of the sun shining in his eyes, but based on the silhouette, he was almost certain it was another Sun Ranger.

"Haaa!"

The man then leaped off the cage towards Koutarou and the others. The suit gave him amazing leg strength, allowing him to jump close to ten meters in the blink of an eye. He landed right in front of everyone, all while maintaining perfect posture.

"The heavens call! The earth calls! The people call! They all call for me to protect the planet!"

He then swung his arm around and posed.

"I am the son of the sun! I am flame incarnate!"

He thrust his hands overhead as if to grasp the sun. It was a move he must have practiced countless times, but he looked manly and powerful doing it.

"Reeeeed Shiiiiiiiine!"

As he shouted his name, his red suit caught the light of the sun.

"Quit messing around!"

However, Koutarou's axe kick was far more powerful than his pose.

"Agh, ugh..."

Eating the vicious kick from Koutarou, the second Red Shine slammed into the asphalt of the zoo grounds before bouncing back up and finally landing on his back.

“O-Ow, just what... Why...”

“No whats or whys! Damn it, it was going so well too! Why would you ruin it at the very end?!”

“Huh?! Baron-san?!”

“Don’t ‘Huh?! Baron-san?!’ me! Do you understand what you just did, you bastard?!”

Now that he was angrily shouting at him, the second Red Shine finally noticed Koutarou. Although he was wincing at being berated, he got up and desperately tried to plead his case.

“Now just hang on a minute! Why are you so angry this time, Baron-san? We colored ourselves after our roles, just like you suggested!”

“Then why are there two Reds?!”

“Please calm down, Baron-san!”

Still rather worked up, Koutarou was about to axe kick the second Red Shine once more, but the first Red Shine was quick to stop him. Little did they realize there was another scene unfolding right behind Koutarou.

“That ferocious and intense voice! Immense power that would be unstoppable if it wasn’t for this suit! Those fiery, evil eyes! Kyaaaaah, I want him to turn that scorching glare my way!”

“Calm down, Megumi-neechan!”

Seeing Koutarou burning with rage, Pink Shine’s excitement was reaching new heights. Green Shine was frantically trying to keep her from approaching Koutarou. If Pink got involved, she would only fan the flames of Koutarou’s anger even more. Green knew better.

“Daisaku-niichan, help me stop Neechan!” Green shouted, turning to Yellow for help.

“Hmm? Okay. I’m almost done eating this yakisoba, Koutaro-kun.”

“Baron-sama, your Pink is over here!”

“Wh-What am I supposed to do in the meantime?!”

However, reality was unkind. Without any backup in his hour of need, Pink dragged Green along with her as she walked over to Koutarou.

This is bad! Baron-san is going to kill us!

Green cast a worried glance in Koutarou’s direction. He was still visibly furious.

“Are you guys doing this on purpose?! Is it fun to make me this mad?!”

“You’re wrong! That’s not what we’re trying to do! Please calm down!”

“As if I could!”

“We still haven’t officially decided on who’s the leader, so we decided to keep the two candidates in red!”

“Quit messing around! There can only be one leader! The only time there could ever be two leaders would be in the movies, or around episode 26 when the leader changes!”

“S-So that really is true...”

“What was that?! You knew and you did this anyway?!”

“Oh crap!”

“Hayato, you idiot! You just had to go say something stupid, didn’t you?!”

“Baaaron-samaaa! Unleash your powerful fists on me!”

“Neechan, nooo!”

“Mm... This yakisoba is delicious. I’ll get some more on our way home.”

Being a secret, elite government task force, the Sun Rangers of the Sun Squad were quite strong. They were well trained, and their suits provided extra power and protection.

“Dieeeee! Pay for you sins with your lives!”

However, the enraged Koutarou was still stronger than all five of them combined.

Reminiscence (Part 2)

Sunday, December 20th

Sunday, the following day.

Koutarou and Kiriha were going out for the second time this weekend. Koutarou and Kiriha were taking the same train they had yesterday, but their destination this time was the amusement park.

“Damn those Sun Rangers... Yesterday was a mess...”

Koutarou grimaced as the zoo came into view through the train window. It was still a good distance away, but the closer they got, the more vividly Koutarou recalled the day before, and the worse his mood grew.

“I’m sorry, Koutarou,” Kiriha said with a weak smile and an apologetic look on her face.

In truth, they were supposed to visit the amusement park yesterday, but they’d run out of time after their encounter with the Sun Rangers. Kiriha felt badly about it.

“Kiriha-san, there’s no need for you to apologize. They’re the ones at fault.”

“That might be true, but... I’m still sorry, Koutarou.”

As Kiriha tilted her head, her hair fluttered slightly and her smile changed. It became a happy one rather than an apologetic one.

“...You’re quite a woman, you know...”

All that had changed was her smile and the tilt of her head, yet when she apologized again, all the negative emotions vanished from Koutarou and he returned to his normal, cheerful self.

“I’ll take that as a compliment.”

“Good.”

Koutarou smiled too, albeit a bit distantly. Kiriha revealed rare, refreshing expressions like that from time to time. Up until now, Koutarou had always tried to ignore them to keep himself from getting pulled in by her. But he treasured them now that he no longer thought she was trying to do anything like that. Kiriha had a fantastic smile, and he took a moment to let it sink right in to his heart.

You really are quite impressive...

But that led to a new set of doubts. Koutarou couldn't figure out why Kiriha would intentionally do things to try and make him suspicious or untrusting of her. If she revealed her true intentions and smiled at him like she just had, Koutarou would probably easily obey her.

"You're quite a man yourself."

"Is that a compliment?"

Koutarou's faint smile curled into coy smirk. Kiriha had stimulated his sense of humor.

"Heh, what do you think?"

"You really are quite a woman..."

Koutarou and Kiriha smiled together as the train rolled along the tracks.

"I found them! They just came through the entrance!"

"Good job, Sanae. Ruth, have the unmanned craft continue tracking them."

"Understood, Your Highness."

"I see them too!"

Theia, Ruth, Sanae, and Yurika were again following after Koutarou and Kiriha. They were waiting in the same alley as the day before for Koutarou and Kiriha to come out from the station.

"At 10:10 AM, they begin walking towards the amusement park."

After issuing commands to the unmanned craft, Ruth recorded a verbal account of Koutarou and Kiriha's actions using her bracelet. Shizuka had to

work again today too, so Ruth had promised her another report. Shizuka was dying to know about Koutarou and Kiriha, but unlike the other four girls with a personal stake in the matter, Shizuka was just curious.

“But it’s still suspicious. Just like yesterday, both Satomi-san and Kiriha-san are acting completely different from normal.”

“Koutarou’s definitely being fooled by her sex appeal.”

“Koutarou’s an idiot and honest to a fault!”

“There are countless knights that have lost their way over a woman. Satomi-sama is just lacking in self-awareness!”

Koutarou and Kiriha were calmly walking down the street together in stark contrast to the anxious girls secretly following them. But much like yesterday, Koutarou and Kiriha looked closer than ever. The four girls each had their own opinions on Koutarou’s relationships with women, but they were all equally on edge as they watched the situation develop.

“Let’s go, Your Highness!”

“Yes, we wouldn’t want to lose sight of them now. Let’s hurry after them!”

“Roger!”

“Okay!”

And so the four girls ended up spying on Koutarou and Kiriha just like they had the day before.

The first thing Kiriha did after they entered the amusement park was take Koutarou to a small theater that showed movies related to events the park was holding. Right now, it was being used to promote a new anime.

“Is this really what you wanted to do?” Koutarou asked when he returned from buying tickets and pamphlets.

“Yes. This is fine,” Kiriha replied and nodded contentedly.

She took her pamphlet from Koutarou and stroked the cover. It was with the same affection she might pat a child on the head, so Koutarou assumed she was

getting sentimental.

She might really be feeling nostalgic...

Koutarou looked down at his own pamphlet, which read “Kabutonga, the King of Beetles: The Movie” in large letters. The movie was a theatrical rendition of an anime that aired ten years ago, and it was being shown again as a promotion for the newest edition to the series: *Kabutonga, the King of Beetles: Second Impact!* There were other events being held along with the screening to promote the new show too.

Kiriha hadn’t said much of anything serious to Koutarou during the two days he’d spent with her, but he noticed that when she did, she kept saying things like “in the past” and “ten years ago.” From that, Koutarou gathered that the places they’d been visiting had something to do with her childhood. If that was true, then the same might be true for the movie. He figured that’s what had gotten her feeling nostalgic.

“Koutarou, look.”

Kiriha presented a brand new metallic foil card to Koutarou. It read “Kabutonga No. 1: Japanese Rhinoceros Beetle,” followed by a picture of a hero striking a pose in an outfit designed after the beetle. It was a trading card included as a promotion with certain snack foods, and it was very popular with kids at the time. It had been reprinted and added in as an extra with the pamphlet for the movie.

This is... Kiriha-san’s...

Koutarou remembered seeing the card before. Though the last time he saw it, it wasn’t brand new. It was aged and worn enough that it had lost most of its luster. On top of that, it had been scribbled on.

“Kiriha-san, isn’t this...”

“Heh...”

Kiriha smiled. It was bright and innocent, and it radiated the fond nostalgia she was feeling. It was the best smile Koutarou had gotten yet today. Seeing that gave Koutarou his answer.

It must be, which means...

In Koutarou's mind, Kiriha's behavior the past eight months and the events of the past two days all lined up in accordance with a certain principle. It all led to a single answer. However, knowing that much wasn't enough to assuage Koutarou's doubts. Like an unfinished jigsaw puzzle, Koutarou was missing one piece before the big picture would really be cleared up for him.

"You're surprisingly feminine."

That was all Koutarou truly understood right now.

"How unfortunate. I've been trying to act feminine all this time..."

"You're doing it on purpose, aren't you?"

Koutarou lightly tapped Kiriha on the forehead with his fist.

"That hurts, Koutarou. How could you treat a woman's face like that?"

She exaggeratedly held her forehead and glared at Koutarou. Seeing that, Koutarou sighed.

"Stop fooling around and let's go. The movie's going to start without us."

"That would be a problem."

But the tension was only momentary. The two of them soon returned to smiling as they entered the theater filled with children.

"A theater, huh?"

"This is bad."

"Yes, this is bad. Very bad."

Seeing Koutarou and Kiriha go into the theater, Sanae and Theia looked at each other with grave expressions. They both knew this meant certain danger.

"Why? C-Could it be that Satomi-san wants to take advantage of the darkness to make a move on Kiriha-san?!"

Yurika, still unaware of the real danger at hand, was worried about something completely unrelated.

“Of course not! There are kids all around them!”

“The problem has nothing to do with them.”

“Then what is it?”

Yurika stared at Sanae and Theia with a quizzical look on her face. The two girls then glanced over their shoulders at the same time.

“Satomi-sama and Kiriha-sama have entered the theater. I’m putting the unmanned craft on standby above it.”

They looked at Ruth, who was currently giving commands to the unmanned craft. Yurika followed their gazes.

“...It’s Ruth?”

She realized who they were talking about, but she didn’t understand what the problem was. She couldn’t imagine what Koutarou and Kiriha going into a theater had to do with Ruth. Still confused, she leaned in to whisper with the other girls so Ruth couldn’t hear them “That’s right. In fact, I regret taking her with us now.”

“Yurika, take a good look at the sign by the theater. Just don’t raise your voice, no matter what you see.”

Theia and Sanae were worried Ruth would notice the sign first, so they casually moved in front of her to obstruct it.

“The sign?” Yurika asked, blinking a couple of times in confusion.

She then looked towards the theater and saw the very sign they were talking about.

“Eek!”

She covered her own mouth to keep from shrieking, but it may not have even been necessary. She was so surprised that she probably wouldn’t have been able to anyway.

The sign read: “Parents and children alike, please enjoy this special screening of the masterpiece *Kabutonga, the King of Beetles: The Movie* to commemorate the broadcasting of *Kabutonga, the King of Beetles: Second Impact!*”

“Th-There’s nothing to enjoy about that!”

Unlike the modern anime industry that relied heavily on CG, the decade-old movie had been entirely produced using hand-drawn cells. Yurika couldn’t help but feel hatred coming from the taunting smile of the hero on the poster. To her, he looked like a demon that had crawled up from hell with the metallic beetle carapace used to transform in his hand.

“Jeez, you idiot! Don’t be so loud!”

“Shhh! Shhh!”

“Hmmph, mhhhm, hmmhmm!”

Theia and Sanae pounced on Yurika as soon as she started making a fuss. Ruth was mostly observing things through the unmanned craft’s point of view, so she hadn’t seen what was written on the sign. But if Yurika kept it up, she would notice sooner or later. That was the last thing Theia and Sanae wanted.

“Quit messing around! Do you understand the situation?”

“Mmh, mmh, mmh!”

“If you make a fuss again, you know what’s going to happen, right?”

“Mmh! Mmh! Mmh!”

Sanae and Theia quietly threatened Yurika, and Yurika anxiously nodded her head in response. They were being dead serious, but if the situation were reversed, Yurika knew she might be doing the same thing.

“Is there something wrong?”

Noticing the commotion, Ruth turned around. With no idea what was going on, she just stared at the other girls and waited for an answer. Sanae and Theia quickly jumped off of Yurika and the three of them began clamoring for a cover-up.

“I-It’s nothing, Ruth! It looked like Yurika had a small pebble stuck in her shoe! So I was just thinking of getting it out for her!”

“Yeah! Right, Yurika?”

Theia was planning on surviving the situation by pretending they were helping

Yurika with something minor, and Sanae was quick to play along.

“Huh? Really?”

Yurika, however, misunderstood Theia and immediately looked down at her shoes. Of course, there was no pebble to be found.

“I don’t see any pe—”

“...Shut up!”

A thud rang out.

“There is one. In the pattern by the heel.”

“I-Is that so?”

Ruth looked at Yurika, who had begun crying for some reason, with a questioning look. However, before she could say anything else, Theia walked up to her, grabbed her by the hand, and walked in the opposite direction of the theater.

“Let’s go, Ruth.”

“Your Highness? Are you okay with leaving Satomi-sama and Kiriha-sama?”

Theia continued walking, trying her best to tear Ruth away from the theater. At the very least, she wanted to put some distance between them and Yurika.

“I don’t mind. Just leave the unmanned craft on standby until Koutarou comes out. The movie will probably last for over an hour, and I don’t intend to just sit here and wait for them.”

“But what if they do something ind—”

“That won’t happen. Did you forget that they’re surrounded by kids in there?”

“Now that you mention it...”

“Koutarou might look unreliable, but he won’t dare do anything to traumatize children like that.”

“Yes, of course. That is certainly true.”

Ruth was worried about just leaving, but after hearing what Theia had to say, she quickly changed her mind and was soon walking alongside her contentedly.

“Would you give it a break?”

“I’m sorry... I didn’t mean to...”

“If you do something like that again, I’m going to possess you and keep your mouth shut for you.”

“Anything but that!”

Just a short while later, Sanae and Yurika followed after Theia and Ruth. Although it might just have been an excuse that Theia came up with on the spot, there really was no point in waiting outside the theater for over an hour.

“Hey, everyone, why don’t we all go see the haunted house since we have the time? I hear it’s really scary.”

“I don’t mind.”

“That does sound like fun.”

“I absolutely refuse! I live with a ghost, so why would I need to go see a haunted house?!”

After leaving Koutarou and Kiriha behind, the four girls were all ready to explore the amusement park for themselves. They had about two hours until the movie ended, so they had plenty of time to enjoy it.

However, none of them knew what lay ahead. None of them had any idea that another event was being held at the venue outside the haunted house. It was a tragedy that could have been avoided if only they had paid more attention to the sign at the theater. Unfortunately, since they’d had to leave in a hurry, no one had the chance.

Meanwhile, Shizuka was on the job, meaning on a stage wearing a full bodysuit. Her performance during last week’s show had caught the eye of a professional, so she’d been scouted to participate in another show that would double as an audition. Of course, it was also a hero show.

“Poison scales don’t affect me! Have you forgotten that my body is a machine? Absorbing Madame Butterfly’s ability backfired, Scarab King!”

Shizuka acted out the scene in accordance with the hero’s voice flowing out

from the speakers.

The acting should be exaggerated, exaggerated...

Even though she had been told to exaggerate the acting, compared to practicing for the Blue Knight play in November, a hero show needed to be even more over the top. Since her helmet covered her face, she had to make bigger, more dramatic gestures to make her character easier to understand.

As if she was doing a karate demonstration, Shizuka powerfully pointed at the actor in a large beetle costume in front of her. And as if he'd been waiting for exactly that, a deep, male voice came through the speakers.

"So what, Kabutonga No. 1?! Even if they don't work on you, what about the humans around you?!"

As the voice resounded from the speakers, the Scarab King started his own set of gestures. Unlike the homemade hero show from last week, all of the dialogue was done over the speakers. A big part of the actors' job was moving around with the lines to make it clear who was speaking.

"Oh no! That was your goal all along?!"

As she pretended to be overly surprised, female extras began surrounding her. They were civilians being controlled by Scarab Kings poison scales.

"Blast, you coward! Fight me fair and square!"

"I refuse! Good guys like you hide behind words like 'fair and square' to give yourselves an advantage! That makes you the coward, Kabutonga No. 1!"

"Curse you, Scarab King! Your only skills are in twisting people's words and planning such nefarious deeds!"

The extras closed in, shrinking their circle as they trapped Kabutonga No. 1. Kabutonga No. 1 was a hero of justice, so he couldn't just attack innocent women who were being controlled.

"Don't worry, No. 1!"

"Just leave those women to us!"

That was when two new Kabutongas appeared on the stage. They had large

horns and bigger builds than No. 1. They were Kabutonga No. 1's allies, Kabutonga Hercules and Kabutonga Atlas.

"You're here, Hercules! Atlas!"

Kabutonga No. 1, the hero Shizuka was playing, was designed after the Japanese rhinoceros beetle. Because of that, it had a smaller body compared to Hercules and Atlas, and in turn required a smaller actor. Shizuka was chosen for the part for her small frame and her precise movements on stage.

"Stag-man created an antidote for the poison scales, so just leave this to us!"

"No. 1, you take care of Scarab King!"

"Thanks, guys! I'm counting on you! Here I gooooo!"

Following the script, Shizuka slipped through the circle of women and closed in on the Scarab King. Before Shizuka was involved, they couldn't rely on scenes that required dexterous movements like that. So in that sense, she was already living up to the stage director's high hopes.

"That traitor again?! Curse you, Stag-man!"

"Scarab King, your ambitions end here!"

Using the momentum from her run over to him, Shizuka took a flying leap. In reality, there was a trampoline hidden in the floor that couldn't be seen from the audience. And with a well-timed jump, Shizuka got good air before coming crashing down feet first on the Scarab King.

"Kabutongaaaa Kiiiiiiiick!"

Just before the kick actually connected, fireworks and smoke filled the stage. Using it as cover and a distraction, the Scarab King crouched down and Shizuka landed on a cushion right behind him. It would be dangerous for both actors if she actually landed a kick like that.

But the children didn't know any better, and they cheered wildly all the same. To them, it looked like the Kabutonga Kick had caused the Scarab King to explode.

"You're good, Shizuka-chan!" the Scarab King whispered to Shizuka as he quickly got into position.

“Ahaha, thank you very much!” Shizuka happily thanked him as she waited for the smoke to clear and the show to go on.

“C-Curses... Well done, Kabutonga No. 1... But you didn’t win using your own power! I lost to Stag-man! No, I lost to our own technology!”

“That’s where you’re wrong, Scarab King!”

Shizuka swung her right arm around in a wide circle and put her hand on her chest.

“You simply lost to the justice budding inside of Stag-man’s heart!”

“A just heart? I won’t accept it, and I won’t accept this... That kind of thing is...”

Scarab King slowly collapsed.

“You haven’t seen the last of us...”

The hand he held out towards Kabutonga No. 1 collapsed to the ground before it could reach him. They were final moments of a great evil, and it was some splendid acting from a veteran that had played villains for several decades.

“We will return... as many times as it takes! Kabutonga, all you’ve done... was for nothing... Wahahahahaha... haha... ha...”

Scarab King’s laughter grew weaker and eventually faded away as with his last breath. The women were saved by the antidote, and the story was going to have a happy ending. At least, it was supposed to.

“Uwaaah!”

“Wh-What’s with this girl?!”

The actors for Hercules and Atlas were suddenly screaming. Since a voiceover was used for the dialogue, the actual actors talking was forbidden. Surprised at the sound, Shizuka turned around, and when she did, she saw Kabutonga Atlas flying through the air.

Atlas’s actor was a large man, and the costume he wore was big and weighty. He slammed into the floor with a resounding, heavy thud that worried even the

children. Atlas didn’t move a muscle after that.

“So this is where you’ve been hiding, Hercules-chan...”

A lone girl carrying a large flyswatter appeared on stage. She was the one that sent Atlas flying.

“Is that...?!”

“I was getting worried since I hadn’t seen you for so long...”

“R-Ruth-san!”

It was Ruthkania Nye Pardomshiha, the very same one Shizuka got along well with at school and at Corona House.

“I was worried that you might be out breeding somewhere!”

An ominous light gleamed in Ruth’s eyes. It was the look of a dangerous predator. Holding the large flyswatter with both hands, she’d spotted her prey. Her next target was Kabutonga Hercules. Ruth had made her way on stage to rid the world of these evil(?) beetles.

“As I thought, your numbers have increased, Hercules-chan! And look how big you’ve gotten!”

“Wh-What?!”

Unsure of how to react, Kabutonga Hercules simply stood still. He thought that Ruth was just an extra and that he’d somehow gotten the script wrong. He looked out towards the stage director as if asking for help.

“Now’s my chance!”

Not missing that opportunity, Ruth rushed forward.

“How foolish of you to leave yourself open for me!”

“Oh no!”

Quick on her feet, Shizuka dashed towards them. She was planning on stopping Ruth.

I knew this would happen if I told them the details about this new gig, which is exactly why I didn’t! How did Ruth end up here anyway?!

When it came to beetles, the normally peaceful and calm Ruth turned into an unstoppable force of violence and hatred. It was the result of deep-seated trauma over a certain incident involving beetles. It had scarred her so badly that she completely lost control of herself at the mere mention of the bugs.

That was why Shizuka had intentionally kept the details of her new job from Koutarou and the others. She knew exactly what Ruth would do if she told her that the show was about beetles. The safest option seemed to be making sure she never found out.

But in spite of everything, Ruth was now here anyway, and Hercules was her next victim. Regardless of how it'd happened, Shizuka knew she needed to do something now or else Hercules's life would be in danger.

"Move!"

"Whoa!"

Shizuka pushed Hercules aside and confronted Ruth on her own. Hercules's actor had no idea how dangerous Ruth really was in this state. He would've been done for before he even realized what hit him. The only real way to protect him in this situation was for Shizuka to face Ruth herself.

"Heh... Heh heh... Another new beetle appears... Heh heh, to think you'd come out on your own..."

"Ruth-san, snap out of it! It's me, Shizuka!"

"Oh, I'm only doing what the Pardomshihas' honor and tradition compels me to do."

Ruth swung down the flyswatter.

"And it compels me to destroy you beetles!"

"She's fast!"

Shizuka caught the handle of the flyswatter with her left forearm. She was lucky it wasn't the top of the flyswatter, and that her thick costume dispersed some of the blow's power. But even then, Ruth's strike had tremendous force behind it.

"This is bad, No. 1! It seems like the antidote isn't working on that girl! You

need to somehow defeat her without hurting her!” Hercules’s voice rang out from the speakers.

The antidote hadn’t worked on Ruth, so she was obeying the Scarab King’s orders and attacking the Kabutongas. The stage director had decided to spin the whole ordeal in a way to keep the show going in order to survive the situation. He was asking Shizuka to win.

“You make it sound so easy!” Shizuka complained as she continued to block Ruth’s attacks.

Using her flyswatter, elbows, heels, and even the backs of her hands, Ruth was attacking Shizuka with astoundingly sharp moves. Her berserk mind had gained complete control of her body and turned her into a battle machine.



Shizuka was just barely able to defend herself against the onslaught. Ruth's attacks were all based on instinct. They were unpredictable and flew at her with overwhelming speed. Because of that, just blocking them was hard enough. But to add to the difficulty, Shizuka was wearing Kabutonga's costume, which was hard to move in. With things as they were, it would take a miracle to defeat Ruth without hurting her.

"Please stop moving. I'll make it easy for you!"

"Kyaaah!"

Ruth's flyswatter grazed Shizuka's nose. She'd almost been hit dead on, and the thought sent a chill down her spine.

"I just can't hold back at a time like this! I'm going to go all out, Ruth-san! Don't hate me for this, okay?!"

"Hate you?! Of course I do! My chest is filled with burning hatred for you!"

Ruth continued with her sharp attacks. Shizuka dodged them and changed her fighting stance. It was no longer Kabutonga's, but one of her own.

"Quit moving around!"

"Satomi-kun, you better buy me something nice later!"

Shizuka exhaled and closed the distance to Ruth in an instant.

"Do you want to seduce my Satomi-sama that badly?!"

Hearing Koutarou's name conjured up bitter memories for Ruth. She recalled how she'd felt when Koutarou had embraced her, and worse, how she'd felt when he then whispered that beetle's name instead of hers. It sent her spiraling into a deep depression not unlike despair.

I won't allow Satomi-sama to choose a beetle over me again! I won't stand for it!

Ruth couldn't process the oddity of Kabutonga No. 1 uttering Koutarou's name. She just desperately wanted to protect what was precious to her and keep that from being stolen away from her.

"Noooooooooooo!"

Ruth shouted with all her might as she brought down the flyswatter. It cut through the air with a whistle. It was the most powerful attack she'd unleashed today.

"This is...?! But...!"

However, Shizuka deflected the blow to the left at the very last second, then used the momentum of her move to tackle Ruth with her right shoulder.

"Agh!"

The blow hit Ruth in the pit of her stomach, knocking the wind out of her and causing her body to stiffen up.

"All right!"

She could feel the effects of the blow on Ruth. Convinced of her victory, Shizuka stopped attacking and stood up. As she did, Ruth began slumping over.

"C-Curse you, b-beetles..."

Shortly thereafter, Ruth fainted. It was her vendetta against beetles that had kept her in the fight until the bitter end. After confirming Ruth was out cold, Shizuka finally relaxed.

"Phew... Even with a cake or two from Satomi-kun, this wasn't worth it..."

Holding on to Ruth, Shizuka smiled wryly inside her helmet.

Koutarou and Kiriha ate lunch after they finished their movie, then went to visit the attractions at the park. The merry-go-round and the tea cups, the haunted house and the house of mirrors. The attractions Kiriha insisted they go to were all more suited for children. However, now that he vaguely began to understand her intentions, Koutarou didn't voice a single complaint.

I think it might be better to treat her like a child than as a girl my age...

That was how Koutarou saw Kiriha today, and he wasn't wrong. Kiriha had a rather childlike smile on her face as they went from attraction to attraction. It had given him pause yesterday, but today he just laughed loudly with her. That's because he knew that behind that smile of hers, this was something near and dear to Kiriha's heart.

“Koutarou, let’s ride that next!”

“The ferris wheel, huh? All right, let’s go.”

“Yeah!”

By the time Kiriha pointed out the ferris wheel, Koutarou had already begun running. Today’s Koutarou wasn’t losing to Kiriha in terms of being childish. Kiriha quickly followed after him, and the two of them raced towards the ride. By the time they reached the platform, the line had just emptied.

“Koutarou!”

“Yeah!”

They smiled and nodded at each other as they passed under the gate and approached the ride. The ferris wheel in this amusement park was big. It was even the largest in the prefecture when it was constructed ten years ago. By the time Koutarou and Kiriha reached the gondolas, just looking up at it required them to crane their necks.

“I’ve certainly gotten much bigger...”

Kiriha had a nostalgic look on her face as she stared up at the structure. In her memories of this place, she was unable to see the top when she stood there and looked up as a child. But after ten years of growing, that was different now.

“Kiriha-san?”

Hearing Koutarou’s voice, Kiriha looked back down and saw him calling for her in front of the slowly moving gondola. Behind him was the attendant in charge of holding the door open and waiting for them.

“Yes, excuse me.”

Kiriha ran towards Koutarou and the attendant as she apologized.

Now that I think about it, the same thing happened back then.

Kiriha recalled how her younger self had looked up at the ferris wheel with sparkling eyes as the boy she was with called for her.

“Kii-chan?”

“Sorry, I’m coming!”

The boy was about the same age Kiriha was now. She was so young at the time, she couldn't remember his face after all these years. But there was one thing she remembered clearly above all else even now, and that was how much she loved him.

"Hup!"

As Kiriha approached, she'd taken the boy's hand and gleefully hopped into the gondola. With the memory fresh in her mind, Kiriha smiled like a mischievous child as she looked at Koutarou.

"Hup!"

"Ah, hey..."

Spurred on by her nostalgic desires, Kiriha grabbed Koutarou's hand and hopped into the gondola.

"That's dangerous."

"That's dangerous."

In that moment, the voices of Koutarou and the boy from her past overlapped. They both had scolded her the exact same way.

Onii-chan...

The decade-old memories all came flooding back to her, escaping her eyes as tears.

"Heh... I'm sorry..."

The attendant outside closed the door and locked it. The well-maintained gondola then rose into the air without making a sound. But Koutarou was too distracted by Kiriha to notice any of that.

"Kiriha-san...?"

Tears trickled down Kiriha's cheeks. They sparkled in the light of the gentle winter sun shining through the window. For a moment, Koutarou was rendered speechless by the beauty of those tears.

"Koutarou..."

Kiriha grabbed at her chest with both hands. It wasn't just tears now; there

was a steady stream of emotion was flowing up from the bottom of her heart too.

I really do still love him...

After spending two days reliving her memories, Kiriha finally reached a conclusion. And she felt that she needed to tell Koutarou about it.

“Koutarou, there’s something I want to tell you.”

Still holding on to her chest with her left hand, she wiped her tears away with her right. But it was no use. They just kept coming. Kiriha gave up on wiping them away and smiled at Koutarou.

“It’s fine. You don’t need to tell me.”

Kiriha was about to give Koutarou the answer he’d been wondering about all week. However, having tagged along with Kiriha over the weekend, Koutarou no longer felt like he needed to hear her say it. Over the past two days, Koutarou had become convinced that Kiriha would never do something terrible.

“I feel like it doesn’t matter so much anymore.”

Koutarou was smiling. He already understood. Even though Kiriha might invade the surface, he knew that she wouldn’t do it in a violent or cruel way.

And the reason for that seemed to be buried in her past. He could tell it probably had something to do with the spots they’d been visiting, but since they were special, precious memories to Kiriha, Koutarou didn’t want to pry.

“No, please listen. You have a right to know.”

However, Kiriha shook her head and looked him right in the eye.

“And more than anything, I want you to know. As my only friend on the surface, I want you to know my true wish.”

Kiriha’s words had a certain weight to them. It seemed to be coming from the light shining deep within her eyes. For the first time, they were aglow with the warm light of trust and friendship. The sight shook Koutarou, but he could feel the small place in his heart for her growing.

“If you’re willing to call me a friend, of course I’ll listen.”

“...Thank you, Koutarou...”

It had been eight months since Koutarou first met Kiriha. And after all of this time, the two of them finally became friends.

“Where should I start...?”

As she said that, Kiriha lifted her hand to her cheek to wipe away the last traces of her tears.

“Anywhere’s fine, isn’t it? It’s not like we’re in a hurry.”

“That’s true. Then let’s start from the beginning.”

Looking straight at Koutarou, Kiriha unhurriedly began telling her story. Koutarou sat up straight and faced her as he listened. The gondola was slowly rising, and had now reached the halfway point to the top. At this height, they could see past the buildings of the park, and the distant scenery came into view. With the day winding to its end, the vista illuminated by the setting sun was particular striking.

“Ten years ago, I got into a fight with my father and ran away to the surface.”

“Really? I can’t imagine you getting into a fight with anyone.”

He knew it was normal for kids to fight with their parents, but Koutarou just couldn’t imagine Kiriha getting emotional in a fight like that. He hadn’t seen it happen even once over the past months.

“Ten years ago, I was still a child. It’s not like I had the mind of an adult at that age.”

“I guess that’s fair.”

Although she was very mature now, Kiriha too had once been a child. Although that much was common sense, it was still almost unbelievable to Koutarou. As Koutarou laughed, a smile formed on Kiriha’s lips, and the stiff atmosphere in the gondola quickly lightened up.

“At that age, my mother had just passed away, so it was an unstable time for me. I got into a fight with my father over something trivial and ran away from home.”

“I understand how you must have felt.”

“That’s right... You lost your mother too.”

Both Koutarou and Kiriha had lost their mothers when they were younger, so they had an easier time understanding each other in that regard—especially now that they thought of each other as friends.

“...Anyway, when I ran away from home, I went to the place I’d always been forbidden to go: the surface.”

Though Kiriha was looking at Koutarou, there was a distant look in her eyes now. She was watching her past unfold, starting with running away ten years ago.

“And that’s when I met him.”

“Who?”

“A boy around the same age we are now. I don’t remember his name. I’m sure he told me, but all I can remember is calling him Onii-chan.”

The most precious of all her treasured memories was meeting a boy on the surface.

“Ahaha, so you had a cute side to you too.”

Koutarou couldn’t imagine Kiriha calling anyone “Onii-chan” nowadays. The thought was funny enough that he burst out laughing.

“You say that like I’m not cute now.”

“Yeah, that’s what I thought up until yesterday.”

“And what about today?”

“You have a surprisingly cute side to you.”

“The ‘surprisingly’ part was unnecessary.”

Kiriha pouted, slightly dissatisfied. It was surprisingly cute in its own way, which only made Koutarou laugh harder.

“Anyway...”

Kiriha exhaled slightly, composed herself, and continued her story.

“He was a bit childish, but he was gentle and had a good sense of humor. He carefully listened to what I had to say, even though I was just a child.”

“I see...”

Kiriha continued talking, indulging feelings of both nostalgia and happiness. Based on the way she was acting, it was apparent that she really loved that boy. Koutarou felt a little bit envious.

“He was a lot like you, Koutarou.”

“Wow, you really think that highly of me?”

“If I didn’t, I wouldn’t have told you.”

“Don’t say something like that straight to my face...”

Koutarou blushed, a little embarrassed by Kiriha’s bold declaration. Not even Koutarou could keep his cool after a woman complimented him like that.

“If I hadn’t, that would have bothered you too, right?”

“So this was your real goal, huh?”

“Heh...”

Koutarou smiled as Kiriha flashed her mischievous grin. He was always being teased by Kiriha, but for some reason, he didn’t seem to mind today.

“After that, I then spent a few days with him. I was selfish as a child, so all I did was cause trouble for him.”

“That part of you hasn’t changed, you know?”

“Koutarou...”

“I can’t help but sympathize with the guy.”

After teasing him so, Koutarou found it strange that Kiriha would say that she was selfish as a child. If she didn’t think she was selfish now, just how selfish was she as a child?

“You’re really throwing me off... Today of all days, honestly...”

Kiriha smiled wryly. Normally she would dance circles around Koutarou, but today their roles had been reversed. He was giving Kiriha a hard time instead of

the other way around.

But I suppose I don't mind. It's not like it's unpleasant...

That change had come about because both Koutarou and Kiriha had accepted one another into the deepest part of their hearts, even if Kiriha still wasn't aware of it yet. And since this new dynamic she found herself in wasn't displeasing to her, she decided she was okay with it. Really, she was happy.

"He and I went all kinds of place together. We'd play in the park or go shop in the city. He even brought me along to the zoo and amusement park."

Through the window, Kiriha looked out over the amusement park and then towards the zoo. As she did, she recalled the weekend's events, and in her mind, they began to overlap with her memories from a decade ago.

"The zoo and the amusement park? Then..."

"That's right, Koutarou. I had you go with me to the places I went with him."

Kiriha nodded at Koutarou and pulled something out from her pocket. It was the aged trading card that had something scribbled on it in permanent marker. Seeing it, Koutarou pulled out the matching card he'd gotten with the pamphlet at the movie theater. It was almost exactly the same as Kiriha's. Koutarou's was just brand new, pristine, and still shiny.

"I got this card from him. It made me so happy... So much that I had him go to the movies with me too..."

Kiriha glanced down, but her gentle, warm gaze was directed at something much further off than the card in her hands. The card itself was a promotional item given out with snacks for the screening of the movie ten years ago. Kiriha's card was so worn because she'd been treasuring it all this time. When she looked at it, she remembered the boy that had given it to her.

"...You loved him, right?"

Koutarou remembered Kiriha saying that while they were at the beach during summer vacation. She said she'd gotten it from someone she loved a long time ago.

"Yes. He was my first love."

Kiriha slowly traced the pattern on the card with her finger.

Of course a memento of your first love would be precious to you...

Seeing Kiriha like that, Koutarou understood the meaning behind the gentle smile she would show from time to time. While they were at the beach house, he hadn't fully appreciated what Kiriha meant when she said the word love, but he understood it perfectly now. She meant the longing, romantic love she'd harbored since childhood.

"But those exhilarating, blissful days were short..."

Kiriha dejectedly drooped her shoulders. She'd had a smile on her face until just a moment ago, and without it, she looked so lonely now.

"What happened?"

"They came to pick me up. I was a runaway child after all."

"Oh yeah, you're the daughter of a distinguished clan, right?"

Kiriha was the daughter of the People of the Earth's chief. When she ran away, the entire clan went out looking for her. When they found her, she was of course taken back to the underground, meaning she was torn away from her beloved boy.

"And so we were parted. After that, I wasn't allowed to go to the surface, so I never saw him again."

"You wanted to though, right?"

"Of course. I may have been young, but I was serious about wanting to marry him."

Still looking lonely, Kiriha managed a weak laugh. Her first love that blossomed when she ran away from home was cut short when she was taken back home. It was only for a few days, and ten years had passed since then, but Kiriha hadn't once forgotten about it. It was like she was storing her feelings in the card in her hands.

"That's why I applied to become the commander when it was decided that we would invade the surface."

“What?!”

With those words, Koutarou’s eyes shot open wide. He was suddenly able to make sense out of why Kiriha had really come to the surface, and it left him astonished.

“So you agreed to invade the surface so you could meet your first love again?!”

“That’s right.”

Kiriha nodded. Koutarou’s guess was spot on.

“That’s why this invasion needs to happen peacefully. I couldn’t bring myself to fan the flames of war in the city where I met my first love.”

Kiriha had invaded the surface to find her first love. If it weren’t for the invasion, she wouldn’t have been allowed to go to the surface at all. But if the invasion was a disaster, meeting her first love again would only end in tragedy. That’s why she had to make sure things went peacefully and smoothly.

“Wait a minute. When you first arrived, didn’t you ask me to hand over room 106 so you could mass produce weapons?”

When Koutarou met Kiriha, she’d said she wanted to construct a shrine in room 106 to manufacture spiritual energy weapons like Karama and Korama. That didn’t seem to fit with what’d she just said about coming to the surface to find her love.

“In reality, that was a gamble of sorts.”

“A gamble?”

“By putting it that way, I was hoping that you would resist.”

“Aha!”

Koutarou had been doubting that Kiriha actually wanted to steal room 106. It turns out he was onto something all along.

“I needed you to resist. If the altar was completed in the early stages of the invasion, the radical faction would have pushed to use the weapons we made to finish the invasion through force. War against the surface had to be avoided at

all costs. Nothing good would have come from obtaining room 106 back then."

The biggest obstacle for Kiriha, who wanted to invade peacefully, turned out to be a radical faction of her own people who were hell-bent on taking the surface by force. If she'd succeeded in taking room 106 too soon, there was a chance it would only fuel the fires of the radical faction. In order to prevent that, she intentionally tried to create a situation that would make it difficult for her to obtain the room.

"That's why you kept trying to make me nervous, but never did anything."

"I'm sorry, Koutarou. I could neither win nor lose the battle for room 106. If I won, the radical faction would mass produce weapons and march to the surface with them, and if I lost, they would move to take room 106 by force. It would mean a war for us either way."

"And if that happened, your wish would never come true..."

Kiriha was a pacifist, so she wasn't in favor of a military invasion to begin with. But she had a personal investment in this too. She wanted to make contact with the surface peacefully so she could see her first love once more. In order for that to happen, she had to bring the battle for room 106 into a stalemate, which was the part that had confused Koutarou until now.

"Really, if you had just said something, I would have cooperated with you from the get-go..."

Koutarou scratched his head and smiled wryly. Kiriha's goals were perfectly reasonable. She was trying to prevent a war while looking for her long-lost love. If he'd known all that from the start, Koutarou probably would have volunteered to help her regardless of room 106.

"You're not wrong, Koutarou. Thinking back on it, I should have just asked for your cooperation. But at the time, I had nothing to fall back on and I couldn't truly trust you."

"Well, I guess that makes sense. We had just met and all..."

Eight months ago, neither of them knew if they could trust the other. But things were different now. Kiriha revealing all of this to Koutarou was a sign of her trust in him, and Koutarou believing what Kiriha said was a sign of his trust

in her.

“I’m really sorry, Koutarou”

“Huh?”

“It’s true I’ve been deceiving you all this time. I want to apologize for that.”

Kiriha had used a lot of methods to keep Koutarou from really trusting her. Everything from simple lies and inducement to trying to seduce or provoke him. She’d even gotten him to trust her only to turn around and make him put his guard up. Although she had to do it, she felt bad about it.

“It’s fine, really. Of course... I am a little disappointed as a man.”

Hearing Kiriha’s apology, Koutarou smiled wryly and shrugged. As he’d said, he did look somewhat disappointed. Koutarou wasn’t angry at Kiriha for everything that had happened up until now. It was all done for a good reason, and Koutarou could forgive her for that. She’d even helped him on more than one occasion, so there were no hard feelings. However, there was still one lingering let-down.

“Disappointed?”

“Yeah. If you’d been serious about pursuing me, I definitely would’ve felt more like a man.”

Koutarou was a healthy teenage boy after all.

“Koutarou...”

Kiriha was taken aback by Koutarou’s words, but her astonishment was brief. The next moment, she fell into a fit of energetic laughter.

“Pfft... Ahahaha!”

The setting sun was shining on Kiriha’s profile, but her smile was bright enough to put it to shame. It was probably the first time Koutarou had ever seen her truly smile from the bottom of her heart.

“You don’t have to laugh that much. I’m young, so it’s only natural.”

Koutarou was a little irritated at being laughed at like that. He crossed his arms in disapproval. However, the real reason Kiriha was laughing was quite

different from what Koutarou was thinking.

“Hahaha... Koutarou, if those words are true, I would be proud as a woman.”

That was the reason that Kiriha believed in him. Satomi Koutarou was not the kind of man to fall for such cheap temptations.

After departing the ferris wheel, Koutarou and Kiriha headed towards another attraction. There was one final place that she wanted to go.

“By the way, Kiriha-san, are you having any luck finding your first love?”

“No, not quite. It was ten years ago after all. There are extremely few clues to go off of.”

Kiriha shook her head with bitter resignation. Her face was dyed red by the setting sun. It was now approaching evening, and the shadows trailing behind them grew longer with each passing minute.

“Well, if the only clue you have is that card, I guess that would be hard.”

“There is one more clue, but I don’t know if he still has it or not.”

The first time Kiriha had said anything about her first love was during their trip to the beach. It’d been a few months since then, but it didn’t seem Kiriha was any closer to discovering her love’s whereabouts.

“There just aren’t any leads to go on. Nobody remembers anything. Not even I remember his face. Even if I found him, how would I know?”

“I guess you’d have to talk to every man in this city closing in on his thirties.”

Kiriha had met this boy ten years ago. She said he appeared to be high school age at the time, so he was probably in his late twenties now. Unfortunately, that only helped narrow things down so much. It was a big city.

“He might not even live around here anymore. Even if he does, would he even remember meeting me?”

“But you can’t just give up.”

“That’s right...”

Kiriha nodded and wistfully looked up overhead. The darkening winter sky

was perfectly clear.

“Do you love him that much?”

“Yes. Spending this weekend revisiting these places and these memories has reaffirmed that for me. Even now, I’m still in love with him.”

Kiriha’s feelings, like the sky, were perfectly clear. She would find him no matter what. Ten years had done nothing to shake her resolve.

“That’s why I want to met him again. I’m well aware that even if we do meet, he might not accept my feelings. But if I never see him again, I’ll never know and I’ll never be able to move on.”

They had only spent a few days together, but he was still her first love. Even as a child, Kiriha had known the significance of that.

But it was a long time ago. That boy would be an adult now, and he might have forgotten all about Kiriha. He might even be married with a family by now. Even so, Kiriha still wanted to see him. She didn’t want to ruin his current life. She just wanted to meet with him and confess the feelings she’d held in all these years. It didn’t even matter if he reciprocated those feelings or not. She just knew that she needed to tell him. If she didn’t, there was no way she’d ever be able to move on, much less fall in love with someone else. It was what had to be done in order to move forward with her life.

“I want to meet him, tell him how I feel, and put an end to this. Of course, I would be elated if he accepted my feelings.”

Kiriha smiled. It was a refreshingly honest expression. She’d never talked to anyone about this before, and the smile on her face now seemed like proof of her trust in the first person she’d chosen to tell. It was a sign that she really thought of Koutarou as her friend.

“So you refuse to half-ass it... Heh, I like it.”

After hearing Kiriha out, Koutarou grinned contentedly. This kind of thing was right up his alley. Wanting to solve a problem, regardless of the odds and regardless of the outcome, was rather close to the awkward way Koutarou lived his own life. He really felt like he understood what she meant, and he felt closer to her than ever.

“Koutarou?”

“Kiriha-san, I’ll help you too, so let’s find him.”

Inspired, Koutarou wanted to help Kiriha. He felt invested in this, almost like he was looking for his first love. That was the strength of the bond he’d forged with Kiriha.

“Huh?”

Kiriha’s eyes opened wide in surprise at Koutarou’s sudden offer. She’d never expected him to want to help.

“I just wanna get a look at the mug of the guy that could make a woman like you feel that way.”

“Koutarou...”

Kiriha reflexively clutched her chest, her eyes moistening.

That’s right... That’s the kind of man you are...

Kiriha was reminded all over again how she had come to trust Koutarou. He was clumsy and awkward, but earnest and kind. That’s why she’d revealed everything to him. This sweet reminder was just the cherry on top. She was truly happy.

“And besides, now that I’ve heard this much, I want to see what happens next.”

“...Thank you, Koutarou...”

Kiriha smiled and bowed deeply with her hands still on her chest. It was the only way she could think to show her gratitude right now.

“Stop it. Don’t worry about it. We’re friends, right?”

“That’s right.”

Kiriha slowly looked up. When she did, it seemed the tears had passed. She was emotional, but she certainly wasn’t upset.

“That said, watching over someone else’s love life does make you feel a bit jealous.”

“That’s true. I understand how you feel.”

After blinking a couple of times, Kiriha began cheerfully smiling again. It was again a special sign of her friendship with Koutarou.

“That’s why, after we get everything sorted out with this guy of yours, you’re going to introduce me to some cute underground girl. Got it?”

“Got it. I’ll try my hardest.”

“Then we have ourselves a deal!”

Koutarou nodded and flashed a wide grin back at Kiriha. It was the same kind of smile he often had on his face around Kenji, and it was a sign he’d started to think of Kiriha as a precious friend in much the same way.

“With that said, let’s hurry up and find this guy. For the sake of my future as well.”

“But of course. I need to push some girl from a distinguished clan on you so I can use you as a foothold for the surface invasion immediately.”

“Hey now...”

“Heehee...”

Kiriha smiled mischievously and dashed away from Koutarou. Her glossy black hair shone radiantly in the fading sunlight.

She’s surprisingly childish sometimes. But I guess that makes sense. As a leader of the underground dwellers, this isn’t a side that she can show just anyone.

Koutarou chased after Kiriha while thinking about that.

“Hey, wait up!”

“No way!”

Ignoring Koutarou’s pleading, Kiriha ran away from him with a bounce in her step. Looking at her from behind, Koutarou couldn’t see any trace of her normally calm and composed attitude. She looked just like a child. And like a child, Koutarou chased after her for a while.

“Hup!”

Kiriha took one last leap and landed by planting both of her feet on the ground. Her hair fluttered behind her and continued to do so as she spun around to greet Koutarou as he came running up.

“Is tag over already?”

“Yes. This is where I wanted to come.”

Kiriha nodded and pointed over her shoulder.

“Something else totally out of character, I see.”

“You think so?”

Kiriha cheerfully smiled.

She had led Koutarou to a roller coaster. Like the ferris wheel at the park, this roller coaster was the largest in the prefecture when it was built. While it had since lost that title, it was still staggeringly high. The intertwined rails, boasting a height of seventy meters with a sixty-five meter drop, spread out before Koutarou and Kiriha.

“...No, actually, I take it back. This might be just like you.”

This weekend had given Koutarou the opportunity to get to know Kiriha much better. While she was usually cool and collected, her inner child was a force to be reckoned with. Knowing that much about her, of course she’d pick the roller coaster.

“It sounds like you’re calling me a tomboy. I don’t like it.”

“Yes, that’s exactly what I meant.”

“That’s mean, Koutarou.”

Laughing, Kiriha approached the gate to the ride.

“So do you have a special memory of the roller coaster too?”

Koutarou followed after her. Kiriha then stopped in front of the sign next to the entrance.

“Yes and no. Ten years ago, I wasn’t able to ride it.”

Kiriha smiled wryly as she turned around.

“You couldn’t ride it? Was there too long of a line?”

Past the gate was an orderly line up to the platform. Seeing that, Koutarou assumed she meant the line must have been too long that day. In fact, when it was the largest roller coaster in the prefecture, it had an equal reputation for long lines.

“No, that wasn’t it. Look here, Koutarou.”

“Let’s see... ‘You must be at least 140 centimeters to ride this attraction’?”

On the sign was an illustration of a child measuring heights. The number 140 on the ruler was in big, bold font. For safety reasons, children under a certain height weren’t allowed on the ride.

“This tomboy was too short ten years ago, you see. I wasn’t allowed to ride it.”

“Ah, so part memory and part regret, huh?”

Koutarou imagined a much smaller, younger Kiriha selfishly demanding to ride the roller coaster as the boy and the ride attendant tried to soothe her.

“Heh, that’s too bad...”

The mental image was too funny, and Koutarou couldn’t help laughing at the thought.

“I don’t like the way you said it, but yes, that’s right.”

“You’re surprisingly persistent.”

“Of course. I’m a woman who’s still in love with a man she met ten years ago, remember?”

“That’s true.”

Koutarou and Kiriha had another good laugh together before going to get in line. It wasn’t too long, so it looked like they’d only have to wait about ten minutes.

“The roller coaster...” Kiriha muttered as they joined the end of the line.

Hearing her soft voice, Koutarou looked her way, but Kiriha was pensively taking in the sights. To Koutarou, it looked like she was reminiscing about the

past.

But why...

There was something in Kiriha's expression that seemed lonely. It bothered Koutarou. She didn't look like someone who was about to conquer one of her life's greatest regrets.

Could it be that...

As he stared at Kiriha's profile, Koutarou was intensely contemplating what might be going on with her. Just as he was on the verge of a conclusion, the ground started shaking intensely.

Kurano Kiriha

Sunday, December 20th

At first, Koutarou assumed the shaking he felt was from the roller coaster passing by. But it was far too intense for that, and it didn't die down after a moment or two. He also felt like the shaking was coming from beneath him. Surely that would have been strange for a roller coaster.

"What is this?"

As Koutarou's puzzlement increased, so did the shaking. What had started as just a small shake now felt like tiny bombs going off underneath his feet. And Koutarou wasn't the only one confused. The other guests in line around him had the same reaction. The sudden earthquake alarmed everyone, especially since they were about to get on a roller coaster.

"Could this be...?!"

However, Kiriha looked more alarmed than anyone. The moment she felt the shake, her eyes lost their youthful glow and regained their usual sharpness. She had a hunch as to what was causing the vibrations.

"Karama, Korama!"

Kiriha quickly called for her two haniwas, both of which appeared at her side instantly. Without even hearing her order, they had already taken action.

"Yes, ho, Nee-san! We can detect it from our side too, ho!"

"Analyzing the vibration patterns... A spiritual power generator has been detected. Analysis complete. There's a 97 percent certainty that it's a subterranean submarine, ho!"

In their hurry, the haniwas skipped their usual greetings and went straight to reporting the information they had. Hearing that, however, Kiriha's expression turned even more severe.

“I thought so! What’s the situation?”

“It’s at a depth of twenty meters and rising!”

“They’re planning on coming up to the surface, ho! Their predicted surface point is fifty meters to the south-southwest!”

“Preposterous! In a place like this?!”

Kiriha jumped the fence around the line for the roller coaster and ran towards the predicted surface point. If the haniwas’ information was correct, the shaking was coming from a specialized vehicle the People of the Earth used to travel through the underground, the subterranean submarine. What’s more, it was headed to the surface in the middle of the crowded amusement park.

“Kiriha-san! What’s wrong?”

Koutarou ran after Kiriha, calling out to her repeatedly.

“This is bad... If it was just a scouting party, they wouldn’t be coming to a populated area like this!”

But Kiriha was in such a panic that Koutarou calling to her didn’t even register. She could only think of one reason the People of the Earth would bring a subterranean submarine to a place like this.

Kiriha’s direct subordinates didn’t use subterranean submarines to come to the surface. Since they came in peace, there was absolutely no reason to use one. And if they did, they wouldn’t want it to stand out. They certainly wouldn’t surface it in an amusement park on the weekend. The only time she could imagine something like that happening would be in the event of an emergency, but she would have been contacted ahead of time about something like that. That only left one other possibility.

“How reckless can they be?!”

Kiriha gritted her teeth. The only reason for a subterranean submarine to appear here and now wasn’t a good one. The radical faction, or at least part of it, must have decided to preemptively invade the surface. Since they would be aiming for a show of force, they wouldn’t care if they surfaced in a crowded area. If anything, they may have even planned it on purpose. The submarine

was surfacing to attack the people here.

“What’s up, Kiriha-san?!”

“Ho! They’re attacking, ho!”

The two haniwas, floating next to Koutarou and chasing after Kiriha with him, were the ones to answer his question.

“Attacking?! Who is?!”

“The people that don’t approve of Nee-san’s way of doing things are coming to the surface to attack people, ho!”

“So it’s that radical faction Kiriha-san mentioned!”

This radical faction was why Kiriha couldn’t seize room 106, but they were also the reason she couldn’t fail at seizing it. Koutarou recalled Kiriha’s words from earlier after Karama explained what was happening.

“That’s right, ho! So Nee-san is planning on stopping them, ho!”

“So that’s what’s going on!”

Now with a firm grasp on the situation, Koutarou did his best to chase down Kiriha. This pacifistic, romantic girl couldn’t overlook such a reckless display of force. She was hurrying to their predicted surface point in an attempt to stop their attack.

“But this is dangerous, ho! At this rate, Nee-san will be killed, ho!”

“The radical faction only thinks of Nee-san as a nuisance, ho!”

“Then hurry up and contact your allies! Get them to do something about this!”

“Understood, ho!”

The radical faction despised Kiriha for scorning the use of military force. The chance they would reason with her was low. Given the current circumstances, they might even try to kill her and make it look like an accident.

“I won’t forgive them! I definitely won’t forgive them for attacking the surface!”

Even though she knew that, Kiriha still had to go. She had to try and stop them. If she didn't, she wouldn't be able to protect what was precious to her.

But as Koutarou ran after her, the asphalt in front of Kiriha suddenly split. From the crack emerged a black, cylindrical structure. It was several meters long and made out of metal. Rising out of the ground vertically, it looked something like a chimney.

Shizuka and Yurika carried the unconscious Ruth together, each one lending a shoulder for support. They were heading towards medical office inside the amusement park. They were going to lay her down on a bed and let her rest until she woke up on her own.

"Nijino-san, keep it together."

"But she's heavyyy!"

However, Shizuka sharing the burden with feeble Yurika had slowed them down considerably. Caving under Ruth's weight, her body began crumpling.

"That's pathetic..."

"Yurika, you can do it! Show us your cosplay spirit!"

"Easier said than done!"

In reality, Theia was stronger than Yurika, but her short stature made it impossible for her to stand shoulder to shoulder with Shizuka.

"Do you want me to help you?"

"Absolutely not! Anything but that!"

Sanae was genuinely offering to help, but Yurika's fear of ghosts prevented her from accepting. She didn't want to be possessed even if it made her stronger. That meant all Sanae could really do was use her Poltergeist powers, but they weren't intended to be used for long periods of time, so it didn't amount to much help in the end after all.

"Then show some guts, will you?"

"I feel like that's asking a little much of Yurika."

“Satomi-saaan, save meee!”

Yurika often managed to get herself into trouble. And when she found herself in difficult situations like this, she usually turned to someone else for help.

But as Yurika called for Koutarou, the group of girls suddenly heard a booming sound off to the left side of where they were headed. It was something like an explosion followed by the noise of various things breaking.

“Kyaaaaah!”

“Calm down, Nijino-san! We’re going to drop Ruth-san!”

“What... What just happened?!”

“Theia, over there!”

Surprised by the loud sound, each of the girls looked in the direction it had come from. They saw what looked like a pillar appearing from behind some buildings. The black, menacing structure stood out like a sore thumb among the other fairytale-like architecture of the park.

“What is that?! Ruth... is still unconscious! Damn it!”

Sensing that something bad was happening, Theia used her own bracelet to send the unmanned craft towards the pillar to gather information. In the meantime, she used the telescopic camera aboard Blue Knight in orbit to zoom in on the scene.

“Is that Koutarou and Kiriha? And who are those other guys?”

In the hologram projected from her bracelet, Theia could see Koutarou and Kiriha, as well a man facing them. Several men and women carrying weapons exited the pillar and moved to protectively surround the mysterious man.

“Is that some kind of event?”

“What kind of park would have an event that trashed the place?”

“Well, that’s true...”

The men and women facing Koutarou and Kiriha had come from the pillar that was sticking up through the hole in the ground. But it was hard to imagine damaging park property like that for the sake of an event. It seemed pretty safe

to assume something more sinister was afoot at this point.

“That’s bad! That means Satomi-kun and Kurano-san are facing off against people with real weapons, doesn’t it?”

By the time Shizuka had finished shouting, Theia had already taken off in a sprint. She had left the others behind and ran as fast as she could.

“Koutarou!”

I had a bad feeling about this!

Theia could see in the hologram that Kiriha was in over her head and that Koutarou was getting involved. Once she saw the mysterious man, she realized the danger Koutarou and Kiriha were in faster than anyone else.

Please be safe, Koutarou!

The princess was rushing to her vassal’s aid. It wasn’t exactly befitting of royalty, but Theia couldn’t help herself. The only thing on her mind right now was Koutarou.

“I’m coming too!”

Though she wasn’t sure what was going on, Sanae could sense it wasn’t anything good and took off after Theia.

To Sanae, Koutarou wasn’t just a roommate. The “family safety” charm still hanging from her neck was her real reason for wanting to save him.

“Ah, wait up, you two!”

Shizuka’s voice didn’t reach Theia. Sanae heard her, but she was planning on catching up to Theia so they could help Koutarou. Seeing that, Shizuka decided it would be best for her to follow after them too.

“Nijino-san, let’s take Ruth-san to that bench over there!”

“R-Right!”

Urging Yurika on, Shizuka took Ruth to a nearby bench and laid her down. She was planning to leave her there until she got back.

“Nijino-san, please take care of Ruth-san! I’m worried about those two going alone, so I’m going too!”

“I-I understand!”

“I’m counting on you!”

Shizuka ran after the other girls as she shouted back to Yurika. She needed her to take care of Ruth so she could go take care of Theia and Sanae.

“...U-Um...”

Yurika looked back and forth between the sleeping Ruth and the three girls running off into the distance.

If I just leave them be, I feel like there’s going to be a huge commotion...

Yurika began growing more and more anxious. Unlike normal, there were lots of people gathered in the amusement park. If Theia or Kiriha were to use their weapons, there would be serious consequences. People could end up hurt. At the very least, it would make an already messy situation even messier.

“I really should go too.”

Once she made up her mind, Yurika pulled herself together with a resolute nod. As a precautionary measure before battle, she would raise a ward to keep innocent bystanders away while keeping those involved from being seen. It was a job only Yurika could do.

“If Satomi-san gets arrested, that would just make things harder for me.”

For the sake of the innocent people who had come to the amusement part to have a good time, for the sake of Harumi, and for the sake of graduating together with Koutarou, Yurika was determined to go to battle herself.

“Come, Angel Halo!”

Her very first job was to cast a protective barrier on the still unconscious Ruth.

“I’m sorry, Ruth-san. Please wait here for a while.”

Whispering those words into Ruth’s ear, Yurika held her staff above her head and started chanting.

Shijima Tayuma was an extreme man, even within the radical faction. He was

extraordinarily proud of being part of the People of the Earth, and he had always scorned the thought of his people being driven underground. It infuriated him. In recent years, the flames of that anger had been fanned by the People of the Earth growing enamored with surface culture, and worse, leaving the underground and their heritage behind.

But this angry, loose cannon of a man was happy enough to breakdance the day the leader of the People of the Earth, Kurano Daiha, decided it was time to invade the surface. Tayuma was certain the time had finally come for him to regain his people's former glory. But Tayuma was a man of extremes, and his extreme excitement was followed by extreme disappointment. The commander of the surface invasion, Kurano Kiriha, put forward an invasion plan that was the complete opposite of what he had hoped.

To Tayuma, Kiriha's peaceful invasion felt like sacrificing their nation's pride. He believed that using force to regain what had been stolen was justice, pure and simple. Kiriha was always afraid of what would come of their ideas of justice clashing, but Tayuma was so self-assured in his beliefs that he didn't bother listening to Kiriha's. He wrote them off as the naive ideals of a weakling with no courage.

What further fueled their difference of opinions was Tayuma's family heritage. The Shijima clan was a warrior clan that had earned their reputation through bravery. Even if a war no one could win awaited them, Tayuma didn't mind one bit. It would still be a chance to put his mettle and his convictions on full display for all to see.

His pride as part of the People of the Earth, his pride as a member of a warrior clan, his ambition to make a name for himself in a war, his blind faith in what he believed to be justice, and the anger he felt when his hopes for a military invasion were betrayed all worked together like a pressure cooker. Roughly a year had passed since Daiha had decided to invade the surface, and Tayuma's patience had finally snapped.

Acting recklessly on his own, Tayuma led his followers to the surface. Their goal was to show the world that the People of the Earth existed with a display of military might. By doing that, the surface dwellers would declare them enemies, and the People of the Earth would have no choice but to take the

surface by force after all. That was Tayuma's plan.

But Kiriha wasn't about to let that happen. If she did, it would be the same as pulling the trigger on an unwinnable conflict that would last for several decades. The People of the Earth would be ruined before they could even move up to the surface. That's why Kiriha now stood in Tayuma's way with absolute resolve.

"Just what is the meaning of this, Shijima Tayuma?"

Kiriha glared at Tayuma and reproached him in an angry voice.

"Well, it looked like you were having trouble with your invasion, so I came to help. I'd prefer it if you just thanked me."

Despite Kiriha's rebuke, Tayuma still had a confident look on his face. Tayuma was a man well into his forties, so he thought of the teenage Kiriha as nothing more than a little girl. He was a big man, and he was wearing something like the robes of a Shinto chief priest. The eight subordinates surrounding him were all dressed in a similar fashion, but their outfits looked easier to move in. They were in their equivalent of military service uniforms while Tayuma was in a formal dress uniform.

"Pull your troops back, Tayuma! Do that, and I'll overlook you bringing out the subterranean submarine!"

"I can't just back down. The time to regain our lost glory has finally come!"

Tayuma was quick to refuse Kiriha's compromise. He showed no hesitation whatsoever. Tayuma had come here dead set on a warpath.

Regaining their lost glory...?

Standing at Kiriha's side while making sure he didn't get in the way was Koutarou. He was on high alert as he observed the situation, but those words started turning the gears in his head. He'd heard them somewhere before. It was the same thing Kiriha had said when they first met. At the time, she'd probably just said it to scare him, but to see her so thoroughly reject the idea now was somewhat reassuring.

"Can't you see, Tayuma? Just revealing the subterranean submarine to the

surface dwellers is dangerous enough! Taking military action on top of that will only lead to war!”

“That’s exactly what I want! A war to put an end to our long exile! To show the world the power of the Shijima clan! To reclaim this bountiful surface!”

Kiriha’s role had changed. In the past, Koutarou was the one trying to prevent Kiriha from invading, but now Kiriha was the one trying to keep Tayuma at bay.

Kiriha-san is serious...

Seeing Kiriha so earnestly trying to persuade Tayuma to back down proved that everything she’d said before about a peaceful invasion was true. Koutarou believed in her, but he was still relieved to see her acting in a way that lived up to his faith in her.

“Ridiculous! Are you so obsessed with fighting with the surface dwellers that you’d bring ruin upon the People of the Earth?”

“We only need to win before that happens! And if we don’t, it would be a more honorable end than wasting away in some cave! Rather than living as dogs, the People of the Earth would be better off dying as prideful wolves!”

“You’re no wolf! You’re just a mad dog!”

“You impudent little girl!”

Angered at being called a mad dog, Tayuma raised his right hand. When he did, the eight men and women surrounding him readied their arms. The weapons in their hands looked different from modern firearms. They looked more like ceramic, similar to Karama and Korama. But there was more than just a resemblance. They were indeed wielding spiritual energy weapons made by the same technology.

“Kiriha-san!”

“It’s okay, Koutarou.”

Koutarou began panicking when eight people pointed guns at Kiriha. He wasn’t planning on interfering if all they were going to do was talk, but if this broke out into a fight, he wasn’t going to stay out of it. He couldn’t just sit tight and wait for the first shot to be fired. But Kiriha seemed unfazed and still

addressed Tayuma calmly.

“Tayuma, do you know what pointing guns at me means?”

“I’ll just report to Daiha-dono that the commander was betrayed and killed by the surface dwellers.”

“So you really did have this all planned out from the start...”

Part of Tayuma’s plan was indeed to take out Kiriha. He’d intentionally surfaced where he knew she’d be. All he had to do was report that the benevolent Kiriha had been killed by surface dwellers, and even the peace-loving People of the Earth would call for a military invasion. This encounter was all by design.

“That said, just killing you right now wouldn’t be any fun. First—”

However, before Tayuma could make his next move, a voice familiar to Koutarou and Kiriha interrupted him.

“I’ve found you, underground people! Get away from those innocents!”

“Who goes there?!”

Surprised by the voice, Tayuma hurriedly turned around. It seemed to be coming from the roof of a nearby attraction.

“Red Shine!”

“Blue Shine!”

“Green Shine!”

“Yellow Shine!”

“Pink Shine!”

“And together, we are the Sun Rangers of the Sun Squad!”

The group of five entering the scene in brightly colored suits and striking poses were heroes of justice that fought against the evil underground people.

“Wherever there is love, there is justice! In this world—”

“Open fire!”

While the Sun Rangers were still introducing themselves, Tayuma gave his men the order to engage. Without any hesitation, each of eight soldiers pointed their weapon at the Sun Rangers and pulled the triggers. What came out of the guns weren't metal bullets, but focused spiritual energy. They were firing spiritual energy beam rifles. The beam had a similar effect to when Sanae used her Poltergeist powers to attack directly. However, since the beam from the rifle was concentrated, it held far more power than Sanae's attacks.

"Aaaaaghh, hey! We were still introducing ourselves!"

There was a large explosion around the Sun Rangers. Each beam rifle had incredible firepower, so all eight shots hitting together caused an explosion large enough to easily sending the Sun Rangers flying.

"We just got here and this is what we geeet?!"

"I even came wearing bluuue!"

"Nooo, Baron-samaaa!"

"Ahhh, my baked potatooo!"

"...It turned into charcoal."

The Sun Rangers traced a perfect parabola in the sky as they were blown up and away. Even though they were sent flying the moment they arrived, thanks to the strength of their suits, they all survived without any life-threatening injuries.

"What did they even come here to do...?"

Koutarou sighed as he watched the five rangers take off.

The Sun Rangers had actually come after their detectors reacted to the subterranean submarine. It was the same technology that had led them to Kiriha's haniwas at the zoo yesterday.

"Tayuma-sama, I believe they were the reported hindrance."

"I see. So they noticed our movements and came here to get in our way. Admirably hard workers, wouldn't you say? Ahahaha!"

Tayuma had previously sent his subordinates to investigate the surface in

preparation for a military invasion. His scouting party had repeatedly been stymied by combat squads. Combat squads that weren't the Sun Rangers, that is. The Sun Rangers had been misfortunate enough to finally find the underground army while they were on a combat mission instead of scouting.

"Karama, Korama, spiritual energy field to maximum output! Use elemental attacks for offense and focus the rest of your energy into the field!"

"Roger, ho!"

"Ho, ho!"

However, the Sun Ranger's appearance hadn't been for naught. When the eight soldiers turned to fire on the Sun Rangers, Kiriha called over her haniwas and prepared for battle. The two haniwas floating next to her enveloped themselves, Kiriha, and Koutarou in a yellow light. It was a thick spiritual energy field durable enough to take attacks from eight people. The two haniwas then began glowing with electricity and fire they were prepared to unleash in an attack.

"Oh, the automatons that the Kuranos are so proud of? Pity. Unlike your defensive models, ours were designed for combat!"

A clay doll about a meter in height floated up next to Tayuma. It looked like it was made from the same ceramic Karama and Korama were, but its shape was more angular and it had an aggressive design. It was a weaponized automaton just like Kiriha's haniwas.

"First you threaten us with numbers and now force? How low the brave Shijima clan has been laid."

"Say whatever you want. That's just how war is! Jakko! Activate the spiritual energy field neutralizer!"

"Gaaaaa..."

Receiving Tayuma's orders, the clay doll roared and began emitting an orange glow. It then slowly approached the haniwas.

"Nee-san! He's eroding our spiritual energy field!"

"This will be bad if it keeps up, ho! We're losing in generator output, ho!"

As the clay doll got closer, the yellow light enveloping Koutarou and the others grew weaker. It was the clay doll's special ability to counteract and overcome spiritual energy barriers taking effect. With one side trying to keep up a barrier and the other trying to destroy it, the side with the most power would come out on top. In this scenario, Karama and Korama were at a disadvantage. The haniwas were only about thirty centimeters tall, and the clay doll was over three times their height. Because of the large difference in size, the haniwas had less power even though there were two of them. At the rate things were going, they would be without a shield in no time.

"Tayuma, is there no way to get you to stop fighting?"

"A foolish question! Now that we've come up to the surface, we can't return with nothing to show for it!"

"I understand. In that case, I must steel myself as well."

Before Kiriha even finished her sentence, she shook off her left hand and formed a fist. Before anyone could realize what she was doing, it was now covered by a blue gauntlet. It was a weapon from the armory in her secret base.

"I'm not letting you take anything!"

Though she had never held a weapon before, Kiriha was now brandishing one to defend herself, her friends, and what she believed in. It was a powerful statement coming from someone who always tried so hard to resolve things peacefully. The short of it was that Kiriha had taken up arms to prevent a war from breaking out.

"Wahahaha! How are you going to defend it all on your own?"

Tayuma sneered at Kiriha. Convinced of his victory, he was now looking down on her.

"You have no allies on the surface! The people you're trying to protect won't lift a finger to protect you! Just you sit there on the sidelines and watch as the future you strived for meets its tragic end!"

Tayuma raised his own gun and pointed the barrel at the roller coaster.

"Curse you, Tayuma! I won't let you attack the surface!"

With Tayuma aiming at the roller coaster, even coolheaded Kiriha began panicking. The amusement park was a treasured place to Kiriha, and the roller coaster was especially precious. Kiriha pointed her left hand, clad in the blue gauntlet, at Tayuma. Tayuma, however, was surrounded by his subordinates who had their beam rifles trained on Kiriha. There was no way she could attack Tayuma like that.

“Tch!”



With Karama and Korama's spiritual energy field being eroded away by the clay doll, it was probably weak enough that the beam rifles could penetrate it now. Kiriha knew she couldn't afford giving Tayuma's soldiers a chance to attack.

"Ahahaha! To think you'd try to protect a worthless scrap heap like this! Your eccentricity sure is something."

Tayuma took his time aiming at the coaster as if to taunt Kiriha.

"Stop it, Tayuma!"

"That's more like it, young lady. I like that tone of voice much better. Now, I wonder how you'll sound when your beloved scrap heap collapses..."

Tayuma mocked Kiriha as he put his finger on the trigger. However, before he could pull it, a fist came flying right at him.

"Gwah!"

"Quit messing around, you bastard!"

The fist belonged to Koutarou, who Tayuma had completely forgotten existed. Of course, it was only natural to overlook an unarmed surface dweller who seemed to be no threat. Kiriha realized she'd done the same thing as her eyes now opened wide in surprise.

"Koutarou!"

"There are some things you just can't do!"

Koutarou yelled at Tayuma, who had toppled over from the blow. Koutarou was unbelievably angry. Enough that he had completely forgotten who his opponent was and that this opponent was armed. But all that really mattered to him right now was that Tayuma didn't get away with this.

"This is a place where people come to make memories!"

"What about it? We don't care about that! How laughable!"

Tayuma wiped his bleeding lip as he stood up. But more hurt than his face was his pride. Tayuma couldn't stand for being so humiliated by a younger man. He glared at Koutarou with hate in his eyes.

“I could never let someone who dares to call this place laughable invade the surface! Kiriha-san would never do that!”

“Quit your howling, brat! In that case, I’ll just kill you first!”

Koutarou came swinging at Tayuma again. To fend him off, Tayuma pointed his gun at him. Koutarou was close enough now that he was in point-blank range.

However, Tayuma’s gun never went off. All of a sudden, several laser beams came raining down from the sky and targeted his gun. They penetrated through it and scattered bits and pieces of its advanced technology all over the ground.

“What?!”

“Nice one, Theia!”

Koutarou then swung his fist, which struck the surprised Tayuma directly in the face. Having been punched in the face again, Tayuma fell down once more.

“How about ‘thank you for saving me, Your Highness’?”

Theia’s voice rang out from above Koutarou. The next moment, a rather sturdy machine that looked like an aircraft only about a meter long descended next to him. It was the unmanned craft that Theia had used to follow after Koutarou and Kiriha.

“Thank you for saving me, Your Highness.”

“You’re always so reckless. Honestly...”

Theia’s dumbfounded voice was being projected from the small craft. She’d set it to standby above Koutarou and Kiriha, and it would protect them if things got dangerous. Theia had given a sign only Koutarou would notice and had him help look for or create a chance to attack. Koutarou had gotten so angry that he went in swinging before Theia could make her move, but in the end, it all worked out as planned.

“Theia, stop babbling and hand over the sword!”

“That’s not it. You say ‘please give me the sword, Your Highness’!”

With Tayuma being attacked, his subordinates weren’t just going stand by

and do nothing. Half of the eight were currently switching targets from Kiriha to Koutarou. But Koutarou was already prepared to fight. He'd pulled a sword out from a black hole that had opened up in the air and was holding it firmly with both hands as he took an old Forthorthian sword fighting stance. It was the treasured sword Saguratin, complete with Theia's golden flower crest engraved on it.

"Smoke Discharger!" Theia shouted.

On her command, white smoke covered the area around Koutarou. It was being produced by a globe the small fighter had launched. A quick chemical reaction almost instantly created enough smoke to rob the enemy of their sight.

"You idiot! I can't see anything either!" Koutarou shouted at Theia as he crouched down.

While Tayuma's subordinates couldn't see through the smoke, neither could Koutarou.

"Calm down, Koutarou! It's all according to my plan!"

"Koutarou!"

The next moment, Koutarou felt a familiar presence around his neck.

"Is that you, Sanae?!"

"Yeah!"

Koutarou recognized the voice he was now hearing in his ear. Sanae had found her way to Koutarou through the smoke and was now clinging to his back in the usual fashion.

"I'll find the enemies for you!"

As promised, Koutarou could suddenly see several lights in the white smoke. The lights were in the shapes of people moving carefully through the smokescreen.

"What is this?!"

"It's the opposite of when I can taste what you eat! I'm showing you what I can see!"

“I see! How convenient!”

Now that he knew what was going on, Koutarou took off. The moving lights were all people. He could tell Kiriha apart from the rest since she had the haniwas with her. That meant the rest were Tayuma’s subordinates. Koutarou knew what he needed to do.

“You better compliment me lots after all of this is done!”

“I know, I know!”

Using his sword, Koutarou destroyed the subordinates’ weapons one after the other. Neither Koutarou nor Sanae had any memory of it, but this was actually the second time they’d used this technique. His experience, albeit unwitting, actually made it easier for Koutarou to process what was going on.

“This isn’t how a knight should be fighting, but...”

“No, you’re a genius, Theia!”

Koutarou then used the pommel of his sword to knock the unarmed subordinates unconscious. Still blinded by the smoke, they had no way of defending against Koutarou’s ambush. They panicked and tried attacking at random, but it was an act of desperation that wouldn’t save them.

“R-Really? You really think so?”

“Yeah, I owe you one.”

It was true that this kind of one-sided trickery wasn’t exactly a chivalrous fight, but Koutarou was really quite thankful he didn’t have to fight to the death —especially knowing Kiriha’s wish. He directed that gratitude to Theia for her help.

“Koutarou, the smoke is clearing.”

After Koutarou had knocked out the four subordinates targeting him, the effect of the smoking globe ran out and the air began to clear. Since the amusement park was near the sea, the coastal winds came in during the evening. Once the smoke was no longer actively being produced, it dissipated quickly.

“So you’ve cleared things up over there too. Good job, Satomi-kun.”

“Landlord-san!”

Once the smoke cleared, Tayuma’s four remaining subordinates were also lying on the ground. Shizuka stood over them wearing large goggles. She had taken advantage of the smoke to sneak in and dispatch the four soldiers targeting Kiriha.

“Glad to see you safe, Shizuka.”

“As a martial artist, using goggles like this kind of feels like cheating. I’m supposed to do this kind of think with my mind’s eye.”

Shizuka took off her goggles while talking to the unmanned fighter Theia’s voice was coming from. The goggles allowed the user to see infrared light, which was how Shizuka had been able to fight in the smoke.

“D-Damn, to think you had that kind of ambush lying in wait...”

Tayuma, who had been knocked down by Koutarou, stood up. As he did, the clay doll moved away from Karama and Korama and went to its master’s side to protect him.

“So what will you do now, Tayuma? Are you still planning on fighting?”

Kiriha approached Tayuma, still wearing the blue gauntlet on her left hand. She was determined to use it if she had to.

Despite his obvious disadvantage, Tayuma gave Kiriha a cold glare and boldly responded, “That goes without question! If I can turn you into a sacrifice here, the People of the Earth will still choose war!”

Even if Tayuma and his group were defeated here, as long as Kiriha died, the remaining members of the radical faction would manipulate the truth to incite the People of the Earth. That way Tayuma would still get what he wanted. He only had to ignore whether he personally won or lost.

“Do you think you can do that in this situation?”

“I don’t.”

Not just Kiriha, but Koutarou and the others all had Tayuma surrounded. He knew killing Kiriha would be difficult now. But in spite of that, he still laughed.

“But the sacrifice doesn’t have to be you!”

Tayuma smiled triumphantly. It was almost as if he had predicted this outcome from the start.

“So your aim isn’t me, it’s—”

In that moment, Kiriha realized what Tayuma was after.

“Jakko, release the safety device!”

“Gaaaaa...”

“Karama, Korama! Focus the spiritual energy field around that automaton! Maximum output! I don’t care if you burn out your circuits! Keep it contained no matter what!”

“You’re too late! Jakko, self-destruct!”

“Gaaaaa...”

Kiriha and Tayuma gave their orders at the same time, but Tayuma’s simple order registered much faster. Karama and Korama’s field wouldn’t make in time. Even if it did, it was still weakened from the erosion, so it was uncertain how much of the explosion it could actually contain.

“Muahahaha! I win!”

Convinced of his victory, Tayuma burst out laughing. Things were going according to plan. Tayuma’s strategy had a primary goal and a backup goal. The primary goal was to assassinate Kiriha with his own hands. Once it became apparent that was impossible, he simply moved on to his backup goal.

The backup goal was to self-destruct the clay doll and make himself the sacrifice. Although they might not have had the influence of the Kurano clan, the Shijima clan was still a considerably powerful clan. With just a small twist of the truth, the radical faction could claim that Tayuma had been attacked by the surface dwellers and his automaton exploded in the process. They could spin Tayuma as a martyr. A victim of the cruel surface dwellers. The best possible outcome was if the explosion also managed to take Kiriha with him.

The reason behind the several scouting parties was to lure out the surface’s combat squads. By doing that, the radical faction could pin the blame on them.

That was why Tayuma waited to attack Kiriha until the Sun Rangers arrived. Once they appeared, all the radical faction had to do was destroy Karama and Korama, and subsequently their records of the events. The entire reason Tayuma had brought a clay doll with the ability to erode spiritual energy fields was to make absolutely sure that Karama and Korama would be destroyed. All he had to do was buy enough time to erode their spiritual energy field.

Once that had failed, he'd chosen to become a sacrifice and ordered the clay doll to self-destruct. The ideal scenario was to catch Kiriha in the blast too, but all it really had to accomplish was destroying Karama and Korama. Without any records of what had happened, Tayuma didn't expect the People of the Earth to believe Kiriha over the entire radical faction. So with Tayuma's death, he could make sure the People of the Earth would no longer trust surface dwellers.

"With this, the People of the Earth shall reclaim their glory! And I shall stand alongside the heroes of history!"

Tayuma had won. The clay doll would explode and he would die. It would also wipe out the haniwas, meaning no evidence would be left behind. The rest of the radical faction would exploit the situation and call for revenge against the surface dwellers. It would be the first step to ushering in the age of war Tayuma had dreamed of.

The clay doll exploded, but Tayuma's laughter didn't stop.

"Wh-Whaaat?!"

At least, it didn't until he saw that the explosion was prevented by Karama and Korama's spiritual energy field after all.

"How?! That's impossible!"

The field should have been deployed too late. Tayuma had finished issuing his orders first. Even if the haniwas had made it in time, their energy field was damaged by the clay doll. Either way, they shouldn't have been able to prevent the explosion.

"It seems like the explosion was smaller than I thought."

With Tayuma dumbstruck, Kiriha didn't miss her chance to close the distance between them. He saw her coming, but he was too shocked over the failure of

his plan to react in time.

“As if that could happen! Quit messing around! This is some kind of mistake!”

Tayuma couldn’t accept the situation. The clay doll had more than enough power to kill him. He’d gone over this countless times in simulations. He was absolutely sure of it. Karama and Korama shouldn’t have been able to prevent an explosion like that. But they had nevertheless, and now Kiriha was closing in.

“Then you were simply abandoned by the goddess of creation!”

The gauntlet on Kiriha’s left hand began glowing. The gauntlet worked by turning the wearer’s spiritual energy into fire or electricity. Right now, Kiriha was channeling hers as electricity.

“There will be war! I will become a hero! The People of the Earth’s history will __”

“Allow me to advise you on something.”

Kiriha’s left fist sunk into the body of the screaming Tayuma. As it did, the electricity from her fist flowed into him.

“Gwah!”

Through precise control of her spiritual energy, the electricity knocked Tayuma out without killing him.

“Next time, don’t skip out on your prayers. For your own sake.”

Tayuma hit the floor. Kiriha watched it happen with a somewhat sorrowful look on her face.

“Ah, it looks like it ended safely.”

Someone was looking down on Kiriha and Tayuma’s fight. However, it wasn’t the goddess of creation that Kiriha had mentioned, but rather a girl wearing a frilly pink costume. And that girl was none other than our magical girl, Rainbow Yurika.

“Now I can finally climb down...”

Suppressing her fears, she had scaled a tall pillar to watch over Koutarou and

the others from afar and support them with her magic if necessary.

“I feel like I’ve gotten good at using my magic in secret.”

Yurika had set up a ward to keep people from gathering, reduced the falling speed of the blown away Sun Rangers to keep them alive, and protected the amusement park and its visitors when Tayuma’s subordinates began firing at random.

“I’m so glad everything worked out.”

And to top it all off, she had contained the clay doll’s explosion by casting a defensive spell on the inside of Karama and Korama’s spiritual energy field. The explosion had terrific power, but thanks to the twofold barrier of magic and spiritual energy, it was successfully contained. While she almost hadn’t made it in time, Yurika still somehow managed to pull it off. Nobody knew, but the hero of the day was indeed Yurika.

“Now all I need to do is head back to Ruth-san and everything will be fine.”

However, unlike every other time this had happened before, Yurika believed that it was a good thing that nobody knew. It was always important to tackle difficult problems with your own power. If people knew that there was magic to do the heavy lifting for them when they needed it most, there would be lots of people who stopped trying to do things for themselves. And the fact that she could appreciate that now was also a sign that Yurika had matured.

That being said, Yurika’s actions were also for her own sake. She wanted to stay as a normal girl for as long as possible, and that meant keeping people from finding out about her powers.

“But how do I get down from here...?”

After casting spells to her heart’s content, Yurika had temporarily used up all of her mana. And without some magical assistance, weak Yurika was left stranded, unable to climb down from the pillar she was on.

“Please save meee, Satomi-saaan!”

Yurika was now more concerned with surviving the crisis she found herself in than who did or didn’t know about her being a magical girl.

A few days later, another evaluation meeting was being held in the office of the Sun Ranger's base. They had finally gotten their five individual colors straight, but today they were all wearing white. The damage they had suffered from the explosion and following crash wasn't anything to be sneezed at. Each one of them was all wrapped up in bandages.

"All of our previous dilemmas have been resolved and we've confirmed that the enemy is active in this region as well, but now we have discovered a new set of problems."

Like last time, Professor Roppongi was writing on the whiteboard.

"...And that's that. We're all terribly weak."

"We didn't even stand a chance."

The White Shine with short hair sticking out from under his bandages slumped his shoulders. As he did, the short White Shine next to him continued talking.

"Besides, in the other regions, the underground people would run as soon as they saw rangers. But here, they came straight for us."

"Yeah. They shot at us without hesitation. Their guns really packed a punch too," the White Shine wearing sunglasses said bitterly.

He was confident in his counter-firearm abilities, so he was quite dissatisfied with such a defeat.

"Still, we were saved by the strength of our suits. It's almost a miracle that we survived."

"I was sure I would die when Megu-chan came falling down on me."

"Daisaku-kun, you don't need to say it like that!"

When the fat White Shine had been blown away, he hit the ground first and ended up as the female White Shine's landing pad. Thanks to that, his injuries were that much more severe. The female White Shine felt bad about it, but since she had a stubborn side to her, she protested when the topic was brought up.

“On the other hand, the underground people were defeated by civilians that happened to be at the scene.”

“Which means that their weapons are powerful, but the soldiers themselves aren’t all that strong?”

“Most likely. Those soldiers might just have been recruits as well.”

“I see... So the situation was the same for both of us, but we lost due to the difference in firepower...”

“If my prediction is correct.”

Roppongi and the White Shine with short hair nodded at each other. However, the mini White Shine had a different opinion.

“There’s also the possibility that the civilians who defeated them were just special. It was Baron Demon-san and the others that did it, right?”

“That’s right! Baron-sama is super strong!”

At the mention of Baron Demon, the female White Shine’s eyes started sparkling. In her head, Baron Demon was already godly. Hearing of his victory, it was like she was dreaming.

“Aaah! I want to be captured and tortured by Baron-sama as soon as possible! Ohohoho...”

“...Megu-chan’s opinion aside, if normal people could come out victorious, won’t things work out if we try harder?” the large man covered in plaster casts said in summary.

If Baron Demon could overcome the difference in firepower with skill, they should be able to do the same if they tried hard enough. Really, they had a much higher chance of succeeding than Baron Demon thanks to their suits.

“Daisaku-niichan, do you mean that we should practice our moves and come up with strategies?”

“Yeah.”

“Practice, huh? That’s my specialty.”

“Strategies... Hey, I’ve been thinking, but can’t we just stealthily snipe them?

We have the detectors on our side.”

“Stupid. Do you want to be scolded by Baron-sama again?”

“Then if we increase our numbers—”

“Quit messing around! Hayato, you really don’t get it, do you?! Did you not listen to a word of what Baron-sama said?!”

“I-I did, but...”

The discussion once again deteriorated into a dispute. Their first battle might have been a loss, but their morale was still high. They wanted to be able to produce results for their next mission. All five members could at least agree on that much.

They’d finally gotten the chance to do some real work since their demotions, so a failure or two was no obstacle. Whether they were defeated or made fun of, they would get up as many times as they had to. At least in that aspect, they could be called heroes.

Really, the Sun Ranger’s battle had only just begun.

Roller Coaster

Monday, December 21st

With Kiriha apprehending Shijima Tayuma, his plan ended in complete failure. Karama and Korama's recorded footage served as proof that backed up Kiriha's testimony. Tayuma was now in custody awaiting investigation and trial.

And with his plan exposed to the world, Kiriha's political rivals, the radical faction, temporarily withdrew from the limelight. With public opinion of the underground dwellers changing, there was little they could do now. Even if Kiriha were to somehow die, those of the radical faction would be primary suspects. They would have to ride out this storm before they could make any further moves. As a result, Kiriha's life peacefully returned to normal.

After surviving the ordeal, she used her winter vacation to take Koutarou to the amusement park again to thank him.

"You don't really need to thank me."

However, to Koutarou, he hadn't done anything that required thanks. He and Kiriha were friends. It was only obvious that he would help her out and defend her.

"Don't say that. I love this place. There are lots of rides I haven't tried yet."

That said, expressing her gratitude was mostly an excuse. In reality, Koutarou coming along was just a bonus. What she really wanted to do was ride the roller coaster. She'd almost gotten a chance to before, but Tayuma showing up had gotten in the way. But Kiriha was determined to ride it today, and she'd been enthusiastic about it since morning.

"Well, in that case... it's fine."

"Good. I'll be happy if you enjoy it with me."

"You can count on me. Having fun is my specialty."

The two of them were leisurely walking through the park in the direction of the roller coaster. However, just before they reached it, Koutarou stopped for some reason. Noticing that, Kiriha stopped too and turned to look at him.

“What’s wrong?”

“Over there,” Koutarou said with a nod of his head. “I was just noticing that they’re already working on fixing the hole.”

He was looking at the place where Tayuma had appeared with the subterranean submarine. It had left something of a crater in the park grounds, and there were several workers in the middle of filling and repairing it.

“Koutarou, having a big hole like that here would be a waste.”

“Well, as long as there are happy memories being made here, everything is fine, right?”

“That’s right.”

“And now I guess you want some happy memories on the roller coaster?”

“Of course.”

After giggling with each other, they began walking towards the roller coaster again.

Thanks to Yurika’s magic that day, the incident had ended quickly. Because of the ward she cast at the same time the Sun Rangers appeared, no one had seen the fighting and the incident was written off as a mysterious sinkhole.

Koutarou and Kiriha, of course, had no idea what Yurika had done either. Koutarou just thought they’d been lucky. Kiriha assumed that the surface government was carefully regulating information on the incident. And while their rationalizations were different, they were both just happy that the incident had been safely resolved.

“As long as happy memories are being made, huh? Koutarou, are you happy being here with me?”

Kiriha eyed Koutarou suspiciously as she walked next to him. They were closer than ever. So while he would normally panic in this kind of situation, today he instead smiled and nodded.

“Yeah. You’re not that bad the way you are now. And I don’t have to worry about anything weird since I now know what you’re really after.”

Up until recently, Koutarou had been uneasy because he didn’t fully understand Kiriha’s intentions. For example, when she had tried to seduce him, he didn’t know if she was kidding or if she was being serious. But things were different now. Knowing that Kiriha had someone she loved, it was obvious that she wasn’t seriously pursuing him. And he knew that she was loyal. In fact, it would be more trouble for Kiriha if Koutarou took her seduction seriously.

But with things the way they were now, Koutarou completely trusted in her. She might play mind games, but she didn’t play with people’s hearts. And knowing that, he was no longer anxious around her. Like he did with Kenji, he was able to just enjoy hanging out and playing around with Kiriha.

“It sounds like you’re calling me a capricious woman though.”

“If it sounds like it, then it’s probably the truth. But I like that kind of person.”

“Heh, then I’ll take it as a compliment.”

“Good. If you hadn’t already chosen a man, I think I would have made a move on you.”

“Quit your lying, Satomi Koutarou. That’s far too transparent.”

The pair headed towards the roller coaster while continuing to joke around. This was unprecedented territory in their relationship, but everything up until today had led to it.

A man she wants to be with, huh?

When they reached the roller coaster, Koutarou stopped moving once more. He turned the thought over in his mind again, then looked towards the sign posted in front of the gate to the ride: “You must be at least 140 centimeters to ride this attraction.” Koutarou then glanced up at the cars running along the rails.

Hmm, something just feels wrong...

Something wasn’t quite clicking for Koutarou as he imagined himself and Kiriha riding the roller coaster together.

“Kiriha-san.”

So he stopped Kiriha as she was about to cross the entrance to the ride.

“Yes?”

Kiriha quickly turned around. Her eyes were sparkling with childlike enchantment and excitement.

“Let’s not ride this.”

“...Koutarou?”

Kiriha’s expression clouded over instantly. After how much she was looking forward to this, she was visibly disappointed.

“Why would you back out now that we’ve come this far?”

“Hmm... How should I put it...?”

Saying “it doesn’t feel right” wouldn’t cut it. Koutarou racked his brain trying to think of a way to explain what he was feeling to Kiriha.

“I really think you should ride it with your first love.”

“...Koutarou...”

Kiriha’s eyes opened wide in surprise as she suddenly became aware of her own feelings.

Am I confusing Koutarou with him...?

Until Koutarou said something, Kiriha had felt like she *was* about to ride the roller coaster with her first love. This was the first she’d realized that she was confusing the two boys. Taken aback by it all, Kiriha looked up at the roller coaster. She couldn’t help thinking the complexly intertwining rails were much like her own feelings right now.

“That way’d definitely be for the best, no matter how things turn out. Since you’ve waited this long, there’s no need to compromise now.”

Koutarou walked up beside Kiriha and looked up at the roller coaster with her. But unlike Kiriha, he had no hesitation whatsoever.

“I’ll help you look for him, so let’s find him for you.”

“Yes... Thank you, Koutarou.”

Looking at Koutarou’s smiling face, Kiriha became aware of another possibility.

No... It might not be that I’m confusing Koutarou with him, but rather that I...

However, Kiriha couldn’t reach a conclusion just yet. To her, both possibilities seemed simultaneously correct and wrong. Her feelings at the moment were very vague. However, there was one thing she did know for certain.

“What if, even then, we can’t find him?”

Kiriha wanted to ride the roller coaster with Koutarou too. She wanted some memorable experiences with her newfound friend. That’s why she couldn’t stop herself from asking.

“Then ride with me. I’m actually pretty interested in roller coasters too.”

“All right. Then I’ll endure for today.”

Satisfied with Koutarou’s answer, Kiriha agreed to his terms.

Regardless of who I ride this with in the future, I just hope my feelings will be clear by that time...

Kiriha didn’t know what would happen in the future, but she grew strangely cheerful at her prospects.

“What to ride next then...”

Abandoning the roller coaster for now, Kiriha walked around the amusement park looking around for the next attraction to catch her eye. Attractions she’d been on before, attractions she hadn’t been on, and attraction’s she had been on but wanted to get on again. There were seemingly endless options.

Oh yeah, there was something I had to say...

Watching Kiriha scope out the area, Koutarou remembered that there was something he needed to tell her. It was something he had been thinking about since he saw her fight Tayuma.

“Hey, Kiriha-san.”

“Yes?”

When Koutarou called out to Kiriha, she continued moving around the area while looking back at him. She walked circles around him almost as if Koutarou himself was one of the attractions she was eying.

“There’s something I want to apologize for.”

“Apologize for? What?”

Kiriha now looked at Koutarou with confusion. She couldn’t remember him having done anything that he needed to apologize to her for. Running down the list, she could come up with several things she could apologize for, but nothing the other way around.

“When we first met, I said some horrible things to you, didn’t I?”

Koutarou wanted to apologize for the way he treated her when they met. Having no way of knowing her intentions, he’d called her an idiot among other things. But now that he knew better—knew her and her intentions better—he realized that what he had said back then had probably hurt her.

“Of course you did. I’m an invader after all.”

Kiriha smiled as if to say that there was no need to apologize. Since she wanted Koutarou to resist, she was prepared for the consequences.

“That might be true, but I’m still sorry, Kiriha-san.”

But even then, Koutarou apologized. When he did, he felt a weight lift off his shoulders. The apology wasn’t just for Kiriha’s sake. It was for him too.

“When you put it like that, it sounds like you want to be invaded by me.”

Kiriha smiled mischievously. Koutarou had been so harsh with Kiriha because he wanted to prevent an invasion. By apologizing, it was almost like telling her he was okay with it. Both the invasion of room 106 and the surface.

However, Koutarou remained calm, even after seeing the way she was smiling. He had absolute faith in Kiriha.

“Feel free to invade if you want. The surface, or my room.”

“Wha...”

“If you seriously want to, that is.”

Hearing Koutarou’s response, Kiriha realized how happy she was.

So you won’t mind if I invade... Koutarou...

It was almost too much. Deep joy filled her heart to the point it felt like it would burst at any moment. She was so happy that Koutarou had accepted her as a true friend. That was the kind of connection she’d been looking for when she came to the surface. It was what she’d truly wished for. And Koutarou was able to affirm all of that for her with such a simple answer. The intense joy she felt now was so overwhelming that the normally calm Kiriha was only barely able to hold back her tears.

“Koutarou, in reality, you don’t want me to find him, right?”

Kiriha wiped the corners of her eyes. Even with her strong will, she had been unable to keep herself from tearing up.

“Hmm? What do you mean?”

Koutarou hadn’t noticed her tears since she was still smiling brightly.

“No, it’s nothing.”

Kiriha grabbed Koutarou’s hand. He looked at her in confusion, but she pulled him along as she started walking. If she had continued facing him, she would probably have cried.

“Let’s go, Koutarou!”

“Yeah.”

Kiriha was heading for attractions she had never ridden with anyone before to make memories with the first real friend she’d ever made on the surface.

As the end of the year approached, even though the days were warm, the evenings turned cold in a hurry. So to Koutarou who had gotten another part-time job over winter vacation, they were the worst.

“How about a cake for Christmas? At Harukaze Bakery, we’re accepting orders for Christmas cakes!”

Koutarou's new part-time was dressing as Santa Claus to hand out flyers. Since the bakery at the shopping street by the station was selling Christmas cakes, they'd hired Koutarou to advertise. Today was December 22nd, and Christmas Eve was right around the corner. The last Christmas cakes would have to be sold today or tomorrow, and the most critical time for street advertising was when people where out shopping or heading home. It was quite cold, but he had to work hard.

"How about a cake for Christmas? At Harukaze Bakery, we're accepting orders for Christmas cakes!"

Koutarou called out to passersby all throughout the shopping street as he distributed flyers.

There were a lot of ends to make meet at the end of the year, and Koutarou's part-time job excavating the ruins wasn't quite enough to cover it all. Because of Yurika, food expenses for the apartment had risen, and because Theia was playing video games so much, the electricity bill had gone up too. Not to mention that as it got colder, the heating bill was increasing. It was all putting a strain on Koutarou's budget.

He knew he could ask his father for help if he really needed to, but in order to prove his own independence as a man, he wanted to solve his own problems.

"How about a cake for Christmas? At Harukaze Bakery, we're accepting orders for Christmas cakes!"

But even with so many people on the street, everyone looked busy, and only a few people showed interest in Koutarou's flyers. He politely handed one to anyone who would accept. But even out of the people who took one, only a few would actually buy a cake. Still, it was important to treat everyone as a potential customer. After Koutarou had been struggling for a while, he unexpectedly heard a girl's voice calling out to him.

"Good evening, Santa."

"Oh? Sakuraba-senpai?"

The girl greeting him was indeed Harumi. When he turned in the direction of her voice, he saw Harumi smiling in spite of the cold winds whipping through

the shopping street. That smile felt like the spring sun to him. It was a welcome sight that helped him forget about the cold for a while.

“Heehee, I think I’ve been a good girl this year, so may I have a flyer?”

Still smiling, Harumi was holding out her hands as if she was asking for a present.





Article 10
Dating between those who have ratified the Corona Convention is forbidden. In the event such a relationship is unavoidable, it must be swiftly reported to Kasagi Shizuka (landlord of Corona House, residing in room 206).

Article 10 Addendum
Should such a relationship be reported to Kasagi Shizuka (landlord of Corona House, residing in room 206), it may be permitted.

Corona Convention

New! December 22nd, 2009

Afterword

Long time no see everyone. It's the author, Takehaya.

The heat this summer has been overwhelming, and I wrote this novel in the middle of all of it. It's now October and it's gradually getting colder, so I think I'll be able to catch up on the sleep I missed over the summer.

This sixth volume centered around Kiriha. Her reasons for taking command of the surface invasion were finally revealed.

With this, we've gone through a volume for each of the four invaders and their stories are beginning to take form. Thanks to that, I bet your impression of the each character has changed some from when the story first began. Having come this far, we're finally at the starting point, and I'd like to keep the story going. I'm really glad the series has gotten on the right track. This is all thanks to you, the readers. Thank you very much, and I hope you will continue to support me in the future.

And regarding that anime PV, it should have reached the hands of all those who applied for it by the time this novel is released... It did reach you, right?

Two points regarding this PV surprised me. The first was that it has been voiced. Since it was going to be used by HobbyJapan's sales department as a promotion, it was only planned to have video and music. However, the anime studio that was hired to produce it, SilverLink, showed their motivation by creating a short story and adding voice actors to it. Since it was different from what they had told me it would be, I was surprised when I saw it.

The second point was that a portion of the lines have mistakes in them. Since there were no lines planned for this PV, SilverLink showed a great deal of goodwill in adding them. But since there weren't detailed notes on the characters for such an occasion, it lead to some natural mistakes. So I hope you could just laugh it off and forgive them. This was all possible because of SilverLink's hard work. And if this novel really does get adapted into an anime, this kind of mistake wouldn't happen, so it's quite a rare scenario.

I would be quite happy if those who received the PV enjoyed it. And for those of who you didn't apply for it, a portion of it is being showed on HobbyJapan's website, so please feel free to check it out.

For me, it's like I'm watching my younger sister's sports meet. I'm half having fun, half nervous. Could this be an author's fate? Personally, I found Karama and Korama cuter than I had imagined them. I wanted to see them move around energetically some more! Ho! Ho, ho!

With the PV complete, project *Invaders of the Rokujouma!?* has kicked into high gear. The moment of truth for determining whether this work gets an anime or not is upon us. I hope for even more support from my readers.

And now for an anecdote. Recently when I go out to eat, I encounter a cat from time to time. It seems like it lives in one of the houses I pass by, but for some reason, it begins meowing whenever it sees me. When I paid attention, I noticed that the cat wouldn't do anything when other people passed by. It's almost as if it's trying to tell me something. I'm not sure if it's because it really likes me or really dislikes me. When I see it next, I'll try to establish contact. Will it let me pet it, or will it scratch me? I'm anxiously awaiting our next meeting, cat.

On another note, I had my air conditioner running the entire summer. Since I use my computer for work during the day, it was a necessity. And during the warm nights, it had to be on for me to be able to sleep. Thanks to that, my jaw dropped when I saw the electric bill. It was more than twice as expensive as normal. Even though it's required for my work, I got to thinking about ecology. However, by the time the novel is released, it should be cooler, so I guess I'm safe for now.

The other day I saw a certain movie. That said, I didn't see it in theaters. I bought the Blu-ray. The title of the movie was *Moon*. It was a low-budget film, but it was interesting with all the ingenious tricks they used. This was more my type of movie, and I preferred it over *District 9*, which I bought at the same time. I want to try writing a work set in space someday. I don't know when that day will come though.

There’s actually room for quite a bit more this afterword, but since I’m already out of things to write about, it seems like an impossible challenge. I’ll wrap things up here.

I’d like to thank everyone at the editorial department; Poco-san who always draws cute illustrations for me; everyone at SilverLink who made the PV; my friends who give me advice; and all of my readers who bought this novel.

Let us meet again in the afterword of the seventh volume.

September, 2010

Takehaya

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Invaders of the Rokujouma!? Volume 6

by Takehaya

Translated by Warnis Edited by Morgan Dreher

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