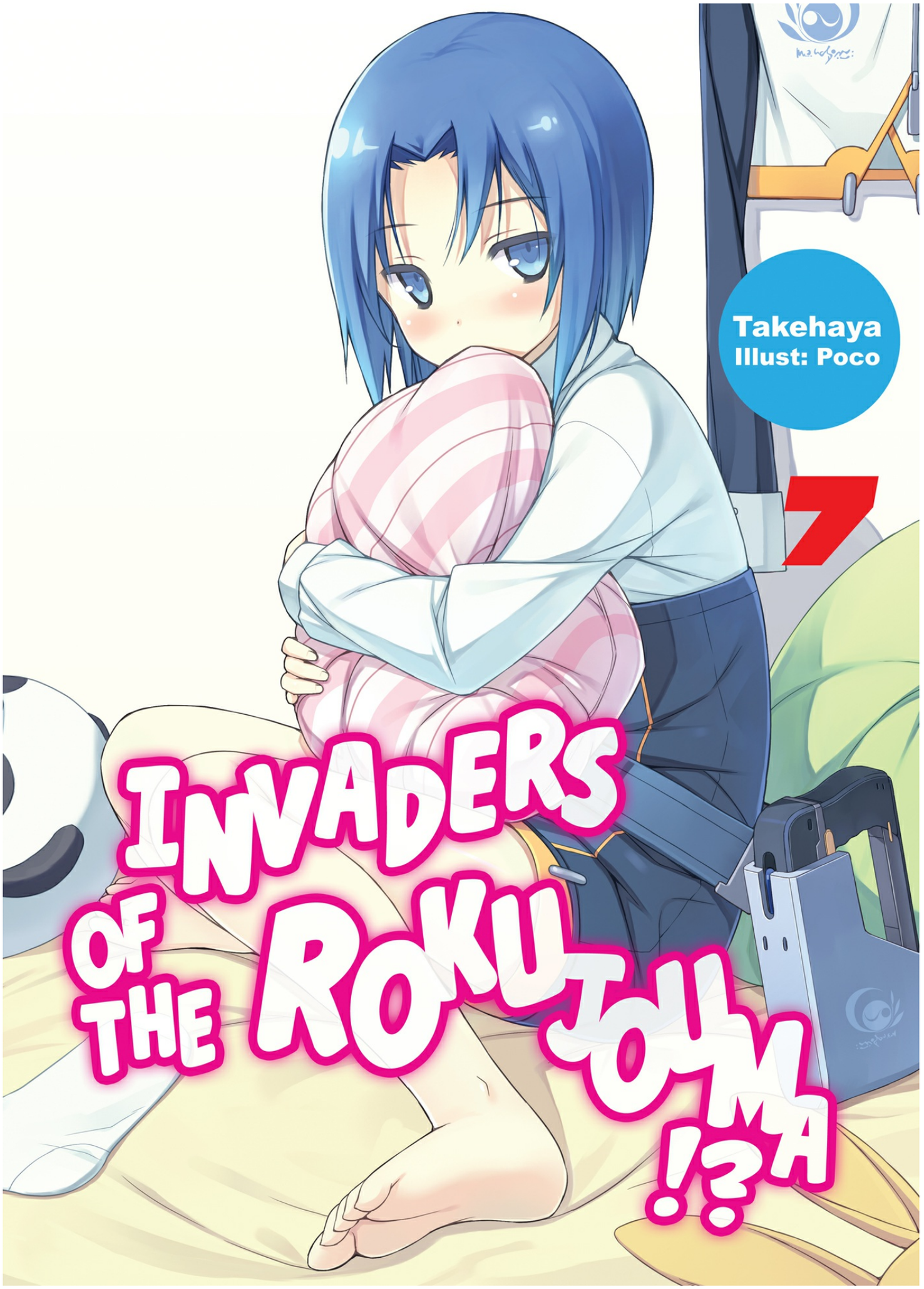

Takehaya
Illust: Poco
7
INVADERS OF THE ROKUJOUMA!?


INVADERS OF THE ROKUJOUMA!? 7
...SATOMI-KUN, YOU MEANIE.


MAIDEN HEARTS FLUTTERING AT CHRISTMASTIME
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WITH A SUSPI-CIOUS FIGURE LOOMING OVER-HEAD...
SATOMI KOUTAROU IS IN DANGER!

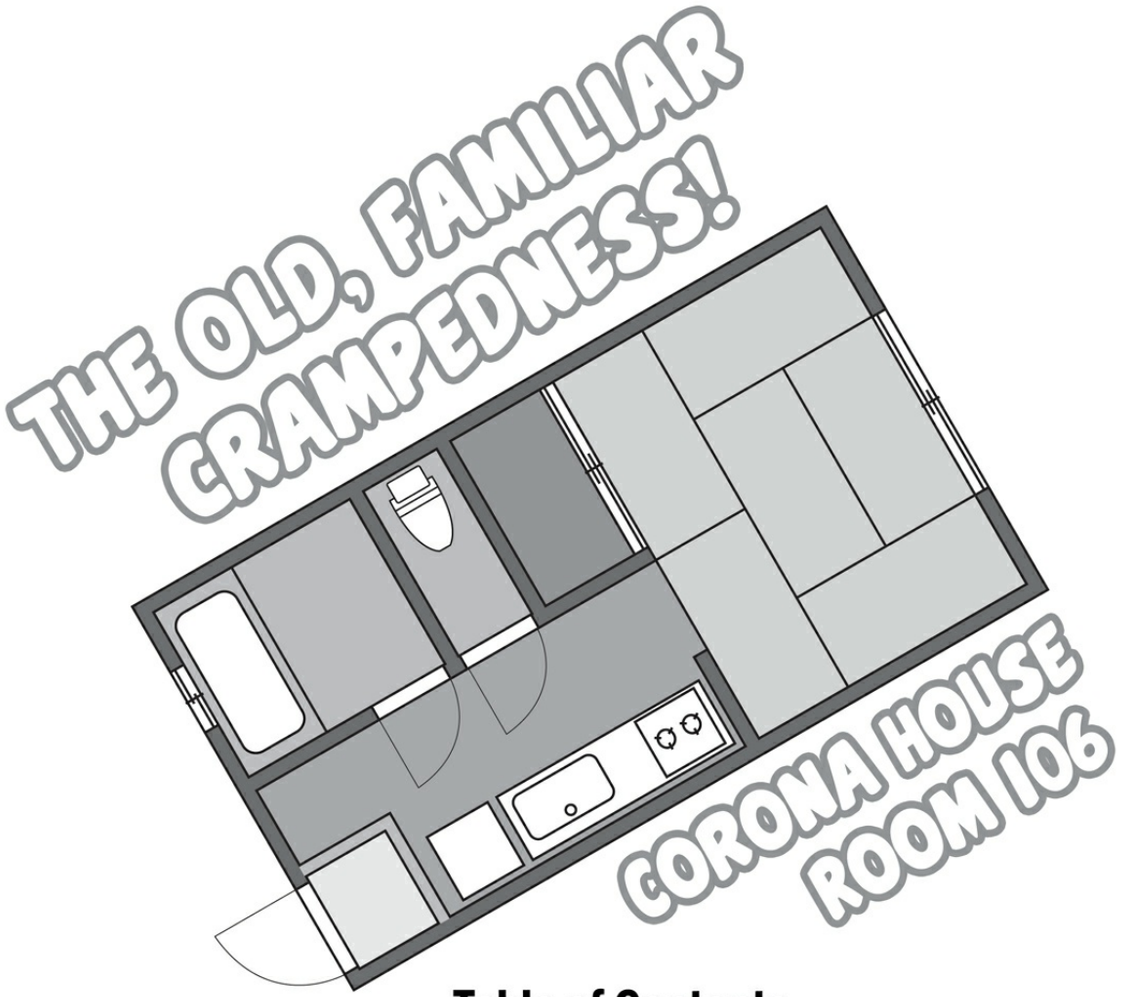


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Santa and Harumi

Tuesday, December 22nd

The bowling ball Koutarou released lightly bounced once as it made its way straight down the lane. With quite a bit of speed, the bowling ball quickly reached the end of the twenty-meter lane. And just as planned, it crashed into the middle pin and mowed down all the others behind it. Even the pins outside of the ball's path were knocked down by the others falling into them one after another.

"Yes, that's right! Fall down! All of you fall down!" Koutarou shouted loudly as if trying to encourage the pins to fall over.

However, one stubborn pin seemed unconvinced and remained standing at the end of the lane.

"Damn, it wasn't enough..."

"Kou, you're too heavy-handed."

Seeing Koutarou's shoulders droop, Kenji laughed at him as he got up from his seat. Since it was a pairs game, Kenji was up next.

"If you don't put a little bit more spin into it and aim for the first pin, you're basically just relying on luck."

"Shut up. Just let me do what I want. Those petty tricks just aren't for me."

"Putting a little spin into it doesn't count as a trick, you know."

After switching places with Koutarou, Kenji tossed his ball with a beautiful, sleek form. Unlike Koutarou's throw, his ball rolled down the lane in a smooth curve thanks to the spin he put on the ball. It easily took out the last remaining pin.

"See?"

"With only one pin left, it didn't matter if you put a spin on it or not."

Thanks to Kenji's precise throw, they managed to pick up a spare, but Koutarou looked somewhat unhappy about it.

Today was December 22nd, and although it was a weekday afternoon, everyone was off from school thanks to winter vacation. Making use of their break, Koutarou and Kenji had come to the bowling alley by the station to play. They'd signed up together for a pairs competition.

"What a catch."

"We didn't get first place though."

"Why do you always have to rain on other people's parades, Mackenzie-kun?"

Leaving the bowling alley, the two boys were holding gift certificates. At the end of the game, they'd managed a score of 180—quite high for amateurs. High enough, in fact, to rank them at the end of the competition. Their prizes were gift cards for the shopping street by the station worth 2,000 yen apiece.

"I like to aim for the top."

"And my livelihood is on the line!"

Although it wasn't an impressive amount, it was a welcome sum to Koutarou, who lived on his own. To him, the gift certificate was more valuable than the first place prize trip to Hawaii. A trip like that would only add on to all the extra expenses he already had to deal with during winter, whereas the 2,000 yen gift card was exactly what he needed right now.

"Ah, that's right. I have a present for a poor man like you."

Seeming to recall something as they were talking, Kenji began searching through his bag. When Koutarou turned to look at him, Kenji had pulled out two booklets.

"What are those?"

"Don't give me that. This is the reason we met up in the first place."

"Oh yeah."

The words "The Silver Princess and the Blue Knight, Part 2" were printed on

the cover of the booklets. They were copies of the new script Theia had finished writing the other day. The main reason Koutarou and Kenji had met up today was to play, but the occasion had arisen because Kenji needed to give Koutarou the new script anyway.

“Hmm, this time it’s actually a proper script,” Koutarou admired as he flipped through the pages.

The first play had merely been a manuscript, written out on paper held together by a paper clip. This one, however, was bound and everything.

“The budget’s increased this time around after all.”

“It’s kind of gratifying.”

Thanks to the popularity of the previous play, the drama club’s budget was increased for the sequel. And because the shopping street had begun sponsoring them, they were receiving help from them as well. Thanks to all of that, the production was going to be on a considerably larger scale than before.

“By the way, why are there two?”

“One is for Sakuraba-senpai. You’ll see each other during club activities anyways, right?”

“Ah, gotcha. Yeah, I’ll give it to her later.”

Koutarou nodded and put both booklets into his bag. The knitting society had club activities planned over winter vacation. He’d even be seeing her for them tomorrow, so he was planning on giving it to her then.

“Right then.”

After packing his bag back up, Koutarou took out his cellphone to check the time. It was now past 3 PM.

“Mackenzie, it’s about time, so I’m gonna head out.”

“What, you’re going home already? Can’t you stick around awhile?”

“I can’t. I actually picked up a new part-time job.”

“Another one?”

“Handing out flyers for a cake shop.”

Koutarou and Kenji both still worked excavating the local ruins, but the dig had been put on hold through the end of the year. In the meantime, Koutarou had taken a new part-time job to pick up the slack.

“Are things that rough for you? Your old man’s helping you with money, right?”

“A real man wouldn’t touch his old man’s money.”

Koutarou proudly laughed and put his phone back into his pocket as he casually turned his back on Kenji.

“Well, see ya.”

“Yeah, see you later.”

Koutarou then walked off without even turning around to look at Kenji when he said goodbye.

“Hmm, a new part-time job... Could it be...”

Being left behind, Kenji watched Koutarou walk away with his head cocked to the side. Something about Koutarou picking up a new part-time job was bothering him. Since Kenji worked with Koutarou at the excavation site, he had a pretty good understanding of Koutarou’s financial situation. And knowing what he got paid, he couldn’t think of a reason Koutarou would need another job, even with it being the end of the year.

“He hasn’t been hanging out with me that much lately either... Did he get a girlfriend? Is that why he’s trying to work up some Christmas funds? No, that can’t be it...”

While Kenji was mumbling to himself, someone approached him as if to take Koutarou’s place.

“A girlfriend? Did you start dating another girl, Mackenzie-kun?”

“Oh? Where did Satomi-sama go?”

As it turned out, it was actually two someones. Shizuka and Ruth had come to shop at the supermarket by the station. They’d seen Koutarou and Kenji just as they were leaving the store, so they’d decided to come over and say hi.

“Oh, Kasagi-san and Ruth-san?”

“Hello, Mackenzie-kun.”

“Hello there, Mackenzie-sama. Do you know where Satomi-sama went? It looked like he was here just a moment ago.”

After they’d all finished greeting each other, Ruth looked around the area for Koutarou. Because it was winter vacation and about the time of day most housewives did their shopping, there were plenty of people around. With the crowd, Koutarou was already out of sight.

“Kou said he had a new part-time job and left just a moment ago.”

“A new part-time job? Did you know anything about that, Ruth-san?”

“No, this is news to me.”

Neither Shizuka nor Ruth had heard about Koutarou’s new job.

“You two didn’t know either?”

“Same with you, Mackenzie-kun?”

“Yeah, I only heard about it just now. But he hasn’t said anything to either of you... This is starting to look suspicious...”

Kenji smirked as he glanced in the direction Koutarou had left. It wasn’t dissimilar from the sly grin Koutarou often had on his face while pranking Kenji. Seeing that, Ruth asked Kenji what he was thinking.

“What do you mean by suspicious?”

“Kou didn’t even tell us, his close friends, about this new part-time job. I suspect our little Kou has gotten himself a girlfriend and is saving up money for dates.”

That was Kenji’s theory. Koutarou hadn’t said a word about his new job to Kenji, Ruth, or the other girls. Kenji was an old friend, and Koutarou had been getting closer with Ruth and the others lately. So for him to keep it from all of them, Kenji suspected that Koutarou might have some shady secret or was spending money on something he didn’t want them to know about. But since Kenji couldn’t imagine Koutarou doing anything dishonest or criminal, the

possibilities were limited.

Kenji figured the most rational explanation was that Koutarou might have gotten a girlfriend. Kenji knew if he got caught hanging out with a girl, Koutarou, Shizuka, and the others would make a big deal out of it, so maybe Koutarou was keeping his girlfriend a secret to avoid exactly that.

“So Satomi-kun has a girlfriend, huh? Who could it be? I really want to know!”

After hearing Kenji’s theory, Shizuka’s eyes began sparkling. She loved this kind of gossip. Her mind immediately went in a million directions imagining what kind of girl Koutarou might be dating.

“Satomi-sama has a lover...?”

Ruth, however, had the complete opposite reaction Shizuka did. Her normally mild expression grew severe and bitter.

It couldn’t be that his relation with Kiriha-sama progressed, could it?

Koutarou’s problems with women would eventually become Theia’s problems. Knowing that, Ruth couldn’t afford to overlook what this might mean.



Unaware of the interest brewing in what he was doing, Koutarou was in the middle of working hard at his part-time job.

“How about a cake for Christmas? At Harukaze Bakery, we’re accepting orders for Christmas cakes!”

His new job consisted of wearing a Santa outfit and handing out flyers. The bakery in front of the station, Harukaze Bakery, was now selling their Christmas cakes for the holiday, and Koutarou was handing out flyers to advertise them.

“How about a cake for Christmas? At Harukaze Bakery, we’re accepting orders for Christmas cakes!”

But the bakery Koutarou was working for wasn’t the only place selling Christmas cakes this time of year. In fact, the supermarket, the department store, the convenience store, and the sweets shop were all rivals in that venture. So by handing out flyers, Harukaze Bakery was hoping to get an edge on their competition and snatch up as big of a market share as possible. With the recent recession still affecting everyone, selling even one cake was a serious struggle.

I relate, honestly...

As Koutarou was handing out flyers to passersby, he smiled to himself. He couldn’t help thinking that he and the bakery were in a similar situation. However, there was a definite difference between the two.

“Good evening, Santa.”

But Koutarou’s thoughts were interrupted by the sound of a familiar, cheerful voice. When that gentle voice reached Koutarou’s ears, he instinctively stopped what he was doing.

“Oh? Sakuraba-senpai?”

When he turned in the direction of her voice, he saw Harumi smiling in spite of the cold winds whipping through the shopping street. She was a slender girl and gave off the impression of being fragile, but seeing her filled Koutarou with a strange, warm sensation. He was happy to see his friend, the girl called Sakuraba Harumi.

As their eyes meet, Harumi's smile changed into the playful grin she had only recently started showing.

"Heehee, I think I've been a good girl this year, so may I have a flyer?"

Harumi smiled as she held out her hands. She looked like a child asking for a present from her father.

"Hahaha, if it's the new script you want, I just so happen to have one with your name on it."

"That doesn't count as a present. Please maintain your pride as Santa."

"Please don't ask too much from a part-time Santa."

"Heeheehee..."

Koutarou and Harumi had a good laugh together. Only recently had the two of them had been able to joke around with one another like this. Harumi's progress was largely thanks to Yurika's love advice. While it wasn't of any practical use, Harumi's attitude had started to change.

I can't keep going like this. Nothing will come from just waiting.

After Yurika had opened her eyes, feelings like that began budding inside of Harumi.

"Then for starters, here's a flyer."

"Thank you, Santa."

Koutarou handed one of his flyers over to Harumi. She then began ardently reading it.

"I'll give you the script in the club room tomorrow. I left my bag at the bakery."

"Please do."

She answered, but without taking her eyes off the flyer. It seemed like she was really invested in reading it. Normally she would look right at Koutarou when they talked, so even Koutarou could tell that she was being distracted by cake now. It was unusual for Harumi, but adorable and silly in its own way. Koutarou couldn't help giggling.

“Pfft... Hahaha...”

“Satomi-kun?”

Wondering what Koutarou was laughing about, Harumi finally looked up at Koutarou while still holding on to the flyer.

“Is something wrong?”

“Heh, nah... You just looked so childish, I couldn’t help myself. Heh heh...”

“Jeez, Satomi-kun...”

Harumi then realized exactly what she’d been doing and began blushing. She puffed up her red cheeks as she looked up at Koutarou.

“You shouldn’t be laughing at others while you’re dressed up so cutely yourself.”

“Hey, at least this is for my job.”

“I hate it when you’re so blunt, Satomi-kun.”

After pouting for a while, Harumi eventually revealed a small smile and held her hands out again.

“May I borrow your hat?”

“This?”

“Yes.”

Koutarou humored her, taking off his Santa hat and handing it over. After staring at the hat in her hands for a moment, Harumi put it on herself.

“How do I look?”

“More childish than before. It’s very cute.”

“Satomi-kun!”

“Come to think of it, take this too.”

Ignoring Harumi’s protests, Koutarou thrust his hand into the large sack he was carrying as part of the Santa costume. It was mostly filled with stuffing to give it volume, but that wasn’t the only thing inside of it.

“You should wear this too.”

“Thank you, Satomi-kun.”

Koutarou had pulled a spare Santa outfit from the bag. This year, Koutarou was the only one handing out flyers, but it seemed the job had been meant for two in the past. After Koutarou handed the second costume to Harumi, she put her arms through the sleeves of the jacket over top of her uniform.

“How do I look now?”

With the Santa hat and matching red jacket on, Harumi spun around with her arms stretched out.

Wow... You even look good in something like this, Sakuraba-senpai...

That’s what Koutarou thought when he looked at Harumi in her outfit, but he said almost the exact opposite.

“It’s funny. You look like you’re a kid.”

“Satomi-kun, you’ve been getting meaner lately.”

Just like Harumi was slowly becoming more comfortable showing her emotions in front of Koutarou, the same was true for him. In the past, he wouldn’t have made jokes like that. But this change in Koutarou’s attitude was thanks to Harumi mustering her courage around him first.

This is nice. This feeling...

Harumi could feel the change in him as well, and although she lightheartedly complained, she enjoyed her back and forth with Koutarou. This was what she had wanted.

I think I can do even more.

And with her success so far, Harumi decided to try a little harder. She knew she wasn’t totally satisfied with things as they were, and that nothing would change if she didn’t do anything about it. Those kind of thoughts encouraged her to take heart.

“Satomi-kun, please give me some more flyers.”

“Senpai?”

Once again, Harumi held out her hands.

“You don’t seem to have many left, so I’ll help you.”

“Hey, wait. This is my part-time job. I can’t have you—”

“You gave me a flyer before. Just give me some more.”

“That’s not what I—”

“Ha!”

“Hey...”

While Koutarou was protesting, Harumi snatched half of the stack of flyers he was holding. There were about fifty in the first place, so now he only had twenty-five or so left.

“Senpai...”

“Heehee. There are barely any left, so this hardly counts as helping out, Satomi-kun.”

Koutarou looked troubled, but Harumi was smiling brightly, flyers in hand. Although their outfits matched, their expressions couldn’t have been more different.

“How about a Christmas cake? Try stopping by Harukaze Bakery!”

“Satomi-kun.”

Once Koutarou gave away the last flyer, Harumi returned to him, also emptyhanded. Harumi was still smiling, despite almost being carried away by the crowd.

“Satomi-kun, I’m all done!”

“Same here. We were done in a flash thanks to you, Sakuraba-senpai.”

Once Harumi started helping, the flyers practically disappeared. Having a cute girl in a Santa outfit seemed to go a long way. Thanks to that, it took less than ten minutes before they’d handed out all of them.

“Heehee, I’m glad to have been of help.”

“You were a huge help. Thank you, Senpai.”

Koutarou bowed to Harumi, who was laughing cheerfully, and thought about the situation they’d found themselves in.

“Still, Sakuraba-senpai, you seemed to have changed since this spring.”

“What? H-How do you mean?”

Harumi put a hand to her cheek and looked down at herself with an anxious expression. She thought Koutarou meant that she had physically changed. She was a sensitive girl, after all, and having someone of the opposite gender point out that she had changed made her worry. Doubly so since it was Koutarou.

“Do you mean I’ve gotten fatter? Or thinner? I don’t think I’ve changed.”

“No, nothing like that. Jeez...”

Koutarou chuckled at Harumi’s response.

Yeah, Sakuraba-senpai has definitely changed a little.

Watching the panicking Harumi only reaffirmed what Koutarou was thinking. And it wasn’t just the way she was acting. When he met her in the spring, Harumi wouldn’t have had the courage to hand out flyers. Even during spring recruitment for clubs, she was mousy and had hardly stood out at all. But that same girl was now cheerfully helping him hand out flyers on the street. It was hard to imagine she’d ever had problems with people. This was an enormous step forward that even Koutarou picked up on.

“In the past, you weren’t very comfortable in front of other people, Sakuraba-senpai. But now you’re helping me hand out flyers to strangers. You’re like a different person now.”

“S-Satomi-kun...”

Harumi blushed at Koutarou’s honest praise. Harumi herself was well aware of the change and why it had happened, but having Koutarou compliment her on it was embarrassing.

“Well, surely appearing in plays and hero shows is bound to give you some courage.”

“That might be true.”

That made sense to Koutarou. After mustering the courage to get up on stage, surely she’d be more confident around people in everyday situations.

I thought I was just dragging her into stuff, but it seemed to have worked out in the end.

Koutarou nodded with satisfaction.

“...Besides, you were with me the entire time.”

“What was that?”

Lost in thought, Koutarou missed what Harumi said.

“Ah, n-no, it’s nothing! Nothing at all!”

In a fluster, Harumi waved her hands around trying to cover it up. She’d accidentally said more than she’d meant to, and she didn’t want Koutarou knowing about how she really felt yet. So if he missed what she’d said, she was fine with that.

“Is that so?”

Koutarou didn’t find anything suspicious in the way she was acting because he knew that Harumi wasn’t good at receiving praise or compliments. He just assumed that was what had her so ruffled this time too. And so without thinking too much of it, Koutarou moved on to the next topic. He actually had something he wanted to talk to her about.

“Anyways, you ended up helping me with my work, so I have to thank you in some way.”

Koutarou was planning on thanking Harumi somehow. He couldn’t just leave it at her helping him out with a job that he got paid to do.

But Sakuraba-senpai is pretty reserved when it comes to this kind of thing...

Although Harumi was grateful for the offer, even now she was shaking her head as if to say that it wasn’t necessary.

“There’s no need for thanks for something like this.”

“That won’t do. This wasn’t like helping me with club activities or

volunteering.”

Hmm?

As they were talking, the Santa outfit Harumi was wearing caught Koutarou’s eye.

That’s it! Yeah, let’s go with that!

A plan suddenly came to Koutarou.

“Sakuraba-senpai, are you free on the 24th?”

“The 24th?”

When Koutarou mentioned that date, Harumi’s heart began pounding. Today was the 22nd, so the day after tomorrow would be the 24th. December 24th.

That’s Christmas Eve...

With the boy she was interested in bringing up a romantic occasion like that, her mind went wild with possibilities.

“I-I’m free, but...”

Harumi used every last brain cell she had to think while desperately trying to suppress her shock. She managed a few words, but the anxiety she’d felt while on stage or while handing out flyers was nothing compared to how she felt now.

“I see. Then could you spare some time for me?”

“Ah—”

And with those words from Koutarou’s lips, her heart almost stopped.

When Koutarou returned home to room 106, he was welcomed, oddly enough, by Theia’s cheerful smile. Her eyes were sparkling and she was dearly clutching a booklet of some kind to her chest with her left hand. When Koutarou stepped inside, she looked up at him eagerly and extended her free hand.

“I’m ba—”

“I’ve been waiting, Koutarou. Hurry on in.”

Theia’s right hand quickly grabbed Koutarou’s arm and she dragged him towards the inner room before he could even greet her.

“H-Hey, wait. I didn’t even take my shoes off.”

“You can enter wearing shoes. I’ll permit it.”

“You can’t... W-Wait!”

Koutarou somehow managed to get his shoes off and toss them towards the front entrance as Theia dragged him down the hall. Sanae, who was nearby, then neatly arranged them with the rest.

“I get that you’re happy, but you’re not a kid...”

Sanae was amazed by Theia’s behavior, but in reality, Theia wasn’t acting much differently than how Sanae usually did. Not that Sanae could appreciate that.

“Welcome home, Satomi-sama.”

“You’re back, Koutarou.”

Theia dragged Koutarou past Ruth and Kiriha in the kitchen preparing dinner, and headed for the far wall of the inner room. Yurika, who was watching TV in the middle of the room, cleared out of Theia’s way as she got close.

As they approached the wall, a rectangle began glowing on it. That glowing rectangle was a gate that led to Blue Knight, Theia’s ship in orbit around Earth.

“Koutarou, we’re going to start right away.”

“Start what?”

When Koutarou asked her that, Theia finally stopped strong-arming him.

What’s going on with her?

Koutarou at last had a chance to compose himself, but not before Theia turned around to look at him. She poutingly thrust the booklet in her left hand in Koutarou’s face: “The Silver Princess and the Blue Knight, Part 2.”

Oh, now I get it. No wonder...

As his eyes scanned the cover of the booklet, Koutarou realized what had Theia so excited. This was the new play she'd written herself. Koutarou had often seen her writing around the apartment and at school, so he knew just how invested in it she was.

The script in Theia's hands right now was actually the one Ruth had brought home. She'd gotten her copy from Kenji, just like Koutarou had.

The moment after Koutarou finally got his head around what was going on, the booklet in front of him slowly lowered and Theia's face poked out from behind it. She stared at him in silence with a mix of apprehension and remorse on her face. To Koutarou, she looked like a puppy apologizing for her blunder.

And he wasn't too far off the mark. Theia herself had realized that she was getting too worked up, and she was peeking at him to see if he was angry or not.

"Ah..."

At first Koutarou was planning on complaining, but he swallowed his grievances when he saw Theia's expression.

Don't look at me like that, jeez...

Her eyes were wavering with worry. Faced with that, Koutarou rubbed the back of his neck and gave her a bitter smile.

"I get it. But I have things to do, so wait a minute."

"Ah..."

Theia's expression brightened immediately, yet her cheeks turned red at the same time. She was relieved that Koutarou wasn't angry, but also embarrassed by her own behavior.

"Sorry, Koutarou. I got a little ahead of myself when I got the script. Let's postpone practice for now."

She then let go of Koutarou's hand that she had been holding all this time.

You always go easy on her when she makes a face like that. That's why you're

always having a hard time, Koutarou...

As he stared at Theia, Koutarou scolded himself. But even as he did, her smile still made him feel like doing whatever it was that she wanted.

Even during dinner, Theia was flipping through the pages of her script. She lifted food to her mouth while reading through it to make sure there were no errors in it.

“Heehee...”

Ruth couldn’t help the small smile on her lips as she watched over Theia. Normally she would remind her of her manners, but she decided to overlook it this time. Ruth knew how much this play meant to Theia. It all came back to her admiration for the Blue Knight and her yearning to see her mother, Elfaria. Because they’d been friends since childhood, Ruth knew all of that even though Theia hadn’t told her.

“How about seconds, Satomi-sama?”

“Yes, please.”

“Okay, just a moment.”

Ruth had secretly begun minding Koutarou’s health, and she was planning on keeping an extra special eye on it until the opening of the play a month from now. It was an important role that only Ruth could do.

Thank you so very much for everything, Satomi-sama...

Ruth smiled at the thought as she picked up Koutarou’s tea cup. Ruth hadn’t just begun taking care of his health because of the play. It was also a token of appreciation after always causing him so much trouble.

“Koutarou, this time there are a lot of fighting scenes, so I’d like to focus on combat practice.”

“So you mean we don’t have to train in knight manners?!”

“That’s right. This time, the play is about war, although there are few scenes where manners are important. Of course, if we have time to spare, we’ll still have some lessons on it.”

“All right, you’re on! This is great!”

In the middle of filling the tea cup and preparing seconds while listening to Koutarou and Theia’s training plan, Ruth remembered that she had something she wanted to ask.

“Satomi-sama, Shizuka-sama, do you have a moment?”

“Sure.”

“What is it, Ruth-san?”

“Actually, I have something I would like to discuss with you.”

Ruth set Koutarou’s now full cup down on the tea table and straightened her posture. Koutarou who was talking to Theia, and Shizuka who was drinking tea both picked up on Ruth’s change in attitude and straightened their postures as well.

“You want to discuss something?” Shizuka asked.

“Yes. I remembered after hearing Her Highness and Satomi-sama talking. I want to practice too—I mean please teach me how to fight.”

Of all the things she could have brought up, no one had expected her to say that. Koutarou and Shizuka’s eyes opened wide, and they looked at each other in surprise.

“Practice? Are you serious?”

“Yes, of course.”

Shizuka questioned her reflexively, but Ruth nodded assuredly.

“What can I say? I can’t really explain it myself, but ever since a while back, I’ve just felt like I need to become stronger.”

Ruth knitted her well-defined brow. Her eyes were saying that she was serious.

“A while back?”

“Do you mean...”

Koutarou and Shizuka came to the same conclusion. Ruth’s words called to

mind for them her loss against Kabutonga after intruding on the hero show at the amusement park. Koutarou only heard about it after the fact, but Shizuka was actually the one who'd had to fight Ruth as Kabutonga. Nevertheless, they both knew what she was indirectly referring to.

"I have to become stronger! I just can't help this feeling that there's a powerful enemy that I must defeat!"

Ruth actually had no memory of what happened after she went berserk, but her defeat at the hands of Kabutonga—more precisely, Shizuka—had left a powerful impression on her psyche. She was still feeling the subconscious desire to get stronger.

"So you want to get stronger..."

Sensing Ruth's strong determination, Koutarou glanced over at Theia. Noticing his glance, Theia shook her head with a dispirited look on her face.

What are you thinking? You know she's uncontrollable. It's far too risky...

Koutarou could tell what was going through Theia's head just from that small gesture, and his shoulders drooped at the response. He was unsure whether to be amazed or troubled.

"But you don't need to learn how to fight, right, Ruth-san? Satomi-kun here has been getting better at using a sword as of late, you know."

"That won't do!"

Ruth slammed her fists down on the tea table. Because of the impact, the utensils and dishes on the table all jumped up and crashed back down again with a clatter.

"I don't know the reason, but my soul is screaming, telling me that I can't leave this to Satomi-sama!"

"Ah, hahaha... I see..."

Shizuka let out a dry laugh and broke into a cold sweat.

This is all your fault, Satomi-kun!

Shizuka glared at Koutarou, mentally blaming him for all of this.

Ruth couldn't leave the fight to Koutarou, partially because he hadn't become Theia's vassal yet, but mostly because, deep down inside, she didn't want Koutarou and Kabutonga to ever meet. She didn't want Koutarou to ever see another beetle again. After the pain of her defeat, an encounter between Kabutonga and Koutarou would be the end of her.

"I... I pass. I'll leave this to Satomi-kun."

"Wow, that's playing dirty, Landlord-san!"

"What good would come from me teaching her how to fight?!"

"Th-That's true, but..."

Koutarou realized the full gravity of the situation when he saw the tears in Shizuka's eyes.

I guess she doesn't exactly want to teach Ruth-san how to defeat her...

Training Ruth would inadvertently mean training her in all of Shizuka's secrets. If she did that, she'd have nothing left to defend herself with the next time she crossed paths with Ruth in her Kabutonga suit. Thinking of it that way, Koutarou couldn't really object to her refusal.

"Besides, Satomi-kun will be training with Theia-san anyway, right? You just need to do it together!"

"Please, Satomi-sama! This is important... probably!"

"Hahh..."

Things sure did get weird around here all of a sudden...

Koutarou nodded at Ruth, but he was already feeling a headache coming on.

An icy stare was watching over room 106.

"Hmph, things are as tense as usual in there, I see."

The icy stare, however, was coming through a camera being used to observe the apartment from a great distance. The culprit was Clariossa Daora Forthorthe, the second princess of Forthorthe and Theia's rival for the throne.

"I may have waited long enough for that to happen, but it's quite irritating. I'll

make you regret forcing me to live this way soon enough!”

Clan adjusted her glasses in annoyance and glared at the screen in front of her. She was in the cockpit of a spaceship, currently sitting in the pilot’s seat and facing a monitor displaying footage of room 106.

Clan was actually in the mountains, intentionally isolated from the people of Earth. She was using her small spaceship, which had been cleverly concealed, as her hideout. After the incident during the play, Clan sent back her personal battleship, the Hazy Moon, while she remained on Earth in a smaller vessel. By her calculations, all she had to do was lie low for a while for Theia and the others to assume that she had gone back to Forthorthe.

And in reality, everything was proceeding just as planned. She was no longer a topic of conversation in room 106. This was exactly what she’d hoped for, but in order to be so forgotten, she’d spent close to two months living uncomfortably in the middle of nowhere, and she wasn’t pleased one bit about that.

“You’ll be the first one, fake Blue Knight!”

Clan glared at Koutarou through the monitor. Not only was she mad at Koutarou for foiling her plan before, she was now directing all of her anger and resentment from these past two months at him. And she was certainly the type to hold a grudge.

“I’ll dispose of you! That’s right, you! And in just the way that will leave Theiamillis-san the most traumatized!”

Koutarou was at the top of her revenge list. Right now, Theia was just an added bonus to dealing with him.

Everyone's Christmas Circumstances

Tuesday, December 22nd

Koutarou presented two playing cards to Yurika.

"Come on, pick one, Yurika."

"Hmmmmm..."

Yurika stared at the cards in front of her. Since she could only see the backs of them, she had no way of knowing what each card was. However, her intense stare made it seem as if she was trying to see through to the other side.

Today, the battle for ownership of room 106 was continuing in the form of card games for the first time in a while. They all had suggested a game they were good at it, and had everyone play a round of each. Right now they were on their fifth game with Yurika's suggestion: Old Maid.

Although there were already in the endgame, no one had actually gone out yet. Everyone had just a couple of cards left in their hand, so things were only a round or two from being over. Koutarou's hand in particular consisted of the ace of spades and the joker, which he would have loved for Yurika to take off his hands. It was Yurika's turn now, and she only had one card left herself.

"You can't see through them no matter how long you stare, so just hurry up and pick one."

"But if I do and get the old maid, it would be bad for me."

"It'd be great for me though."

"Th-That's mean, Sanae-chan!"

Yurika's hand wavered between the two cards. Under the circumstances, the normally indecisive Yurika was hesitating even more than usual. It was only natural for Sanae to try and hurry things up. No matter how long Yurika agonized over the cards in front of her, she always managed to pick the old

maid. At least, that was the track record she had so far.

“Fight! Yurika, fight!”

Yurika pumped herself up and suddenly looked determined. She then made up her mind and put her hand on one of the cards in Koutarou’s hand.

“Aiiee!”

She drew the card with a shrill cry. She was so scared of drawing the old maid that she actually did it with her eyes closed. And only after bringing the card close to her face did she fearfully peek at it with one eye.

“Oh?”

As she did, her expression brightened up. She had picked the ace of spades.

“I did it! I’m out!”

Yurika put the card she already had and the card she had just drawn together and threw them onto the tea table. She then threw her hands into the air victoriously.

“Ooh...”

Seeing that, Kiriha seemed impressed. As Yurika was constantly losing, her victory here only helped to prolong the battle for room 106. Since that was just what Kiriha wanted, she welcomed Yurika’s good fortune.

“Huh?! Yurika won again?!”

Sanae, however, wasn’t so happy about it. She pouted as she looked at the cards that had been tossed on the table. Sanae hated losing, so it was hard to swallow Yurika beating her.

“Are you cheating or something?!” Sanae demanded, pointing an accusatory finger at Yurika.

“O-Of course I’m not!” Yurika pleaded, adamantly shaking her head.

It wasn’t just that Yurika had beaten her this time. She’d been on a winning streak lately. Yurika bombed games that required brain or brawn, but she was unbelievably lucky when it came to games of chance. Thanks to that, she’d slowly been able to amass points and pull herself out of the dangerous slump

she'd been in.

"Calm down, Sanae. At the very least, we know she's not cheating."

"Are you so sure?! It's weird that Yurika is winning this much, no matter how you think about it!"

Even though Koutarou was trying to reason with her, Sanae just couldn't accept it. Yurika's winning streak was so remarkable that it didn't make any sense to Sanae.

"Thank you, Satomi-saaan! I knew you were a good person from the first day we met!"

Tears of gratitude streamed down Yurika's cheeks at the unexpected support from Koutarou. In typical fashion, she grabbed his hand and intensely shook it up and down.

Heehee, Satomi-san really is my ally! He really understands me!

Yurika didn't get a whole lot of respect in room 106, but she was happy that Koutarou believed in her.

"Calm down, Sanae. Just have a little faith in Yurika, will you?"

With Yurika still emphatically shaking his hand, Koutarou calmly attempted to persuade Sanae.

"That's right. I'm not cheating."

Yurika smiled and followed Koutarou's lead. Since he was on her side this time, there was no way Yurika was going to back down.

"But..."

"Just think about it. It's Yurika we're talking about. She couldn't possibly cheat."

"Huh?"

However, the very next moment, Yurika's smile froze in place. Koutarou's follow-up was going somewhere strange.

"Kiriha-san might be one thing, but how would Yurika cheat without us catching on? She's clumsy, not to mention the fact that she has no poker face."

Koutarou couldn’t even conceive of the possibility of Yurika cheating.

If anything, Yurika’s not the one cheating...



Koutarou glanced at Kiriha, who was happily looking at Sanae and Yurika. In Koutarou's mind, it made much more sense for Kiriha to be giving Yurika cards to make it easier for her to win. She had something to gain from it by prolonging the battle for room 106.

But I doubt Kiriha-san is cheating either.

Neither one was cheating. That was Koutarou's ultimate conclusion.

"...That's true. I'm sorry for doubting you, Yurika. I was wrong. There's no way an airhead like you could pull off cheating."

"Yeah, just believe in her, Sanae. She couldn't possibly cheat."

"That's what you meant when you said to believe in me?!"

In the end, Yurika was left shedding bitter tears over Koutarou's faith in her.

"I'll definitely cheat. I'll cheat in an amazing way that no one will notice..."

Apart from Yurika, who was currently in the corner mumbling to herself, the residents of room 106 were drinking tea together. Koutarou, Sanae, Theia, Ruth, and Kiriha were joined by Shizuka, who had come over to play. However, since Sanae couldn't drink, there were only six cups on the table.

The day's games had ended with Yurika's victory, mostly attributable to her luck. She'd managed to get a good deal of points from the invader in the lead, Theia.

"Koutarou, once winter break is over, we'll do a little training."

"Would 'a little training' even count as training?"

"If that worries you, I won't mind if we make it a lot of training."

"No, I'm not worried in the slightest, Princess Theiamillis."

"At least it seems like you're well aware of who your master is now, Satomi Koutarou."

"You're still going on about that?!"

However, despite her crushing defeat at cards, Theia was in a grand mood.

She didn’t seem to care about her points at all.

“It’ll be too late when Satomi-san realizes it. I’ll use my fancy techniques... my fancy techniques and... and...”

Tears continued to stream down Yurika’s cheeks.

“It’s hard to tell who came out on top here...”

Between cheerful Theia and depressed Yurika, it looked like their roles were reversed.

“Oh, by the way, Satomi-kun...”

When she finished drinking her cup of tea, Shizuka turned to Koutarou.

“There’s no need to be shy. I understand.”

“You twerp! Just because the play is close, you’re getting— Huh? Yeah?”

Koutarou, who was in the middle of bickering with Theia, took a moment to realize Shizuka was talking to him before he turned to look at her.

“Hey, Koutarou, we’re not done yet!”

“Owowowow...”

But Theia grabbed Koutarou’s head with both of her hands and forcibly turned it so he was looking at her again. Koutarou yelped.

“A-Are you trying to break my neck?!”

“Ah, sorry...”

However, realizing Koutarou was in pain, Theia quickly let go. She didn’t want to hurt him. Especially not with the play coming up. She couldn’t afford to let anything happen to the Blue Knight’s actor.

“You look like you’re having fun, Satomi-kun.”

“Ouch... Well, it isn’t what it looks like. So what’s up, Landlord-san?”

“Right, about that...”

Shizuka happily clapped her hands together before twirling her finger around and explaining.

“Satomi-kun, I hear you’ve picked up another part-time job.”

“Huh? How do you know that?”

“Mackenzie told me.”

“That bastard, running his mouth like that...”

Koutarou recalled his talk with Kenji at the bowling alley and lightly clicked his tongue. Just as Kenji had assumed, Koutarou wanted to keep the extra part-time job a secret.

“Oh, a new part-time job, huh?”

“Is that why you’ve been getting home late recently?”

“I can’t believe you can do that in this cold weather...”

“I’ll cheat. I’ll definitely cheat...”

Learning of Koutarou’s new part-time job, each of the four invaders reacted somewhat differently. Kiriha was still happily sipping her tea, Theia was nodding her head in understanding, Sanae was fretting he might catch a cold, and Yurika was mumbling something in the corner. They were mostly positive responses, but there was one person in room 106 that was clearly unhappy.

“...”

There were deep furrows in Ruth’s brow as she gave Koutarou a sharp glance almost like glaring at an enemy.

“What’s wrong, Ruth-san?” he asked.

“Oh, it’s nothing.”

Ruth then turned her head away. Even though she’d said nothing was wrong, Koutarou could tell she wasn’t telling the truth.

“So why did you start a new part-time job, Satomi-kun?”

When Shizuka pressed the issue, the furrows in Ruth’s brow became even more pronounced.

“Well, I—”

“Is it because you’ve got a girlfriend?! Is it to fund a Christmas date?!”

Unlike Shizuka, whose eyes were sparkling and full of curiosity, Ruth's countenance was getting darker and darker.

What's going on?

Koutarou looked at the two contrasting expressions in confusion.

"Now that it's out, there's no point in hiding it."

Kiriha, who had been listening in, grinned at Koutarou, though it quickly changed into a more elegant smile as she began speaking to Shizuka. Koutarou had a bad feeling about what was about to happen, but he was too concerned about Ruth at the moment to intervene.

"Actually, Shizuka, Koutarou and I have a date planned for Christmas."

"I knew it! So it's Kiriha-san you're going on a date with!"

When those words burst out of Shizuka's mouth, the atmosphere in the room froze and the number of stares piercing through Koutarou increased from one to four. The extra three were courtesy of Sanae, Yurika, and Theia, who each proceeded to lay into him.

"Koutarou, I told you to keep away from Kiriha! She'll invade our room and the city, you know!"

Sanae assumed that Kiriha had seduced Koutarou for the sake of her invasion. She didn't believe for a minute that Kiriha had actually fallen for him. Fully believing it was some kind of trickery, Sanae was desperate to save Koutarou from Kiriha's grasp.

"That's cheating! Two-timing is unforgivable! It's cheating! Why are you the only one cheating?!"

Yurika puffed up her cheeks like a balloon. She thought that Koutarou was having an affair with Kiriha. Koutarou had Harumi, so going on a date with Kiriha was an unforgivable betrayal. And since Yurika always imagined Koutarou, Harumi, and herself all going out on dates together, it wasn't just a betrayal against Harumi, but against her too.

"You fool! What kind of business have you gotten involved in this time?! Spit it out, Koutarou! Who are you fighting against without my permission?!"

Unlike Sanae and Yurika, Theia was worried about something else. She was worried that someone other than Kiriha might be out for Koutarou. Theia wasn't blind to the political problems of the underground dwellers happening around Kiriha. The battle the other day only confirmed her suspicions on that front. Although they'd come out on top at the amusement park, Theia knew the root of the problem had yet to be resolved. She was concerned that Koutarou had gotten involved in more of Kiriha's business.

Why are you always like that? I'm the only one you need to protect!

Really, it was the knightly behavior that Theia desired. The courage to stand up against any enemy, challenging every evil, and unconditionally love all else. Those were the three virtues the legendary hero, the Blue Knight, was said to embody. Theia had wished for those virtues to manifest within Koutarou. And even though he was showing them now, knowing that Koutarou might be in danger, she couldn't bring herself to celebrate it. Joy and worry intermingled in her heart, creating a very complex emotion.

"Kiriha-san, what are you saying all of a sudden?!"

But while the girls berated him, Koutarou himself was loudly protesting to Kiriha. He hadn't made any date plans with her.

"There's no need to be so cold, Koutarou. Not after so passionately telling me that you loved me the other day."

Kiriha looked at Koutarou with a sorrowful expression. And for a brief moment while their eyes met, the corners of her lips curled up in a mischievous smile. Kiriha was having fun backing Koutarou into a corner.

"Oooh, well done, Satomi-kun!"

"Satomi-san! Is this true?!"

"You're being tricked, Koutarou! Keep it together!"

"Argh, this is getting nowhere! Tell me everything! No secrets!"

Kiriha's plan worked perfectly. The other girls had all taken the bait, and so Kiriha continued to fan the flames.

"Koutarou promised me that we'd enjoy Christmas on the surface, just the

two of us.”

“What are you talking about? Besides, you have someone you’ve decided—”

“Now, now... Here you go!”

Koutarou, who was in a hurry to resolve the increasingly confusing situation, opened his mouth to object, but Kiriha used that opening to shove the half-eaten manjū she was holding into his mouth.

“Mmrphh! Hrmm, mmhhmm...”

“Is it good, Koutarou?”



After successfully shutting Koutarou up, Kiriha smiled brightly. Nothing she'd done seemed suspicious, and her acting was flawless. Even after stuffing a half-eaten manjū in his mouth, they just looked like lovers to the others looking on.

"...I'll have you explain in detail, Satomi-sama," Ruth spoke in a low, cold voice.

"I'm sorry. It was really a joke. Honestly, I don't know why Koutarou picked up another part-time job either," said Kiriha.

After an explanation and an apology, the atmosphere in the room lightened up again. The girls even stopped glaring at Koutarou as they collectively sighed.

"Jeez... Just give me a break..."

"Heehee..."

Koutarou himself let out a sigh of relief as the situation simmered down. Seeing that, Kiriha smiled yet again.

"How boring."

The only one who seemed unhappy now was Shizuka, who had been enjoying the commotion.

"...Ahem."

Finally calmed down, Ruth blushed a little over the misunderstanding. She cleared her throat and pulled herself together before turning to look at Koutarou once more.

"So why *did* you start a new part-time job, Satomi-sama?"

"Yeah, I want to know too."

"Well, it's because I need more money now that it's getting to be the end of the year," Koutarou quickly replied.

It was the answer he was going to give in the first place.

"The excavation job is on hold right now, so I needed something else in the meantime."

“Making ends meet, huh? That’s the most boring answer ever.”

Shizuka sighed despondently. Seeing that, Koutarou smiled bitterly at her.

“I don’t care if it’s boring. My livelihood is at stake here.”

“Satomi-kun, don’t you want to make the most of your youth?”

“What is that even supposed to mean?”

“Koutarou, if you’d like, I’ll live up to your expectations.”

“Kiriha-san, you just be quiet!”

“Ooh, scary...”

Koutarou gave Kiriha an angry stare, but he didn’t exactly look unhappy.

Really, being friends with her is almost more troublesome...

While admiring Kiriha’s strangely cute smile, Koutarou sighed to himself mentally.

“Hmm...”

Watching Koutarou and Kiriha interact like that, Sanae reached a certain conclusion of her own.

Kiriha isn’t really planning on doing anything to Koutarou.

The auras being emitted while Koutarou and Kiriha were talking were very similar to those when Koutarou was talking to Kenji, for example. And it wasn’t just their auras. It was what they said to each other and the meaning behind it. Between all that, Sanae decided that their relationship had changed for the better.

Then I guess letting them be is fine...

Sanae returned to her usual smiling self and jumped on to Koutarou’s back.

“Koutarou, you should make the most of your youth with me.”

“Really, what is that supposed to mean?”

“Don’t sweat the details.”

Now that Sanae was clinging to Koutarou, she felt like copying Kiriha.

“By the way, what is everyone doing on Christmas? Or, really, for the rest of winter break?” Koutarou asked, looking around the room.

He made eye contact with each of the girls, apart from Sanae who was on his back, and they took turns answering him.

“Training for the play, obviously. Of course, you will be too.”

“Helping Her Highness. That and martial arts training.”

“Participating in the cosclub’s activities from the 29th till New Year’s Eve.”

“I’ll be doing the same as always. Ah, but I might go play with Yurika!”

“I was invited to the apartment union’s end of the year party on New Year’s Eve, and I’ll be visiting the shrine on New Year’s Day with some girls from class.”

“I have to perform a ritual on New Year’s Eve and the New Year’s Day.”

“...I see.”

Koutarou nodded after hearing everyone’s plans.

So everyone’s free on Christmas, huh? In that case, I better do my best to keep this a secret or else it’ll be a total bust.

If the cat got out of the bag, it would only be trouble, so Koutarou decided to keep his plans to himself.

Sensing strange feelings from Koutarou’s aura, Sanae whispered into his ear with a confused expression, “What’s up?”

“Oh, nothing. Everyone was so interested in what I was doing, so I was just wondering what all of you had planned.”

“Hmm...”

Sanae quickly backed off. She had only wondered what was going on, so she didn’t pester Koutarou about it.

“So, Koutarou...”

“Yeah?”

Fortunately, no one else seemed to mind Koutarou asking about their plans, and the conversation naturally moved on.

The traditional sword of Forthorthian knights was small for a two-handed sword, but at the same time large for a one-handed sword. It was actually designed to be used both ways, giving the wielder the option of taking up a shield.

With the development of firearms and the arrival of the modern age, two-handed swords largely fell out of favor, meaning that knives and one-handed swords were mostly what was being produced nowadays. Because of that, the only time anyone really saw traditional swords was in noble society, as they valued tradition, or in the hands of a high-ranking officer wearing a formal uniform.

The treasured sword Saguratin in Koutarou's hands right now, however, was one of those traditional swords.

"Theia, isn't this a bit too big to be used in one hand?"

"All I can say is get used to it. In the next play, you have to use the sword and shield together."

"I'll give it a try, but don't expect too much."

Koutarou was currently holding Saguratin in his right hand and a large shield in his left. He was also wearing the replica of the Blue Knight's armor Theia had given him. It was an ensemble inspired by what the Blue Knight would have worn to battle.

He was having a hard time swinging his sword around like that, however. Before now, he had always fought with the sword in two hands, and this was his first time trying it one-handed. Because of that, his posture caved whenever he swung the heavy sword. To Koutarou, it felt like suddenly being forced to swing a baseball bat with only one hand. However, Theia insisted the shield would be required for the war scenes in the play, so she was counting on Koutarou to pick up the technique.

"Your Highness, do we really need to be so insistent with the shield?"

Koutarou was having trouble wielding the sword and the shield at the same time, so Ruth felt that forcing him to use both was overdoing it.

In reality, Koutarou's form while using the sword two-handed now was quite good. On top of him getting used to the sword, the power-assist function of the armor had started learning his movements, meaning he was now moving much more sharply than he had during the last play.

All things considered, dropping the shield would allow Koutarou to perform better.

"..."

After what Ruth said, Theia took another look at Koutarou's appearance as he swung the sword.

She does have a point...

No one on Earth knew the first thing about Forthorthe, so historical accuracy wasn't really an issue. Only Theia and Ruth would know that the Blue Knight used a shield during the war. So as Ruth had suggested, there was no real point in insisting on it. Having the Blue Knight, no... having Koutarou use a shield would only be for Theia's self-satisfaction.

But...

But even then, Theia wanted Koutarou to do it anyway. She wanted him to be able to do the same things the Blue Knight had.

"In the end, I guess I just have high expectations of Koutarou."

"In what regard, Your Highness?"

Ruth readied her own sword and shield as she responded to Theia's mutterings. Her equipment was quite large compared to her height, but she showed no sign of having any trouble with it. The sword and shield that she was using were automated, modern weapons created by advanced science, unlike Koutarou's. Because of that, even someone like Ruth who wasn't that strong could fight on the same level as a normal soldier. And once geared up, Ruth was going to be Koutarou's practice partner.

"He'll become an exemplary knight."

"Just like the Blue Knight?"

Theia couldn't respond to Ruth's question right away. She was overcome with

surprise.

Could it really...

She had been training Koutarou all this time to become the Blue Knight, but once Ruth had said it that way, Theia realized that wasn't quite how she actually felt about it. She didn't know what to make of it.

I don't want Koutarou to become the Blue Knight...?

She wanted him to be an exemplary knight. But she didn't want him to be the Blue Knight.

In other words...

"No, I want him to surpass the Blue Knight."

"Heehee."

Ruth smiled at Theia's declaration.

Just by saying that, Satomi-sama has become already become more important than the Blue Knight to us, Your Highness...

After growing up with Theia as something of an older sister, Ruth knew Theia better than anyone. At some point, Theia's desires had stopped centering on the Blue Knight and started centering on Koutarou. More importantly, Ruth wasn't sure Theia had ever expected this much from anyone.

"It's Satomi-sama, Your Highness. I'm sure he'll be able to."

"Ruth... Why do you think that?"

Theia looked questioningly at Ruth, who was smiling. She wanted to know the reason behind Ruth's belief that Koutarou could actually surpass the Blue Knight.

"Because his title is not just 'Blue Knight.'"

"Huh...?"

"There's no way that Satomi-sama could be inferior to the Blue Knight. He is 'Theiamillis's Blue Knight,' after all."

Seeing Ruth declare that with a smile, Theia's shoulders went slack. And

though dumbfounded, the corners of her lips raised into a smile.

“...That’s not logical, Knight of Pardomshiha.”

“I am aware. However, a knight’s virtue is not governed by reason.”

Theia and Ruth laughed at each other. Beneath their formal language was all the love of two sisters.

“Hey, Theia!”

But their bonding moment was punctuated by Koutarou calling out to Theia.

“I don’t know why, but the armor’s beeping and stuff! Something about the weight balance!”

“...Either way, we’ve got a long ways to go.”

“Heeheehee!”

Looking at Koutarou like that, Theia and Ruth laughed once more. As they did, Koutarou got impatient and called out to Theia again.

“Are you listening? Hey, Theia!”

“Then let’s go.”

“As you wish, my princess.”

The two girls then walked over to Koutarou. Today’s training had only just begun.

Koutarou’s sword practice ended as the clock neared midnight.

“Ruth, that’s it for tonight.”

“It’s still early though.”

“I don’t mind. Let him sleep.”

The real reason training had been called to an end was that Koutarou had fallen asleep. They had agreed to take a break, but Koutarou sat down and dozed off that way. In the past, Theia would have slapped him awake and carried on, but for some reason, this time she just quietly declared the lesson was over for the night.

“Is that all right?”

“Koutarou is stubborn. If we woke him up, he’d insist he was fine.”

Theia smiled slightly as she squatted down next to Koutarou and pressed the button to release the armor’s equipment. As she did, the sound of compressed air escaping could be heard as the blue armor loosened up. She thought it would be more comfortable to sleep like that. After confirming that Koutarou was truly asleep, Theia slowly got up and turned to Ruth.

“But considering he fell asleep like this, he must have been really tired. He must’ve worn himself out at that new part-time job.”

“Yes, I think so too.”

Theia and Ruth looked down at Koutarou.

“Our presence must be putting strain on Koutarou’s lifestyle. I can’t find it in me to wake him up and force him to continue with practice.”

“I understand...”

As they watched him sleep, the two girls recalled the various memories they had made living on Earth. To a normal boy like Koutarou, life with them couldn’t be easy. Even getting jerked around by the invaders, he still had his own life to live. And in spite of that, Koutarou was living up to Theia and the others’ expectations.

“...You don’t always have to please everyone, Koutarou...”

Theia looked at him with an apologetic, yet grateful expression.

Rest easy, my knight...

Theia smiled at the sleeping Koutarou. It was a gentle smile truly worthy of the word royal.

“Your Highness... you’ve grown so much more mature,” Ruth muttered when she saw it.

“Huh?”

Hearing that, Theia turned to look at Ruth, who now had a gentle smile of her own on her face.

“I don’t believe you had the luxury to do that when we first came to this planet, Your Highness.”

“That’s true.”

Back then, Theia’s desire to become the empress and protect her mother was so strong that she couldn’t afford to worry about other people’s circumstances or feelings. However, after coming to Earth and meeting Koutarou and the others, that gradually began to change.

“Now I know better. Just as Koutarou said, I was a useless princess. It was perfectly understandable that he wouldn’t swear his loyalty to me.”

And now after all this time, Theia wasn’t the princess she used to be. Her desire to protect her mother hadn’t lessened, but she now appreciated that the best way to do that wasn’t necessarily to become the next empress. Instead, Theia felt that it was more important to become a splendid princess that could earn the loyalty of her citizens. Becoming empress after that would just be a bonus.

Ruth is saying that I’ve changed, but... would Koutarou swear loyalty to me as I am now?

She could ask him to as a joke as often as she wanted, and she certainly did from time to time when they were together. But what would happen if she seriously asked him?

If she did, Koutarou would probably answer. But Theia didn’t have the courage to do that yet. At the moment, all she could do was stare at the sleeping Koutarou. And as she did, she decided in her heart that she would ask him once she had grown more mature.

“I’m really glad we came to this planet.”

Meeting Koutarou and the others, and everything since then... It was a remarkable series of coincidences that was nothing less than miraculous.

“Yeah...”

Right now, Theia and Ruth were both endlessly grateful for those coincidences. Coincidences, perhaps, that were better called fate.

The Cold Front Line and Feeling Like a Princess

Wednesday, December 23rd

Koutarou, who was reading the script, reached the end of the page he was on. And as if waiting for that, the script flipped the page on its own. It hadn't been moved by hand, and nobody was touching it. It was almost as if the wind had flipped the page for him. Despite that, Koutarou showed no sign of surprise at the strange sight. He just continued reading on the next page as if nothing had happened.

"Thanks."

"Mmhmm!"

It was Sanae's voice that responded to Koutarou, coming from somewhere overhead. She had used her psychic powers to flip the page. It was a very similar phenomenon to what occurred in horror movies when pages of books would turn on their own.

"Oh..."

Shortly after starting on the next page, Koutarou stopped. He'd reached the end of the scene, so more than half of the page was blank.

It's almost time to go anyway, so I guess I'll stop here.

Since it seemed like a good place to stop, Koutarou closed the script. He then clasped his hands together and lifted them over his head.

"Hmm...!"

When he stretched, his joints could be heard popping. He'd been reading sitting in the same position since morning.

"Jeez, reading really makes my shoulders stiff."

When he lowered his arms again, Koutarou grabbed his left shoulder with his opposite hand. Simply stretching wasn't going to fix the stiffness.

“Koutarou, I’ll massage your shoulders.”

“Yeah, please do.”

“Just leave it to Sanae-chan!”

Sanae floated down to Koutarou’s back and began rubbing his shoulders.

“Excuse me, sir! Your shoulders sure are quite stiff!”

“Ah, but that feels good.”

“It’s Sanae-chan’s Special Spiritual Massage, after all!”

Sanae used her Poltergeist powers to roughly massage Koutarou’s shoulders as she controlled the flow of the surrounding spiritual energy. She soothed his aura wherever it needed it most, and put more power into the parts that were already working well. Overall, it had an amazing effect on his body. It was a completely new kind of massage technique that would have surprised even professionals in the field.

“You could make a living doing this.”

“No way! I could only do this for you, Koutarou. Anyone else would put up their guard, and the whole thing would be pointless.”

“I don’t really get it, but what a waste...”

“Eeheehee! Praise me even more, you jerk!”

Since Sanae’s massage was so skillful, Koutarou simply entrusted his body to her for a while. It felt like the iron buried in his shoulders melted away like ice.

“Sorry to have kept you waiting, Satomi-sama.”

By the end of the massage, Ruth appeared from the glowing wall, wearing a gym outfit. She was going to go jogging to build up her physical strength.

“I’m off.”

“I’m leaving now.”

Koutarou and Ruth, now both in gym clothes, dashed out of the apartment for their jog. And since Koutarou was going to knitting society club activities

afterwards, he was carrying a bag with a change of clothes.

"...Take care."

Theia's shoulders drooped a little as she saw them off.

The Blue Knight is heading for the Silver Princess. Isn't that only natural...?

While Theia tried to convince herself that was how things were supposed to be, she realized her own disappointment. Even though it was just an acting role, she didn't like her knight going to another princess.

Koutarou would probably swear loyalty to the Silver Princess, no, to Sakuraba Harumi...

Theia began feeling like there was a large gap between her and Harumi. Koutarou had respected and admired Harumi for a long time, but he hadn't done the same for Theia. It was obvious who he felt was more noble.

In the end, I'm lacking the qualities that make a true princess...

The door closed with Theia lost in thought, and Koutarou and Ruth disappeared from her sight.

If Sakuraba Harumi and I fought over who got to make Koutarou their vassal...

A dark feeling rose in her chest as she imagined that.

I'm no match for Sakuraba Harumi. There's no way I'd win the way I am right now...

Left alone in room 106, Theia felt a true sense of defeat for the first time in her life.

Koutarou and Ruth were jogging side by side along the road that led to their high school. Ruth wanted to jog and Koutarou was headed to school anyway, so it worked out well for both of them.

Since he was matching his pace to Ruth's, Koutarou was going much slower than he would if running on his own. Ruth had a shorter stride and a lot less muscle than he did. The former she couldn't help, but working on building up those muscles was the first phase of her martial arts training.

Since it was the middle of the day during winter vacation, there was no one else out on the street. The cold winter road looked even lonelier with just the two of them jogging down it, yet none of that loneliness was reflected on either of their faces.

“I’m sorry for wasting your time, Satomi-sama.”

“Don’t sweat it. You’re always taking care of me, you know, Ruth-san.”

Ruth looked apologetically at Koutarou while running. However, Koutarou shook his head and smiled.

“You’re always doing all the housework, so I feel a little guilty. Don’t even worry about something like this.”

“Thank you very much, Satomi-sama.”

Ruth cheerfully nodded. The boost in mood put a little spring in her step, but there was still a lingering doubt in the back of Ruth’s mind.

Why... Why is it that I want to get stronger? Thinking about it now, there doesn’t seem to be any need for it...

Up until now, Ruth had an urge to get stronger that drove her forward in this endeavor. But as she jogged alongside Koutarou, she felt none of that whatsoever. Though at the same time, she didn’t want to stop running. She felt like going on forever. It was all quite mysterious to her.

Listen to me! I’m Her Highness’s guard. The stronger I get, the safer Her Highness will be!

In the end, Ruth decided she did want to get stronger. She had some questions about where the motivation had come from originally, but the stronger she got, the safer Theia would be. She couldn’t see any benefit to staying as weak as she was.

“I hope I can become strong enough to protect Her Highness.”

“Theia’s already stupid strong. Is there any real reason to protect her?”

Koutarou smiled wryly at Ruth. To him, Theia wasn’t exactly someone who needed protecting. In fact, she’d helped Koutarou out so many times now that he knew he could count on her to take care of herself and then some.

“Heehee, Satomi-sama, if you took the weapons away from Her Highness, she would be just a normal girl.”

“She’s pretty good in a fist fight too though.”

Koutarou continued to smile wryly while rubbing his chin. The very same chin, in fact, that Theia had punched just the other day. Koutarou had gotten into plenty of fights with Theia, so he knew just how strong she was. And she was light on her feet, despite all that power. She also had good instincts when it came to fighting. So no matter how he thought about it, he just couldn’t see Theia as Ruth had described her—“a normal girl.”

“Heehee, but Satomi-sama, it’s not like there’s only ever going to be one enemy.”

“Ah, that’s true. I guess I tend to forget that she’s a princess.”

In that moment, the reality of her situation set in on Koutarou.

Even if she’s fine now, once she returns to her country, she’ll be surrounded by enemies, huh...

She was the princess of an empire that ruled an entire galaxy. She had a lot of political adversaries, and she was always in danger. There were radicals that opposed the imperial government, not to mention rivals competing for the throne. Additionally, Theia’s mother, Elfaria, had a poor relationship with the empire’s military. The whole atmosphere was a little tense. That was her everyday life, so her current life on Earth was the exception rather than the norm.

“Yes. Once Her Highness returns home, things will be much more dangerous for her than they are here.”

Ruth’s expression turned severe in an instant. Seeing that expression, Koutarou felt like her life was far harsher than he had even imagined.

So that’s why she wants to protect her and get stronger... Rather than just wanting to deal with the actual danger, she wants Theia to feel safe...

Koutarou could vaguely understand how Ruth felt. And as he looked up into the winter sky, he knew he wanted to be of help to her.

“I have something I want to ask you, Satomi-sama.”

“Yes?”

Koutarou looked down from the afternoon sky and turned to Ruth. As he did, he saw that she had a very grave look on her face.

I guess it must be serious...?

Sensing how serious she was, Koutarou stopped, and Ruth did the same. They now stood there facing each other on the road that led to school.

“Satomi-sama, this is not Her Highness’s will. Rather, I’m telling you of my own initiative, so I want you to keep it secret from Her Highness for a while.”

Ruth started the conversation in a very solemn manner. She had been thinking about this for a while now, so neither her words nor her expression showed any hesitation.

“Satomi-sama, I don’t mind if you don’t do it right away, but regardless of whether Her Highness seizes room 106 or not, would you please serve Her Highness?”

“Huh...?”

Ruth’s request surprised Koutarou. Not really understanding what she meant, Koutarou asked her for clarification.

“What do you mean by serving her?”

He understood that Theia needed to make him her vassal if she won room 106. The conquest of a location and its inhabitants was Theia’s trial. However, Ruth was asking Koutarou to serve Theia regardless of whether she won or not. Koutarou couldn’t understand the meaning behind that.

“Yes. Like I said before, Her Highness has a lot of enemies. She lives her life constantly on guard. She never knows when the people she considers her allies might betray her.”

Ruth looked right at Koutarou with the light of a strong wish and deep trust reflecting in her eyes.

“She also can’t easily trust those who would offer her help. There’s no way of

knowing what organization or faction put them up to it.”

This consultation with Koutarou wasn’t just important for Theia, but for Ruth too. She continued to explain herself to him as if praying.

“However, Satomi-sama, you are different.”

“Me?”

“Yes. Satomi-sama, you have no connection to Forthorthe. There is absolutely no risk of ulterior motives. And I am well aware of what kind of person you are.”

Having heard that much, Koutarou began to understand what this was about.

Now that I think about it, Ruth’s mentioned something like this before...

As Koutarou recalled, Ruth had explained Theia’s circumstances just before they all went to the beach. Because of political reasons and because of her title and position as a princess, she had a hard time making companions. However, she had come to Earth and met Koutarou, who had absolutely nothing to do with Forthorthe. Thanks to that, Theia was able to make her first friend—an equal that would yell right back at her whenever she yelled at him.

And Ruth was talking about the same thing now. Koutarou had no investment in whatever happened in Forthorthe, and Theia and Ruth trusted him as more than just a friend. He was a true ally. That was why Ruth was asking Koutarou to serve Theia.

“And that’s why you asked me?”

“Yes. Please, whatever it takes. Regardless of whether or not Her Highness becomes the empress, she needs an ally she can trust. A knight.”

Whether or not Theia ascended the throne, if she remained a princess, she would still have enemies. So regardless of what happened to Theia in the future, Ruth, who was concerned for her safety, wanted Koutarou to be on her side.

“But Ruth, I’m an alien—or a human from a different star system or whatever. I don’t think what you’re asking is really possible.”

Koutarou was well aware of how big of a deal this was. It was on a completely different level from becoming a vassal in name alone for the sake of some trial.

And because of the gravity of it all, Koutarou was a little overwhelmed. He couldn't decide something like that on the spot.

"That is not a problem. Forthorthe has long been an intergalactic empire. There are already several examples of humans from different star systems becoming nobles."

It was almost as if Ruth had expected his response. She countered without missing a beat. However, Koutarou replied with even more fervor.

"Even so, I have no status and no authority! I can't see how I could be of any help!"

Based on Koutarou's reaction now, Ruth was quite convinced she'd judged him correctly.

Seeing as you're worrying about things like that, we have no other option than to make you an ally, Satomi-sama...

Ruth flashed a small smile and replied to Koutarou, "If this is about status or authority, Her Highness already has those, so they are unnecessary in your case. And if you insist on them, I wouldn't mind you joining the Pardomshiha family."

Theia could give Koutarou both status and authority. And if he needed pedigree, he could be adopted into the Pardomshiha family. But Ruth wasn't really asking Koutarou for anything like that.

"What we need is neither status nor authority. What we need is you personally, Satomi-sama."

Ruth was asking for Koutarou himself. It might have been a sincere enough wish to be equivalent to a declaration of love.

Koutarou walked towards the club building at Harukaze High School, scratching his head and thinking.

"Become Theia's vassal, become her knight..."

He had parted ways with Ruth at the entrance to the school, and she had continued her jog from there. She was long gone now, but Koutarou's head was still rattling with what she'd said. Ruth wanted Koutarou to serve Theia

regardless of whether Theia gained control of the apartment or not. Koutarou wasn't sure how to feel.

"It's just unreasonable, Ruth-san..."

Koutarou sighed repeatedly. Becoming Theia's vassal meant traveling to Forthorthe, leaving Earth and abandoning his current life. That's why it wasn't something that Koutarou could decide on right away. Fortunately, Ruth understood that and didn't mind waiting for Koutarou's answer until rulership of room 106 had been determined.

"If she just wanted me to be Theia's vassal, that would be one thing... But leaving Earth..."

Koutarou wasn't as resistant to the idea of becoming Theia's vassal now as he was when they first met. Theia had saved him several times since then, and he knew that behind her stubborn facade, she was really a lonely, gentle girl. Both Koutarou and Theia had grown over the past months, and their relationship had greatly changed.

Koutarou felt like he could have said yes to Ruth if all she'd asked was for him to pledge his loyalty to Theia. Since he was stubborn himself, he had a problem saying it to Theia's face, but he wouldn't really mind becoming her vassal. The reason he hadn't done so already was because of Kiriha's situation. If Koutarou became Theia's vassal, the current power balance in room 106 would shift dramatically in her favor. And if Theia seized control of the apartment, things with the underground dwellers might develop just as Kiriha feared. That scenario had to be avoided no matter what.

Another wrench in the gears of Koutarou's decision making process was the thought of what would happen after he became Theia's vassal. Theia would eventually return to Forthorthe. When that happened, he would have to accompany her back as part of her retinue. In other words, he'd need to abandon his life as an Earthling and become a Forthorthian. Koutarou had grown pretty attached to his current lifestyle, so giving that all up wouldn't be easy.

He didn't dislike the idea of becoming Theia's vassal. He also knew about her hardships and enemies. But he couldn't allow Kiriha to lose the battle for room

106 right now. He also didn't want to leave his life on Earth. Those thoughts kept swirling around Koutarou's head, putting his brain in danger of overheating.

"Aargh, I give up!"

Reaching his limit, Koutarou abandoned thinking about it altogether. Just like Ruth had said, there was no need to make a decision right away.

Either way, I feel like something's missing...

That's what Koutarou concluded as he made his way to the club building.

He wanted at least one clear sign before deciding if he should become Theia's vassal or not. Right now, the scale in Koutarou's head was balanced with Kiriha on one side and Theia on the other. It would only take the slightest nudge to dip it in either direction, and then Koutarou would be able to make his decision.

"Now to focus on knitting..."

Koutarou stopped in his tracks and shook his head as if to clear it. For now, he would be participating in the knitting society's club activities. He couldn't keep worrying about all this.

"I wouldn't want to make Sakuraba-senpai worry by having a serious expression on my face... Hmm?"

After switching mental gears, just as Koutarou was about to start walking again, he could suddenly feel someone's eyes on him. It was a cold stare that sent shivers down his spine.

"What?"

Koutarou looked around to see who it was, but there was no one nearby. Since the area around the club building was pretty open, it should have been easy to spot whoever it was. But Koutarou didn't see anyone at all.

"...Am I just being too self-conscious?"

He chalked it up to his imagination and entered the club building.

With the new script in hand, Harumi seemed happy despite her tense

expression.

“Thank you, Satomi-kun.”

After thanking him, she began flipping through the pages of the script. Watching her do so, Koutarou figured that she was pleased.

“Satomi-kun, it might be a bit sudden, but can we practice our lines now?”

“Sakuraba-senpai, I understand that you’re excited about it, but we have club activities to do.”

“O-Of course. I’m sorry, Satomi-kun.”

Harumi’s face turned red when Koutarou pointed that out. She hurriedly closed the script and picked up her knitting needles that were resting on top of a nearby desk.

The knitting society had planned club activities for the day, and they had only received permission to use the club room during winter break because of that. Koutarou also wanted to practice for the play, but just ignoring their club activities altogether would be problematic.

Besides, if we start practicing now, it’ll affect tomorrow...

Koutarou began moving his own knitting needles and smiled at the flustered Harumi.

“I’ll be your practice partner all you want later.”

“...Satomi-kun, you meanie.”

Harumi, still blushing, snuck a peek at Koutarou’s face and quickly went back to looking at the knitting in her hands. She was feeling a mix of embarrassment and unhappiness, a rare combination for her.

“Maybe I am, but there are preparations to be made for tomorrow.”

“I-I know that. You really are a bully...”

Harumi continued moving her knitting needles, her face still red. While Harumi’s expression and tone of voice seemed displeased, she was actually quite delighted at the moment.

Lately I’ve gotten better at talking to Satomi-kun...

Harumi looked up from her work to sneak another peek at Koutarou. He was cheerfully moving his knitting needles and was still smiling from his conversation with Harumi.

Harumi in the past often felt lonely when Koutarou only treated her as a respectable upperclassman. So to her, Koutarou being mean from time to time was a welcome change.

This is all thanks to Nijino-san... But this is still nothing compared to Theiamillis-san...

Harumi's ideal relationship with Koutarou was like the one he had with Theia. They would talk to each other without holding anything back. From time to time they would even fight, but they always seemed energetic and cheerful even then, just like best friends.

Harumi wanted to be treasured as a dear friend, not as a princess or an upperclassman. She wanted them to be able to be who they were with each other—for better or worse—without reserve. That's how Harumi felt, and that's why she was envious of Theia. The only other person Koutarou was that open with was Kenji.

I'd like it if we could be like that one day... and then some day...

Harumi's cheeks suddenly got hot and turned red again. She had gotten flustered imagining her ideal future with Koutarou. She then hurriedly moved her knitting needles as if trying to knit away the embarrassing thoughts that had entered her mind.

"Oh, by the way, about tomorrow..."

"Eeek!"

Hearing Koutarou's voice in such a moment, she let out a surprised yelp.

"What's wrong, Senpai?"

"I-It's nothing! Nothing at all..."

Harumi's face, shaking from side to side, was redder than ever. She was now about the color of a tomato or an apple.

"Really? Well anyways, about tomorrow..."

Koutarou didn’t pay it much mind and continued to talk. Meanwhile, Harumi was desperately trying to keep her cool, but her knitting needles were only moving faster.

“Are you ready for tomorrow?”

“Y-Yes. It will be my first time spending Christmas this way, so I’m not sure what to wear, but all the other preparations are ready.”

“I see. I’ve finished the preparations on my end as well. I had a hard time finding something that would suit your tastes though, Senpai.”

“I-I’ll make sure not to be late tomorrow.”

At this rate, Harumi wouldn’t calm down until quite some time later.

Koutarou was holding a metallic card between his fingers. It was the trading card he had gotten the other day on his trip to the amusement park with Kiriha. Koutarou himself didn’t have any strong attachment to it, but he knew that it was precious to Kiriha, so he couldn’t bring himself to get rid of it.

“S-Satomi-kun, do you have a moment?”

“Sure.”

When Harumi called for him, he placed the card between the pages of his script and closed it. He was currently using the card as a bookmark.

After finishing their club activities for the time being, Koutarou and Harumi were now practicing for the play. That said, they had only just gotten their scripts, so the most they could do was read through their scenes and lines.

“About this final parting scene...”

“S-Sakuraba-senpai, what’s wrong?! Are you hurting somewhere?”

The moment Koutarou saw Harumi’s face, he was so surprised that he nearly leaped out of his chair. Tears were streaming down her cheeks.

“Ah, no... I’m s-sorry, it’s not like that. It was just such a good story that I teared up...”

Harumi smiled at Koutarou as she wiped the tears from her eyes. Harumi had

been so moved by the script that it had genuinely brought her to tears.

“Oh... So that’s what it was...”

Realizing he may have overreacted, Koutarou let out a sigh of relief while smiling wryly as he sat back down. He then flipped to a page at the end of the script.

She must have really liked it. No, Sakuraba-senpai is sensitive, so that might be why...

The story ended with the Blue Knight and the Silver Princess parting ways. That scene seemed to make Harumi very emotional. Even though she wiped her eyes, her tears wouldn’t stop flowing. Seeing that, Koutarou thought this was really just like her.

“I’m sorry for crying all of a sudden...”

“Hahaha, it’s fine. Don’t worry about it. So what part of the story did you like the most?”

Koutarou wanted to make sure he was able to perform that part to the best of his ability, so he wanted to know exactly which part of the play he needed to concentrate on.

“Well...”

Harumi flipped through the pages of the script while smiling and crying at the same time.

“In a way, the play tells the story of the Silver Princess’s feelings.”

She ran her finger across the Silver Princess’s lines printed on the page. Both her touch and the way she looked at the lines were very gentle.

“The sorrowful and impatient feelings of not being able to confess her love... The Silver Princess would give her life for the Blue Knight, but their titles get in the way and she’s unable to convey how she truly feels. That really struck a chord with me...”

Harumi slowly closed her eyes and put her left hand on her chest as she spoke.

“If I were to pick a scene, it would probably be the final parting scene.”

“I thought so.”

Koutarou nodded at her answer.

The last scene is so amazing that it’s hard to believe Theia wrote it...

The Silver Princess and Blue Knight’s love ended without ever blossoming. That wasn’t just Theia’s writing, but historical fact.

There was much too large of a gap in status between the empress-to-be, the Silver Princess, and a low-ranking noble whose territory was on the very fringes of the nation like the Blue Knight. Regardless of how much the Blue Knight had done, it wasn’t enough to bridge the chasm between them. If the Blue Knight suddenly acquired a high position through marriage, the aristocracy—made unstable by the war—surely would have protested. That kind of unrest just couldn’t be risked in such delicate times.

On top of that, Forthorthe was still in a precarious political situation, so the Silver Princess never would have been able to marry as she pleased. Marriage was a powerful political tool, especially with other nations. So even if it weren’t for the difference in their stations, it was unlikely they would have been able to be together.

Knowing that, the Blue Knight left before any problems arose from their relationship. It was said that he simply left to return to his hometown, but it was also theorized by historians that his disappearance was to avoid any political conflict.

“Satomi-kun, if the person you loved was out of your reach, what would you do?”

Harumi finally wiped away the last of her tears.

“I...”

Koutarou began thinking.

If I was in the Blue Knight’s position and I fell in love with the Silver Princess...

It was so different from his life or anything that he knew that he was having a hard time imagining it.

“I don’t know. And I don’t think I would until it actually happened... Love that crosses social boundaries, huh? I wonder...”

Koutarou tilted his head to one side and then the other. He couldn’t conceive how the Blue Knight must have felt.

It’s probably bad if I can’t at least imagine what it was like for him before the play...

Koutarou slumped his shoulders and smiled wryly at his own immaturity.

“I see...”

Harumi smiled when she saw that.

I’m glad that’s not an issue between me and Koutarou...

Harumi understood the Silver Princess’s feelings quite well. Well enough, in fact, that she was grateful that she and Koutarou were just normal high school students.

“What about you, Sakuraba-senpai?”

“I... I feel like it would be hard to convey my feelings too.”

Harumi already had her answer, but like the Silver Princess, she couldn’t tell him.

If both Theiamillis-san and I confessed to Satomi-kun at the same time, Satomi-kun would surely pick Theiamillis-san. I’m no match for her...

Harumi was convinced that she didn’t stand a chance against Theia.

“That’s just like you, Sakuraba-senpai.”

Koutarou smiled at Harumi’s answer. It sounded just like something the shy and modest Harumi would say.

“But I don’t think that will do.”

However, when Harumi compared herself to the Silver Princess, she felt like she shouldn’t give up just yet.

I can’t give up. I’m not like the Silver Princess who had so many obstacles before her...

Harumi didn’t have to worry about differences in social status, what the aristocracy might think, or politics with other countries. It was simply a matter of letting Koutarou know how she felt.

“Sakuraba-senpai...”

But hearing Harumi say that keeping her feelings in just wouldn’t do came as a surprise to Koutarou. There was a strong will visible in her eyes as she said those words.

Sakuraba-senpai really is strong... She’s just like a real princess...

In the moment, Koutarou was quite sure he’d done the right thing in recommending Harumi for the lead role as the Silver Princess.

“So you would confess?”

“Yes. It might be impossible right away, but eventually, for sure.”

Harumi looked Koutarou straight in the eyes and nodded.

No matter how many years it takes and no matter how much distance there might be between us, one day I’ll...

That strong desire was the biggest difference between the girl in the script and Harumi.

As Koutarou got off the bus, Harumi, who had stepped off before him, met him with a smile.

“I don’t think it’s good for a knight to keep his princess waiting.”

“Yes, but Her Highness is the only one with a pass.”

In Kisshouharukaze City, public transit passengers paid when disembarking. Because of that, Koutarou, who didn’t normally ride the bus, took longer to get off than Harumi, who had a digital pass.

“As you desire.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Teeheehee...”

“Hahaha.”

The pair laughed together and walked along side by side. They could see the arcade of the shopping district in the direction they were headed. Because it was starting to grow dark, the lights from the arcade shone gorgeously.

After finishing up with their club activities and practice for the play, they headed towards the station together. Koutarou had his part-time job handing out flyers, and Harumi had something to buy. It was practically on the way home for Harumi anyway.

“It looks like it’ll get cold tonight... Your job must be hard.”

The sun was still up, but the wind was already cold. Now that it was late December, it was safe to say it was finally winter proper. And with the cold, Harumi was worried about Koutarou, who would be out here working alone. Harumi’s body trembled lightly and she looked up towards the sky. The setting sun in the dead of winter always seemed melancholic to her.

“This is the last day, so I’m gonna go all out.”

However, Koutarou didn’t seem to be feeling anything like that. Instead, he was pumping himself up for the task ahead.

Today was December 23rd. It would be his last night handing out flyers since it was the last day the bakery he was working for would be taking orders for Christmas cakes. The cold might be harsh as Harumi had said, but Koutarou was keeping himself motivated by telling himself it was the last time he’d have to put up with it.

“Satomi-kun, please be a little more considerate of your health.”

Harumi smiled halfheartedly at Koutarou. She was part worried and part impressed.

Satomi-kun is always so reckless...

Thinking about it now, Harumi recalled several times in the past he’d behaved that way.

During the sports festival, he jumped over the crowd of racers while carrying me. During the cultural festival, he made me play the lead role as the heroine...

Harumi had plenty of memories with Koutarou. They popped into her head as if they were bubbling up from a spring in her memory bank.

The same was true when we were being chased by the coup d'etat forces. Even though I tried everything I could to stop him, he went ahead on his own. And when the magicians summoned a dragon, I begged him not to come, but in the end he did anyway...

In the forest along the border, Koutarou had stayed behind to fight the coup d'etat forces in order to let Harumi and the others get away. When the magicians had summoned a strange monster, he'd fearlessly stood in its way.

"Satomi-kun is always so reck— Wait, huh?"

Harumi's train of thought ground to a halt and she stopped cold in her tracks.

"When we were chased by coup d'etat forces? And what about a dragon...?"

Harumi was confused by the memories that had popped into her head. Of course she'd never faced a dragon or anything like that.

Oh, silly me. I'm really getting too absorbed in my character for the play...

The memories she was recalling were very similar to scenes in "The Silver Princess and the Blue Knight," so Harumi quickly determined that she was too caught up in her character.

"Hee... heehee..."

"What's up, Sakuraba-senpai?"

Koutarou had a perplexed expression on his face as he looked at Harumi, who had stopped walking all of a sudden and started giggling. Harumi responded to Koutarou's question while still laughing.

"I-It's just... I caught myself thinking of myself like a princess. It was just too funny. Teeheehee... It seems like I've gotten too into character."

"If you're talking about the play, I should probably do the same thing."

"You can't. It would be strange if we both became like that. Heehee..."

"Hahaha, that's true. Everyone'll start to think the club has gotten into something weird. Hahaha."

The sound of Koutarou and Harumi's cheerful laughter was heartwarming on such a cold winter night. Once Harumi caught back up to Koutarou, they began walking side by side again.

"Oh, that's right, Satomi-kun. Would you like me to help you with your part-time job like yesterday?"

"I can't have that. I can't afford having a princess help me out all the time."

"...You cheapskate, Satomi-kun."

"It's just as you say, my princess."

"Jeez..."

In contrast to the bright and lively air about the two of them, their surroundings were growing ever darker. The truth was that a sword-shaped crest had been glowing on Harumi's forehead ever since she'd gotten off the bus, but that crest was now flickering as it disappeared. In better lighting, Koutarou might have noticed it, but in the dim light of the setting sun, he hadn't seen it at all.

"Achoo!"

Koutarou stopped handing out flyers to sneeze. It was now past eight in the evening and the shopping street was getting colder. Koutarou had felt much warmer while he was with Harumi.

"I wonder if it was a good idea to turn her down..."

Koutarou wondered if he'd made the right decision as he wiped his nose with a tissue.

Harumi had offered to help hand out flyers like before, but Koutarou had declined and sent her home. She had only joined in for the last spurt yesterday, but if she helped out from the start, she'd be out in the cold for hours. And since Harumi had a weak constitution, Koutarou couldn't accept that.

"If you help me out from the start, I'd have to give you half of the pay, Sakuraba-senpai," he'd told her.

"Can't you just treat it like me repaying you for everything you've helped me

with?”

“No can do. Besides, don’t you have something to do, Senpai?”

“Please. Can’t you allow me this much?”

“I can’t. Tomorrow is more important.”

Harumi had done her best to protest, but when Koutarou brought up tomorrow, she’d reluctantly backed down. She knew getting ready for tomorrow was important too.

“Senpai’s been a lot more feisty lately, but this might be too much.”

Koutarou began handing out flyers again, and while he did, the cold chilled his body more and more. Even his sigh of relief after sending Harumi home came out as white mist.

“How about a cake for Christmas? At Harukaze Bakery, we’re accepting orders for Christmas cakes! Today is the last day to reserve yours!”

The temperature was only going to drop further, and there were still plenty of flyers to hand out. Koutarou’s last night on the job for the year was by far the harshest.

About an hour later after the clock had passed 9:30 PM, Sanae’s energetic voice—and her spiritual energy with it—rang out through the shopping street.

“Ah, there he is! Found Koutarou!”

Sanae had raised her voice because she’d spotted Koutarou. Locating him was growing to be a special skill of hers. Since she was always clinging on to him, she was extra sensitive to his aura and could pick it out of a crowd with ease.

“Where?”

“There. Under that light.”

“Ah... What’s with that ridiculous outfit?”

Theia also managed to spot Koutarou with Sanae’s guidance. However, the moment she saw him, she frowned.

“Your Highness, that’s an outfit made to imitate Santa Claus, a type of fairy

that hands out presents to children this time of year.”

“I see. So it looks so outlandish because it’s fantastical.”

Next to Theia was Ruth. It seemed like they were interested in the Santa outfit that Koutarou was wearing. They were both staring at it intently. And behind the two of them stood Yurika and Kiriha.

“Brrr! Let’s hurry on home and get out of this cold.”

Yurika’s nose was running as she shivered in the night air. Despite wearing more clothes than anyone else, she seemed to be the one that took the cold the worst.

“Heh, Yurika, aren’t you the one that said that we should go meet up with Koutarou?”

Kiriha was the opposite of Yurika. Despite being lightly dressed, she showed no sign of succumbing to the cold. She looked just the same as she did when in room 106.

“But I didn’t think it would be this cold.”

“...You really don’t have any guts.”

“Guts wouldn’t make me any warmer right now!”

“Koutarou seems pretty fine though.”

“Satomi-sama has guts to spare, after all.”

“That said, it’s not like it’s not cold out here. Let’s hurry.”

Following Kiriha’s lead, the residents of room 106 approached Koutarou.

The truth was that the five girls were all worried about Koutarou working in the cold, so they’d come to check up on him. They’d actually been tipped off by Harumi about it. She’d messaged Yurika around 9 PM while she and the other girls were watching the news.

Harumi’s message was about how worried she was over Koutarou working out in the cold. As Yurika was reading it, the news was reporting how it would be the coldest night in Kisshouharukaze City of the year. The other girls became worried as well, which was why they’d come all the way out to the station to

see him.

“How about a cake for Christmas? At Harukaze Bakery, we’re accepting orders for Christmas cakes! Today is the last day to reserve yours!”

By this hour, Koutarou was almost done. He only had about six flyers left. Since the bakery was open until 10 PM, he was confident that he would be able to finish up before it closed.

“Thank you. Please order your Christmas cake from Harukaze Bakery.”

Koutarou handed a flyer to couple with a child because the child had taken an interest in Koutarou’s outfit.

“Bye-bye, Santa! Please give me lots of presents!”

“If you’re a good boy, I’ll make sure to bring some. See you later!”

The child waved his hand to Koutarou as he walked away. Koutarou quickly waved back. As he did, the parents smiled and bowed before taking their son’s hand and walking away as a family.

“Heh, I remember being like that once.”

Koutarou looked at the couple and their child as they walked away. The child was holding on to the flyer Koutarou had given him and was talking to his parents about something. He clearly believed Santa was real, and his parents were smiling at him... The sight warmed Koutarou in a nostalgic way.

“Oh, you have a surprisingly cute side to you too.”

“Whoa! K-Kiriha-san?!”

Koutarou reflexively shouted out in surprise when Kiriha suddenly whispered into his ear. The act alone shocked him, but that she’d overheard him talking to himself shocked him even more.

“It’s not just Kiriha.”

“Huh?”

When he heard Sanae’s voice too and turned to look, he saw all five girls: Kiriha, Sanae, Theia, Ruth, and Yurika. The residents of room 106 were all

gathered together now.

“What’s up? Why are you guys all together like this?”

Koutarou was confused as to why the five girls had shown up in the shopping district. He didn’t think they’d have any business there at this time of day.

“We heard on the TV that tonight would be really cold, so we came to check up on you.”

Theia was the one to answer Koutarou’s question. She stuck her finger in his face and stared right at him.

“On me?”

“Are you unhappy with that?”

Koutarou’s eyes were wide open as Kiriha revealed a somewhat teasing and somewhat amazed smile.

“No, not at all.”

Seeing her smile like that, he realized this wasn’t really anything to be surprised about. He had been getting along with Sanae ever since their ceasefire. Yurika was a little unreliable, but he thought she was fun to be around. Kiriha had finally opened up to Koutarou, so they had been getting along much better as of late. They were practically best friends now. As for Theia and Ruth, he felt like Theia had matured a lot since they first met. Thanks to that, their relationship was improving by the day. And Ruth trusted Koutarou so much that she had even asked him to serve Theia with her.

That’s right. I shouldn’t be surprised that they would come to check on me. But that means...

However, becoming aware that the occasion was nothing to be surprised over brought with it a new surprise.

Koutarou wanted Sanae to remain in the room so she could wait for her parents. If Kiriha were to lose, war might break out. He also wanted to help her find her first love. He didn’t mind cooperating with Theia regarding her trial, and he didn’t want to betray Ruth’s trust. As for Yurika, Koutarou was moved by how sincere she could be from time to time. She’d even been getting a little

more serious recently, and she was a good friend of Harumi's. Her extraordinary hobby alone wasn't a reason to kick her out.

I don't feel like chasing any of them out of room 106...

The new surprise was that he was no longer against their invasions. At the start, Koutarou had tried to repel all of the girls, but before he knew it, he had begun wanting the opposite. He now wanted all of their invasions to succeed.

They've managed to invade my heart before I even realized it...

If the battle for his apartment ended now, the war that Kiriha feared might break out. As a princess, Theia wanted to win fair and square, but Ruth wanted the battle to continue so Theia could live her life out peacefully on Earth for a while longer. If the other invaders were to disappear, Sanae would probably get lonely. And he simply wanted Yurika to live however she wanted.

For all of those reasons, Koutarou wanted the battle to continue. It wasn't just for his own sake, but also for the sake of protecting the surface and for the sake of each of these invaders.

That's why I'm doing this job too...

Though he was hesitant about this development, he didn't think there was anything wrong with it. These invaders, after all, had all come to pick him up.

"One, two, three, four, five... There are only five flyers left!"

"Then if we take one each, the job will be done."

"L-Let's hurry home, Satomi-san! There's no need to be out in this cold!"

"All right, let's go home and get started on your practice!"

"Your Highness, before that, Satomi-sama should take a bath and eat dinner."

And that wasn't all. Koutarou believed that these five girls had begun feeling that they were all necessary to one another too.

Once all the flyers had been handed out, Sanae jumped on to Koutarou's back like normal as the six of them headed home.

"Ack, Koutarou! Your body is so cold!"

And as soon as she did, Sanae reflexively let go of him for a moment. She was startled by just how cold he felt.

“Really?”

“Yes, really! At this rate, you’re going to catch a cold!”

Because Koutarou’s body temperature had gradually dropped while he was working, he hadn’t realized how cold it had actually gotten outside. Sanae, however, could tell exactly what state his body was in with her psychic powers, and she was rightly worried about how cold he was.

“It’s fine. I have faith in my constitution.”

“Shut it, you. You could have at least worn some more clothes.”

Sanae put her palms on his back as she scolded him. She was planning on warming his body up by carefully regulating his circulation, similar to when she had given him a massage.

“What?!”

When Theia heard what Sanae said, she snatched up Koutarou’s hands and held them in her own.

“I-It’s true! You fool, what were you doing to get this cold?!”

“I was working, obviously.”

“That’s not what I meant!”

Theia glared at Koutarou and exhaled slowly into his hands. She was trying to warm him up too.

“Ah...”

Seeing Theia do that, Sanae stopped. She let go of Koutarou’s back and looked at her palms with a forlorn expression.

I’m envious of Theia... I can’t do that...

Sanae stared through her somewhat translucent hands. She was a ghost and had no physical form. She would often hang on to Koutarou, but in reality, she couldn’t physically touch him. Although she knew how it felt for her spiritual form to make contact with him, it wasn’t the same sensation as touching him

directly.

“Seriously, what are you going to do if you catch a cold and you fall behind on your practice?!”

“...Could you at least be worried about me?”

“I am. You’re my leading man, after all!”

“That’s still just being worried about the play!”

“Don’t worry. If you catch a cold, I’ll spend all night nursing you back to health. Fortunately we have tomorrow off, so I’ll treat you lovingly and—”



“Don’t say stuff like that with a straight face, Kiriha-san! If you don’t stop, I’m eventually going to think you mean it!”

“You’ve been getting colder lately, Koutarou. Hahh... And you used to react so energetically, too...”

“Of course! I won’t be tricked by you anymore!”

“Ruth, help out. Take clothes off of Yurika and wrap Koutarou up.”

“As you wish, my princess.”

“Kyaaaaah! Nooooo!”

Through Sanae’s translucent palms, she could see Koutarou and the other four girls making a fuss.

It’s not just Theia... Everyone can do that...

Touching, grabbing, shaking. Those things were only natural to them, but Sanae couldn’t do any of it. If she tried to touch something, she’d pass right through it. If she possessed someone, she could feel the sensation of touch, but she wasn’t the one actually touching anything.

A ghost... I really am just a ghost...

Like that, Sanae finally realized that she was fundamentally different from the other girls.

Christmas Eve

Thursday, December 24th

After changing into his gym clothes, Koutarou returned to the inner room. Ruth was there, also in gym clothes and preparing to go out jogging.

“Hmm, so you started with jogging?”

In addition to the invaders, Shizuka was over too. She was drinking tea that Ruth had just poured for her, and she was quite curious about what they were doing.

“Yes. According to Satomi-sama, I lack the basic physical strength fighting requires.”

“That’s true. If you’re going to punch and kick, you need at least a certain level of muscle.”

“I’m afraid so.”

“There’s no need to feel bad. Everyone starts like that.”

“That’s right. You can do it if you just keep at it.”

The look on Ruth’s face indicated she was embarrassed about her current lack of strength, but Koutarou and Shizuka were quick to encourage her.

If anything, Ruth-san already has all the knowledge she needs about combat. She’s this strong without even having the muscles to back it up...

Since Shizuka actually had firsthand experience fighting Ruth, her encouragement was quite genuine. She knew what Ruth was capable of. In fact, a chill ran down her spine when she imagined Ruth after building up some muscle.

“Koutarou, when are you getting back today? I was wondering when we should start our practice.”

“Ah, about that... Today’s no good.”

“No good? Why not? Do you have some other business?”

Theia was shocked when Koutarou said that he wouldn’t be able to practice today. She would have yelled at him for that a few months ago, but not now. She had matured considerably, and she knew that athletic Koutarou wouldn’t skip out on practice without a proper reason.

“Yeah. It might take all night.”

“I see...”

Hearing Koutarou’s answer, Theia’s shoulders drooped despondently. While he felt bad about it, he continued talking.

“And on that note, there’s something I’d like to ask all of you.”

Koutarou was addressing the six girls in the room.

“Okay. What is it?”

Sanae, who was floating next to Koutarou, answered right away without a hint of hesitation. She could no longer imagine turning down anything Koutarou might ask.

“As long as I don’t have to freeze.”

Yurika also wanted to help Koutarou with whatever it was as long as it didn’t mean going out in the cold again. Lately, Koutarou had been giving her food and helping her with her homework, so she wanted to do something for him in return.

“Sure, but it’ll cost you, Koutarou.”

Kiriha smiled in typical Kiriha fashion. She enjoyed all things in her own little way. This was no different, and she was thinking of ways she could tease Koutarou over it.

“I’m game. I’m free today anyways.”

Normally Christmas was time to spend with family, but since Shizuka had already lost hers, she was grateful if Koutarou had something for them to do together. Shizuka knew all too well the loneliness of standing on the sidelines

while everyone else was together.

“...Um...”

Theia was the only one who didn’t answer right away. Instead, she turned her eyes away from Koutarou and looked at Ruth.

Heehee...

Ruth smiled slightly and nodded when she saw Theia’s expression. Seeing that, Theia’s expression eased up.

“Very well, let’s hear what it is. I’ll allow it for all your hard work as of late.”

Theia could only express herself in her usual high and mighty fashion, but it left Ruth, who knew how Theia really felt, desperately trying to hold back her laughter.

In the end, Koutarou left to go jogging with Ruth without explaining the details.

“There’s something I want to talk to you all about, so could you come by the knitting society’s club room around four?”

That was all he’d said before he departed with Ruth, leaving the five remaining girls with confused expressions on their faces.

“Just what does he want to talk about?”

“You haven’t heard anything either, Mackenzie-kun?”

“Nope. He just told me he had something to talk about and asked me to come to the knitting society’s club room.”

Kenji was apparently equally stumped. He’d met up with the girls on their way to school, but since he hadn’t been given any details either, he was just as confused as they were. So as the four invaders plus Shizuka and Kenji walked towards the school, they all pondered what Koutarou wanted to talk about.

“Uh... I just hope it won’t get too cold...”

“Couldn’t you do something about that outfit?”

Yurika was walking in the back of the line wearing layer upon layer of clothing.

Because it was now the end of December, the sun set early and the temperature was dropping rapidly at this hour. In preparation for that, Yurika had put on nearly all of the clothes she owned. She was practically twice her normal size like that, so it was no surprise that Sanae was astounded by her silly and pathetic appearance.

“Just what is Satomi-kun thinking if he hasn’t even told you, Matsudaira-kun?”

Since Kenji was there, Kiriha put on her honor student act and smiled. The smile, however, was quite genuine. She was eagerly anticipating seeing what Koutarou was up to.

“It’s definitely not anything important. That’s not the kind of vibe he was giving off,” Theia commented.

“You can never be too sure with him,” Kenji responded with a shake of his head. “Since it’s Christmas, I wouldn’t even be surprised if he called us over to introduce his girlfriend.”

“Really?! Do you think Satomi-kun actually got a girlfriend?! I can’t even picture it!”

Shizuka immediately perked up when the conversation went in that direction. Her mind was racing as she imagined Koutarou going out with various girls in their class.

“Well, he’s always been popular,” Kenji shrugged.

“What?! Really?!” Shizuka squealed with delight.

“Whaaaaat?! You’re kidding!” the other girls screamed in astonishment.

They then surrounded Kenji and demanded that he explain. The entire group was surprised. Sanae even forgot that Kenji couldn’t see her and demanded an explanation from him as well. Kiriha was the only one who remained calm.

“Come on, give us the details!”

“Is that true, Mackenzie-kun?!”

“I can’t accept this!”

“Tell us everything! Spare no detail!”

“Uh, sure...”

Flustered by the pressure from the girls, Kenji adjusted his glasses and began explaining.

“Kou’s stupid, so you wouldn’t expect him to be popular.”

“Right.”

“Yeah, that’d be weird.”

Everyone nodded at Kenji’s words. Koutarou wasn’t popular. The girls were sure of it. At school, he was never surrounded by the girls in class and he was always playing around with the boys.

“Well, I can’t imagine Satomi-kun being a ladies’ man.”

“Yeah, that’s the kind of thing I’d expect from Matsudaira-san instead.”

“Now that I think about it, Koutarou said something about holding a grudge against Glasses-kun regarding Valentine’s chocolates...”

It was true. The girls at school flocked to Kenji, not Koutarou. There were always girls around him. He had a lot of female fans because of his good looks, his manners, and his ability to do anything well.

“But that’s only on the surface,” Kenji explained.

“On the surface, you say?”

Kenji let out a loud sigh and slumped his shoulders. Complex feelings were welling up inside of him.

“In reality, there are always a few girls falling for him. And they’re always the kind of wonderful girls I fall for!”

Kenji clenched his fist and put extra emphasis on those last few words. It pained him to admit, but he was really speaking from the soul.

In other words, it’s a matter of quantity versus quality!

It was true that Koutarou wasn’t popular. But the girls that Kenji fell for were all in love with Koutarou. There had always been girls over the years that were

able to appreciate the positive qualities Koutarou had.

“The truly wonderful girls all understand Koutarou’s good points. Just how many times have my heartfelt confessions been rejected because of him?!”

The most recent example was Harumi. Kenji would have loved to go out with someone like her. She’d be the type of girlfriend he could brag about to anyone. But Harumi loved Koutarou. Anyone with any insight at all could tell that.

Well, everyone probably chooses him because I keep thinking about things like that...

Kenji was aware of his own faults. When he set his eyes on a girl, he was always playing some angle or another. He wasn’t as straightforward as Koutarou. All the girls Kenji was interested in noticed that slight difference, and that seemed to be why things never went well for him. In other words, Kenji liked the kind of earnest girls that were interested in Koutarou.

I guess I’m unexpectedly old-fashioned... In the end, I can’t really laugh at Kou...

Kenji sighed once more while smiling wryly.

“Don’t at least some of you know what I mean?” he asked, looking around at the girls.

Recently, the girls that were in front of him now were all getting along well with Koutarou. His intuition told him that, regardless of whether they loved him or not, they at least all saw Koutarou’s good side.

“That’s true. You would feel more at ease with him as your boyfriend than Mackenzie-kun.”

Shizuka laughed. She could see most of what Kenji was talking about.

Despite all of us girls hanging around him, he’s still so honorable and sincere...

That’s why Shizuka came down to room 106 to play daily. It was because she trusted Koutarou.

“That’s how a man should behave! Being unfaithful is unforgivable!”

Yurika was worried about Harumi.

I know Sakuraba-senpai is in good hands with Satomi-san because he's a good guy! I could never trust her to someone who has a new girl every day!

She would be troubled if Koutarou was as popular with the ladies as Kenji was. She would always be worried for Harumi. But the way he was, Koutarou only had to take Harumi and Yurika out on dates.

"Duh! All that's a given!"

Slightly angry, Sanae stuck her tongue out at Kenji. But he didn't seem to mind. He couldn't see her, after all.

I have this charm, so I know that better than anyone!

Sanae held a charm with the words "family safety" embroidered on it in her hand. To her, as long as she had that, it was proof of Koutarou's worth as a man.

"That's right. Koutarou's not as much of a schemer as you are."

Theia nodded as if that was plain fact.

Of course my knight isn't like that. Knights are paragons of virtue. And if he didn't meet those expectations, I wouldn't have given him a title like that!

Theia was no longer trying to make Koutarou her vassal because of her trial. She was doing it for her own sake.

"It looks like you all know what he's talking about."

Hearing everyone's response, Kiriha smiled.

So in the end, everyone has faith in Koutarou. He's the earnest man that I revealed my true intentions to after all...

Kiriha believed that if she didn't already have another man she loved, she would probably want to go out with Koutarou. So she understood what Kenji meant, and she could imagine how the other girls must feel about him.

"So that's why I wouldn't be surprised if he suddenly introduced us to a girlfriend."

"That won't happen."

"That's too big of a leap, Mackenzie-kun."

“I won’t allow it!”

“That’s impossible.”

“Heh, that might just be the bitterness talking, Matsudaira-san.”

The girls understood what Kenji was trying to say, but at the same time, they completely rejected the idea that Koutarou might have a girlfriend. They hadn’t noticed any signs of something like that while living together, so they didn’t believe it could be true.

“No, really. You can’t be so sure. He could show up with a girlfriend at any time.”

“He’s not like you, Mackenzie-kun.”

“That’s right.”

“If that was the case, he would have told me sooner.”

“If it was Ruth, I could forgive him.”

“Talking like that, you guys are just going to make Matsudaira-san feel bad.”

The girls began sensing that, while they might not be aware of it, there could be plenty of other girls that were indeed in love with Koutarou.

As Theia opened the door to the knitting society’s club room, she was greeted with the sound of several small explosions. Surprised by the noise, she jumped back.

“Kyaaaaah!”

Although Yurika had been the only one to scream, the other girls and Kenji all curiously peeked into the club room to find out what was going on.

“Merry Christmas!”

Inside the room stood Koutarou, Harumi, and Ruth, plus several familiar faces from the drama club. They were all holding the spent party poppers that they had just used.

“Come on, don’t just space out like that! Come in, come in!”

While they were still unable to process what was going on, Theia and the others were pulled in by the drama club president.

“‘Drama club celebration and Christmas party’?”

As Theia and the others were pulled into the room, they noticed the banner hung up on the back wall, decorations all over the room, and a large quantity of food set out. Seeing all of that, it was finally obvious what was going on.

“Whoa, so you’re holding a Christmas party today!”

“Oh, was that all...”

“All right! There’s lots of food!”

“Yurika-chan, you’re drooling.”

“Heh, looks like Satomi-kun deceived us all.”

Koutarou had called Theia and the others to school for the party. Since it was serving as both a Christmas party and a congratulatory celebration for the play being held next year, everyone involved in the play had been invited.

“What took you so long?”

“Koutarou, just what is this commotion?”

Although they understood what was going on now, there were still a lot of unanswered questions. Theia looked to Koutarou, who was approaching them wearing a Santa outfit. But it was Ruth, also wearing a Santa outfit, that explained the situation to Theia.

“Your Highness, this party was planned by the drama club president. We weren’t told what was about to happen until just a moment ago. The only ones who knew were the few people helping with preparations, including Satomi-sama and Harumi-sama.”

The drama club president had planned the party, and since it was supposed to be a surprise, the preparations had to be carried out in secret. Koutarou was known to be tight-lipped, so he was asked to help out since preparing for the party was too much for the president alone. Koutarou got Harumi involved for the same reason. Koutarou’s role was to prepare the decorations, but because he lacked any sort of talent for that kind of thing, he relied on Harumi. And on

the day of the event, Koutarou had asked Ruth to help him with the food. They'd gone out jogging together, so it was easy to fill her in without letting everyone know.



They'd ended up deciding to hold the party in the knitting society's club room because the drama club's didn't have enough room. It was already full of props and set pieces for their upcoming play, so there wasn't anywhere to even squeeze in a table. In contrast, the knitting society only had two people in it, so they had plenty of space to spare in their club room since it wasn't used for all that much. That's also why they'd needed Harumi, the knitting society president, in on things.

"That's right. The president's a big tease. You only had to mention it."

"Yeah. I wasn't sure what was going to happen when you told me you had something important to discuss."

The drama club members crowded around and added to Ruth's story. They had only learned the truth after entering the room a few moments ago, the same as Theia and the others had just now.

"I see... Now who was the one that said Koutarou would announce something shocking?"

After learning the truth, Shizuka looked at Kenji and grinned.

"What are you talking about, Landlord-san?"

"Well you see, Satomi-kun, Mackenzie-kun said—"

"Wah! Wait, wait, Kasagi-san! Time out!"

Shizuka was about to reveal what Kenji had said, but he hurriedly cut her off and pulled her over to a corner of the room.

"Kyah! Mackenzie-kun, you pervert!"

"Don't say things like that! Please! It'll give me a bad reputation!"

"Wh-What?"

Shizuka let out an, oddly enough, cheerful scream as Kenji began to panic. Not understanding what was going on, Koutarou just blankly stared at them and tilted his head in confusion. When he did, the Santa hat on his head bounced humorously. The bobble dangling from the end of it was actually something he and Harumi had made the day before yesterday. They had plenty of yarn to

spare and they were easy to make.

“Yaaay! Let’s eat!”

Though he was puzzled by Kenji and Shizuka’s behavior, Koutarou returned to his senses when he heard Yurika’s voice.

“Hey, Yurika, at least hold out until after the toast.”

“Huwah?”

“Hahh... Nothing. Never mind. Just eat.”

“Hmph...”

Koutarou had tried to stop Yurika as she was starting to pick out food from the table, but he gave up when he saw how pathetic she looked. Sanae followed up by poking his slumped shoulders.

“Koutarou, did you pick up the new job so—”

When Sanae uttered the phrase “new job,” Theia and Kiriha looked over to Koutarou.

“Yeah, it was for this. The drama club will end up picking up the tab, but they needed some immediate funds to make it all happen.”

Koutarou had taken a second part-time job for the sake of the party. Although the drama club would cover the expenses eventually, they’d needed some cash to make all the preparations. Since he wasn’t willing to tap into the money his dad had given him for living expenses, Koutarou and the drama club president had both secretly started part-time jobs to foot the bill. The drama club president had actually worked helping to make cakes at the bakery Koutarou handed out flyers for.

“So that’s why...”

A smile crept across Theia’s lips.

I see. So it was for our sake...

It wasn’t for any one person in particular. It was for all of them. Even though all he’d really done was get a part-time job, that side of Koutarou made Theia happy.

“I was surprised too.”

“Hmm...”

I knew it. Koutarou just has to become Her Highness’s knight, no matter what...

Everything that had happened today only further served to reaffirm Ruth’s feelings on the matter.

“My my... If you needed money, you could have just said so.”

“I can’t pull my friends in just for the sake of money.”

“Satomi-kun hates shallow relationships after all.”

Kiriha kept up her act as she smiled at Koutarou.

This’ll give me an excuse to tease Koutarou for a while.

Despite her pleasant smile, a certain mischievousness could be seen in the depths of her eyes. But before she could tease Koutarou any more, they were approached by the drama club president, who was also wearing a Santa outfit.

“Thanks for your help, Satomi-kun. You show some real promise.”

“Thank you, President.”

With the drama club president, there were a total of four people wearing Santa outfits at the party: her, Koutarou, Ruth, and Harumi. They were the four people that helped with the preparations.

“Here, Satomi-kun. Something to drink.”

“Thank you, Sakuraba-senpai.”

“Here, I have some for everyone.”

Harumi came over carrying a tray full of glasses.

At first I was surprised because I thought Satomi-kun was asking me out on a date... but I feel like this is much more like us. Don’t you think so too, Nijino-san?

While handing out drinks, Harumi glanced over at her best friend, Yurika. Yurika, however, was far too busy stuffing her face to notice.

“Does everyone have a drink? We’re going to have a toast.”

The drama club president took the initiative on the toast. Since she was working as the stage director, she would be the one to give it. And following her lead, everyone in the room raised their glasses.

“Koutarou, I want orange juice.”

“Okay, okay.”

Koutarou was holding up two glasses, one with apple juice and one with orange juice.

“Well then, with the lonely end of the year approaching for us singles, here’s to the success of the play next year! Merry Christmas, everyone!”

“Merry Christmas!” everyone cheered.

And with that, their Christmas party had officially begun.

As the party kicked off, the guests spent their time freely talking and eating, but after about an hour, they started playing games. The console belonged to the drama club president, and they’d rented the large TV just for the occasion. It was something they’d only been able to do thanks to Koutarou and the president’s part-time jobs.

“Hhnnngh... My stomach hurts so much I can’t move...”

By that time, Yurika had started bellyaching. After ignoring everyone and all the friendly conversation over the past hour to purely focus on eating, her stomach had been pushed past its limit.

“Is this stomach of yours because of all the clothes you’re wearing, or because you’ve eaten too much?”

Sanae poked Yurika’s bloated belly.

“That hurts. Please don’t poke me there.”

“So it’s from overeating.”

Sanae continued to poke at Yurika’s stomach. Although she was partially dumbfounded, she seemed to be enjoying herself.

“Waaaaah, my stomach hurts!”

“Show some restraint then, you idiot!”

“But there’s no guarantee that all this good food will still be here later. If I don’t eat my fill now, who knows when I’ll get to eat something so good again?!”

“Is it really that big of a deal? Jeez...”

After laying Yurika down on the couch, Koutarou scratched his head. He felt like he was watching over an incompetent little sister.

“Yurika, what was the most delicious?”

“I-It was all delicious, but the pizza over there was the best. There’s three kinds of cheese, and it was like it melted in my mouth.”

“I see. Koutarou, let’s go eat some!”

“Okay, okay.”

Yurika was one thing, but Koutarou couldn’t ignore the bad influence she was having on others. It would be problematic if Sanae turned into a second Yurika.

I guess I’ll get her something good to eat for the end of the year. If she keeps up like this, it’ll have a negative influence on Sanae’s upbringing...

Although he was going to be reimbursed for what he’d spent on the party, Koutarou was starting to get the impression it was going to go straight into Yurika’s stomach.

“Yurika, I have some stomach medicine.”

“Thank you, Kiriha-san. But there’s no room in my stomach for it...”

“Ho! We’ll grind it up into powder for you, ho!”

“It’ll be easier to drink that way than taking it in tablet form.”

“Nooo! It tastes more bitter when you grind it up!”

Y-Yurika...

Koutarou took Sanae with him to go get some of the pizza that Yurika had recommended, but as he heard the discussion behind him, his stomach hurt a little bit too.

Are you really okay with living your life this way?

Koutarou couldn't help but worry about her future.

"Hey, Koutarou."

When Koutarou and Sanae arrived at the table with the pizza on it, Theia walked up as well.

"Are you already done playing?"

"Yeah. I beat everyone, so they chased me out."

Theia smiled wryly as she looked in the direction of the game console. There was a large crowd around the TV. Right now they were taking turns playing a four-player game against one another. Harumi, the drama club president, and two other girls—not a single one of which were any good at games—were having a go at each other.

Theia, who loved games and loved competition, had won too many times and ended up being chased off by the others. They'd been keeping the winner on to play against the next person, but the line had to be drawn somewhere.

"Just hold back a little, will you?"

"Are you telling me to lose on purpose?"

When Koutarou suggested Theia had gone a little overboard, her cheeks puffed up. The way she frowned and looked up at Koutarou made her look much younger than him.

"It's not like there was anyone you had to prove yourself to or an opponent you had to defeat, right?"

"..."

But hearing him say that, Theia's cheeks shrunk down to normal size.

"You're right. I'll be more careful next time."

Theia smiled and looked back to the TV once more.

So she's only able to let her guard down and make faces like that while on Earth, huh?

Looking at her profile, Koutarou recalled what Ruth had said. Theia was only able to act like a girl her age should because she was on Earth. Knowing that, Koutarou wanted to help her. Seeing the way she behaved at the party only reaffirmed that.

“Your Highness, Satomi-sama, have some food.”

Ruth walked over and presented Koutarou and Theia with plates full of food. After looking at the two of them, Ruth gently smiled.

“Thanks, Ruth.”

“Don’t mention it.”

“Koutarou, the pizza!”

“I got it, I got it.”

While Theia was reaching for the plate in Ruth’s right hand, the plate in Ruth’s left hand came floating towards Koutarou. That was thanks to Sanae’s psychic powers, and the plate landed in Koutarou’s hands just as she had planned. It was the kind of supernatural phenomenon that would freak out anyone who didn’t know any better, but fortunately, the only people who saw it already knew about Sanae.

“Koutarou, say ‘ahh’!”

“Ahh...”

Following up, Sanae controlled Koutarou’s right arm and used it to bring the pizza from the plate to his mouth. All Koutarou did on his own was open his mouth.

“Oh, this really is delicious.”

“At least something good came from Yurika trying everything.”

The rich taste of cheese and refreshing acidity of tomato spread throughout Koutarou’s mouth. The texture was exquisite too. It was quite satisfying for Koutarou, and for Sanae who was clinging on to his back.

As Koutarou happily chewed on the pizza, he noticed Theia looking around the room.

What's she looking at?

Interested, Koutarou began following her glance. Almost as if she was trying to answer Koutarou's question, Theia muttered something.

"Everyone's looking very motivated."

Theia wasn't looking at the room, but rather the people in it—the drama club members and everyone else involved in the play. Their smiles and energetic voices filled the normally quiet club room.

"They get along well and their teamwork is excellent."

"Yes. If it stays like this, the next play is sure to be a success as well."

Ruth, who was carrying a tray now, was the one to respond to Theia. She also joined in looking around the room.

"That would be great, but it's going to be quite difficult."

Their next play was quite a different undertaking. Since it was the climax of the story, it would be far more difficult to pull off than the previous play. In that light, Theia figured there was a fifty-fifty chance of the play succeeding.

"Stupid."

Koutarou responded by whopping Theia on the top of her head with his now empty plate.

"Ow! What are you doing, Koutarou? How dare you hit a princess with a plate?!"

"That's it. That's the spirit."

Next, Koutarou lightly tapped Theia's head twice with the palm of his hand.

"...Huh?"

"You're the leader, so you have to keep showing everyone that you're in high spirits."

"Koutarou..."

Theia had assumed that Koutarou was just bullying her again, so her shock at what he'd ended up saying was more than enough to make her forget her

anger.

“You’ve been thinking about the people around you more lately, but at the same time, I feel like your spirit’s drooped.”

Playing games earlier was a good example. The more mature Theia had grown to become considerate of other people, but there were times it was better to let that go. This was one of those times. Theia wasn’t the stage director, but as the writer of the play, she had a significant effect on how the play turned out. It would be for the better if someone in that kind of influential position didn’t hold herself back at all. In fact, the actors would probably feel better if she had the kind of spirit to pull everyone along with her on this ride.

That was Koutarou speaking from experience. The worst part of baseball for him was seeing his coach look nervous in the middle of a game.

“It’s better to just do things sometimes instead of worrying too much.”

“But...”

Even though he said that, Theia’s expression didn’t change. She couldn’t help the anxiety. She wasn’t sure if she could lead these people the way she needed to. She wasn’t sure if she could get people to obey her like the Silver Princess that Harumi was playing could. But this wasn’t always something Theia had worried about. It was a worry that had been born from Theia’s newfound consideration of others.

“Don’t worry. Everyone would follow you the way you are now,” Koutarou calmly said while indicating the people in the room with a nod of his head.

Before Theia knew it, several sets of eyes were focused on her. Everyone had stopped eating and playing games for the moment to look at Theia. Just as Koutarou had said, everyone had high expectations of her, and they were more than ready to follow her lead.

“Everyone... I see...”

Theia’s worry was deeply rooted, but Koutarou helped her get a little bit of a handle on it.

Regardless of whether or not I can do it, there are times when I just have to,

huh?

When Theia realized that, her expression and eyes began to brighten up. Her smile was fierce and full of confidence. It was the appearance of a strong leader.

“That’s it. That’s more like it.”

Seeing Theia like that, Koutarou flashed a relieved smile. Her current countenance was just what he had been hoping for.

“Just who do you think you’re talking to, Satomi Koutarou?”

“To the princess I can’t help but respect.”

Koutarou jokingly bowed a little to Theia. He then took the chance to eat some more. All of the food was great, not just the pizza.

“If you’re going to go that far, then I trust you’re prepared.”

“That’s not it.”

With his plate now empty again, Koutarou struck Theia on top of her head for a second time. It was a sign telling her to be more aggressive. Theia understood that much.

“Then prepare yourself, Satomi Koutarou! You and I will walk this road of blood, sweat, and tears together!”

With Koutarou’s challenge, Theia was able to boldly make her declaration. That was the kind of Theia Koutarou thought they needed now.

“As you wish, my princess.”

“I trust you won’t go back on your word.”

“I promise, Theia. I’ll make the play a success.”

There was no hesitation in Koutarou’s answer. He had his heart set on making the play a success together with Theia.

“All right!”

After Theia and Koutarou nodded at each other, Theia raised her voice and addressed everyone at the party.

“Listen up, men! We’ll make this play a success no matter what! Got that?!”

Her powerful voice filled the room.

“Yeaaaaah!” the whole crowd roared back in unison.

Just like she had said, the people gathered here made an excellent team.

Koutarou and Harumi headed for the school gate together. It was now past 7:30 PM. The party that the drama club was hosting was still ongoing, but the two of them had snuck out.

The reason for that was because it was time for Harumi to go home. She had her last checkup of the year scheduled for the next morning, so she had to limit what she was eating for the day and make sure she stayed rested. As an extra precaution, she’d decided to retire early for the night. She was taking a taxi home, and since it would be picking her up from the school gate, Koutarou had offered to accompany her. Even though it was just at the edge of the school grounds, things could still be dangerous at night.

“It’s certainly gotten a lot colder, hasn’t it, Satomi-kun?”

“It’s been cold for a while now, so maybe it’s going to snow.”

Now passing through the school gate, the two of them stared up into the night sky. It was cloudy enough that not a single star could be seen, but it was cold enough to see every breath.

The taxi still hadn’t arrived, and the bus stop in front of the school gate was empty. There was only a single streetlight illuminating the area. Seeing that alone made Koutarou happy that he’d accompanied Harumi.

“A white Christmas would be wonderful.”

“You’re the Silver Princess, Sakuraba-senpai. Can’t you just conjure up some snow?”

“Ahaha, Satomi-kun, please don’t be too unreasonable.”

Laughter escaped Harumi’s pretty lips, and the cold air immediately turned it into a white haze.

“If you’re going to tease me like that, I’ll make you fight a real dragon, Satomi-kun.”

“I would really prefer not to.”

Koutarou started laughing alongside her. Their visible breaths intermingled before dispersing with the wind.

“But still, it sure is cold.”

“We were in such high spirits before, so maybe it just feels colder than it really is.”

It was only minutes ago that the two of them were in the middle of a lively party. Koutarou and even Harumi had joined in the festivities and had a good time playing around excitedly. Their current situation was the opposite of that.

“High spirits, huh? I can’t quite imagine you horsing around or anything like a tomboy, Sakuraba-senpai.”

“Neither can I. Jeez...”

Harumi put her hand in front of her mouth and began giggling. But even though she seemed happy, her body began lightly shivering.

You really are freezing, aren’t you, Sakuraba-senpai? Ah, that’s right!

Seeing Harumi so cold, Koutarou remembered what he was carrying.

“I have just the thing, Sakuraba-senpai.”

Koutarou shoved his hand into his pocket and pulled out what was inside.

“A hat?”

“This one’s mine. I have something else for you.”

Koutarou had pulled out a red Santa hat. It was the one he had been wearing at the start of the party.

“What is it?”

“Well, it’s not really something to get excited about.”

Koutarou quickly put on the hat and reached for something else, this time from his inside jacket pocket. It was something he had been planning on giving

Harumi as a Christmas gift.

“Ho ho ho!”

Giving Harumi his best Santa laugh, Koutarou pulled out a colorful package with a ribbon wrapped around it. It was about as big as a comic magazine, but it was very light. The bundle rustled as Koutarou presented it to Harumi.

“Santa has a present for a good girl like you.”

“My...”

When she saw the present, Harumi’s eyes lit up.

“Is this really for me?”

“Ho ho ho, that’s right!”

Koutarou nodded at Harumi and handed her the present.

“Thank you very much.”

Harumi clutched the present lovingly to her chest as she lightly bowed to Koutarou. Her smile was positively radiant.

“That said, it’s not really something I’m proud of.”

Koutarou quickly began rubbing the back of his neck in embarrassment. Knowing what was inside the package, he couldn’t help it.

“Can I open it?”

Harumi was so interested in the contents of the gift that she didn’t notice his embarrassed expression.

“Go ahead. It should be of use to you right now, but... maybe only ever right now.”

Waiting for Koutarou’s approval, Harumi carefully undid the ribbon around the present and peeked at what was inside.

“Ah, this is...”

Seeing what it was, Harumi’s expression grew even brighter as she hurriedly pulled her present out of the paper.

“A muffler...”

It was a hand-knit muffler, but one that was rather poorly made. Because the knitter's skill was lacking, it was covered in snags and it warped to one side and then the other.

"Satomi-kun, you remembered..."

However, in spite of its quality, Harumi didn't seem at all disappointed. Instead, she was beaming as she happily stretched it out.

Satomi-kun gave this to me...

It was the first piece of knitting that Koutarou had worked on when he joined the society that spring. That was why it was so shoddily done.

"I really was worried about giving you something like this as a gift."

Koutarou recalled Harumi once saying that she loved the beginning of the first piece he'd done. She said it showed off his hard work the best. But even though she'd said that, he wasn't sure if she would actually be happy to receive something like that for Christmas. There weren't many people who would be happy about getting such a poorly knit muffler.

"No, Satomi-kun... I'm really happy. Thank you."

But Koutarou lucked out. Harumi was one of those people. It wasn't just that she had an appreciation for knitting, either. This muffler was chock-full of memories for her. It symbolized all the time she'd spent with Koutarou since the start of the school year. To Harumi, it was precious gift. She was thrilled that Koutarou had remembered her fondness for it.

He gave this to me as a present...

Harumi's eyes began tearing up. She knew that Koutarou didn't mean anything special by the present. He wasn't that type of person. But she was so elated with the gift that she was almost sorry for that.

"Does it look good on me?"

Harumi wrapped the muffler around her neck and smiled at Koutarou. It looked almost as if she was dancing when she spun around to show it off.

"It doesn't. Your taste in mufflers is terrible."

“Silence. What makes a mere knight think he could criticize a princess so?”

“Hey, that’s not in the script.”

“Even I can ad-lib on occasion.”

It was still as cold as it had been, and it would only get colder as the night progressed. Harumi, however, no longer noticed it.



Headlights approached from a distance. Since it was a straight road with little traffic, the lights stood out rather well and Koutarou noticed them right away.

“Looks like the taxi is here.”

“...Huh?”

“What do you mean ‘huh’? Sakuraba-senpai, isn’t that how you’re getting home?”

“R-Right. I’m sorry.”

Harumi had been so absorbed in the muffler that she had completely forgotten about the taxi.

Ah, I almost forgot!

Harumi then remembered something else she had forgotten.

“Satomi-kun, I actually have a present for you too.”

Normally she might not have been able to muster those words, but the malformed muffler around her neck gave her courage.

“For me?”

“Yes.”

“But I haven’t been a good boy.”

“I don’t mind. I’m not Santa after all.”

But I think you’ve been a great boy, Satomi-kun...

Harumi giggled as she reached into her bag and pulled out something long and slender.

“Are those knitting needles?”

“Yes. I wasn’t very sure if something like this would make a good present for a boy though.”

Harumi had gotten Koutarou knitting needles made of bamboo as a present. They were wrapped in beautiful paper with a ribbon around them. When Harumi held them to her chest, it looked like she was holding a bouquet.

“Here, Satomi-ku—”

As Harumi went to hand Koutarou the present, she was seized by a strange sensation.

Huh...? Hasn’t this happened once before...?

Harumi was getting a strong sense of deja vu. She felt like this wasn’t the first time she had given Koutarou a present.

“What’s the matter, Sakuraba-senpai?”

Confused by Harumi suddenly falling silent, Koutarou tried to figure out what was wrong. When his voice reached her ears, a scene played in her mind.

“What’s the matter, Alaia-sama?”

“It’s nothing.”

Harumi was imagining Koutarou wearing blue armor and herself holding a silver sword.

I see. This is a scene from the play...

Thinking about it, she recalled that it was a scene from the new script. Ever since she’d gotten her hands on it, she’d spent any spare time she had reading it. She figured that must be the cause of her deja vu.

“It’s nothing.”

Harumi giggled and presented the knitting needles to Koutarou.

“I was just thinking that there was a scene like this in the manuscript.”

“Oh, yeah. You’re right.”

Koutarou nodded, satisfied with the answer he had gotten. He then kneeled in front of Harumi. They both wore serious expressions. The scene Harumi was talking about was where the Silver Princess presented the Blue Knight with the sword Signaltin. In it, the Blue Knight and Silver Princess faced each other just like Koutarou and Harumi were now.

“Lord Veltlion, from now on this sword will protect you. From any enemy and any trial.”

“Then I will use my life and this sword to protect you, Princess Alaia.”

As they recited their lines from the script, Harumi placed the knitting needles in Koutarou’s hands. It was a masterful scene full of emotions they could never express themselves. And after Koutarou received the knitting needles from Harumi, the two of them burst out laughing.

“Ahahahaha!”

“Wahahahaha!”

“A-As if you could use bamboo knitting needles to protect anything! Pfft... Hahaha!”

“Wh-What’s that supposed to mean? You’re the one who said it! Ahahaha!”

Koutarou stood up as he laughed loudly. However, his footing was unsteady because he was laughing so much. Harumi bent forward almost as if in pain as she continued to laugh. It was a heartfelt, soulful laughter from both of them.

“Hahahaha, hah— Look, Sakuraba-senpai!”

“Oh?”

“Look! It’s snowing!”

The only thing that stopped their laughter was the snowflakes drifting down from the dark sky.

“My, it’s beautiful... And it just keeps on coming.”

Harumi stood there breathless at the beauty of the snow seemingly dancing through the air. As she reached up with her hand, she caught a few of the falling flakes. The fantastic view of the gently falling snow illuminated by the street light had her captivated. Koutarou, on the other hand, wasn’t looking at the falling snow at all.

The Silver Princess, huh?

Koutarou was looking at Harumi playing with the snow. The Silver Princess was only a role that had been given to her, but as he looked at snow-kissed Harumi now, the feeling that she’d surpassed that role filled Koutarou’s heart.

“...Merry Christmas, Satomi-kun.”

And when he saw the smile Harumi gave him as she turned around, Koutarou felt a strange sadness that he wasn’t actually the Blue Knight.

The Fire Dragon Emperor and the Silver Princess

Sunday, January 10th

"Let's go, Yurika."

The strong lighting on the stage made the blade of Koutarou's sword shine a bright white. It was the treasured sword Saguratin that Theia had lent Koutarou along with the armor he was wearing. She had told the other actors in the play that it was a special order replica, but the truth was that it was a real blade. That said, thanks to the barrier the armor created around the blade, there was no fear of cutting anyone.

"No way!"

But even so, Koutarou's opponent—Yurika—was afraid of it. Despite repeated attempts to assure her that the blade wouldn't actually hurt her thanks to the technology in the armor, Yurika just couldn't believe it when she saw the blade gleaming in the light like that.

I'll get cut! Satomi-san is definitely going to cut me up!

Tears streamed down Yurika's face as she cowered in her bulky costume. She was currently dressed as the dragon that would fight Koutarou on stage. The Fire Dragon Emperor, Alunaya, was the strongest enemy that the Blue Knight fought. Not coincidentally, it was a highlight of the play.

When the casting staff was discussing who to play the part, Yurika's name came up as someone who had a good track record of animal roles. She'd done such an amazing job as the horse's rear in the last play that no one was able to keep up with her. It was no contest this time around. And while Yurika was overjoyed when she thought her time to shine had finally come, that joy only lasted until they began practicing the play.

"Don't be selfish, Yurika! There are people waiting to use the stage!"

"I don't care!"

Not only did the sword look sharp, but Koutarou looked just like a strong knight when he brandished it. Koutarou's training with Theia over winter vacation clearly hadn't just been for show.

"I'm going to get cut in half!"

Yurika, tears still streaming down her cheeks, imagined herself being cut in half right along with her costume. Only serving to further her fear was the Forthorthian movie she'd watched with Theia and Koutarou in order to prepare for the play. The knight that appeared in the film cut an enemy right in half, and that scarred poor Yurika. The image was burned into her mind.

"Yurika, what kind of dragon emperor acts like that? Keep it together!"

"Uwaaaah, that's impossible! At least do something about that sword!"

"That's not happening!

"Nooooo!"

Theia furiously shouted at Yurika from the floor beneath the stage, but it wasn't enough to motivate Yurika. The Fire Dragon Emperor shook its head and retreated off the stage.

If she was playing a scared dragon, she would be perfect...

Watching her go, Theia went past being frustrated and instead felt somewhat impressed.

"Yurika-chan, you can't be like that. If anything, you should be trying to go all out to beat Satomi-kun!"

"Beat Satomi-san?!"

What changed Yurika's mind was what the drama club president working as stage director said.

That's right. I only need to beat him before he beats me! I just have to defeat him before he cuts me!

Thanks to the stage director's encouragement, Yurika was able to take heart and overcome her fear of being sliced in half. She would just defeat Koutarou before he cut her. That way she'd have nothing to be afraid of.

“Heh heh heh! Arrraaghh! Grrroaaar!”

The Fire Dragon Emperor’s giant figure advanced. Her movements were completely different from before. And quite fitting of a name like Fire Dragon Emperor Alunaya, it was almost as if each step caused a tremor on stage.

“Ah, Koutarou, it looks like Yurika’s found some motivation.”

“That’ll help.”

“Yeah. But it seems like it might be the wrong kind of motivation...”

“I’ll beat him! I’ll beat Satomi-san! Then I won’t have to be scared!”

Yurika’s eyes were bloodshot and she was muttering to herself. Clinging on to what tiny hope she had, Yurika pointed Alunaya’s head upwards and roared.

“Yurika, fight! Yurika, fight!”

But it was all a delusion. The hope she was feeling was really just desperation.

This was the first day of stage practice after winter vacation. While there had been some complications between Christmas and New Year’s, Koutarou and the others had all managed to gather for the day.

The goal for the day’s practice was to run through the play from start to finish. But that was less to confirm the abilities of each individual actor and more for the staff to get a feel for the flow of the play. There were countless things to check other than just the acting. There were the sets, the costumes, the special effects, the lighting, and much, much more.

“Roar, roar!”

“Nijino-san, you can do it!”

“Leave it to me, Sakuraba-senpa— Kyaaaaah!”

“Hey, don’t run, Yurika!”

The Fire Dragon Emperor costume that Yurika was wearing was among the most important things that needed to be checked. There were still plenty of things to touch up regarding its appearance, but they also needed to confirm that the contraptions inside were functional. Because the performance was

scheduled for the end of the month, they had to hurry up and finish everything mechanical.

“S-Satomi-san, you were just about to cut me in half, weren’t you?!”

“Of course. That’s what I’m supposed to do in this scene.”

“You’re the villain, so just accept your fate and get sliced in two.”

“Satomi, cut the tail off next.”

“Understood.”

“Noooooooo!”

Inside the Alunaya costume were rigs that let the costume’s tail pop off when cut or let the dragon spew fire from its mouth. Through the use of wires, it could even fly through the air. The prop team had fully outfitted the costume with all kinds of special effects through their combined skills and hard work. That was just how excited they had gotten for the play.

“Hmm, aside from Yurika’s courage, the costume seems to be functioning properly.”

“Good. That Alunaya costume is an exceptionally well made piece for a high school play.”

“I heard the prop team spent several all-nighters working on it.”

At that moment, Koutarou’s sword cut off the costume’s tail. Seeing the device working flawlessly, Theia gave a satisfied nod from below the stage.

“You have all done a great job! Be proud of your work! You have my praise!”

“All riiight, it’s a success!”

The prop team cheered as they watched on with Theia. This was the moment they had been waiting for, and all their blood, sweat, and tears had paid off. Seeing their giddy expressions, Theia nodded once more in satisfaction.

“It looks like preparations are proceeding according to plan, Your Highness,” Ruth called out from nearby.

“Yes. All we can do now is pin our hopes on the actors.”

The Alunaya costume included, progress on the play was going well. As this was their second time putting a play together, the costumes and sets were all prepared, and the lighting check was going smoothly. As Theia had said, all that was left now was the actors.

“Th-That was... really scaryyy!”

“Good work, Nijino-san.”

After her part was over, Yurika was huddled into a ball, trembling and holding her knees. Harumi was gently consoling her. From a distance, it looked like a giant dragon was crying to a princess, but with Harumi’s smile, it was quite a charming scene.

“Lately it’s been hard to say no to Sakuraba-senpai.”

Shizuka took a picture of Harumi and Yurika like that as she talked to Koutarou. Since the scenes were leading up to the climax of the second half, Shizuka’s part as a maid was still a ways off, leaving her plenty of time to take pictures for an activity report.

“You think so?”

“I guess you could say she’s getting the princess role down pat. She seems to be getting used to acting in front of people too.”

“Well, I can agree that it looks like she’s gotten used to it.”

Koutarou was always practicing with Harumi, so he didn’t really have a handle on how much she’d changed. He’d gotten to see the whole process unfold slowly, so he had a different perspective on it from Shizuka, who hadn’t seen her acting for months since the last play.

But looking back on how she was that spring, Harumi had certainly gotten much better at dealing with people. She wasn’t as nervous now when speaking to people she didn’t know, and she would smile from time to time even with strangers. It was clear that Harumi had grown a lot since she first set foot on stage.

“Hey, Theia.”

“What?”

“Since Sakuraba-senpai has gotten more used to things, shouldn’t we switch the Blue Knight role back to Mackenzie?”

Originally Koutarou was only acting as the Blue Knight because Harumi got stage fright with anyone else as the leading man. But after she’d grown so much, Koutarou felt like there was no longer any need to worry about that. That’s why he’d suggested switching the roles back to their original casting, meaning having Kenji as the Blue Knight.

“A-Absolutely not! You’re good as the Blue Knight!”

However, Theia looked awfully surprised and shook her head forcefully.

“Why not? He looks better.”

“W-Well...”

Theia couldn’t respond right away, but it wasn’t because she didn’t have an answer.

My only knights are you and Ruth...

Theia could no longer imagine training a knight other than Koutarou. Only Koutarou and Ruth could hold the title of “Theia’s knight.” That was the firm belief she held in the bottom of her heart.

However, Theia couldn’t say that out loud. She was far too scared of what Koutarou would say if she did. That’s why her glance naturally shifted to Harumi, who was behind Koutarou.

“That might but true, but it’s too late for that now, Satomi-sama.”

Seeing her master troubled, Ruth answered in her stead.

“We’ve already begun advertising. And besides, if we suddenly changed the parts, I don’t think Mackenzie-sama could pick up the Blue Knight’s role in the short amount time we have left.”

The advertising for the play had already begun. Flyers had been scattered around the area and put up on bulletin boards. Those flyers, of course, included the cast list. If they changed things up now, they would have to correct all those

flyers. And since the play was set for the end of the month, Kenji would only have about two weeks to learn all of the Blue Knight's scenes. For those two reasons, Ruth was sure a cast change now was unrealistic.

"I see... And here I was thinking I could slack off..."

"Then stop thinking of stupid things and get back on the stage! Next up is your fight with the minister and court magician!"

"Yeah, yeah. As you wish, my princess."

Koutarou flashed a weak, bitter smile and climbed back up onto the stage.

"'As you wish, my princess,' huh?"

"I just wish those words weren't said jokingly..."

Unlike Koutarou's light steps as he walked away, the feelings of the two girls left behind were anything but.

The voices of Koutarou and the others filled the gym where they were practicing, and things were getting close to the climax. Koutarou was confronting the minister who was the evil mastermind behind the coup d'etat.

"You bastard! Are you trying to destroy Forthorthe?!"

"Hahaha, that's what ruining a country means!"

A cleverly concealed, complex sensor was recording them and converting the footage into a hologram before sending it off somewhere.

"Curse you, fake Blue Knight."

The person looking at the hologram on the other end was none other than Clan, the second princess of Forthorthe who was out to get Theia and Koutarou. She was hiding in the shadows inside the equipment room next to the gym while staring at her bracelet, which was very similar to Theia's. It was projecting the hologram from the sensor, almost like she was watching a puppet show being played out just for her.

"It's even more irritating now that his acting is getting better..."

Clan's dark, sharp glare was fixed on Koutarou. She was plotting revenge on

him for getting in the way of her previous attack. Her resentment for him had even exceeded what she felt for Theia. Clan didn't feel any real need to kill Theia as long as she could just sabotage her trial instead, but she felt like she had to kill Koutarou no matter what.

Clan had a lot of pride, just like Theia, and as a Forthorthian, she also had strong feelings about the Blue Knight. So having a commoner from an underdeveloped planet point a sword at her while dressed up as the Blue Knight—and worse, defeating her like that—was completely unacceptable.

"But I just can't seem to find an opening. How irritating!"

That was why Clan was constantly watching Koutarou now. She was waiting for the right time to pounce, but a good opportunity hadn't presented itself yet. That was partially because Koutarou was almost never alone, but also because Clan had a very narrow conception of what that ideal scenario would be.

Clan wanted Koutarou to know who he had lost to when he fell, and to regret ever raising his blade against her. That's why Clan only wanted to defeat Koutarou after revealing herself to him. If she didn't do at least that much, her wounded pride would never heal.

Because of that, the only time she could attack was when Koutarou wasn't with Theia and the others, and while he was in a place where there wouldn't be other people. Of course, that rarely happened in Koutarou's case. Because of that, Clan had been waiting all this time.

"Hmm?"

Suddenly, Clan spotted Koutarou getting off the stage and heading out back behind the gym with Harumi. Based on the footage she could see of the room, it looked like they were taking a short break before the final scene.

"That's it! This is the perfect chance to send him my regards!"

There was a fire burning in her eyes behind her glasses. Behind the gym was isolated enough and the only other person there was Harumi. She now had an opportunity to reveal herself in a way that only Koutarou would understand, and possibly even defeat him then and there.

"My chance has finally come!"

Clan swiftly operated her bracelet and shut off the footage before jumping out from the shadows of the equipment room and dashing out of the building in Koutarou's direction. Her steps were light, almost like a dancer's. She was excited that her chance for revenge was at last upon her.

"Just you wait, fake Blue Knight! I'll be right there!"

Clan was like a girl gleefully running to a date with her first boyfriend.

After sprinting for a few meters, Clan gently kicked off the ground. As she did, it was almost as if she'd sprouted wings. She flew up into the sky and showed no sign of surprise as she continued to rise higher and higher. The speed at which she was ascending was much faster than when she had been running, and she soared above the roof of the gym in an instant.

This was the power of a new tool she had invented. The defensive barriers that Clan and Theia used worked by controlling gravity to create repulsion in order to deflect incoming attacks. And since the device had the power to control gravity, with a few delicate adjustments, it could be used to fly instead. That was exactly what Clan had done. She'd altered her own barrier to be able to defy gravity.

That said, it had its drawbacks. Whenever she flew, the energy use was increased exponentially and the barrier's defensive power greatly decreased. Her current barrier was less than half as powerful as it had been before. But Clan didn't mind the sacrifice. Since the barrier couldn't stop Koutarou's sword when they fought last time, she believed it was better to improve her mobility instead. Really, her movements in the air were rather impressive as she gracefully changed her posture and flitted about almost like a fairy from a movie. It was on a different level from Yurika's dragon flight using wires.

"There he is!"

As soon as she spotted Koutarou and Harumi, Clan gently touched her bracelet. When she did, her appearance melded with the blue sky and disappeared. This was yet another countermeasure against Koutarou. By setting up a field that let light pass through her body, she became invisible. Whether she liked it or not, when she was flying through the air, she was bound to stand

out, so this was an indispensable part of her strategy.

And what's more, Clan pulled out a large, strangely mechanical looking gun from a hole in space-time. It was an even further improved version of the cannon she had used before. Since she was expecting to be using it in the sky with no footing, it was smaller, its handling had been improved, and the recoil from firing had been greatly reduced. The compromise was that it could only fire a very limited number of times, but considering its usefulness, it was an appropriate design. In the past, it was simply too big to keep up with Koutarou's speed.

"Let's start with a little greeting!"

Clan held the beam rifle with both hands and pointed the muzzle at Koutarou. As she did, the scope that was synchronized with her bracelet automatically aimed for her. Although shooting from the sky was unstable, the scope didn't waver in the slightest. Clan's preparations were perfect.

"If there's anything you can do in this situation, then show me, fake Blue Knight!"

A grim smile appeared on Clan's lips as she squeezed the trigger. She wasn't planning on killing Koutarou with her surprise attack. If Koutarou died without knowing who defeated him, she wouldn't be satisfied. She was aiming for Koutarou's right arm so he would be unable to use his sword.

There's no way you could dodge this! Enjoy being blindsided, fake Blue Knight!

Scorching hot particles of heavy metal came flying out of the muzzle of the rifle. The beam consisted of heavy metal that had been heated by electromagnetism inside the barrel, and it approached Koutarou with frightening speed. Since it had been launched from a handheld firearm, it was nothing compared to one fired from a spaceship, but it was far faster than any gun using gunpowder. It was enough that Clan was convinced of her victory.

Koutarou was talking with Harumi and had his back facing Clan. He had completely lowered his guard. Clan, flying and invisible, had fired on him from such close range that there was no conceivable chance of her missing. Moreover, Koutarou wasn't showing any sign of activating the barrier on his armor.

No matter how she looked at it, Clan was sure she could take out Koutarou's right arm without a problem. And after that, Koutarou would be practically defenseless without his sword. Then she could do whatever she pleased. A knight that couldn't use a sword was no match for her.

And yet... something unexpected happened.

The exact moment before the beam hit Koutarou, it crashed into a translucent white wall and scattered. Koutarou was perfectly unharmed.

"Impossible!"

Seeing her shot get blocked, Clan hurriedly confirmed the data on her target via her bracelet.

"It's not a barrier? Then just what is it?!"

At first, Clan thought that the armor had reacted to the beam and automatically put up a barrier to protect him. However, her bracelet couldn't detect any gravitational distortions. That meant it had to be a barrier that didn't use Forthorthian technology.

"And the fake Blue Knight didn't even notice?! Then just what— Hah?!"

After going through the data, Clan looked back at Koutarou. He hadn't noticed that he'd been shot at, but there was the girl he was talking to.

"Could it—"

A shiver ran down Clan's spine.

Harumi, who was facing Koutarou, was staring right at Clan. It was almost like she could see her.

Could it be that the fake Silver Princess did something?!

Clan and Harumi stared at each other. Harumi's eyes were calm and showed no sign of wavering. Her eyes were shining with a strong will, just like the sword crest on her forehead. Seeing that, Clan's intuition told her that it was Harumi who had blocked her attack. It wasn't a logical conclusion, but when Clan looked into Harumi's eyes, it was the only thing she could think of.

"There's no mistaking it. That girl, that fake Silver Princess—"

Just as Clan came to that conclusion, Harumi raised her right arm up past Koutarou's shoulder. Her palm was pointed straight towards Clan.

"Gather, spirits of light. Come closer to the heat daze, and dance, dance..."

"She's counterattacking?! And this is...?!"

A small orb of light appeared in Harumi's palm. There was no doubt that it was some kind of reaction to Clan's attack. The orb of light quickly grew to the size of a tennis ball and emitted a powerful glow, just like the sword crest on Harumi's forehead. But that wasn't what had surprised Clan.

"The ancient language of Forthorthe?! Just who is this girl?!"

Her bracelet's automatic translation function interpreted what Harumi was saying. It was a language that hadn't been used for over a thousand years, now known as the ancient language of Forthorthe. And she was even speaking special words used only by people over a certain status when performing rituals.

Leaving what she's planning on attacking with aside, facing someone who can use keywords from Forthorthe's ancient language offensively is just too dangerous!

But Clan didn't freeze up from her surprise. The moment she realized she was facing an unknown threat, she turned tail and fled. Clan wasn't foolish enough to try to take on two uncertainties at the same time.

"The fluttering veil's—"

When she did, Harumi stopped speaking mid-sentence and the orb of light in her palm disappeared. Seeing that, Clan was overcome with relief.

She let me go...?

As Clan was flying away from Koutarou and Harumi at full speed, she looked back several times. She wanted to make sure that Harumi wasn't going to chase her down. That was how surprised and worried she'd been.

But still... Just what is happening? That barrier, the ancient language... To think that it wasn't just the Blue Knight... Even that fake Silver Princess is a mystery. I need to come up with more countermeasures right away.

Clan quickly went from feeling relieved to scheming more plans against her new enemy.

When Koutarou finished checking his lines and looked up, he saw Harumi staring up into sky with her hand outstretched for some reason. But when Koutarou looked over his shoulder in the direction she was staring, he saw nothing but the winter sky.

“...What are you doing, Sakuraba-senpai?”

“Huh?”

When Koutarou said something to Harumi, she blinked two or three times before finally returning to her senses.

“H-Honestly, I don’t...”

Not understanding what she was doing herself, Harumi was at a loss. She turned red and hurriedly lowered her hand before thinking back in an attempt to recall what had happened.

Um, we came to the back of the gym to go over our lines for the next scene and to take a break. I was reading the script with Koutarou, and then... and then... Huh?

Harumi tilted her head in confusion. The last thing she remembered was reading her lines. The next moment, Koutarou was asking her what she was doing. She had completely forgotten why she had raised her hand up towards the sky.

“...What *was* I doing?”

“Why are you asking me that? Ahahaha!”

Koutarou was thoroughly amused at the unexpectedly silly answer from Harumi. Her face then turned several degrees redder as she began coming up with excuses in a flustered manner.

“It’s because of the acting! I-I’ve gotten too into my role lately!”

“Gotten too into it, huh? W-Well, you were muttering something. Pfft...”

Koutarou continued laughing. This was so hilarious to him that tears started forming in the corners of his eyes.

“Satomi-kun, you meanie! I’m being serious here!”

Harumi puffed up her cheeks like a child while holding her hands in front of her chest. She stared at Koutarou with a defiant look. But seeing the supposedly noble and elegant Silver Princess do such a thing only made it impossible for Koutarou to keep silent.

“Wahahahahah! Ahahahaha!”

The script in Koutarou’s hands shook he was laughing so hard. The metallic card he was using as a bookmark shimmered every time the script moved and caught the light.

Ah, not good. Not at all.

However, coming to the realization that he was getting a little too hysterical, Koutarou forcefully shut his eyes and mouth to try and contain himself.

“I’ve just been so busy with my duties! I was just a little tired!”

But that was it. Koutarou lost it again.

“Bwahaha! S-Senpai, your duties...? Y-You sound like a real princess! Wahahaha!”

“Jeez, Satomi-kun!”

Harumi was desperately trying to smooth things over, but her best efforts only served to fan the flames of Koutarou’s laughter.

“Pfft... Ahaha... S-Senpai, y-you’ve got a surprisingly fun side to you, hahahahaha!”

“Please forget everything that just happened!”

Harumi’s mind blanked. She was honestly mortified as she grudgingly stared at Koutarou. She had forgotten about everything else.

“If you laugh any more, I’ll get angry! Even if it is you, Satomi-kun!”

“P-Please, by all means! Get angry!”

“Hey!”

However, Harumi wouldn’t realize until she got into bed that night just how long she’d waited for this moment, and just how blissful of a time it truly was.

An Ideal Knight

Sunday, January 17th

“Satomi-kun, Satomi-kun.”

“Yes?”

Koutarou turned around to look at Harumi when she called for him. As he did, her slender white fingers poked into his cheek.

“Heehee, it’s time.”

“...Senpai, why are you playing such childish pranks?”

Half-amazed, and with Harumi’s finger still poking into his cheek, Koutarou laughed.

“I’m sorry. It’s just something I’ve always wanted to try.”

Harumi smiled and lightly tilted her head before grabbing the hems of her dress and turning around. She quickly climbed up the stairs and fled on to the stage.

“Jeez...”

Koutarou’s armor made a clanking noise as he sighed, and he scratched his head while looking up at Harumi. But he wasn’t the only one looking at her right now. There were a lot of people involved with the play watching her with a smile too.

Sakuraba-senpai has started looking a lot more like a princess lately...

Harumi was in high spirits. With the performance only a week away and everyone on edge, Harumi was the only one still behaving like her normal self. On top of that, she didn’t seem to be anxious at all in regards to her acting. The soft atmosphere she created around her seemed to reduce everyone else’s stress, and as a result, she set the mood for the entire crew.

“Theia, that’s how it is, so I’m off.”

After pumping himself up, Koutarou called out to Theia before climbing the stairs to the stage to chase after Harumi.

“Yeah...”

The preparations for the play were going quite well. The actors’ performances, the set, the lighting, and the special effects were all in the final round of adjustments for the performance next week. Compared to last year’s play, the prep work was carrying on without a hitch. Although they were nervous, everyone was full of confidence and motivation.

“Keep it together and do your best...”

Only Theia had a gloomy expression on her face.

“Lord Veltlion, from now on this sword will protect you. From any enemy and any trial.”

Holding a sword in both hands, Harumi presented it to Koutarou as she recited her line. Her tone of voice was calm and gentle, yet her body language indicated the painfully sad meaning behind her words.

“Then I will use my life and this sword to protect you, Princess Alaia.”

Koutarou, kneeling, accepted the sword and everything it stood for. Koutarou had realized the feelings behind the sword and Harumi’s words. Yet even though he had, he still didn’t answer them. He couldn’t.

“Those two are wonderful...”

“I want to experience that kind of love...”

Yurika and Shizuka, who were looking up at the stage together, sighed. Yurika was always going on about her shoujo mangas, and Shizuka loved love stories, so the two girls felt a strong sense of admiration as they watched the scene unfold.

Koutarou and Harumi were currently acting out the scene where the Silver Princess, Alaia, was presenting the Blue Knight, Lord Veltlion, with the holy sword Signaltin, which had been passed down in the royal family for

generations. With the battles becoming more and more fierce and Veltlion already having had several near-death encounters, Alaia just couldn't stand it. She presented him with the royal family's greatest treasure, the holy sword, in order to protect him.

To Alaia, it was an act equivalent to confessing her love for Veltlion. No matter how much power the sword held, no matter how much of a pillar of support that Veltlion was for the Reborn Forthorthian Army, presenting the royal family's greatest treasure to a mere knight was unheard of. The very gesture revealed how Alaia truly felt.

But even then, neither one spoke of their feelings. They simply couldn't. A princess and a knight. Even though they were both nobles, there was an insurmountable gap between them. It was a love that would never be permitted or realized.

"It looks like we can relax for now," Ruth whispered to Theia as she watched the stage with her.

There were three pivotal moments in the play, and this scene was one of them. In the past, it had been said that the quality of the story hinged on the quality of those three scenes. And fortunately, this one was good enough. It was a good sign, if not a relief, and that's what Ruth had meant when she said that they could relax.

"That's... true, but..."

However, it seemed like Theia was still unsatisfied. She looked up on the stage with a melancholy expression.

"Was there something you didn't like?"

"Yes..."

When Ruth asked her that, Theia began to express how she really felt inside, but it was something that she could only admit to Ruth.

"The Blue Knight and the Silver Princess... They've reached a sufficient level for amateurs, but... something's..."

"Something is missing?"

“...”

Theia silently nodded. She was unable to put words to the complicated feelings stirring inside her small chest.

The play was nearing completion. Harumi was settling in as the Silver Princess and Koutarou was behaving like the Blue Knight that Theia had imagined. But as she looked at Koutarou, she felt like something was missing. That sensation grew more and more pronounced each time she saw him acting the part of the Blue Knight.

“It’s strange. His acting as the Blue Knight is sufficient, but I can’t help but feel that something is missing,” Theia said impatiently.

She looked up at Koutarou on the stage again. With each tilt of the head as she racked her brain, her golden hair fluttered.

“Your Highness...”

Seeing Theia like that, Ruth looked astonished for a moment before returning to a smile. Her expression was reminiscent of an older sister checking on her little sister’s homework. Ruth knew exactly what Theia was feeling and wanted to help her out a little bit.

“Your Highness, that is probably because the person up there is the Blue Knight.”

“What do you mean?”

This time, Theia was the one to look at Ruth in astonishment.

“It’s just what I said. You are probably dissatisfied because the man standing up on stage now is the Blue Knight, Your Highness.”

“What a foolish thing to say. Of course he’s the Blue Knight. He’s a main character in this play.”

Theia rejected what Ruth was saying and looked up on the stage again. Her expression was still riddled with impatience. Seeing that, Ruth knew she was right.

It’s true, Your Highness. You are dissatisfied because he is the Blue Knight...

It was the hidden desire that Theia herself hadn't yet realized, but that Ruth was able to identify after they'd grown up like sisters together.

Theia originally admired the Blue Knight because she wanted a splendid knight just like him to help her and her mother. The strongest knight that Theia knew of was the Blue Knight, and that's why she wanted his help. The script she'd written that allowed the strongest knight to shine was a reflection of that.

But now, Theia's idea of the strongest knight was changing—she began thinking of someone else. And because she wanted the strongest knight in her play, it should be him up there on the stage and not the Blue Knight. That was what Theia was struggling with.

And there's one more thing... The heroine shouldn't be the Silver Princess, right, Your Highness?

Theia's ideal knight was someone who stood by her side and worked with her to protect her mother, the current empress. And since that ideal knight was currently with the Silver Princess instead, there was no way Theia could be happy with this scenario.

"In other words, Her Highness wants to be with Satomi-sama..."

"Did you say something?"

"No, nothing at all."

However, Ruth didn't share this conclusion with Theia. It was an answer that Theia had to reach for herself. If someone else were to tell her, it wouldn't hold any meaning.

Ruth was trying to bring Koutarou over to her low-spirited master. For better or worse, right now he was the source of Theia's energy.

"Satomi-sama, a towel."

"Thanks, Ruth-san."

Ruth used delivering a towel as an excuse to approach Koutarou. Unaware of her intentions, Koutarou expressed his gratitude for her consideration and accepted the towel.

“And for you too, Harumi-sama.”

“Thank you.”

She also handed Harumi a towel. Although Koutarou was the one she wanted to talk to, Ruth was an especially considerate girl.

“Sorry for all the trouble, Ruth-san.”

“No, this is my job after all.”

What’s wrong with Theia?

While Ruth was talking to Harumi, Koutarou was looking at Theia. She was sitting on a large cardboard box in the corner of the gym, her shoulders slumped and her legs hanging down lifelessly. She was leaning forward slightly, staring down at the ground under her feet.

Koutarou was used to Theia always coming flying at him as soon as he stepped off the stage, so he found Theia’s current behavior rather unusual. Contemplating this, the hand he was using to wipe the sweat off his brow with the towel stopped moving.

“Satomi-sama, do you have a moment? There’s something I’d like to talk about!”

That was when Ruth, who had finished talking to Harumi, turned to Koutarou. She had been wanting to talk with him for a while, so she was speaking quite quickly and energetically.

“Sorry, Ruth, we can talk later. There’s something I need to do...”

However, Koutarou’s answer wasn’t what Ruth had wanted to hear. He even started walking away.

“Ah, w-wait a moment, Satomi-sama!”

Ruth wanted to talk to Koutarou about something very important to her. It was something that she didn’t want ignored or put off, so Ruth raised her voice and tried to stop him.

“This is an important— Ah...”

However, Ruth stopped mid-sentence when she realized where Koutarou was

going.

“Satomi-sama, you...”

Ruth put her hands on her hips and let out a big sigh. Whether she was surprised, happy, or both, the only thing to come out of her mouth was that sigh.

How do you understand us so well?

Ruth was mad when Koutarou tried to put her off at first, but in fact, Koutarou was already trying to help Ruth with this important matter before she could even talk to him about it.

“Really... This is how you’ve surpassed the role of the Blue Knight...”

Ruth was filled with a warm feeling as she watched Koutarou walk away. The joy that filled her chest was both deep and intense. Although she’d been angry for a moment, she was now so happy she could dance. After all, Koutarou was walking over to Theia.

Please take care of Her Highness, Satomi-sama...

Of course, she couldn’t actually break into a dance here and now. She couldn’t ruin her beloved master’s important moment. Instead, Ruth pressed her lips together and clenched her fists as if to contain her joy.

“Hey, what are you spacing out over here for?”

After walking all the way over to Theia, Koutarou casually pulled on her cheeks with both his hands.

“Huh...?”

Theia’s glance slowly shifted upwards to Koutarou.

“What? I’m not doing anything.”

“That’s not what your face says.”

Hearing Theia’s answer, Koutarou honestly began to worry.

This might be serious...

Koutarou was still pulling on Theia's cheeks, but she wasn't complaining at all. Like a sulking child, she just turned her face away and looked down at the ground. With her pride being what it was, that act alone was enough for Koutarou to tell that something was wrong.

"It's my face, so let me do with it as I please."

"Talk to me. I can't understand what's going on if you're just going to frown."

Koutarou went from pulling on her cheeks to smooshing them together with his palms. Although his actions had no meaning, he felt that it was better than just letting her frown.

"There's nothing to tell you. Just the fact that you're doing this at this very moment makes it clear that the problem hasn't been resolved."

"Hmm? What's that supposed to mean?"

Hearing what Theia said, Koutarou stopped moving his hands and instead looked into her eyes.

Ah...

Since Koutarou was still holding on to her face, she couldn't turn away, but she was quick to avert her eyes.

"I don't want to say."

"Tell me. If you don't, I'll just keep doing this."

Since Theia didn't answer him, Koutarou began moving his hands again. Theia's soft cheeks changed shape in his palms.

"Okay, okay, I'll tell you, so just stop."

"Good. As long as we've got that straight..."

Since Koutarou was being overly persistent, Theia finally caved. She sighed before she started explaining what was wrong as best she could.

"Nine months have passed since I came to this planet. But you haven't treated me with respect even once. If anything, you're treating Sakuraba Harumi more like a princess than you are me."

In order for Theia to complete her trial, Koutarou needed to swear his loyalty

to her. However, he'd expressed no interest in doing so. And to Theia, it looked like Koutarou was ready to be Harumi's knight more than anyone else's.

That's right. She was worrying about something similar at Christmas as well...

Hearing her words, Koutarou remembered Theia's worries at the Christmas party. At the time, she was concerned about her position and her ability to get people to follow her.

However, her real worries this time around were different than what was bothering her at Christmas party. That said, Koutarou wasn't sharp enough to realize that. Because of that, Koutarou and Theia weren't quite on the same page now. But since Koutarou didn't have Ruth's intuition, it was unavoidable.

Yet even so, there was still a certain degree of understanding between them, and Koutarou honestly spoke his mind.

"That's not true. I'm totally showing you respect. You're just looking at it the wrong way."

Koutarou shook his head. Theia looked up, but her eyes were full of doubt.

"Don't lie. Do you even realize what you're doing right now?"

"I'm playing around with your face."

"And that's how you show respect to a princess?!" Theia shouted furiously.

When she raised her well-shaped eyebrows, she looked incensed. If Koutarou were really treating her like a princess, he wouldn't be messing with her face like that. That was her proof that he wasn't showing her any respect, but it wasn't just limited to right now. At school, in the city, in the apartment, and on board the Blue Knight, Koutarou was always treating her roughly. And he was always shouting about how she couldn't make him her vassal against his will.

So to hear Koutarou deny it now and act like he did treat her respectfully only fueled Theia's dissatisfaction.

"In the end, you don't see me as Princess Theiamillis at all!"

"So that's what it was? I'm sorry about that."

Koutarou stopped moving his hands again.

“Huh...?”

Koutarou pulled his hands away from Theia’s face. He then sat down on the cardboard next to her.

“Hey, Theia.”

“What?”

Theia sounded unhappy, and she turned her face away from Koutarou as she answered him. She still hadn’t calmed down yet.

“There are reasons I can’t swear my loyalty or hand over the room to you right now... But there’s no way that I don’t think of you as a princess.”

“You liar! Don’t spout such blatant lies to me!”

Theia turned back to glare at Koutarou for a moment and barked at him before turning away once more. It looked like she didn’t believe a word Koutarou said.

“You’ve been calling me a useless princess or pathetic princess all this time!”

“It’s true that’s what I felt at first.”

Koutarou and Theia’s first meeting had gone terribly. Theia only considered the population of Earth to be Neanderthals, and Koutarou believed Theia was an evil alien set on invading the planet.

“I could never have imagined swearing loyalty to you.”

“See? It’s just like I said!” Theia spat and puffed up her cheeks somewhat.

That reaction alone revealed how much she’d changed, but Theia couldn’t appreciate that. She’d lost her cool. In the past, she probably would have pulled out her weapons and demolished the entire gym.

“But lately, I’ve started seeing you more and more as a princess.”

“Huh...?”

Like a popped balloon, Theia’s puffed up cheeks suddenly deflated. Those unexpected words out of Koutarou’s mouth made Theia feel like the very ground underneath her was shaking.

“Th-That’s a lie!”

Theia’s expression changed repeatedly as she looked at Koutarou with a sidelong glance. If Ruth had been there, she probably could have discerned worry, joy, doubt, and expectation from her all at once.

“As if I could believe that!”

“I understand how you feel. And that’s because I feel the same way.”

Koutarou leaned his elbow on his knee and placed his chin on his palm before sighing.

That’s right. When I think about it, I still can’t believe it...

At first Koutarou was determined never to swear loyalty to Theia no matter what, but his determination had wavered during the nine months they had spent together. After their intense daily clashing, Koutarou was able to catch a glimpse of who Theia really was. He now knew that behind her strong-willed mask, she was a gentle and lonely girl. Because of that, he no longer thought so poorly of her.

That hadn’t been the only thing to change Koutarou’s mind either. When Koutarou, Sanae, and Kiriha were in trouble, Theia had come to their aid even though she started off as a rival to each one of them. At the time she had seemed reluctant, but now it was obvious that she had been seriously worried about them.

On top of making friends with her opponents, Theia was trying to win room 106 in an honorable fashion befitting of royalty. When Koutarou saw that, he could no longer deny that she was indeed a princess. But the truth was that he’d only come around on the matter because they’d both matured. Theia had matured enough to change, and Koutarou had matured enough to realize it.

“Theia, you’ve changed. You’re completely different from who you were this spring. Before I knew it, you were no longer some pathetic princess or Tulip.”

“Ah...”

In that moment, Theia realized that it had been a long time since Koutarou last called her Tulip.

When...? When did Koutarou start calling me Theia?

Theia's heart began pounding and she scanned through her memories going backward in time, confirming each time Koutarou had called her Theia. Maybe the first time he called her that was a sign of when he'd started thinking of her as a princess. That hope fiercely stirred up her emotions. And for each time she could clearly remember Koutarou calling her Theia, her heartbeat grew faster and her blood grew hotter.

Since when...?

After contemplating it for a spell, a certain incident came to mind.

"Theia! I need you to trust me now! I'm your knight, aren't I?!"

It was back just before the performance of the first play when Clan had attacked. She specifically recalled what Koutarou had shouted to her when she lost her cool. And since then, Koutarou had stopped calling her Tulip and started calling her Theia.

That's right. That's when I stopped too!

The same was true for Theia. Since that day, she had stopped calling Koutarou "pleb." That was because she had acknowledged Koutarou as someone worthy of being her vassal that day. In fact, it was that night she had visited Koutarou in his sleep and made him her knight of her own accord, including awarding him with the sword named after her, Saguratin.

How foolish! How could I not have noticed?! That was the day we both acknowledged each other!

It was probably something they had both overlooked out of their own immaturity. And since both of them were so stubborn, the only thing that had really changed after acknowledging one another was what they called each other. The same was true now. Since it was hard for them to talk like this face to face, Koutarou was sitting down next to Theia.

"So if you're really that against how we treat each other, then I don't mind changing it."

Koutarou's hands reached out for Theia's face and started mushing her

cheeks again.

“Change how we treat each other...?”

“Thinking about it, I am always doing rude stuff like this.”

While rubbing Theia’s cheeks, Koutarou looked at what he was doing.

That’s right. Unlike Sakuraba-senpai who’s only playing a princess, Theia is the real deal...

The only reason they treated each other so roughly was because of how poorly their first meeting had gone. But in reality, Theia was a foreign—or more accurately, alien—princess. She should be treated more courteously. Yelling at her or playing with her cheeks wasn’t the kind of thing you did to a princess.

It’s rude. It’s stupid...

Realizing that, Koutarou finally understood the immeasurable gap in their statuses.

“Koutarou...”

Theia’s eyes were wide open in surprise, but Koutarou was still rubbing her cheeks. Normally she would slap his hands away and tell him not to belittle her. But when Koutarou asked her if she wanted him to stop, the idea of pushing his hands away didn’t even occur to her.

So... our relationship would change? The one we have now would end?

Theia felt a deep sense of loss at the thought. Just a moment ago she had wanted Koutarou to treat her more like a princess, but now she had changed her mind.

In Theia’s head, the memories of the days she had spent with him popped up one after another. The fist fight that had erupted after Koutarou stole her side dish at dinner. The all-night gaming session born of a simple, stubborn rivalry. The tennis match that played out until they were both completely exhausted. Their practice that had continued without breaks, despite their respective complaints.



They clashed on an almost daily basis. However, when they really needed it, they would lend each other a hand. It felt like there was no end to the memories they had together.

If Koutarou starts treating me like a princess, this kind of thing will stop...

If Koutarou actually treated Theia like the princess she was, she never would have experienced any of those things. She was a princess, not to mention an alien. If he respected that, their relationship would never be the same. The gap between them would just be too great.

No! I don't want that!

Theia couldn't accept it. She wanted more memories like the ones she had. She couldn't stand the thought of knowing she'd never be able to play or fight with Koutarou the same way again.

What's wrong with me? Even though I want Koutarou to become my knight, I don't want him to treat me like a princess...

And with that thought, Theia realized that what she wanted from Koutarou wasn't actually to be treated like a princess. It was something similar, but completely different altogether.

"I—"

Theia tried to say something, but not even she knew what.

"I—"

There were conflicting emotions brewing within her small chest. She wanted Koutarou to treat her with respect, but not to treat her like a princess. Since she wasn't sure why, she couldn't bring herself to tell him that.

What is this? Just what do I really want from Koutarou...?

And just as Theia was at the height of being swept up in her own feelings...

"...Actually, I'd rather not."

As Koutarou said that, he suddenly squished his hands together, firmly clasping Theia's head between them.

"Huh?"

And before Theia could question it, Koutarou began shaking her head.

“Wh-What are you doing all of a sudden?!”

Irritated, Theia yelled at Koutarou with a glaring look. And with that yell, it was almost as if she expelled all of the confused emotion inside her.

“This upper-class stuff is beyond me. I just can’t come up with an elegant way to cheer you up.”

Smiling wryly, Koutarou continued shaking Theia’s head.

In the end, I’m a commoner...

Koutarou knew that he should just treat Theia like the Silver Princess. He only had to act like the Blue Knight from the play, yet he just couldn’t imagine himself doing it.

I guess even though I know Theia’s a princess, I still want her to stay Tulip...

Koutarou couldn’t help the bitter smile that crept across his lips as he stared at Theia’s golden hair fluttering between his hands.

“N-No one, regardless of status, would be cheered up by this!”

“Really? You seem quite energetic now to me.”

Besides...

Koutarou glanced at Ruth from afar. As he shook Theia’s head, he recalled a previous discussion with her. She’d once said that she wanted Theia to live as a normal girl for as long as she could on Earth. But if Koutarou really started treating her like a princess, that would come to an end. And with that in mind, Koutarou believed it was best just to continue their relationship as it was now.

“Th-That’s not it at all! Aaarrrgh!”

“See? You’re full of energy.”

Theia struggled between Koutarou’s hands. Things seemed back to normal now. Not how they were when they first met, but how they had come to be as of late.

Things are fine this way. Well, I’m still angry, but this feels right...

Theia still hadn’t found her answer, but she knew that she wanted things to stay the way they were. So while she was getting irritated at being shaken about, she was simultaneously relieved and happy about it.

The only person who really understood what Theia wanted was quietly watching over her from a distance.

“Just one more step, Your Highness. Just take one more step and jump right in...”

If Theia realized her feelings and was honest about them, Koutarou would surely respond to her. There was no way he wouldn’t. Ruth was certain of that. Happily watching the two of them now, she was full of hope for their future together.

But Ruth wasn’t the only one with her eyes on them at the moment. A hushed whisper could be heard not too far from where she was standing.

“So that’s Princess Theiamillis, owner of Saguratin...”

The voice belonged to Harumi. There was a crest in the shape of a sword glowing on her forehead as she looked at Koutarou and Theia. Her appearance was dignified and beautiful, and she had a mysterious allure to her just like when she stood on stage.

“And... Koutarou-sama’s princess...”

However, no one around heard her. Contrary to her extraordinary presence, her whisper was seemingly silent.

An Answer and a Prayer

Sunday, January 24th

A bright spotlight shone on Harumi and Koutarou. Harumi was in costume, wearing a pure white dress and a silver tiara, and her expression indicated great affection as she looked at Koutarou. With the spotlight on her and the other lights shut off, it was as if she was glowing in the dark.

"...I asked you not to come countless times."

Harumi's smile momentarily vanished as she criticized him.

"Pardon me, but that sounded like a cry for help to me."

In response, Koutarou smiled in her stead. Wearing his metallic armor, he stood facing Harumi. It was the replica suit that also served as a way to control Theia's battleship, Blue Knight. The bright blue armor was large and made Koutarou's already massive body look even more gigantic and powerful.

"Thank you for coming, Lord Veltlion."

Harumi smiled once more, but unlike before, this was a truly special smile—the kind you would only reveal to someone equally special.

"My life and my sword exist for you, Your Highness."

Koutarou lightly smiled and nodded towards Harumi. He then swung his sword demonstratively before carefully returning it to its sheath. The tip of the blade traced an elegant circle in the air that looked like a silver moon to the audience.

It was now Sunday, January 24th, the day of the play.

Fortunately, the day was blessed with fine weather, and despite being the weekend, a lot of students, their families, and other locals flocked to the gym to see the production. All of the prepared seating was full, so there were even

people standing in the back to watch. Because of how popular the previous play had been, the sequel was highly anticipated.

Fortunately, the performance so far was living up to the hype. The acting, impressive action scenes, and special effects were all well received. The audience had gotten fired up several times already, particularly when the Fire Dragon Emperor used wires to take flight. Yurika had enjoyed being in the spotlight and gotten a little full of herself. She started to rampage above the stage, making a few young children in the audience cry. It was a big hit.

And so, without any major trouble, the play was proceeding smoothly towards its conclusion. Only two scenes remained: the coronation scene where the Silver Princess ascended the royal throne, and the final scene where the Silver Princess and the Blue Knight said farewell.

With their current scene finished, Koutarou and Harumi returned backstage. It was like entering a warzone. The set pieces that weren't in use took up most of the room, and there were lots of people milling about.

"Drop the curtains for now! We're changing the set!"

"Beam A-4 is gone!"

"What do we change it with?"

"Costumes! Where is Sakuraba-san's costume change?!"

"We're changing it for the coronation scene! Hurry up!"

"Make up for it with B-4 next to it, but mind the difference in angle!"

"Are all the aristocrats here?!"

"They're here!"

"I don't know!"

"Are they, or are they not?"

"I said they're here!"

Although there was an established procedure for how to deal with scene changes, things weren't going as smoothly backstage as they were on the stage.

According to their original schedule, they shouldn't have had to rush this much. That said, since they were still keeping the show going without the audience realizing anything was amiss, they were doing well for amateurs.

"Saaatomi-saaan! Saaakurabaaa-senpaaai!"

While the backstage chaos was soaking in for Harumi and Koutarou, Yurika passed by strung up with wires. She was still wearing her Alunaya costume and was flailing her limbs and tail to get their attention. Her part was over, but there was practically no room for her and her bulky costume backstage. Because of that, the crew was wheeling her—flying contraption and all—out behind the gym where baggage was being stored.

"Everyone seems to be having a hard time..."

After seeing Yurika off, Harumi looked around once more and sighed. Just seeing the state of affairs things were in, anyone could tell how rough the crew had it. Harumi was truly impressed with all of their hard work.

"Now's not the time to act like it's not your problem."

"Huh?"

Koutarou was smiling wryly at Harumi, but Harumi just looked surprised. Before she knew what was happening, the stage director appeared from out of nowhere and casually grabbed her arm.

"Kyah!"

"There you are, Sakuraba-san! Hurry up! We have to change your costume!"

"R-Right! I'll see you later, Satomi-kun."

"Save the pleasantries for later! Just hurry, Sakuraba-san!"

Harumi turned back to wave at Koutarou as she was forcibly pulled away by the stage director.

"Ahaha, you seem to be having a hard time yourself, Sakuraba-senpai..."

Watching Harumi get dragged off, Koutarou laughed. Unlike Koutarou who didn't appear in the next scene, Harumi was the star of it. Since it was the scene where the Silver Princess was crowned empress, she had to be outfitted with a

crown, robe, and scepter. And just like everyone else backstage, Harumi didn't have much time. She wasn't in a position to stand around and take it all in like Koutarou was.

As he looked around, he could see Theia and Ruth also standing over in the direction that Harumi had gone. Since Theia had the role of the Silver Princess's little sister, the Golden Princess, she also had an appearance in the coronation scene. In preparation for it, she was wearing a formal dress that was different from normal.

"Move it, Satomi! Get out of the way!"

"Oops, sorry!"

The prop team came through carrying a set piece. Since Koutarou was in their way, he hurriedly moved aside.

"Move it, Satomi-kun! I'm in a hurry!"

"S-Sorry!"

However, a different crew member was trying to pass through the area he'd just moved to in order to get out of the way. Koutarou quickly moved again, but the process repeated itself several times. He just couldn't seem to get out of the way, leaving him with no place backstage where he could safely spend his downtime.

"Jeez..."

"What are you going to do, Koutarou?"

"I guess we don't have a choice. Let's go behind the gym with Yurika."

"Roger."

Koutarou started walking, and Sanae tagged along. She'd been supporting him throughout the play, and she was willing to help even between scenes. Koutarou's next appearance was in about ten minutes, so he was better off finding somewhere to practice his lines than standing around backstage and getting in the crew's way.

"Oh, Satomi-kun, if you're heading off to the baggage storage, please take Yurika with you."

“Roar!”

“Gotcha.”

“All you need to do is pull on this.”

On his way outside, a girl on the special effects team handed Koutarou a rope. It was attached to Yurika’s costume, and when pulled, it would drag Yurika along. This was another device the prop team had painstakingly created for the production.

“Thanks, Satomi-kun. See you later.”

“You bet.”

The girl who gave Koutarou the rope went back the way they’d come. She had no time to spare. Her next job was already waiting for her.

“Everyone sure is working hard...”

“Yeah.”

“Roar, roar!”

Seeing the girl off, Koutarou realized he had to do his best too and got himself pumped up. His next appearance was the incredibly important final scene. How well it was done could make or break the entire play.

“Let’s go, Yurika.”

“Roar!”

“Still, you look pretty pathetic...”

“Roar, roar!”

Koutarou and Sanae pulled on Yurika’s rope and left the backstage area. It was an odd sight since it looked like a giant dragon was being taken for a walk.

“I’m letting you down now.”

“Aaah, wait! Please wait!”

“Here we go!”

“Kyaaaaaaaah!”

Hearing Yurika scream, Koutarou looked up. When he did, he saw her and the Alunaya costume she was wearing come crashing to the ground with a loud thud.

“Owowowow...”

“S-Sorry.”

“I don’t want to hear it! You should have let me down gently!”

“I didn’t think you would fall that fast.”

Koutarou had left Yurika to Sanae so he could go over his lines for the final scene. Apparently that was a mistake. Yurika was now on the ground with her limbs spread out in all directions. It was sad.

Once they were outside behind the gym, Sanae pressed a button to release the rope holding Yurika up. But since she pressed it before lowering Yurika to the ground, she plummeted all the way down from about a meter up. It wasn’t too much of a fall, but because the costume she was wearing was quite heavy, it was painful.

“What are they doing...?”

Koutarou sighed and placed his Kabutonga bookmark into the script and closed it before hopping off the set piece he was using as a chair.

As he landed, his armor chinked loudly. Based on its bulk, the armor looked like it was quite heavy. However, Koutarou walked around in it like it weighed nothing at all. Since it was a powered suit, it didn’t inhibit or restrict his movement. Contrary to its classic look, it was an advanced piece of Forthorthian technology.

“Hey, are you okay, Yurika?”

Koutarou tucked his script inside his armor and offered his left hand to Yurika.

“I’m nooot...”

Yurika tried to reach out for it, but she was worse off than she thought. Her outstretched arm lost its strength halfway and fell to the ground. Still lying in the dirt with her limbs spread out, Yurika began crying.

“Hey now...”

Koutarou was momentarily amazed by her behavior, but considering what happened immediately after, not taking his hand was the correct choice.

“Look out, Koutarou!”

By the time Sanae tried to warn Koutarou, the heavy metal particles fired via electromagnetism were already flying towards him. The beam that had been building energy until just moments earlier grazed the hand Koutarou was holding out to Yurika.

“Uwah!”

“Kyaaaaaaaah!”

Koutarou and Yurika were blinded by the sudden beam and the small explosion that followed, but the only damage appeared to be that Koutarou’s left gauntlet was destroyed. Thankfully neither Koutarou nor Yurika were hurt. If Yurika had actually taken his hand, however, it would have been blown off right along with Koutarou’s gauntlet. In other words, Yurika’s weakness actually saved her this time. The only thing Koutarou had felt was the scorching heat on his arm, which, considering what could have happened, was extremely lucky.

“Ah, hot, hot, hot!”

“Koutarou, it’s her! The girl that attacked Theia before the last play!”

“That’s right, it’s me!”

Both Sanae’s voice and the voice of the person who’d fired the beam could be heard coming from above Koutarou. When he looked up, the smoke from the explosion had cleared and he could see someone’s silhouette against the clear blue sky.

“Prepare yourself, fake Blue Knight! The Moon of the Schweiger family reflected upon the surface of the water will be taking your life!”

“She’s—?!”

Koutarou had seen her before. It was a girl in a luxurious black and white dress wearing antique-style glasses on her face. Perhaps more noticeably, however, she was holding a clunky beam rifle in her hands and flying in the air.

“My name is Clariossa! Clariossa Daora Schweiger Meltsfen Foa Forthorthe! Take that proud name with you to the grave and through the gates of hell, fake Blue Knight!”

She was Theia’s rival—Clan, the second princess of Forthorthe.

There were two reasons Clan had chosen this moment to attack.

The first was that Koutarou wasn’t with Theia or Harumi. During the coronation scene, both the Golden Princess and the Silver Princess would be on stage. However, the Blue Knight had no appearance, meaning Koutarou would be separated from them for a time. Avoiding Theia, who had overwhelming firepower, and Harumi, who had mystical powers, was an important part of her plan.

The second reason was that if she killed Koutarou now, it would grieve Theia tremendously. The following scene would be the parting scene between the Blue Knight and the Silver Princess. If she could dispose of Koutarou before then, the Blue Knight would be missing for the most important part of the play. Since Clan was keenly aware of Theia’s attachment to the Blue Knight, she timed her attack so that it would ruin the play too.

And with those two requirements satisfied, Koutarou had willingly walked out back behind the gym where there were very few other people. It was too perfect. Clan couldn’t pass up such a golden opportunity.

When Koutarou realized it was Clan, he put his hand on the sword at his waist. It was the treasured sword Saguratin that Theia had given him, and which had already protected them several times.

“You again! Are you after Theia again?!”

Koutarou drew his sword from its sheath and, following the etiquette of Forthorthe’s old school sword fighting style, traced a large circle with the tip of the blade in the air.

This feels a little weird...

As Koutarou held the sword in both hands, he readjusted the grip of his left

hand. He had always trained using the sword while wearing the armor, so it felt somewhat uncomfortable to wield it with his left hand bare.

“You think I’m after Theiamillis-san now?! You’re wrong, fake Blue Knight!”

Clan grinned and clutched her beam rifle with both hands. Even though she was floating in the air, she seemed to be in a fixed position without swaying at all. From several meters up in the air, Clan took deadly aim at Koutarou’s head.

“My prey for today is you! I’m going to kill you before I take care of Theiamillis-san!”

“Me?!”

“Of course! Just you standing there is irksome to me!”

While Koutarou was still caught off guard, Clan squeezed the trigger. When she did, a beam went flying from the muzzle of the fully charged rifle. Although the effect of beam attacks inside an atmosphere was greatly reduced, at this kind of range, it made a negligible difference. The beam approached Koutarou with most of the energy it had when it left the barrel.

It’s fast!

Koutarou’s eyes shot open wide. The beam coming straight for him was much faster than he had anticipated. It far outstripped what she’d used in the past. Clan had effectively remodeled her handheld beam cannon into a lethal rifle.

“Tch!”

Because of that, although Koutarou moved to dodge, he wasn’t going to make it in time.

“Leave it to me!”

However, that’s when something strange happened. After leaping to dodge, Koutarou’s body suddenly began accelerating. It was as if something invisible had given him a push. Thanks to that, Koutarou avoided getting hit by the beam, which instead drilled into the ground and left a charred hole.

“What was that?!”

“Koutarou!”

“Was that you, Sanae?! You saved me!”

Clan was surprised at this development, but Koutarou less so. He knew that Sanae had used her psychic powers to send him flying. Koutarou then calmly landed and began running at full speed. Although Clan had gotten the first shot off because Koutarou was so distracted by their conversation, he wasn’t planning on letting her dictate the flow of battle. He had begun running to make it harder for Clan to aim and to close the distance between them.

“Curse you! Quit running around!”

Two more flashes shot out of Clan’s rifle. Since Koutarou had anticipated these attacks, he swiftly twisted his body to dodge the incoming beams. While he was able to avoid two direct hits, one of the beams grazed his armor.

“Whoa!”

Although it had merely grazed him, he felt quite a jolt. Not only were these beams faster, they were more powerful too.

“Damn it, that gun is completely different from last time!”

Feeling the impact from a shot after seeing one completely destroy his gauntlet, he could tell the rifle form of the beam cannon had been improved in every aspect.

Looks like I’ll be in trouble if I assume this’ll go the same way it did last time...

Koutarou clicked his tongue to himself and moved in on Clan. Closing the distance was important to him, both defensively and offensively.

“I told you to leave it to me!”

Sanae laughed practically right in Koutarou’s ear. Before he had realized it, she was already hanging on to his back.

“Sanae?”

“With our friendship power, we won’t lose to the likes of her!”

When Sanae shouted that, Koutarou’s view greatly changed.

“This is...”

Overlapping with what he could normally see, there was a white light around

living creatures. And by focusing on that light, he could faintly tell what a creature was doing and what they were planning on doing.

This was the power Sanae had lent Koutarou. By doing the reverse of what she did to taste the food Koutarou ate, she transmitted her spiritual senses to Koutarou. Thanks to that, Koutarou had an idea of where Clan was aiming and when she was going to fire. There wasn't anything more convenient than that in a fight.

"Eeheehee! And that's not all today!"

"Take this!"

Just as Sanae was cheerfully laughing, Clan repeatedly fired her beam rifle. Although her attack became harder to dodge with the increased number of shots, Koutarou was able to avoid each of the beams with quick footwork.

What is this?

Koutarou was puzzled at how easily he'd dodged them. It felt like the beams had suddenly gotten slower, and his body felt surprisingly light. It was almost like time was moving at half speed.

"Sanae, is this your doing too?"

"You got it! Remember to praise me a ton after this is over!"

Sanae responded to Koutarou's question with a bright smile. Happy that Koutarou was surprised, she gleefully strengthened her grip around his neck.

"Our strong bond has created a miracle!"

Sanae's psychic powers were the reason behind Koutarou's increased speed. Normally she used this power for massages, but by tapping into his synapses and sending her energy through him, she could sharpen his senses and increase his reflexes. Clinging to his back, she was also blocking out any unnecessary mental noise, so even his concentration was improved.

And since he could tell when and where Clan would fire with her spirit sight, Koutarou had no problems dodging her beams. That was only a given considering he could start dodging before she even fired.

"You haven't fully possessed me, right?"

“Hmm... I guess you could call it that.”

Orders from Koutarou’s brain were sent throughout his body via Sanae. It could be described as a possession since she’d taken over his body, but she was still allowing him to move as he pleased.

“I guess I have to make some concessions to survive, but that sure is scary...”

“It’s okay. I love you after all!”

With all the strength in his legs, Koutarou jumped up towards Clan overhead. He was planning on swatting her down with his sword, firmly grasped in both hands. Clan was high enough that Koutarou normally wouldn’t be able reach her, but between the powers given to him by the armor and Sanae, it wasn’t a problem.

“Well done! However...”

Attempting to distance herself from Koutarou, Clan rose up further into the sky. Thanks to that, Koutarou’s sword only caught air as he swung it.

“I missed?!”

Koutarou then fell back towards the ground and landed on both feet. However, in that moment he was focused on landing and nothing else, Clan rained down beams upon him.

“Koutarou!”

“I know!”

The mantle Koutarou was wearing over his armor for the last scene was scorched and the AI in his armor reported minor damage. Clan had strategically waited to fire so Koutarou was unable to avoid damage as he hit the ground, even with Sanae’s help.

“Koutarou, let’s fly too! This armor can fly, right?!”

“So I hear, but I don’t know how!”

“You’re kidding!”

The armor Koutarou was wearing served to control Blue Knight, Theia’s battleship. Since the ship’s pilot would normally wear it, the armor was also

equipped with all the standard functions of a spacesuit. Propulsion was on that list, but since Koutarou was only using the armor for the show, he had no idea how to operate anything like that. The legendary Blue Knight could supposedly fly through the skies, but they couldn't use that kind of power in a school play.

Because of that, Koutarou currently had no way of counterattacking. With Clan attacking from out of his reach, he was helpless. As he dodged more beams, Koutarou racked his brain, trying to come up with a solution to this problem.

"Curse you! Do you have eyes in the back of your head or something?!"

Meanwhile, Clan was getting more and more frustrated. Although Koutarou could no longer get to her because she was airborne, her beams could no longer hit Koutarou because he was so fast. Clan's rifle was much easier to handle compared to her beam cannon from before, but Koutarou was moving much faster than her data from their previous fight indicated. So despite her marksmanship and the aiming assistance she had from her computer, she still couldn't score an effective hit on him. Koutarou keeping a close distance and Sanae keeping a watchful eye on his blind spots were the primary reasons for miss after miss on Clan's part.

"In that case...!"

Annoyed, Clan touched a button on the body of her rifle. When she did, the information flowing from the rifle to her bracelet was cut off for a moment before hurriedly restarting. She had changed the rifle's attack mode and rebooted the FCS.

"Not even you can dodge this!"

Clan grinned as she pointed the muzzle of the rifle at Koutarou once more. It was an amused smile, almost like a cat cornering a mouse. If Koutarou had seen it, it definitely would have reminded him of when he had first met Theia. Clan was so confident in her next attack that she couldn't help smiling like that.

"Koutarou, in that case, I'll fight her my— Look out! Run, Koutarou!"

Sanae was the first one to notice it, and she did her best to warn Koutarou immediately.

Up until now, whenever Clan had attacked, Koutarou and Sanae could sense her hostility, represented by small circles a few centimeters in diameter visible with Sanae's spirit sight. The circles corresponded to the anticipated diameter of the beam and Clan's aim, so by moving away from those circles, they could dodge the beams.

"What?! That's—"

"Quit talking and run! You can't dodge this one!"

"You're too slow, fake Blue Knight!"

Before Koutarou could take evasive maneuvers, Clan pulled the trigger.

I see! This is what she meant!

Koutarou sensed Clan's hostility shortly after Sanae did, and he saw that the circle this time was several meters wide.

"Take thiiiiis!"

A gigantic cone-shaped beam came flying out from the barrel of the rifle. It was the result of scattering the beam. Her rifle was now effectively a beam shotgun.

Although the width of the beam got larger when scattered, the amount of energy required to fire a shot increased, reducing the actual power of the beam. It was originally intended as a method of attacking multiple targets at once, but it was also effective against a mobile opponent.

"Koutarou!"

Sanae closed her eyes and held on to Koutarou as if she was trying to shield him. As a ghost, however, it wouldn't help him at all. The beam would pass right through her body and hit Koutarou. Knowing that, she felt just how powerless she really was in that moment.

"Damn it!"

Koutarou made a dashing leap with all of his might in an attempt to get out of the beam's way. However, completely dodging the attack seemed hopeless. If a normal beam was like a faucet, the scattered beam was like a shower. Although the total amount of water was the same, the range was completely different.

Even if it had less power, Koutarou wasn't enough of an optimist to think he'd make it out unscathed.

It looked like the beam was about to hit Koutarou, but just before it did, the voices of two other girls could be heard nearby.

"Karama, Korama! Spiritual energy field to maximum output!"

"Blue Knight! Activate the suit's battle mode! Override input and put the emergency boosters on the back and legs to full thrust!"

It was Ruth and Kiriha, both still wearing their play costumes. Kiriha was shouting in Koutarou and Sanae's direction, while Ruth was giving orders to her bracelet.

"Leave it to us, ho!"

"Karama-chan, Korama-chan!"

"Ho, Sanae-chan! Everything will be all right now, ho!"

Just moments after the two girls arrived, the two haniwas appeared next to Koutarou and Sanae. Following Kiriha's commands, they deployed a yellow spiritual energy shield to protect Koutarou, Sanae, and themselves.

"As you wish, my lady."

But that wasn't all. After Ruth's bracelet confirmed her orders, the back and leg parts of Koutarou's armor began spewing out flames. It was the afterburners of boosters kicking in. Normally the armor would manipulate gravity, just like the barrier generator, in order to fly. However, when a large amount of thrust was required in the case of an emergency, boosters using conventional propellants were used for assistance. The boosters in the back and legs spewed more and more flame as Koutarou's body rapidly accelerated forward.

"Wh-Whoa! What?!"

"Kyaaaaaaaah!"

Thanks to the overwhelming thrust of the boosters, 90 percent of Koutarou's body managed to escape the beam's range. Karama and Korama shielded the remaining 10 percent with their barrier. Normally their barrier was intended to

defend against spiritual energy attacks, so it wasn't well suited for blocking something like beam technology. If the attack had been the normally concentrated beam instead, the haniwas probably wouldn't have been able to defend against it. Fortunately, however, the haniwas' barrier was more than enough to block a scattered beam like this one.

"More of them?! Pardomshiha and... that girl!"

Clan was more irritated at Ruth and Kiriha's appearance than her attack being blocked. Having suffered at the hands of Kiriha last time around, Clan held a grudge against her too, second only to her hatred for Koutarou and Theia.

"Koutarou!"

"Satomi-sama, are you all right?!"

Koutarou tore up the ground as he tumbled along in his armor after the sudden thrust, and Kiriha and Ruth quickly came running over to him. Cautious of their interference, Clan gave Koutarou and the others a hateful glare, but she didn't attack right away. Meanwhile, the haniwas got in between Clan and Koutarou, intent on protecting him and the girls.

"You saved me."

"I'm just glad you're okay, Satomi-sama."

"Nice timing!"

"I was so surprised when I got a warning about the armor's left arm being damaged right after I got off the stage, Satomi-sama."

Kiriha and Ruth had only come outside because of the alarm Ruth's bracelet had sounded. Since the armor Koutarou was wearing was equipment from Blue Knight, any damage it suffered was naturally reported to the ship's operator, Ruth. And after receiving such a strange alert, Ruth and Kiriha, who had finished their parts at the same time, rushed to come to find Koutarou.

"Koutarou, use this."

Unlike Ruth, Kiriha's stern expression remained unchanged as she glared at Clan and handed Koutarou a blue gauntlet.

"This is the thing you used..."

Koutarou remembered seeing this gauntlet before. Unlike the armor Koutarou was wearing, it had a somewhat Japanese feel to it. It was Kiriha's personal weapon, and it was what she'd used to fight the radical faction when they'd attacked.

"That's right. When facing someone like this, you need a ranged weapon, don't you?"

Looking at Clan flying overhead, Kiriha realized that Koutarou would be at a disadvantage with only his sword. She was giving him her gauntlet to compensate for that. Since Koutarou's left gauntlet had already been destroyed, it would give him a little bit more protection too. Moreover, Koutarou felt uncomfortable holding the sword with one bare hand, so it was useful in that sense as well.

Kiriha could have just used it to cover Koutarou from the ground, but aiming for a target directly overhead was tricky. In the end, Kiriha felt it was best for Koutarou to take it instead.

"Thanks, but how do I work this?"

"Don't worry. Sanae knows how."

"No, I don't. I've never even touched— Actually, yeah, I think I can do it, Koutarou!"

Sanae smiled broadly as Koutarou fitted the gauntlet onto his left hand. She was like a child that had just found a new toy. The moment Koutarou touched the gauntlet, Sanae had intuited its design and automatically knew how to use it. The weapon was easy to understand for someone like her who used spiritual energy.

"All right! Then let's fight back!"

While getting a feel for the new piece of equipment on his left hand, Koutarou readied his sword with his right.

"Like this!"



A glowing red fireball appeared in Koutarou's left hand with a powerful electromagnetic field around it. The field would unleash small arcs of electricity from time to time, making the red fireball glow even brighter.

It was an incredible sight, and Sanae was the one responsible for it. The gauntlet converted spiritual energy into fire and electricity, so Sanae's immense spiritual power created an almost inexhaustible supply of the elements. The fireball was hot enough to scorch even Koutarou's space-age armor, and the electricity created enough electromagnetism to overpower the armor's built-in protection against it and cause errors in its main system.

"Sanae-sama, please make the fire and electricity a little weaker. At this rate, Satomi-sama will get burned first!"

"Ah, sorry!"

"Satomi-sama, I will remain here and provide support."

"I'm counting on you."

"Karama, Korama, stick with Koutarou. I'll give you further instructions as needed."

"Understood, ho!"

"Got it, Nee-san!

The two girls stood on the sidelines to back up Koutarou and Sanae, while Karama and Korama moved out with them. Koutarou and Sanae took the front line, Kiriha assisted them with her haniwas, and Ruth supported Koutarou with the technology she had access to.

"Ah, looks like they're getting serious..."

There was also someone supporting Koutarou from the shadows. It was Yurika, who still lay collapsed inside the Alunaya costume. Fortunately, however, the costume was so large that there was plenty of room inside of it for Yurika to call forth her magical staff and help out in secret. For example, she had already cast a ward to keep people away, increased the armor's defensive powers, and increased the density of the air between Koutarou and Clan to help stop the beams from her rifle. No one suspected her because she was

contributing in ways that couldn't be seen.

"Now then, the last scene is coming up, so let's hurry up and beat this villain so we can have our happy ending!" Koutarou roared.

Koutarou glared at Clan up above. There was no way he would lose. He was certain of it now that he'd gained several powers from his friends supporting him. Close quarters and long range combat, information and magic. Although it was a hastily constructed team, they had a splendid balance between offense and defense.

Nine months had passed since the invaders first appeared in Corona House room 106. The same powers that had scared Koutarou so badly back then were now being used to protect him.

Although Ruth didn't really stand out in direct combat, her true value was revealed when she began supporting Koutarou from the rear.

"Kiriha-sama, I have finished analyzing the electromagnetic pattern emitted before Clan-sama fires!"

"Can you let Karama and Korama know when she's about to shoot?"

Using sensors dispatched from Blue Knight, Ruth gathered all kinds of data on the battlefield and analyzed it. She then filtered for the information that would be useful for Koutarou. The information she had ranged from weapon and barrier performance reports to geographical details on the surrounding terrain. She even had data on Koutarou and Clan's various habits in battle.

"I can use the laser communicator positioned in the shoulder area of Satomi-sama's armor!"

"Great, then we don't need to worry about jamming! Do it right away, Ruth! You heard us, right, Karama, Korama?!"

"Got it! Setting incoming laser transmissions as one of the triggers for deploying the spiritual energy field, ho!"

"Ruth-chan, you're a big help, ho!"

Ruth picked out what was important from all the data she had and passed it

along to Kiriha, who made strategic decisions off of it. Their supportive teamwork had a significant effect for the others who were actually doing the fighting. The armor's settings were changed to adapt to Koutarou's fighting style, the adverse effects of the electricity emitted from the gauntlet that Sanae was using were reduced, and Karama and Korama's barrier was synchronized to react to Clan's shooting. Kiriha's quick thinking and instructions quickly turned the tides of battle in their favor.

As expected of Kiriha-sama... Nobody can keep up with her sharp mind.

Still processing vast amounts of information, Ruth was secretly relieved. She was glad to have Kiriha and her intelligence on their side. Thinking about it, it was strange that she hadn't already seized control of room 106 with her brilliance.

As Ruth and Kiriha watched the battle intently from the sidelines, Karama and Korama repelled another one of Clan's scattered beams with an overhead barrier. Thanks to that, Koutarou was completely unscathed.

"These things again?! They just keep moving around!"

Irritated, Clan changed the setting of the rifle back so the beam would regain its focus, then repeatedly fired down on Koutarou and the others.

"Koutarou, she's firing lots!"

"It's okay! I can see them all!"

"Ho! Ho, ho!"

"Too slow, ho!"

However, even her desperate spray and pray attack couldn't harm Koutarou, who was protected by both Sanae and the haniwas' abilities.

Ruth's information certainly is accurate... Is this just how meticulous she is?

Kiriha smiled as she looked at the haniwas. It was a mix of joy and admiration. The haniwas had been able to dodge the beams too thanks to Ruth's accurate data analysis. Without it, the haniwas would probably either have been destroyed or wasted a great deal of energy blocking the attacks. So while she was thankful for the accuracy of Ruth's data, she was also pleased at catching a

glimpse of what Ruth was really capable of.

“Let’s go, Sanae!”

“Yeah!”

After dodging the hail of beams, Koutarou closed in on Clan. The armor’s flight capabilities made it nimble in spite of how heavy it looked. While manipulating gravity, he could fly around as freely as Sanae did. Clan flew by manipulating gravity as well, but Koutarou had extra propulsion devices in the emergency boosters and the thrusters used for posture control, meaning he could move faster.

“Koutarou!”

“I’m counting on you!”

Koutarou swung the sword in his right hand as Sanae manipulated his left to shoot out a fireball and a lightning bolt simultaneously.

“That left gauntlet is annoying! If I think of it as just a toy replica of the Blue Knight’s gauntlet, I’m in for a world of hurt!”

Clan shifted all of the energy she was using to fly into her barrier. When she was airborne, the barrier was weaker and wouldn’t be strong enough to block Sanae’s fireball and lightning bolt. On top of that, they were chasing after her like homing missiles because Sanae was using her spiritual powers to manipulate their trajectories. Clan might have been able to dodge them with her mobility, but it wasn’t a safe bet.

So instead, Clan cut her flight power momentarily, and while free falling, she poured all of the freed up energy into her barrier. She knew she had to block the fireball and lightning bolt before she could do anything else.

Countless translucent white hexagonal tiles appeared around Clan. It was the barrier created by the device attached to the back of her waist. As the fireball and lightning bolt crashed into it, the barrier dispersed them while making a grinding noise.

“Next up...”

But Clan had no time to waste. She pointed her beam rifle straight ahead of

her just as Koutarou was approaching. He'd closed in as she was falling through the air and messing with her barrier.

"Take thiiiiis!"

"As if I'd be taken down that easily!"

Koutarou swung his sword at full force, aiming to break through her barrier. In order to prevent him, Clan pulled the trigger on her rifle.

"It won't work, Koutarou!"

"No, it'll be fine!"

Sanae warned Koutarou of the danger, but he swung his sword without hesitation.

I can do this! I can win! As if I'd let someone like this ruin our play!

Koutarou was really angry at Clan. She had gotten in the way of their plays twice now for her own selfish reasons, but worst of all, she was trying to kill Theia. A blinding rage at the thought drove Koutarou forward. And as if in response to his powerful will, the blade of the treasured sword Saguratin began shining with a pure white light.

What happened next left Clan at a loss for words.

"Hyaaaaaaaah!"

When the beam fired from Clan's rifle came into contact with Koutarou's sword, the sword continued to swing forward and cut the beam in half. The split beam wavered and flew off to either side.

"What?! How?!"

Clan couldn't believe what she had just seen.

That's impossible! How could he possibly do something like that?!

Like Theia's Saguratin, a treasured sword had been forged for Clan when she was born. But that sword had no special powers. It was just a commemorative gift to celebrate her birth, no different from Theia's. Both Clan and Theia's swords were just supposed to be ceremonial tools.

Even if the armor was supplying the sword with power, she couldn't imagine

that it was capable of cutting a beam in half. It just wasn't something a personal combat suit's generator had enough output to do. Really, it was only because Clan was so well versed in science that she understood how abnormal Koutarou's power really was. And realizing that, she was both shocked and afraid.

"Oh no!"

The glowing white sword's blade closed in on Clan. The barrier had used up a lot of energy blocking the fireball and lightning bolt, so when Koutarou's sword reached it, it cut through the barrier like it was paper.

"It's over, Clan!"

Koutarou then aimed for Clan with his follow-up swing. With her barrier down from the previous attack, Clan was completely defenseless.

I've lost?!

Seeing the writing on the wall, Clan tossed her gun aside without hesitation. She couldn't possibly dodge Koutarou's attack while holding the bulky, heavy rifle. She kicked off of it as it fell to further distance herself from Koutarou.

The very next moment, Koutarou's sword cut the rifle in half. There was a small explosion and it fell down towards the back of the gym in pieces. And while Koutarou's vision was obscured by the explosion, Clan did her best to get as far as she could from him.

"So close!"

"But now she's unarmed!"

As the smoke from the explosion cleared, Koutarou readied his sword in both hands and pointed the tip of it towards Clan.

"If you're going to give up, now would be the time."

"You want me to surrender to some Neanderthal from a backwater planet like this?! Don't kid yourself!"

Despite being disarmed, Clan bravely refused to surrender. Being at least as prideful as Theia was, Clan simply couldn't accept having to surrender.

I guess that attitude is to be expected from a princess... But what would Theia do if she was in this situation?

While staring at Clan, Koutarou thought of Theia. In the past, Theia probably wouldn't have surrendered either. But Koutarou was sure that if the current Theia were to lose despite her best efforts, she would accept her defeat and acknowledge her opponent.

I guess you could call it a princess's, no... a ruler's dignity.

That was the fundamental difference between Theia and Clan, and being able to sense that was proof of Koutarou's friendship with Theia.

That said, when she's playing games with me, she will probably never accept defeat...

As things were, Koutarou was learning to accept both sides to Theia—Theia as a princess, and Theia as a normal, albeit childish, teenage girl.

"I wouldn't even surrender as a joke, but..."

While Koutarou was thinking of Theia, Clan was racking her brain trying to come up with way to get out of her current predicament.

To think the fake Blue Knight had this much power...

Clan hadn't just attacked randomly. She had sent her personal battleship, the Hazy Moon, home to Forthorthe using autopilot to get Theia and the others to lower their guard. Then she'd waited until Koutarou was separated from Harumi and Theia to strike. It was a well planned endeavor.

Clan hadn't underestimated Koutarou either. She had analyzed the data from their previous encounter and prepared her gear specifically to defeat him. The beam rifle and modified barrier that allowed her to fly would have been more than enough to win against Koutarou two months ago.

However, once put into practice, the results spoke for themselves. Clan's attacks were completely ineffective, and she couldn't defend herself against Koutarou. Everything had gone completely counter to her expectations.

Without a weapon, I'm definitely going to lose. Since they're faster, I'm going to have a hard time escaping too. But I still have that!

Clan grinned despite her hopelessly desperate situation.

What's up with Clan...?

Just as Koutarou started to get a bad feeling about the face Clan was making, she started shouting.

"Come, Cradle! Prepare to fire a Super Space-time Repulsion Shell!"

This was her last resort.

What Clan called "the Cradle" was the small spaceship she was using to hide out on Earth. In order to trick Theia and Koutarou into letting their guard down, Clan had sent her personal battleship, the Hazy Moon, back to Forthorthe. The Cradle was one of the smaller ships kept aboard the Hazy Moon, so Clan had taken it and used it as her base of operations while on Earth.

The Cradle served as an escape ship, but it was also outfitted to double as a mobile base in an emergency. She had hidden it away in the nearby mountain range and used as it her base while creating new weapons and spying on Theia and Koutarou. The beam rifle and her flying device were among the things she'd made with her own hands there, but the list also included the Super Space-time Repulsion Shells she just mentioned.

"Fake Blue Knight, it doesn't matter how strong you are when faced with the Cradle's Super Space-time Repulsion Shells!"

Clan put her hands on her waist and was boasting triumphantly. A strong will could be seen in her eyes behind her glasses and her demeanor was radiating confidence.

Behind Clan was her spaceship, the Cradle. The egg-shaped spaceship had appeared the same way Clan and Theia would summon their weapons. Although it was small for a spaceship, the Cradle was still several dozen meters long. It had a dignified appearance very similar to Clan's, but the sheer size and scale of the ship made quite a statement. If it weren't for the ship's impressive stealth capabilities and Yurika's magic, the entire surrounding area would have erupted into a panic.

"Super Space-time Repulsion Shells...?"

Koutarou blankly stared at the Cradle in all its glory and mumbled to himself. Ignorant when it came to science, he had a hard time grasping what the weapon did from just its name.

“Heh heh heh, you don’t have to understand!” Clan laughed as Koutarou tilted his head in confusion.

At the same time, the Cradle’s body opened and revealed two missiles, each about as large as Clan. The Cradle itself was shaped something like an egg lying on its side, with the thicker end of the egg being the bow and the thinner being the stern. The missiles had appeared from the lower half of the Cradle, but compared to the size of the massive ship, the small missiles didn’t look like much of a threat to Koutarou.

“You’ll soon experience what they can do firsthand!”

However, Clan had absolute confidence in her newly created bomb that these missiles were carrying. In theory there was nothing they couldn’t beat. That’s how powerful they were.

The Super Space-time Repulsion Shell was actually a weapon that Clan had been developing for a long time. Its chief characteristic was that, as the name suggested, it manipulated space-time. When the warhead was activated, it deployed a gigantic energy field and forcibly removed everything within it from the universe. Regardless of how fast the enemy was or how powerful their barrier was, they couldn’t escape or block an attack that shunted them out of the universe.

The attack was similar to a warp, except that a warp destination was still on the same plane of existence, so it was possible to return. There would also be a limit to how far a forced warp from a missile of this size could send its target, but there was no coming back from being thrown out of the very universe. The target would need to develop the same technology on their own to reverse it, which was nearly unthinkable when stranded in an unknown universe.

The attack itself was practically impossible to evade. And when it hit, there was no return. Those two facts were what made Clan so confident now.

Her Super Space-time Repulsion Shells had been completed just the other day. Clan had a prototype ready two months ago when she first attacked Theia,

but Yurika had knocked her out before she had the chance to use it. Now wanting revenge and absolute victory, Clan had waited for the weapon to be completed before attacking Koutarou. She wanted to defeat Koutarou no matter the cost, and the Super Space-time Repulsion Shells were the proof of just how far she'd go to do it.

Of course, Koutarou was unaware of that. At this rate, he was going to be hit by one without ever knowing better. At least, he would have been if not for a strange voice that informed him of the danger.

"Koutarou-sama, you can't let Clan-sama use that weapon..."

The voice didn't seem to be coming from anywhere nearby. Instead, it seemed to be coming from inside his head. It was something he never would have been able to hear if Sanae hadn't strengthened his senses.

"Who's there?! What are you saying?!"

"What's wrong, Koutarou?!"

"That weapon will bring extraordinary destruction..."

Though Koutarou was puzzled by the sudden voice, he started seeing flashes of images. He could see a Super Space-time Repulsion Shell being fired somewhere. He saw people dressed like the nobles in their play, and people holding staffs and wearing long robes. Around them were various weird looking monsters. The monsters were holding a bottle filled with something black, and were trying to take to the skies on spread wings.

The Super Space-time Repulsion Shell headed straight towards them. A terrific flash of light and a giant glowing cube could be seen on impact, and everything within the cube was erased, including the ground. The only thing left was a giant hole, followed by a massive earthquake and shockwave.

After seeing such a terrifying image, Koutarou instinctively looked down below his feet. He saw the Kisshouharukaze High School and the gym. The cube created by the Super Space-time Repulsion Shell could have easily fit both inside of it.

"I won't let you do that!"

“Koutarou?!”

Immediately after that, Koutarou rushed forward. Sanae desperately struggled to hold on to Koutarou as he suddenly sprung into action.

If the Super Space-time Repulsion Shell was fired, there would be catastrophic destruction. That had to be avoided at all costs. That was the only thing on Koutarou’s mind.

All Koutarou had to go on was the voice he’d heard and the images he’d seen, but they were compelling enough. The images were realistic, and he felt a straightforward honesty and kindness in the voice. He couldn’t imagine this was some kind of joke.

“What’s the matter all of a sudden, Koutarou?!”

“I need to destroy those missiles! I can’t let her use them!”

Koutarou answered Sanae’s question while setting the boosters on his armor to full power. As he did, he shot through the sky like a meteor. Intense winds swirled around him and roared loudly, so Sanae now had to scream for Koutarou to hear her.

“What? Do you mean they’re mushroom bombs?!”

“Something like that!”

By mushroom bombs, Sanae meant nuclear weapons. Koutarou nodded in response and sped up even more.

“That’s why I need to destroy them before she can fire!”

The armor’s AI screamed out as Koutarou blazed forward at speeds faster than what the armor had been designed for. But Koutarou didn’t have the time to worry about that.

“Will you be okay doing that, Koutarou?!”

“...That’s why this is goodbye, Sanae.”

“Kyaaaaaaaah!”

All of a sudden, Sanae was blown right off of Koutarou’s back. Koutarou hadn’t pushed her off, however. Rather, she was simply unable to hold on to

him any longer as she felt something like electricity coursing through her.

“W-Wait, Koutarou!”

Sanae quickly tried to chase after Koutarou, but something like an invisible wall stopped her and she couldn’t follow him.

“Why?!”

That was the first time she had ever felt Koutarou clearly push her away since she’d begun clinging to his back on a daily basis.

After finishing up her part in the coronation scene, Theia made her way behind the gym too. She arrived around the same time that Sanae was blown away from Koutarou. The only ones on the stage now were Harumi and some extras. The Silver Princess was giving a speech after becoming the new empress.

“Your Highness!”

“Ruth, what’s the situation?!”

Though detailed information was steadily being sent to Theia’s bracelet, there was still a certain delay. To get the most important information immediately, she asked Ruth.

“Just a moment ago, Satomi-sama was pushing back Clan-sama, but she has summoned her spaceship and is seemingly trying for a large-scale attack.”

“Have Blue Knight bombard her!”

“It’s impossible! There’s a heavy amount of disturbance blocking both radio and hyperspace communications, and I can’t contact Blue Knight!”

“What?!”

The reason for the disturbance was the Super Space-time Repulsion Shell preparing to launch. In order for it to shunt its target out of the universe, it had to store up a large amount of energy. As it did, it created considerable distortion around it which functionally jammed communications.

“It’s mortifying, but there’s nothing we can do right now other than leaving this to Koutarou.”

“Koutarou!”

While grinding her teeth, Theia stepped forward next to Kiriha and looked up at the sky where she saw a flying knight in blue armor heading towards a large spaceship.

Koutarou...

Seeing Koutarou so far out of her reach, Theia grew anxious and impatient. She had a feeling that something bad was about to happen. What Sanae said next justified that feeling.

“Everyone, do something! Stop Koutarou!”

“What’s going on?!”

“Koutarou is on a suicide mission!”

When Theia heard those words, she felt her world grind to a screeching halt.

Aware Koutarou was approaching, Clan ordered the Cradle to counterattack. In order to fire a Super Space-time Repulsion Shell, the warhead needed more time to charge. In the meantime, she couldn’t let Koutarou get close.

“So you’ve finally arrived, Theiamillis-san! But it’s already too late! There will be no happy ending for your silly little play!”

“Clan, I won’t let you get in the way of our play!”

While dodging the barrage of fire from the Cradle, Koutarou closed in on the Super Space-time Repulsion Shells loaded in the bottom of the hull. As he was pressed for time, he had to focus on gaining ground and not on evading. He didn’t make it through the volley unscathed. The beams and lasers repeatedly grazed him, leaving his armor, face, and body covered in wounds.

However, Koutarou didn’t even flinch. What fueled his courage was the promise he’d made at Christmas. That day, Koutarou had sworn to make the play a success. He couldn’t let Clan ruin that for her own selfish reasons.

“This play is the humble dream of a little caged bird!”

Koutarou knew how Theia felt about the play. She admired the Blue Knight

and wanted to protect her mother. The play embodied those emotions. It was a humble dream. The dream of a girl who was unable to live the way she wanted. Koutarou couldn't allow Clan to take that away from her.

"Ha! You think you can protect everything?! You can't even protect your friends with just that sword!"

"I'll protect them all! I have to make sure that they all succeed with their invasions!"

In the midst of this fierce fight, that was the answer Koutarou had finally arrived at.

He wanted all of the girls' invasions to succeed. He wanted to let Sanae wait in his apartment for her parents. He wanted Theia to complete her trial, earn the right to become empress, and protect her mother. He wanted Kiriha's people, the People of the Earth, to safely migrate to the surface. He wanted Yurika to live as a normal high school girl.

He wanted all of them to win. He wanted all of them to have the futures they hoped for. Fulfilling all of their wishes at the same time might be hard, but he certainly couldn't let it all come to an end now.

"Hyaaaaaaaah!"

So Koutarou wasn't going to stop. Not even if he was scorched by beams or shot through by lasers.

"Stop it, Koutarou! Obey my orders!"

Not even if he made his radiant golden princess cry.

"You're my knight, aren't you?!"

"...Sorry, Theia."

Koutarou simply held his sword tightly and let it shine bright white. He didn't care where that white light came from or why it was there right now. As long as that light shone for him, he could protect everyone.

That was enough for Koutarou.

"I hope... you can find a replacement knight right away."

“Wait, Koutarou! Wait!”

In that moment, Theia finally realized her own feelings.

“Even if I find a replacement knight, there’s no replacement for you!”

That was Theia’s answer. Theia truly desired Koutarou.

However, by the time she reached her answer, Koutarou’s sword had already cut the Super Space-time Repulsion Shell in half. A giant glowing cube then appeared above Kisshouharukaze High School.

From the top of the stage, Harumi knew what had happened. The sword-shaped crest on her forehead indicated to her that Koutarou’s presence had vanished.

Koutarou-sama...

While thinking about Koutarou, Harumi ran across the stage just as her stage directions indicated. Realizing that the Blue Knight was nowhere to be seen at the coronation ceremony, the Silver Princess went running to look for him.

Farewell, Koutarou-sama...

Up until now, everything had gone as she had been informed, but she didn’t know what would happen from here. Although she had a lot of powers, she was not omniscient.

And please, stay safe...

And so Harumi, just like the Silver Princess she was portraying, said a prayer.

She prayed that she would be able to meet her precious someone that had vanished once again.



A Promise

Sunday, January 24th

The Super Space-time Repulsion Shell that Koutarou cut in half unleashed its stored energy and created a giant glowing cube. But since it wasn't fully charged when it was destroyed, the cube didn't grow to be the size Clan had intended. It was only large enough to cover the Cradle.

Once the glowing cube vanished, there was nothing left. No Koutarou. No Clan. No Cradle. Not even the air remained. It was the very definition of a vacuum. Utter nothingness. Although it had been on a smaller scale than intended, the Super Space-time Repulsion Shell worked just as designed.

The next moment, the air surrounding the empty cube began stirring to equalize and fill the void that had been left. There was a large quake following it, and at the same time, the air flooding the void created a shockwave.

"Emergency deployment of the repulsion field! Maximize the range! It doesn't have to last long! Just focus on its integrity!"

"Karama, Korama, hold it in with the field!"

"Force Field! Modifier: Maximize! Effective Area, Colossal!"

However, the invading girls managed to prevent any damage from the quake and shockwave using their various defensive powers. If the cube had been a little larger, they would have been in danger, but fortunately, there was no harm to the surrounding area. Because of that, the play continued as if nothing had happened.

However, the same couldn't be said for the girls who had been left behind. Koutarou had vanished into thin air alongside Clan and the Cradle. Not even knowing whether or not he was alive, they fell into panic.

"Koutarou! Where'd you go, Koutarou?!"

Sanae restlessly looked around the surrounding area, scouring it for Koutarou's presence. Yet no matter how hard she looked, she couldn't pick up any sign of it. This was unprecedented. Not ever before had Sanae been unable to find Koutarou after looking for so long. Sanae was perpetually in a state of spiritual connection with him, but now that bond had been severed.

No, it can't be true...

That could only mean one thing, but Sanae desperately tried not to think about it. Koutarou had become a part of her life. She didn't want to think that he might be gone forever.

"The signal from the power suit has been lost?! Blue Knight, increase sensor sensitivity and scan again! And give me the data on all spacequakes in the last three minutes!"

Ruth was operating her bracelet with a pale face. The armor Koutarou was wearing had an identification signal, but when the cube had vanished, so had the signal. That alone would have been enough to worry her, but with a good understanding of Forthorthian technology, Ruth already had a faint idea of what had happened.

Satomi-sama... There's no way you could have been thrown to the outskirts of space and time...

The data from Blue Knight only served to confirm her fears. The more she read, the deeper she fell into despair. It wasn't the simple feeling of having lost something precious. It was more like having her light snatched away from her while walking in the dead of night. She had lost her direction, and she was now left stranded in the darkness.

"Karama, Korama, search through all life in the area and filter for Koutarou's aura pattern."

"Ho! That will take time, ho!"

"I know that much! I still want you to do it!"

"Understood, ho! We'll get right on it, ho!"

Kiriha was angry. She put her hands together and showed a severe

expression.

This kind of ending... I won't accept this kind of ending, Satomi Koutarou!

She gritted her teeth. He was the only one that truly understood her on the surface. A true friend she could reveal her true self to. Losing him this easily was an unbearable blow.

But even so, Kiriha knew deep down inside that Koutarou would never make it out in one piece after being caught in the middle of all that. It was extremely unlikely that he had survived, much less that he was still in the area. That fact slowly sank in for Kiriha, and she grew angry at her own helplessness.

I am a cold woman...

And most of all, she was angry that she was able to remain calm despite believing that Koutarou was dead.

"In this situation, it'll be faster to search for that spaceship rather than Satomi-san!"

It was possible, however, that the calmest one present was actually Yurika. In her case, she'd witnessed the last fight of her predecessor, Rainbow Nana, so she was no stranger to the feeling of the people close to her being in danger.

"If they really were sent off to a different dimension, I might still be able to detect something that big..."

Yurika closed her eyes and focused on the staff in her hands. She heightened her mana and spread out her senses, searching for traces of Koutarou.

That was a spaceship, and Satomi-san was wearing a spacesuit... If I find him in time, we can still save him...

Despite how grim things looked for her close friend, she hadn't lost hope. That was the true strength of the magical girl she had gradually come to be.

"Koutarou..."

Of the five girls, Theia was the most devastated. She stood there motionless with her hand reaching for the sky. If it hadn't been for the timing, Theia probably would have behaved more courageously. But it was in losing Koutarou that she finally understood her feelings. The moment she realized what she

truly desired, it slipped right through her fingers. In that situation, not even the princess of a galactic empire could stay strong.

“Don’t leave me alone, Koutarou... You’re just hiding, right? Don’t be such a tease. Hurry... Hurry up and come out already...”

She tried to smile, but she couldn’t. She tried to speak, but voice was hoarse.

“Can’t you understand that... that I’m telling you to come out? That’s... That’s why you’re... a pleb...”

The only thing she could do was cry.

The other girls were much the same. They had all lost sight of themselves.

“Space distortion reaction increasing. Predicting a small-scale spacequake. Take precautions, my lady,” Ruth’s bracelet reported in an abrupt warning.

“Huh...?”

And while Ruth’s eyes opened wide in surprise, it happened. It was a glowing door, much like the one that Theia and Ruth used to travel between room 106 and Blue Knight. It suddenly appeared, stretching several dozen meters across the sky. It appeared in the very same place Koutarou had vanished.

“Detected a small-scale spacequake. There is a 95 percent certainty it is an incoming short warp.”

“A short warp?!”

Ruth hurriedly confirmed the data being projected in the air from her bracelet. And just as the AI had said, the data indicated that something large was warping in.

“Found it!”

That was when Yurika suddenly opened her eyes inside the Alunaya costume. Not a moment later, the tip of something came out of the light in the sky.

“Mass from the space distortion calculated. Report: There is a 98 percent certainty that it is the ship being searched for. Target has been located, my lady.”

It was a several-dozen-meter-wide dome. Seeing it, Sanae alerted the others.

“Something’s appeared!”

In the direction Sanae was pointing, the dome moved forward as it emerged from the gate. From the ground, it looked like a balloon blowing up. And by the time it grew to several dozen meters in length, the rear appeared. When it did, the silhouette changed from that of a dome to an egg.

“Is that the spaceship from before?!”

What had appeared was indeed the egg-shaped spaceship that had vanished in the cube just minutes earlier. It was the Cradle. And with its miraculous return, not even the normally calm Kiriha could hide her surprise.

“Koutarou!”

Seeing the Cradle overhead, Theia shouted out and called for Koutarou right away. She began looking around for any sign of him. She was desperate.

Where are you, Koutarou?!

She hoped that Koutarou would return alongside the Cradle, or that he had returned after taking it over.

“Where are you?! Hurry up and show yourself!”

However, Koutarou was nowhere to be seen. He wasn’t near the bottom of the ship where he had been before, nor were either of the two Super Space-time Repulsion Shells.

It couldn’t be that Clan left Koutarou behind and came back on her own, could it...?

A new worry began budding in Theia’s chest. And it wasn’t just her. All five girls were concerned about the same thing. But the next thing they knew, a hatch at the thickest part of the egg opened. The five girls all stared at it, praying that Koutarou would appear.

“We’re here! We made it in time!”

However, as if betraying all their faith, the one that appeared from the hatch was the Cradle’s owner, Clan.

“Ah...”

Theia felt like she was sinking to the bottom of a very deep darkness. Her tears that had stopped began flowing once more.

“Koutarou...”

“Satomi-sama...”

Kiriha and Ruth also revealed pained expressions and lowered their shoulders. Although it had only been a small hope, their disappointment was profound. If someone had so much as blown on them in that moment, the three of them would likely have collapsed to the ground.

“...Huh?”

“Could it be?!”

However, Sanae and Yurika were in a much different state. In contrast to Theia and the others, their eyes were gleaming as they instinctively leaned forward in anticipation.

“There’s no time. Hurry up and get off, Clan!”

“Kyaaaaaaaah!”

Koutarou, who had come up behind Clan, kicked her out of the hatch.

Koutarou followed after Clan and jumped out from the hatch. The next moment, the Cradle disappeared from view. While it might be near the mountains, they were still in the middle of the city. Standing out here would be a bad thing, so the Cradle concealed itself in accordance with the instructions it had been given in advance.

“There we go.”

Not minding the fall of several dozen meters, Koutarou’s sky blue armor rang out as he landed strikingly. It was completely different from Clan, who had hit the ground in a fluster just the moment before.

“What kind of education have you received to make you think you can treat a princess like this?!”

“That’s because we’re out of time and you’re just wasting it.”

“We’re only running out of time because you overslept!”

“Stop talking and start running! We don’t have any time!”

“Jeez, you’re so selfish!”

The newly arrived pair ran towards Theia and the others while arguing. Meanwhile, the five girls simply stared at them in astonishment.

Clan and Koutarou had gone missing after a fierce battle. No one was even certain they’d made it out alive. And now they had mysteriously reappeared from the Cradle. Even stranger still, it was like things were completely different between them. They showed no signs of picking up their fight from just minutes ago. Although they were arguing, it wasn’t the kind of argument enemies would have. It was about on par with the kind of bickering often heard in room 106.

That bizarre and mysterious scene was enough to leave the five invaders dumbfounded.

“What’s up with that...?”

“Wh-Who knows...?”

Even Sanae and Yurika, who had realized Koutarou was back alive and well before the others, couldn’t do anything but blink.

“Besides, how could you oversleep at such an important time?!”

“That’s why I said you should wake me up early!”

“Are you asking a princess to babysit a knight?!”

“Theia did!”

“Well, excuse me!”

Koutarou and Clan’s relationship wasn’t the only thing that had changed. Their appearances were slightly different from before as well.

The armor Koutarou was wearing had more damage now. It wasn’t just damage from lasers and beams either. Both the number and variety of battle scars on the armor had greatly increased. There were dents from being hit by something hard, and his mantle had been slashed here and there. What’s more, there were now two swords at Koutarou’s waist. Just a moment ago he’d only

had Saguratin, but now he'd gotten another from somewhere.

Clan's appearance was odd as well. She was wearing the same dress as before, but she was also wearing a large overcoat on top of it. It looked like something a noble's daughter would wear when heading out into town.

But to the girls, these cosmetic differences were only a minor issue. Their surprise that Koutarou was fine and right in front of them was so great that they hardly paid attention to his change in appearance.

Roughly two minutes had passed since the cube had disappeared. During that short time, they had panicked, fretted, and mourned. Koutarou disappearing was a huge event in and of itself, but his immediate return... The entire series of events was just one shock after another for the girls. Their heightened emotions had been thrown completely for a loop, and they were all too stunned to take any concrete action.

"Clan, what's the time?!"

"There's one minute left! We somehow made it in time!"

Ignoring everyone else, Koutarou and Clan were headed towards the back entrance to the gym.

"W-Wait, Koutarou! What happened?!"

"Satomi-san, what is going on?!"

As Koutarou approached them, Sanae and Yurika tried to question him. Since they'd realized he was safe before anyone else, they'd had a little more time to recover than the other three girls.

"Sorry, we'll talk about that later! The play comes first now!"

But Koutarou didn't answer either Sanae or Yurika. He simply ran past them with Clan in tow. He was headed for the stage. The last scene was about to start, so he didn't have the time to answer their questions.

He continued right past Kiriha and Ruth too. But as he reached Theia, Koutarou stopped moving for the first time since reappearing. He then tossed the script in his right hand to Clan.

"Clan, hold my script!"

“Vel— No, Koutarou! How long are you planning on treating me like your servant?!”

While complaining to Koutarou, Clan caught the flying script. Despite sounding unhappy, she preciously clutched the booklet to her chest.

“I’m still a princess of the Holy Forthorthe—”

“Now’s not the time for that! I’m in a hurry, so quit your yapping and carry it for me!”

“Ah, jeez! You’re so selfish! You’re always like that!”

Clan was still complaining, but Koutarou ignored her. The same as he hadn’t had time to answer Sanae and Yurika, he didn’t have the time to deal with Clan either.

“Theia, come!”

“Hu... Huh?”

Koutarou grabbed Theia’s hand and forcibly pulled her to his side.

“I know you’re surprised, but I need you!”

Three people were needed for the final scene: the Blue Knight, the Silver Princess, and the Golden Princess. They wouldn’t be able to pull it off without Theia, the Golden Princess.

“Ah...”

“I need you.”

Theia was finally able to affirm that Koutarou was truly safe after hearing his words and feeling the warmth of his hand.

“K-Koutarou...”

The next moment, Theia’s knees gave way. She was so overcome with deep relief and joy that she could no longer stand.

“Ah, h-hey!”

In order to keep Theia from falling over completely, Koutarou quickly grabbed her.

“So you’re safe after all, Koutarou... I’m so...”

Now in Koutarou’s arms, tears scattered from Theia’s eyes once more. In the fading winter sun, they caught the light and glimmered beautifully.

“Don’t cry, from— Hmm, actually, keep crying. We’ll be doing the parting scene after all.”

Having lost all strength in her legs, Koutarou lifted Theia up as she cried. He was planning on carrying her to the stage like that.

“No, this isn’t a parting...”

Theia shook her head, gently touched Koutarou’s left hand that was supporting her legs, and looked up into his eyes.

“...Everything is just about to start...”

Tears were still flowing out from her eyes, but Theia had finally regained her smile.

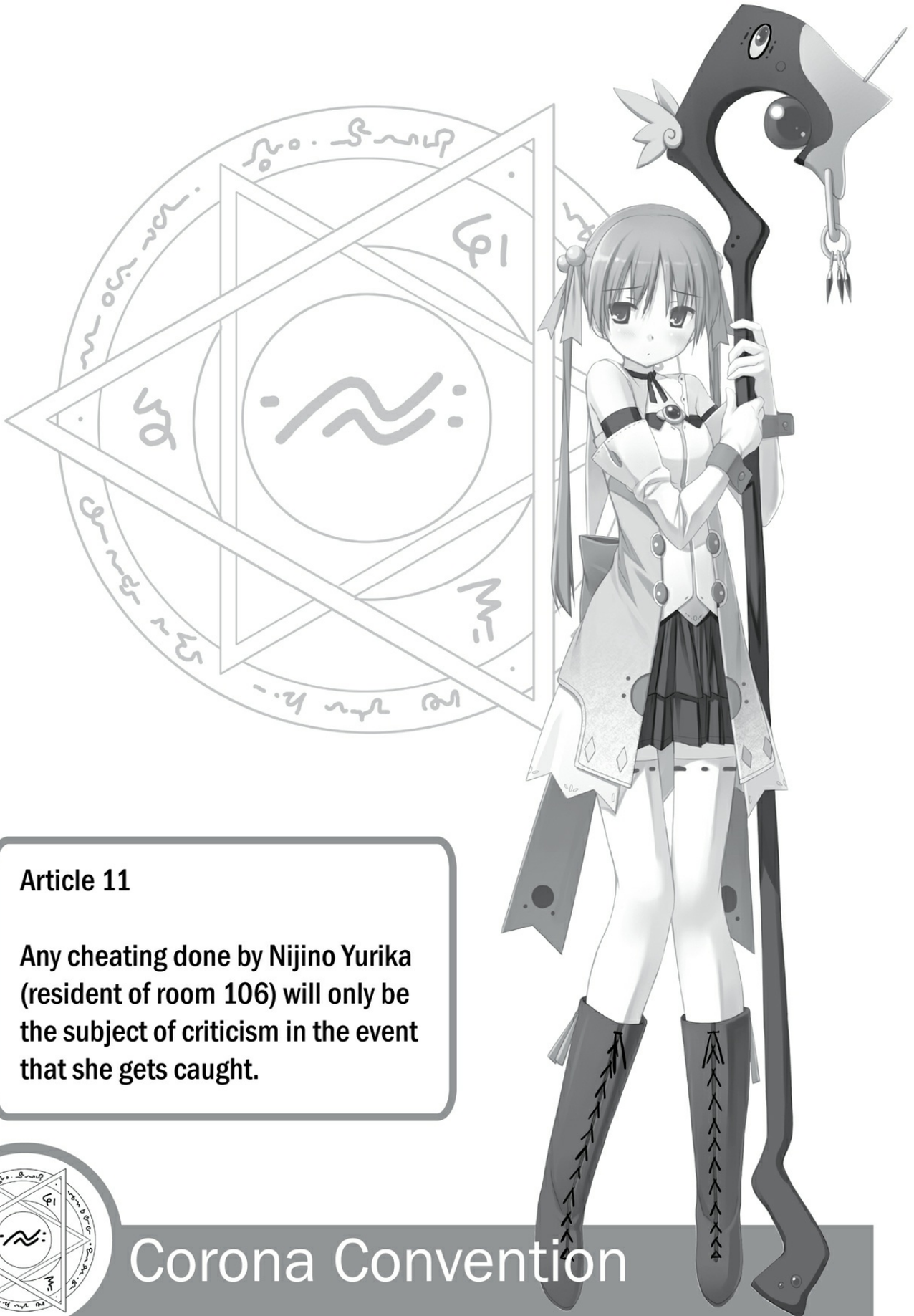
“It’s just as you say, Theia.”



Koutarou started running again. He didn’t have the time to stand around. Inside the gym were all their comrades and friends waiting for them.

They would definitely make the play a success. That was the promise Koutarou had made with the invaders and the drama club, and the time to fulfill that promise had finally come.

Koutarou eagerly ran into the gym carrying Theia.



Article 11

Any cheating done by Nijino Yurika (resident of room 106) will only be the subject of criticism in the event that she gets caught.

Corona Convention

New! January 31st, 2010

Afterword

Long time no see, everybody. Since there's not much room for the afterword this time around, I'll keep it short.

There were a lot of suspicious developments this episode. I'm sure you all want to know what happened to the odd couple after the incident. The next volume will be the story of what happened to Koutarou while he was gone. It's even planned to have a subtitle, though since it's an irregular story, I guess it'll be treated as a side chapter.

As for my life, the friend who had a child that I wrote about in a previous afterword has opened his own store. I went to take a look, and it was a beautiful new building. I better work harder so I don't lose to him. Wife, child, store... Aren't things going too well for you, you enviable bastard? Ha...

Ah, looks like I'm already out of room. I'll have to shorten my normal thanks. Thank you as always, everyone involved. And to all you readers, let's meet again in volume 7.5, "The Silver Princess and the Blue Knight."

December, 2010

Takehaya

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Invaders of the Rokujouma!? Volume 7

by Takehaya

Translated by Warnis Edited by Morgan Dreher

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