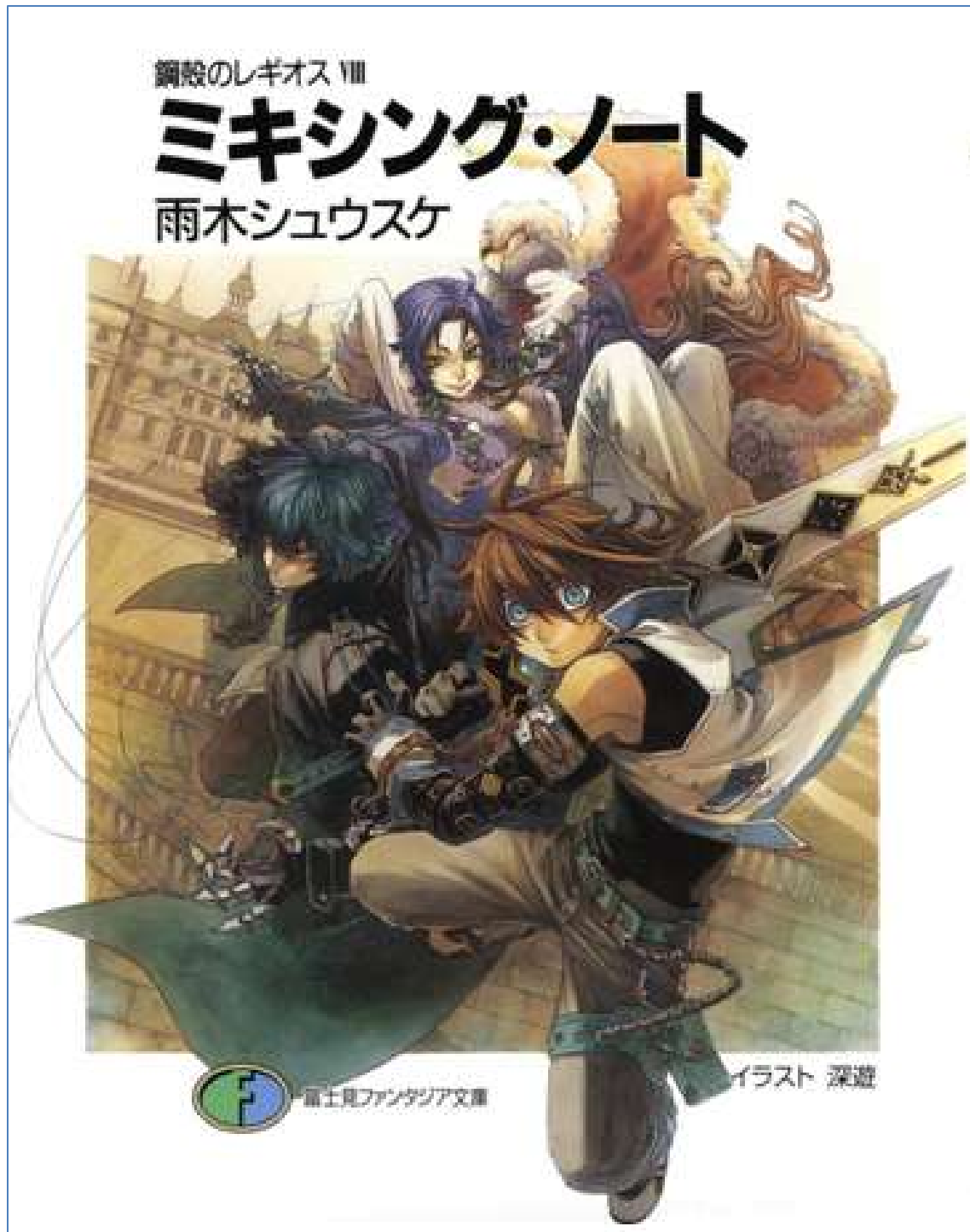


Chrome Shelled Regios

Volume 8



Mixing Note

鋼殻のレギオスⅧ
ミキシング・ノート

ついに『彼女』はやって来た。超鈍感王
レイフォンの幼なじみにして、『本妻』と
噂される、リーリン・マーフェス。

二人きりで過ごすのは本当に久しぶり
で、リーリンにとっては何よりも待ち望
んでいたことのはずだった。

だけど、レイフォンの口から語られる
様々な『彼女』たちの存在に、リーリンは
内心穏やかではなくて……？

さらに、レイフォンが天剣授受者にな
ったことから端を発する、『グレンダン女
王暗殺計画』が今、語られる！

ドラゴンマガジンに掲載された、レイ
フォンを巡る三つの『彼女』たちの物語に
加え、大ボリューム書き下ろしによる衝
撃の『レイフォン過去編』を収録!!

鋼殻のレギオスⅧ

ミキシング・ノート

雨木シュウスケ



富士見ファンタジア文庫

イラスト 深遊



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ミキシング・ノート

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少女は巨人と踊る

少女は聖霊と歌う

少女は蒼剣と語る

少女は世界と歩む

そして少女は慈しむ

鋼殻のレギオス

サイレント・トーク

センチメンタル・ヴォイス

コンフィデンシャル・コール

エモーショナル・ハウル

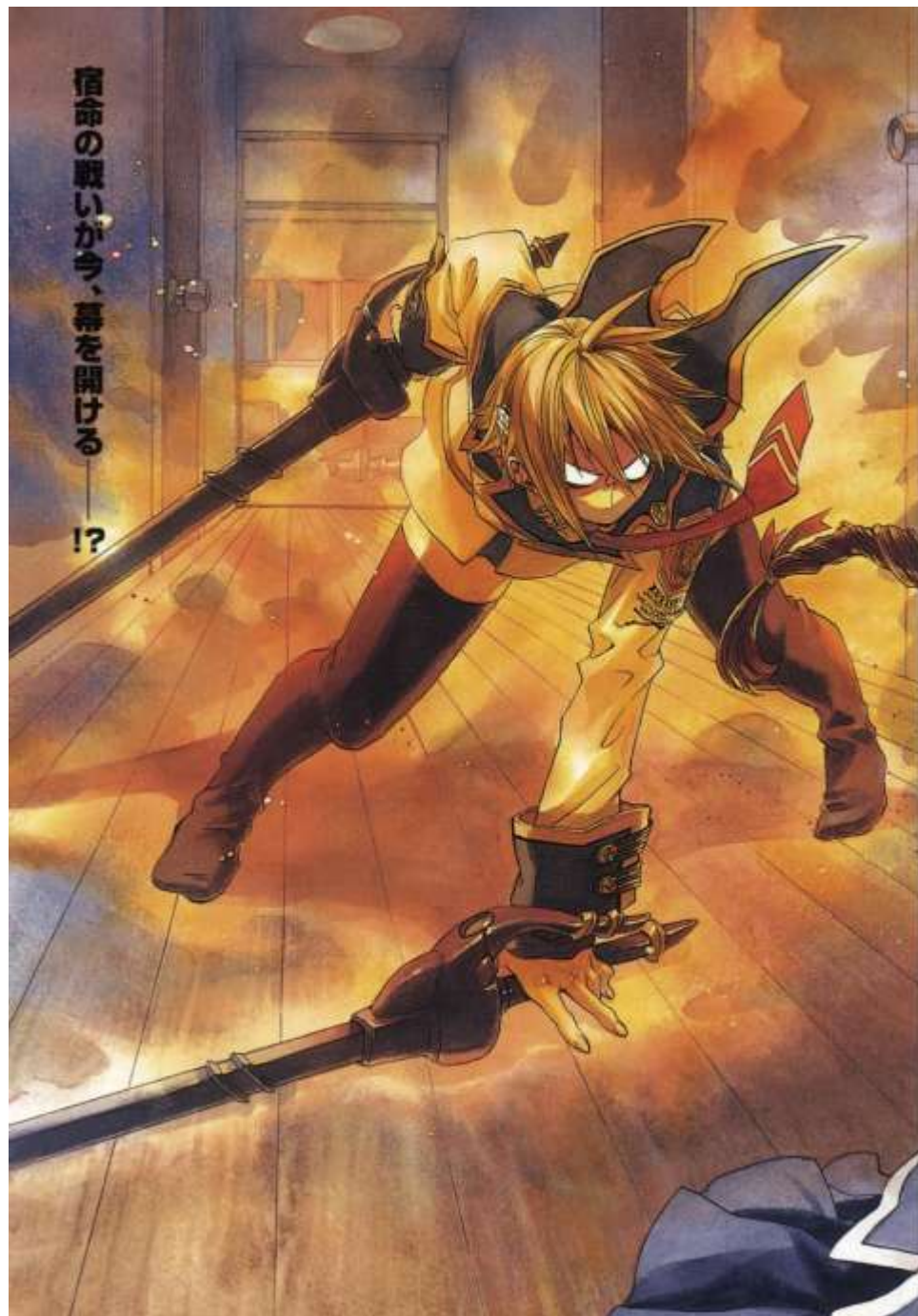
レッド・ノクターン

ホワイト・オペラ

ミキシング・ノート

「ご注文はお決まりですか？」

鋼殻のレギオス Ⅳ
ミネシグノート



「『週刊ルックン』の取材できました。
一般教養科一年ミイ・フィ・ロツテンとその連中です」



Prologue

Hmm?

Something seemed amiss. Layfon was confused as to why he felt that way.

He felt uncomfortable.

This was the hospital section of the academy.

It was at the end of their inter-city battle with Myath, after his right arm received treatment. Surgery to repair his muscles and nervous system that were injured had been completed on that day as well.

“It’s all because you act like an idiot and continually return to hospital that we’ve compiled a complete image of your body, and our thorough understanding of it allowed surgery to commence immediately” said his long-time surgeon Wakudi-senpai.

Two hours later, the surgery finished. Afterwards, he received treatment from Jinmaike-senpai. Layfon had only stayed in the hospital for one night. Right now, his left arm was covered by a simple plaster cast to keep his arm in place, and the veins in his lower back looked like a pincushion, being filled with so many needles. “If you want to sleep, sleep facing down” and Layfon, being so instructed, had sat upright in an attempt to avoid touching his back.

Leerin was beside the bed.

She was wearing the same clothes as when they had met outside the city, with her travelling case by her side. She probably hadn’t returned to the hotel at all, and still retained the appearance of arriving recently.

She wore an angry expression.

That was the cause of Layfon’s discomfort.

(Strange...)

Layfon felt perplexed at that expression.

No, this wasn’t the first time he had provoked Leerin’s anger. In fact, he had done it so often that he had lost count long ago.

Tearing his clothes after training, making too many snacks for his younger brothers and sisters, and playing around too recklessly and covering his clothes in mud, he had always

seen this scary expression. And when he covered the rest of the clothes that were about to be washed with mud as well, she looked all the more terrifying.

But Leerin would immediately return to her kind self after scolding them. It was very rare for her to actually be angry. It seemed that Leerin was trying to avoid looking Layfon in the eye, lowering her head, gazing furiously at the sheets which covered Layfon's legs.

So Layfon couldn't see Leerin's face clearly either, so he could do nothing else but stare at her hair instead. It seemed a little different from when he had departed Grendan. Her hair had grown longer, making it impossible to keep the same hairstyle. Even though they hadn't been apart for more than a year, there was still a difference.

He didn't recognize the clothes that Leerin was wearing, so she probably bought them in anticipation of entering senior school. "That's great" thought Layfon. Leerin valued her possessions a lot, so she wouldn't buy new clothes. She knew how to tailor her clothes, so if they didn't fit, she would patch them up.

Seeing her wearing new clothes probably meant that they had a bit of money to spare now, allowing Layfon to breathe a sigh of relief.

"How's your health?"

"Really good, thanks."

Layfon gingerly attempted a start to the conversation and Leerin replied sincerely.

"You aren't really well, are you, Layfon?"

"Well I did get injured."

In between the scattered fragments of conversation Layfon smiled bitterly. That numbness of his hands that he felt during his battle with Haia returned.

"Don't you think you've had too many injuries?"

"Huh?"

"Didn't the doctor say so as well? You're getting hospitalised continuously like an idiot."

Ah, so she had overheard their conversation.

"It's not that bad."

"You were never injured as badly as this in Grendan, right?"

That was completely true. The worst injury he had ever sustained during training was when he became a Heaven's Blade Successor and was practicing with the steel wires. When his adoptive father was training him, his father would take every care to avoid pointless injury. When it was necessary, he would not hesitate to hit or hack at Layfon, inflicting on him bruises, burns or even fractures. Yet he would never injure Layfon unless it was really essential to training. His adoptive father was very good at teaching.

But Lintence was different. He wasn't good at teaching other people Military Arts, and it was no exception with teaching Layfon. So he often sustained preventable injuries. He nearly died once. But rather than saying it was Lintence's fault, that time was Layfon's own fault.

"I have been injured pretty badly when I was training."

"But you've never been injured as badly as this before, have you?"

As badly as today...Only in this battle.

It wasn't wrong to put it that way. On the other hand, when he battled against the filth monster, if he couldn't win and was forced to retreat, dying from the pollutants in the air would have been perfectly normal.

(Ah, but...an excuse like that...)

Leerin didn't participate in the battle, so she wouldn't understand.

It wasn't her fault either. It was a difference in perception between normal citizens and Military Artists.

It was also true that Layfon was repeatedly in the care of the hospital since his arrival at Zuellni.

(Even though unpredictable events had occurred one after another, they failed to surprise anyone.)

(Is it because I have gotten weaker?)

Layfon thought about this. His senses weren't as sharp as they used to be at Grendan, but that was inevitable.

"Well it was different this time."

He was hit over the head with a hollow "dong" sound.

"That's not a reason" said Leerin in a reprimanding tone.

Her eyes...She looked as if she was about to cry.

“I’m sorry.”

“You have to be careful next time.”

“Ok.”

The atmosphere suddenly turned very serious, and Layfon obediently lowered his head.

“I guess I’ll let it pass this time.”

Leerin revealed a comparatively more relaxed and less worried expression.

There were tears in the corner of her eyes, but she quickly wiped them away.

(Oh, it was that. I haven’t shown any signs of repenting for my actions.)

Understanding Leerin’s reasons for being angry at him, Layfon sighed in relief.

This was the ritual he performed as a symbol of reconciliation with her.

If he correctly put on a regretful expression, her anger would cease and that would ease Layfon’s heart.

“It is really fortunate that you could arrive here safely.”

Taking roaming buses to other cities was extremely dangerous. If filth monsters attacked them while they were on the roaming bus, they wouldn’t last very long.

“We didn’t run into any filth monsters.”

“That’s great.”

“But it was really uncomfortable being cramped in the bus for so long.”

“At first the bus seems really spacious, but after you consider how much time you’ll spend in the vehicle it starts to seem really cramped. Even though there is ventilation, there is still a really bad smell and you can’t even wash yourself properly. It’s really uncomfortable.”

Layfon silently listened to Leerin’s complaints. Sitting here, listening to her, it sounded like she wanted some sort of compensation. She was still the same old self. Maybe something happened after her arrival, so as she was sorting out everything that happened she kept up her usual air.

Because Layfon had also experienced a drastic change like this, he understood what was going on.

He had also been sorting out the changes that had occurred up till now, as well as his feeling on living together with Leerin in the past. As he sorted his thoughts out, he also observed the changes. Again, he reaffirmed his changes to himself.

“...It seems after arriving at Zuellni there are many girls near Layfon, taking care of you.”

“Erm...Ah...”

“I haven’t seen you for only a short time and you’ve changed already. When did you learn to woo so many girls?”

“Wai– Wait a second. Didn’t I tell you about my captain in my letters?”

“True, but it's still suspicious. There are things that you can't write in a letter, such as things like ‘I'm being happily chased and sought after.’ What did you come here to do? To study, right?”

“Yeah, that’s right, but... you’ve got it all wrong. Those people really have helped me a lot, but there wasn’t any other meaning to it.” Without knowing what happened, Layfon nervously attempted to explain the situation.

“They aren’t really my lovers or anything... and they shouldn’t have those kinds of thoughts about me anyway.”

“Is it really like that?”

“What?”

Leerin had mumbled something under her breath. It was really quietly whispered and Layfon couldn’t quite catch it.

“Then, you had better explain your relationship with them right now.” With that Leerin suddenly leaned in closely.

“Then... Ok?”

Layfon had no choice but to begin his explanation.

(Well... the explanation right now probably isn’t too reliable)

Leerin considered it knowingly, thinking of how her slow-witted childhood friend couldn’t possibly guess what other people felt deep down in their hearts. So in reality,

what Layfon was saying only fit in with what was on the surface, and wouldn't be of too much use.

Even considering its unreliability, she could still find some things out from his explanation.

For example, his feelings and thoughts towards the ring of girls who had surrounded him upon his arrival at Zuellni.

(Haaa...What exactly...what exactly did I come here for?)

Feeling a little annoyed with herself, Leerin listened to Layfon's explanation.

"Then... Who started the friendship?"

"That, it was..."

Layfon could only tell Leerin what was happening on the surface.

If it was like that, then figuring out what was going on beneath the surface would be Leerin's job.

Interlude 01

"Who's that pretty girl? That girl who gave me the directions."

"Ah, are you talking about Felli-senpai?"

"Senpai? You're joking, right?"

"Yeah, she's a second year student."

"Yeah, you're right. Layfon's a first year, right? But she looks pretty young. Maybe I did something bad?"

"What did you do?"

"Eh? Nothing. I didn't do anything."

"Then, you shouldn't care about it too much."

"Yeah, you're right...well, she seems a bit like a person who attracts attention."

"Ah, you're right about that. Felli-senpai seems to be a bit neurotic."

“She didn’t do anything, and she just suddenly starts apologizing to me, placing me in a difficult position.”

“Well, just be wary in the future, and think about how to improve your relationship.”

“Is that all? According to that letter, that person is a Psychokinesist, right?”

“Yeah, that person is a prodigy. It’s the first time I’ve heard of a psychokinesist whose hair glows when they use their powers. I wonder if that happens with Delbone-sama as well. I’ve never seen it, so I wouldn’t know.

“Delbone-sama is that Heaven’s blade successor, right? Wasn’t she standing beside her majesty in the new year’s ceremony?”

“Ah, that was just an acting Heaven’s blade successor. That’s because the twelve Heaven’s Blades have to be complete.”

“Really? I’ve never heard of that.”

“Yeah, so anyway, that’s why Felli-senpai is a psychokinesist.”

“Ah, I’ve seen her hair glowing before as well; it really is a beautiful sight.”

“She doubts her destiny as a psychokinesist and so she came to Zuellni in hope of learning something else, yet she was forced by her brother, the Student Council president to transfer to the Military arts department.”

“Didn’t he force you as well? He’s so over the board and extreme.”

“I reckon. But with the way that person does things, I think he puts many things into consideration.”

“Maybe it’s like that, but even so it seems a bit overboard. As a brother, shouldn’t he be supporting his sister in every way he can?”

“I agree, that’s what he should be doing.”

Cool in the cafe

That day, Layfon lived out a perfectly normal day of his life without anything abnormal.

After getting out of bed in the morning, he went to school and stayed there, attending classes and absorbing all the information from his lectures without delay until dusk.

Afterward, he went to his platoon training session. To the Zuellni Military Arts department first year Layfon, it was a day which was devoid of anything worth mentioning - just another normal day.

His platoon training was the same as always; with Captain Nina filled with enthusiasm, Sharnid, who didn't know what enthusiasm meant, Felli, who was perpetually observing from the sidelines with absolutely zero enthusiasm, and Layfon, who always obediently completed all the exercises.

Felli's immediate departure at the end of training was another part of daily life.

But today, Sharnid, who normally disappeared right after Felli did, was staying behind and waiting for Layfon with a somewhat sinister smile.

"Hey, you don't have work today, right? You couldn't possibly."

This happened after Layfon took a relaxing shower after working up a rare sweat during training.

Nina had already returned, and Sharnid, who had already packed up and was ready to leave, was waiting outside the door of the training rooms in high spirits.

"If you had to go to your part time job on a day like this, I'd probably end up rolling around on the floor laughing at you."

"Stop acting talking about strange things sempai, I don't have any work today."

"Good, you really are a lucky guy. Let's go and share the joys of a day like this together. It's not often that I invite another guy." As he said this, he tightly grasped Layfon's shoulders and, like that, forced Layfon out of the training area with him.

"Just what are we doing?"

"You'll just have to calm down and wait and see."

Releasing a struggling Layfon from his grip, Sharnid lead the way with an extremely happy look on his face. Layfon quickly caught up to him, completely lost as to what was going on.

The Regios. They were the whole world.

Since the world was covered by pollutants, making it extremely difficult for normal life forms to survive on the earth. The people who lived in the world before it was polluted had the Alchemists create and pass on the Regios and continued to live the same way they

did before, paying no attention to their drastic change in environment and returning to their everyday lives.

Living in the wandering cities, they fought with the real inhabitants and menaces of the earth; the filth monsters.

“It’s here.”

He was brought in front of a coffee store by a confident Sharnid. Calling the store a restaurant wouldn’t be an exaggeration, with a sign at the doorway listing all the kinds of dishes that were available and the store sign reading “Coffee Mira”. Layfon remembered his classmate Mifi saying something about the selling point of this cafe being the beautifully dressed cute waitresses who served the food and drinks.

“Ah... Do you like this sort of stuff, senpai?”

Supposedly this was a very popular place among male customers, in comparison to its relative unpopularity among females. The mood of the café was flirtatious, filled with handsome young men. It suited Sharnid, who always liked to hit on girls.

“Cute girls are the heritage of the world, even though they aren’t really part of our cultural heritage.” As he laughed at his own words, Sharnid walked into the store.

“Welcome.”

Layfon was greeted by a young girl and it really surprised him. At the door, a whole line of girls who wore cute pink uniforms greeted Layfon and Sharnid.

“Whoa...”

“Table for two? Come with me.”

Layfon was still spaced out, and before he recovered he was already lead to his seat.

After Layfon sat down, Sharnid said something quietly so that girl, who smiled and nodded. She then placed the menu in front of them and left.

“What’s happening?”

“We’re leaving the best till last right? Anyway, today is my treat, so just choose anything you like.”

“Ha...”

Layfon felt puzzled at Sharnid’s cheerful mood as he searched through the menu.

“You really are a hard worker, aren’t you? Even if you didn’t do that every day you would be just as strong.” As Sharnid looked at his menu, he started talking about their platoon training.

“It’s not that I want to do the training seriously, it’s that instead of wasting my efforts thinking about it, I might as well train instead.”

“I can understand that kind of thinking. Well...when you compare the inter-platoon matches to the actual inter-city battle, it still seems like a kind of game.”

“Did senpai participate in the last inter-city battle?”

“I guess you could say that. But at the time, I hadn’t gotten into a platoon yet, so I was just a normal member of the infantry. But because of that I could just relax and do all the support work from behind the front lines.

“Next time will be the real thing, and if we don’t win, there will be no future for Zuellni. Seeing the other platoons training seriously, and even organising all these inter-platoon matches, I really am moved.”

“It’s more like you’re trying your luck, sempai.”

“If you’re too serious about everything then you won’t be able to experience the joys that this world has to offer. A normal Military Artist would never leave victory for luck to decide. I guess I’m the only one who can do such a thing without worries.”

Layfon pretended he didn’t hear anything at all and closed the menu.

“Oh! Have you finished choosing what you want? Then...Hey!”

Sharnid motioned to a nearby waitress.

“So what did we really come here for?”

“You’ll find out in a sec.”

Ignoring the silently smiling Sharnid who wouldn’t answer any of his questions, Layfon shifted his gaze into the scenery outside the window.

It wasn’t too long before somebody came over.

“What would you like?”

Her air was totally different from the girls who had welcomed Layfon at the door...it seemed like she was angry?

“Ah...”

“.....”

As Layfon turned his head around, he found a very familiar person standing before him.

Outside of training, her long hair was usually worn overflowing her shoulders but right now it was tied in a high ponytail with a bright red ribbon. On that delicate face you could say that her features were all very well proportioned. Her long eyelashes were quivering; needless to say, she was very angry.

“Felli...Senpai?”

“What would you like?”

Before he was cut off, his voice was barely audible from the shock, the tone of his words revealing much of his underlying thoughts.

It was Felli, without a doubt.

Speaking of which, there couldn't possibly be another beauty such as this in Zuellni anyway. Also a Military Artist of the 17th platoon, this senpai was older than Layfon by a year, and she was also the sister of the president of the Student Council. A psychokinesist prodigy. To think that Felli, who was expressionless no matter where she went, that Felli who seemed like she was unhappy, a synonym for indifference, was wearing such a cute, pink costume working in this store, was hard to believe.

But she was standing before him regardless.

And even her name card clipped to her chest read: “Felli Loss”

“What are you doing here...?”

“Have you decided what you would like?” The second time she asked that question she cut him off yet again in deathly cold manner.

Sharnid, who was shaking all over, could take it no longer and finally burst out laughing.

Even with this, Felli continued to fume as she kept her cheeks drawn.

“Have you decided what you would like?”

What on earth is happening...Am I having a nightmare?

In reality, her biggest failure was to be found out by Sharnid-senpai while she was looking for a job. That thought wouldn't leave Felli's head as she angrily picked up the curved plates in the kitchen.

Girls wearing the same cute uniforms as Felli as if their looks were their only redeeming quality bustled all around her. Girls with larger chests specifically wore clothing which emphasized that point and the rest of them chose to wear chest pads to wear such clothing as well. Someone else also suggested that Felli do the same, but the offer was immediately rejected.

Thinking back, she could only blame herself for not thinking that this kind of thing would happen. Felli continued to hide in that corner cursing Sharnid with a furious look in her eyes.

“Are you looking for a job?”

After she had finished eating during her lunch break and was enjoying a cup of tea as she read through an info-magazine, Sharnid came over and asked that question.

“Ahh...”

Noticing Sharnid peeking at her careers magazine over her shoulder Felli nervously closed it. But in doing so, she revealed the cover of the magazine instead, and she ended up not hiding anything at all. Even if she put the magazine into her bag the moment she noticed someone else reading it, there was no way she could have deceived the vision of a Military Artist.

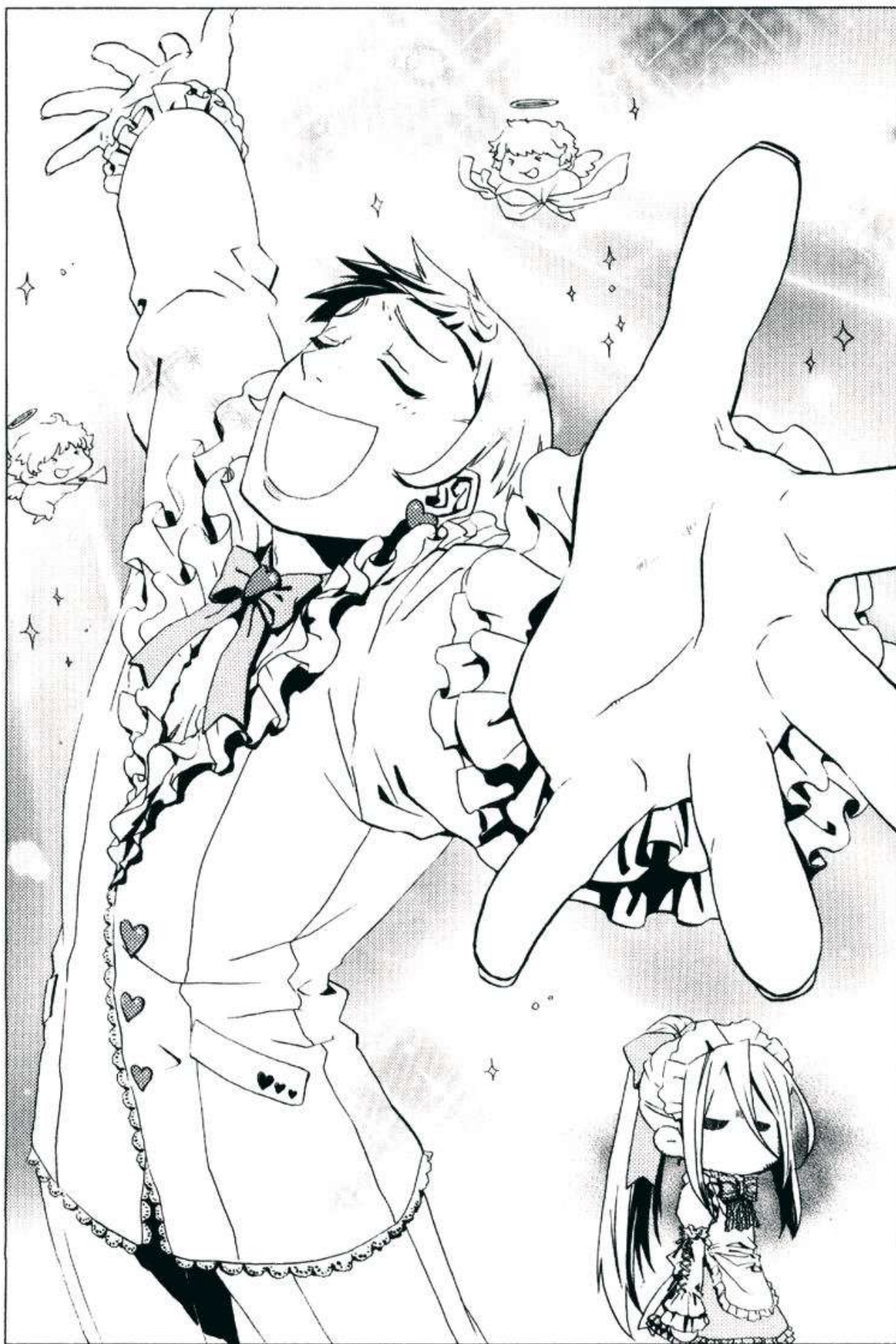
It was even more impossible when you considered the fact that Sharnid was a sniper in the team, and his vision was several times better than a normal Military Artists in the first place.

“Do you have a problem?”

“Ah, no, no...But to see Felli-chan looking for a job is not something you see every day. What's wrong? I thought your parents were sending you money for living expenses, unless for some reason this month they're experiencing some sort of financial crisis?”

“That's...”

...impossible. As she thought this, Felli decided to keep her cool and play along. She had already received the money from her parents, and although she wasn't too sure of its exact value, she knew it was far beyond what a normal student got. And that money was perfectly managed by her brother so that there would be no unnecessary waste. So getting a job had nothing to do with earning more money.



But...

“No, you’re exactly right. My brother went overboard and bought too many books. ”

In short, she was trying to push all the blame onto her brother.

“Oh? That Student Council President-sama? There shouldn't be any problems with the city’s budget right?”

As Sharnid said this, he had a look of indifference on his face but he as stroking his chin as if thinking intensely about something.

“In other words, you want to get some money as quickly as possible?”

“As long as it isn’t anything shady.”

“It’s legal! It’s legal! It’s definitely legal! All you're doing is delivering the completed dishes to the customers.”

It wasn't that she trusted that smiling Sharnid.

It’s only that she accepted the offer, considering the circumstances that she was in.

That was how she had gotten into a situation like this.

“You bastard, I’ll remember this!”

Sharnid hadn't actually lied to her. All she really did was ask what people wanted to eat, and then bring serve those dishes to the customers. But she never thought that she would be brought to a shop where you had to wear costumes like this.

“Ok, new girl. Are you used to the job now?”

“I’m memorizing the menu right now.”

Hearing someone shouting, Felli turned around. And it was something like...

“Really~~? Felli-Chan really is a brilliant child. You could probably remember it immediately, right~~?”

To think she was being hired by a man like this.

This man was wearing a cute pink uniform and as talking in a feminine voice, happily waving at all the waitresses.

“Everyone, do your best to show off your cute points, ok? What’s our mission?”

“To make cuteness reign supreme!”

“That’s right!”

Seeing the shop owner happily nodding at the waitresses’ replies, Felli’s head felt like it hurt even more.

“And it’s all thanks to Sharnid, too.”

His nightmare got even worse. As he thought this, Layfon pretended to not notice the man in the strange uniform and continued to eat.

“You guys are the best, right?”

“Yeah. Ever since I started the store, we’ve been making uniforms like this, so we always pick girls who could bring out that feeling on the chest part of the uniform So that’s why I’m considering making a new type of uniform which can bring out Felli-chan’s loli aspect.”

“Layfon, this here is my classmate from my first year here, and right now he’s going into the clothing industry.”

“I’m James~~ Please take care of me, and please use a light to and call me James~~”

“Haaa... Nice to meet you.”

“I decided that opening a normal clothing store would be too boring, so I opened this instead. However, it actually turned out to be a huge success.”

“A couple of normal stores also use this sort of uniform as the basis for their designs.”

“Those guys are a bit miserable, aren’t they?”

“Yeah, there isn’t a single girl in the world who would understand the cuteness of those uniforms.”

Listening to words that seemed logical and incomprehensible at the same time, Layfon decided to not make any judgments and remain as a listener for the entirety of the conversation.

“So in order for us to maintain our customers who live in that area, we have to do much better and we’re working very hard to improve. We have many more competitors than before. It’s because there are fewer and fewer kids willing to work here, and some are

even taken away to work at other places.....It's thanks to Sharnid that we have pulled through this tough time."

"So what you guys were talking about for that whole time, it was all about Felli-Senpai wasn't it?" Layfon started to understand a little of what they were really talking about.

But no matter how he thought about it, he couldn't imagine Felli coming to work at a place like this by herself.

"Yeah, we were. She was looking for a job, so I introduced her here."

"Haa..."

Sharnid obviously didn't make it very clear to Felli as to the nature of her job before she arrived...Layfon began to feel sorry for Felli.

"But still, it seemed strange that Felli, who had never had a job, suddenly needed one. Anyway, it's all thanks to her that it seems that we've gotten the upper hand over our competitors. I heard that many people are secretly her fans. This time the store with the highest sales is ours."

"What are you guy's talking about?"

"Eh? Ah, recently there have been many shops which have opened up nearby which are very similar to ours. Everyone is competing for customers, causing income for each store to drop quite a bit."

"Seriously. It's because the things we sell in our store originally couldn't be found anywhere else, and since we've become well known, immediately many other people tried to enter the market. If they wanted to copy us, it would have been fine if they opened up somewhere different, but they had to cramp up here with us. All they are doing is causing trouble for other people."

"Well...the thing is, not many people like this sort of stuff in the first place, so if you think about it from an business standpoint opening here is actually not a bad choice. Regardless of what happens though, if this continues on, at this rate everyone is going to go broke."

"If the competition gets too fierce it won't be good for the economy either."

"That's why the economic scientists stepped out and tried reconciliation, and made this decision. Next week, there will be a turnover competition, and the shop with the most turnovers will be accepted by the Economic Sciences department."

“We are putting the honor of the store on the line here, so no matter what we must come first. But at the rate we are going at now, it’s not enough to overcome our opponents. Because the other stores used us as a blueprint of sorts and have worked out some sort of marketing strategies, but as a result they don’t have anything that is key to their victory. Our strategy of changing uniforms every month has allowed us to pull away from them a little, so next week we have decided to change our uniforms everyday in order to attract more customers. But what we can’t have a shortage of in battle is man-power.”

“So you decided to hire Felli-Senpai.”

“That’s exactly right.”

It seemed like he understood but then looked like he didn't, showing an expression which was difficult to describe.

“Then...does Senpai know about this?”

“Of course she knows, I have already given her the pay for next week.”

“Ah...I see.”

A week eh...If it was spent doing a job you didn’t like, the week would probably pass by very slowly.

And it was a job which was in complete contrast with her image.

(It should be OK, right?)

She would definitely make a mistake somewhere down the line.

“What would you like?”

“Uhh...A hamburger meal please.”

“What drink would you like?”

“Uhh, red iced tea please.”

“Would you like me to bring it up together, or do you want to wait until you’ve finished eating for me to bring it over.”

“Together please.”

“Ok, it’ll be ready in a moment.”

Faintly, a feeling of cold indifference rose up over that cute atmosphere which the pink uniform created, making the customers flinch. Felli looked as if she didn't see them at all, and left the table. After she left the table, the customers let out a sigh, released from that tension.

As Felli gave the orders to the kitchen, the store owner said "Felli-chan~ you have to keep smiling, smiling."

"Smiling...is it?"

"Yes, you have to show our customers your most beautiful expression."

"To smile."

"Yes. It doesn't have to be heartfelt, ok? But forcefully smiling isn't ok either. It's ok to act like you're happy, and if you think you can do it you should welcome the customers as they enter and feel their smiles. Have a look at how the other girls do it."

He looked at the busy waitresses in the other stores.

Felli looked over at the girls who were standing there, all of them with bright, clear smiles on their faces.

At the same time, she noticed all the males in there had a lusty look on all their faces.

"....." Perhaps he followed Felli's line of sight, as the store owner immediately followed up with a couple of lines.

"You don't need to be too conscious of how the customer's are looking at you. If you can't go to the door and welcome the customers, then please try and display the cutest aspect of yourself."

That's hard too.

"We aren't trying to greet the customers with an overbearing airs. If I had to describe it, then it would be a frank expression. Let them feel that they are being welcomed like friends in a relaxed manner."

"Frank..."

"Can't do it?"

The store owner was also starting to feel a little insecure.

"I've never tried smiling before."

“That’s strange, your brother is a professional when it comes to smiling. His fake smile really is brilliant.”

“It confuses people into not knowing what to think.”

“Even if you are thinking about something else, it’s ok. If you smile, you leave a very good impression upon other people. Knowing that, your brother is always showing a smiling expression.”

“Haa...”

“Then practice your smile please. You can have a look at those girls, and say something like ‘welcome’”

“...Welcome.”

“Noo~~ooo! You weren’t smiling. Try again.”

“Welcome.”

“Your eyes don’t have a very welcoming feel to them.”

“Welcome.”

“You’re too stiff.”

“Welcome.”

“No! No! This won’t do!”

“Welcome.”

“Try again.”

“I think you can do it.”

...Just like this, they continued to do this for a length of time.

About an hour had passed.

“...Have a bit of a rest.”

The store owner showed his weakness first.

“Oh, you really are quite stubborn.”

“That wasn’t my original intention.”

“It seems she really hasn’t ever smiled before.”

Felli decided that she would put on an innocent look, but there was practically no way for her to communicate that.

It was always like that. Felli had trouble with expressing her feeling to anyone other than her family members.

“She pretty much failed.”

So that's all they could say.

The store owner wiped the sweat off his forehead, and thought it over a little before continuing.

“Ok, seeing as it's come to this, then we just have to prepare our store to match your expression instead.”

“Haa...”

“Just show us your unique expression. That cool loli feeling. Next week we’ll prepare a special uniform just for you. Aaaah~~ It’s been a while since I’ve felt this excited.”

“No, that's...”

“I’ve already decided. I will not change my decisions. We will change our uniforms daily – Uwaahh! It’s going to be difficult. Uwaahh!”

The store owner pranced away with impossibly tiny footsteps, and Felli couldn't stop him.

It wasn’t because she was worried about what she was thinking that she couldn’t properly communicate with him. She didn't really care what he thought of her.

How other people perceived her, wasn’t a problem for Felli at all.

Right now the issue was...

To tell the truth, she wanted to resign.

She didn’t need any money at all.

And she didn’t think that this job was very interesting either.

And it wasn’t like she had no option other than to do the job.

Indeed, she really wanted to throw the week's worth of pay she was given in advance right in the store owner's face and just leg it out of there.

“AAAAAAHHHHHH!”

No, this was serious.

“AAAHHH! Genius! I'm a genius! A prodigy! Kami-Sama has gifted me with my superior abilities. Perhaps you'd better just call me Kami-Sama? Once again, I have gathered the conviction that I had lost by my side.”

If she could run away from that shop owner who was constantly making these weird noises, Felli would definitely do that.

“That's...”

“Yes, it's Kami-Sama. I am Kami-Sama. That's why I have to say this. What is cuteness? Cuteness is justice. That's why all those who are cute are gathered to my side.”

“It doesn't matter how you do it, but please give me a more normal response.”

“Ah, I'm sorry. I accidentally got caught up in the moment; there's no need for you to worry as it happens all the time.”

“...All the time?”

Keeping a constant distance between herself and the shop owner who was still shaking from his recent excitement, Felli looked at the uniform she was wearing again. It should have been...changed a little. The design of the uniform was definitely different from the others. The uniform doubtlessly still retained its cute feel, having kept its pink color

They had started from pink, and finally returned to pink. She felt that if they were going to use that uniform emphasize her selling points it would be a little forced.

“It seems blue and black really do suit you the most. But if we just obediently followed that train of thought, we wouldn't have a chance to dig deeper into your potential, and I can't further make use of my genius. Regardless as to how it goes, as long as it is confined by some sort of trend, then that would be a defeat; one which I cannot accept. You have to make cuteness your objective, you must make that pink color your objective!”

“Please don't just casually put out a motto like that.”

“But no matter what it's one which I must always adhere to. It's difficult, oh, it's difficult.”

He didn't look troubled at all; instead seeing the shop owner revealing an expression of utmost satisfaction at the new uniform Felli couldn't say anything.

“Well then, everybody! From now on for the next week, we must all work hard, ok? You are warriors which have been chosen to protect the cute-ism ideals. In order to protect the cuteness in the world, you must show the customers your heartfelt smiles filled with bravery and hope... It's also in order to protect what's dear to you! What's dear to you?”

“Of course, our pay!”

Just like this, with the dropping of the shop owner's tears, the sales wars began.



“Ok, ok, let me have a look at what the uniform has turned into.”

“Why did we have to come to a place like this?”

After training ended, Layfon was dragged here by Sharnid again.

This was the roof of some tall building. Layfon listlessly asked Sharnid who was lying on the water tank enhancing his vision with Internal-type Kei and looking toward the store.

“If I peeped at her from close up I'd probably piss Felli off, yeah?”

“So they say...”

“Even if it's her, she probably wouldn't be using psychokinesis while she's at work.”

“No, that's not what I'm trying to say.”

“If anything diverges from the plan, then I'll lose all the money I put into the bet.”

“You bet on something again?”

“Of course, that's why I prepared the ultimate weapon.”

“And the ultimate weapon refers to...?”

“Well, you'll see.”



Sharnid dragged Layfon over by the neck, and Layfon used his Kei unwillingly and looked across to the Cafe.

The store was filled with people.

In the midst of it all, girls wearing pink uniforms rushed back and forth.

Of the people who were sitting in the cafe, the majority of them were pretty much male students in uniform. Their eyes were glowing as they looked towards the girls in the pink uniforms.

And out of all the girls, the male students were all looking towards Felli.

Felli, wearing a custom uniform, wore the same cold expression on her face as she carried the plates back and forth. After placing their meals in front of the stunned customers, she left without a shred of warmth in her expression.

Even so, all the male customers in the store were completely satisfied.

“How is it?”

“That...”

“I have no idea how to describe this situation” thought Layfon.

Felli was the same as always with a cold, featureless expression. What was more striking was an annoyed look as if she had been forced to do this reflected on her doll-like face. Even though she should be very nervous at carrying all those dishes around, yet...

“It seems like you still don’t get it” said Sharnid as he shook his head.

“It doesn't matter that she doesn't provide a very welcome service. Look, see all those girls around her who are attending to the customers’ every need? Look at them all, all smiling the same smile, and even the girls who are a even a little cute just get buried under the whole group. No matter how much prettier Felli is she would probably be the same, buried by the rest of the girls. That’s the result of the uniforms. Wearing the same uniforms, doing the same things and saying the same words, it will always bury a person’s individuality to an extent. The only people who could tell all those waitresses apart would be the waitresses themselves. But Felli is different. She’s definitely wearing the same systematic uniform, but the impression she makes is different to the rest of them. And on top of that the other girls are obviously treating the guests enthusiastically. ‘What’s wrong with her?’ is probably what most of the people are thinking when they see her. As long as you give them this kind of an impression, you’ve won. She’s already a lot prettier than the

rest, making other people wishing they could see her smile. Not the smile she uses to greet the customers. Her real smile.”

Her real smile.

Speaking of which, Layfon hasn’t ever seen it either.

“Senpai, you...have you seen Felli-Senpai smiling before?”

“No. She already has a fan club, and the people there haven’t caught her honestly smiling either. But there are heaps of people who are willing to pay a lot of money for a picture of her smiling.”

“Speaking of which, what’s in that box?”

Beside Sharnid, there was a box which he could carry over his shoulder.

“That’s a telescopic camera which I borrowed from the people in the Newspaper Club.”

“You’re trying to get pictures too.”

“Naturally” said Sharnid confidently, leaving Layfon sighing in resignation.

Just like that, he unconsciously probed the area around him.

“How do I say it, there seems to be a lot of people around here.”

“They are the members of the fan club. Damn, they really are quick. If it’s like this, even if it’s a smile out of professional duty, it’ll have to do.”

Sharnid anxiously got the camera out of the box and proceeded to get into position. In that position, he looked like a sniper who had already locked onto his target.

“No matter what, I must take a photo of her smiling.”

Seeing Sharnid erase his presence completely with his external-type Kei right in front of him, Layfon tilted his head, using internal-type Kei to boost his aural sensory organ, or more commonly known as an ear, and listened for any changes.

With a clang, the dishes that were originally on the tray fell out in front of Felli. The spaghetti bolognese was tipped all over the floor, and the sauce spilt out with it. The empty tray fell onto the floor spinning, going sha-ra sha-ra.

The waitresses who saw this immediately began to apologize successively, and Felli turned her head looking over her shoulder behind her.

Somebody had pushed Felli from behind her, making her lose her balance and drop the meal.

But as she turned her head to look back, there wasn't anyone near her.

(She must have been set up)

The person who pushed Felli from behind vanished just like that, during the instant when Felli's concentration was broken by the fallen dishes.

(Was it on purpose? Who?)

“Hey, aren't you even going to apologize?”

While she was looking for some person who had already vanished, an angry voice cut in. It came from a guest who was on the table beside Felli whose uniform was splattered with oily dots from the sauce.

“You don't even check if you had splattered that on anyone, how the hell are you treating customers?”

The waitress who was holding onto the mop froze in confusion.

That person was wearing a Military Artist's uniform, and the expression on his face was doubtlessly one of fury.

The store suddenly quieted down.

“My most sincere apologies.”

Felli lowered her head.

“If you want to apologize, then get rid of this filth on me.”

Felli lowered her head, listening to that person's words, and she immediately realized that that person wasn't really angry.

It was all an act.

As she noticed this, Felli immediately checked the feelings on her hips. The sword belt wasn't there. Of course, she didn't have her Dite rod hidden anywhere either. Realizing that she was about to teach that person a lesson, Felli remembered what she was here to do.

(Since she was taking care of a customer, she couldn't do that)

“Hey, say something.”

“I’m extremely sorry.”

Just like that, she lowered her head and repeated those same words. She couldn’t think of anything else to say.

“Aiyayaya, we’re very sorry Customer-san.”

The store owner spoke in an extremely high pitched voice as if to ward off the awkwardness of the situation, quickly appeared in front of Felli.

“We are very sorry. We’ll pay for the cleaning. The dishes will be free as well, so please forgive us.”

“I don’t want to hear this.”

“Eh?! Aiya, then what?”

The customer moved in front of Felli with difficulty as she had been pushed aside by the store manager who was acting as if he were lamenting.

“As soon as I came in here I felt unsatisfied. Everyone is pretentiously doing work in front of the customers and there isn’t a single sincere smile here. It really pisses me off.”

That was actually a very appropriate statement. However, she didn’t lose her calm but instead felt a cutting pain on her skin.

Felli was also very self-conscious about the fact that she couldn’t smile properly. When she was practicing with the store owner, she felt that even if she didn’t smile very often, she should still be able to do it. She was quite shocked herself.

“I’m extremely sorry.”

But, right now, the problem wouldn’t just go away after laughing a little. And he couldn’t even put on a smiling expression anyway.

Felli just kept her head lowered for the whole time.

“I’m sorry.”

In the resting room Felli lowered her head as she apologized to the store owner.

“It’s okay~~this kind of thing is pretty common in this business” said the store owner, light-heartedly dismissing the apology with a wave of his hand.



That customer had left after taking the money for cleaning his clothes. Felli was allowed to have a short break, which is why she was in this resting room, which doubled as a change room for the girls that worked here.

Felli stared at the spiralling pattern that spread across the tea cup in the store owner's hand.

“...I really wasn't suited to do things like serving the customers.”

There wasn't a single time where she revealed her true smile. All she did the whole time was listen to the customers' conversations closely. “In that kind of a situation, what would Karian have done?” thought Felli. He would probably deal with a perfectly. No, her brother would never let the customer get angry in the first place.

But Felli couldn't do it. And she was completely lost on what to do.

“Well...I had thought that dealing with the customers would have been the easiest job, but I hadn't considered suitability for the role.”

“Then...”

“But, I don't think you're not suited to the role.”

“Eh??”

“You quickly memorized the entire menu and when you deliver the dishes there aren't any excess movements. And it's not like you're completely unable to treat the customer nicely, so there's no way anyone could tell you were a newbie.”

She never thought that she would be praised, and Felli started feeling dazed about all this.

“But it's a pity, we still can't increase the number of customers that way.”

When he put it like that, for some reason Felli suddenly felt calm again.

“Well, if you went to the other stores, there are probably some waitresses who aren't too friendly either. The issue here isn't whether or not you're suited to the job, this is the customer service business. There aren't any real qualifications required, and in a job like this, screwing up is part of the business as well.”

“Ha....”

“But you're not really getting stressed over this right?” The store owner continued “I've got many military artist friends, and most of the psychokinesists are all people who aren't very good at expressing themselves, right? Even though us commoners don't really understand, but those friends told me, that when the psychokinesists are using Nen-I, in

order to sharpen their senses, they will normally cut off their responses from their physical body.”

She kind of understood the meaning behind these words. While using psychokinesists to gather enormous amounts of information, if their bodies reacted to all of the information they received it would waste a large amount of time. So in order to prevent this kind of reaction, the brain limited the amount of information sent to the nervous system in the body.

If that repeated continuously over time, the result would be the same as how Felli was now.

Whether it be shock, anger or grief...and even laughter, all of those emotions are processed within the brain, and thus Felli became an emotionless doll.

“But that’s something that must be fixed. In reality, right now, my friend can finally begin to smile again. I think that if you want to express yourself properly, it’s definitely not impossible.”

“Is...that true?”

“Of course, I guarantee you.”

“... The store owner’s promise seems somewhat unreliable.”

“Hey, that was too far.”

“But, I’m extremely grateful to you.”

“Ara? What’s wrong?”

“I don’t know if I’ve figured out where my goal is. I was just thinking that a person already assigned to the Military Arts department who is unable to read the atmosphere and regretted it might exist.”

The store owner tilted his head, looking at Felli, and Felli felt that the gloomy atmosphere had gotten somewhat more relaxed, and her facial expressions recovered likewise. After bidding the store owner good day, Felli left the resting room.

“...That really scared me,” muttered the store owner to himself as he spaced out in the resting room. “Really, that child can smile too. If she practiced a little more, she could do a professional smile as well...ah...but it’ll be impossible by this week. And I don’t know if that child will still work here after this.”

The store owner’s inner musings never reached Felli’s ears.



“Was that ok?”

A little distance away from the store in a nearby alleyway stood the man from before. He was looking uncomfortably at his surroundings as he flattened out his tie.

“You did it very well,” said a girl, wearing a bright pink Café Mira costume. “If a perfect girl with such a noble air to her resigned, Café Mira’s customers would definitely be reduced. Even if she doesn’t resign, it would take away a lot of her enthusiasm. If we do this another two, three times, then that Onee-san will definitely not be able to take it anymore.”

“But is this ok? Isn’t that where you work?”

“Yeah, it’s fine. I’m starting to get annoyed with that boring shop owner cause of how long I’ve been here. And I hate how he has us wear these idiotic clothes. If you can do it well, you’ll get paid for your acting fees.”

This waitress had accepted the bribe of a rival to Café Mira. In today’s competitive market, buying people out was perfectly natural, but amidst all that, transactions such as these occur quietly in the background.

This is also something which the Commerce Department was worried might happen.

“Anyway, it’s about time to get these clothes off. It wouldn’t be good if other people recognized me.”

“What? Cause it’ll make other people thinks you enjoy Cosplaying?”

At this moment, they heard a new voice.

“So that’s how it is, huh? Well, I knew it would be like this anyway...”

“Who is it...”

“Who cares who I am. To appear in a situation like this, I must be a hero of justice, right? Do you understand your position?”

Sharnid stood there, looking like he was blocking the way to the exit of the lane.

“Che. Seventeenth Platoon.”

“That’s how it is.”

Sharnid snickered at the slowly retreating boy.

“What’re you doing? What do you want with us?” shouted the waitress.

Sharnid shrugged his shoulders. “Well...if it was just me, it wouldn’t really be a problem. But there’s someone else who wants to have a little chat with you guys.”

“Huh?” After hearing Sharnid’s words, the other two finally noticed.

“You should be feeling your backs getting cold about now. Although I’m surprised at how relaxed you guys are, how do you feel now?”

It was as if there was a gale behind them.

They gingerly turned around, and standing there was...

“.....”

Stunned to silence, the two just stood there rigidly like corpses.

Layfon was standing behind them.

Gazing at them, silently.

He wasn’t holding anything in his hands, but his dte was clearly hung on his hip-belt for all to see. It felt like he could whip it out in an instant.

“Speaking of which...you guys were talking about some very interesting things. That it wouldn’t be good for people who know you to recognize you. Can you tell us why you would be troubled by that?”

“What...What do you want? It’s got nothing to do with you.”

“Well... it doesn’t have anything to do with us, but...”

There was a very quite knocking sound. It was the sound of Layfon tapping the Dite with his fingers.

Da... Da... Da... The sounds reverberated through the small alleyway with rhythm.

“Did you know? There’s a rule, specifically dealing with duels between Military Artists in the student handbook. Well, if we did this in public, we would break the rule, but if you

reject others' challenges, it's a sort of disgrace to a Military Artist. It's not easy to reject another's challenge."

As he said this, Sharnid slowly pulled out the student handbook.

"Let me see, ok? Lets, see... Lets see... If there's to be a duel between Military Artists on school grounds, you must first apply to the student council for permission, and after verification of the two student's identities, the duel is to take place at a specified arena. The weapons must comply with the Academy City's regulations...etc. etc."

He closed the student handbook with a slap.

"So, you'll have to wait until our trump card decides to apply for a duel before this can proceed. If you piss him off, even just a little, then you'll no longer get to speak reason to him. So let me tell him."

Da. Da. Da. The sound was continuing.

Seeing the paling boy, Sharnid continued.

"So, what do you say?"

"W-w-w-wait a sec, I, I'm not really a Military Artist, I've only just worn this uniform for a little while. Duels or whatever, just spare me!" "Then that makes it very difficult for us. That's obviously against the rules. Then... about the uniform, it's the proof of what kind of student you are, and if there's no valid reason to be wearing another type of uniform then you'll have to receive punishment. It says here."

"It's much better than a duel."

As the male student lamented he took off his Military Artist's uniform and threw it onto the floor.

Da...The sound stopped.

The boy looked relieved as he collapsed in a heap onto the floor.

"Hmm... I guess it's ok like that as well. Then we're done over here, but not quite yet over there, eh?"

"What are you going to do?"

The blanching waitress looked down upon Sharnid with a belittling expression.

"This guy wearing a Military Artist's uniform has absolutely nothing to do with me."

“Woah, acting like you don’t know him already?”

“What are you talking about, acting? I obviously don’t know him.”

“Well, if you want to take this approach it’s fine as well. Then how did she drop all those dishes and spill it over a customer’s trousers?”

“It was her mistake, I suppose.”

It seems she was going to pretend she didn’t hear what the other boy had said previously... No, she was insisting that she didn’t even speak to the boy.

Of course, Layfon and Sharnid both knew Felli, so you could say they were protecting one of their own people and lying.

“No, that’s not such a simple problem.”

As he said this, he took out the camera.

“I prepared this baby to catch a Kodak moment, but instead it caught a different moment instead”

“Che...”

“I got the decisive shot. We haven’t broken the student rules by doing this...at least we shouldn’t have. Anyway, if the Commerce Department catch wind of some bad rumors, it might be pretty difficult to find any jobs in the future.”

“.....”

Looking at the silent waitress, Sharnid gave Layfon a signal with his eyes, telling him what to do.

But Layfon didn’t reply either.

The blood rushing to his head was genuine, him getting pissed off wasn’t an act either, but to push a girl in a dilemma to make a choice still seemed low.

And it wasn’t their place to deal with this girl either.

If he still forced her to make a decision, it would seem a little excessive.

If they were officially questioned, it would actually be Layfon and Sharnid who wouldn’t be able to answer.

“...Really, what the hell are you guys doing?”

Hearing a tired sigh, Layfon and Sharnid's bodies both shivered from the surprise.

“Oh, Felli-Chan. Are you well?”

“Of course. I'm having a wonderful time working at some brilliant store somebody recommended to me.”

“Wahh... but isn't that obviously displeasure in your voice?”

“And on top of that, you make someone your money tree?”

As she said this, Felli walked up to Sharnid and pulling the camera off him and took out the memory card in an instant.

“I'm confiscating this.”

“That memory card has a huge storage capacity, and it was pretty expensive. Can you return it to me afterwards?”

“Denied.”

Hearing this, Sharnid powerlessly lowered his head.

Ignoring Sharnid's reaction, Felli stood in front of the waitress.

“What are you doing?” The girl looked at Felli with contempt and provocation.

Felli brought down her palm with a lot of force.

The sound didn't seem to match with the small lane...or rather, it was a huge noise you would expect to find on busy highways, reverberating in that tiny side street.

“Hmph.” “Ah....”

The sound was so loud it left Layfon and Sharnid stunned for a moment.

“Well, with that, your debt to me has gone away quite easily; I'll just leave you to the store owner and let him deal with you.”

Saying that, Felli stared steadily at her and walked past Sharnid, quickly returning to the store.

The four people behind her watched her leave, stunned.



It was already deep into the night.

The shift was over, and Felli came out from the store.

When she looked up, she saw a familiar person standing in front of her.

“You were here.”

Layfon stood under a lamppost near the store.

“Yeah, well...”

“...Could it be that you’ve been waiting here for the whole time?”

“No, even for me that would be too...”

“No willpower?”

“Eeehh?”

As Felli finished speaking, she didn’t even stop and left, and Layfon chased after her.

I’ll walk you home.

“Of course you will. You’ve been waiting for so long, so of course you would.”

And just like that, they continued to walk silently. But she still felt conscious about Layfon, who was walking behind her just out of her peripheral vision.

His expression at that time was the exact opposite of that when he was fighting Filth Monsters; it really made people want to sigh. It was like a child throwing a fit... Felli sighed.

“Really, thanks for before.”

“No...I’m sorry, I just went ahead and did something unnecessary.”

“You were really pissed off, weren’t you? I could feel your killing intent from all the way inside the store.” At that time, as Felli was repenting on her actions, she had already felt Layfon’s killing intent. “Looking at you threatening those two people, you seemed pretty happy to me.”



“No, that was all Sharnid-senpai’s idea.”

“Why were you so angry?”

“That...It seems I really can’t bear to see my friends being bullied.”

She had guessed it was probably something like this much earlier, and her expectations for any other reasons were disappointing.

“Well...that’s just how you are.”

“And besides...” As if countering Felli’s words, Layfon began to say something. “I also wanted to help senpai...Felli try out things other than being a psychokinesist.”

He whispered this at a barely audible volume to himself, surprising Felli so much that she couldn’t catch her breath.

(This person really is...)

She wanted to live a life outside that of a Nen-I user.

Her brother knew that Felli had this dream. Other than him there was only Layfon.

(He really is...He really is...He really is...!)

Nobody else knew; only Layfon. She never even told her captain, Nina, and this man she did tell didn’t even understand the meaning behind it. But at that time, she didn’t know what kind of expression to put on.

He was cheering for me, worrying about me, it really makes me happy...

But Layfon, who knew of her dream, didn’t recognize the deeper meaning to this dream at all, and his slowness really made Felli angry.

Now, how was she going to show both those expressions at once...

(Right now, she was completely lost on what expression to use.)

“Fine, I’m going home!” Felli loudly ended the conversation, and continued on forward and as she confirmed the sounds of Layfon’s chasing footsteps. She walked a little bit faster.

Interlude 02

“.....”

“What’s wrong?”

“Speaking of which, there aren’t any Heaven’s Blade Successors who use metal whips, are there?”

“I think you should know more about these things than I do.”

“I guess I should. Well, including me, there’re three people who use swords, and if you exclude Delbone, there’s a person using his fists, a longsword, a shield, a gun, a staff, a bow and metal spheres. There isn’t anyone who uses metal whips.”

“What’s the matter, bringing up these things now.”

“Well, it’s about my captain, Nina-senpai.”

“Yeah, I know, you’re always talking about this person in your letters, and she seems to be very hardworking.”

“Yeah, it was just teaching her some moves. But I’ve taught her a lot of different moves before...”

“Because Layfon isn’t used to teaching others, that person must be having a hard time learning, right?”

“Hmm, maybe it’s like that. So that’s why, I suddenly thought of a move at that moment. It’s a move that couldn’t be more suitable for her. But I can’t remember where I picked up that move from.”

“...You’ve gotten dementia?”

“Hmm...Maybe it’s like that. But as long as I’ve seen a move once, I can immediately recognize the direction of its Kei flow, so maybe it wasn’t a Heaven’s Blade successor’s move. I should be able to remember a person who used such an elegant move, even if I’ve only seen him once.”

“But to make Layfon so eager to teach her that move, that person must be really talented.”

“Yeah, she’s really hardworking as well.”

“Oh...?”

“Not only that, she’s also very frank. I doubt there’s anyone else who’s as direct as she is. But then again, she’s a little bit of a klutz at times.”

“You don’t have the right to say that about others.”

“Really?”

“Yes, really.”

“But I’m a little bit envious. Even though she’s clumsy, she’s still very straightforward about everything. It really makes me envious.”

“Yeah, maybe.”

Diamond Passion

To Layfon Alseif, Nina Antalk was someone who held many secrets.

In the Academy City of Zuellni, as a Military Artist elite, she was allowed to enter a platoon as only a 3rd year, making her a very accomplished girl. At the same time, she was a person who was involved with the dilemma Zuellni was facing and was very passionate about doing something for the city.

But where did this passion come from?

He felt that if he went and asked her, he might be able to understand her feelings completely, but then again he might never be able to understand.

“Is it really ok?” Nina asked Layfon in an unsettled manner.

“It’s ok.”

A completely spiritless Layfon nodded his head.

They were in a training area that was especially reserved for the 17th platoon of Zuellni. Soundproof and shockproof materials were used to isolate this huge space, and in it, stood the Captain of the seventeenth squad, Nina and her platoon member Layfon. Only platoons with the bare minimum of four fighting members, such as the seventeenth squad, felt that the training area was extremely spacious. And in a situation like today when there were only two people, it felt even more spacious.

It was also an unavoidable reality.

Today was a rest day with lessons only before lunch, so most of the platoons had finished training by dusk. Even if the sounds of training came through the neighboring walls, it would be probably be some hardworking individual practicing by himself.

“Is it really ok?” Asked Nina almost naggingly, as she confirmed the sensation of the two restored Dites she held in each of her hands. The whips that she wielded were weapons designed to emphasize offensive capabilities.

“Anytime is fine.”

Again, he nodded as if unaware of anything.

“I can’t say how this’ll turn out.”

Facing Layfon’s attitude, Nina felt a little annoyed. She felt that she was being underestimated. Considering their strength, that would be understandable as well. The problem was that he wasn’t even holding a Dite in his hands, and not only that, he had loosened his sword strap as well while still standing around with a complacent look on his face, which made Nina feel like he had seriously insulted her self-respect.

She wouldn’t ask him again.

She immediately got her internal-type Kei flowing. Using the internal-type Kei generated from within her to reinforce her entire body, she immediately cut down the distance between herself and Layfon.

Following up on her charge, she brought out her right-hand metal whip.

Nina locked onto Layfon’s left shoulder.

Layfon was in the center of her vision as she charged at him, and showing no signs of moving just caught Nina’s strike just like that.

The force in that strike was more than enough to rend flesh; to smash bone into little pieces.

Even though the strike was that powerful, it was as if it had fallen upon a steel wall, and her wrist received a jarring impact instead.

“Ugh...”

Even though she didn’t let go of the steel whip, Nina was caught completely off guard, and kept her distance from Layfon.

“Do it more seriously.”

Layfon turned to face Nina, whose wrist was wracked with pain and spoke to her in a critical manner.

“That attack was nothing like Senpai’s usual attacks. You have to attack even more seriously, and make it so that I’m forced to evade it. If you can’t do that, then there’s no meaning to what I’m going to show you next.”

She’s had been training with Layfon for a long time now, and it wasn’t only after the platoon training sessions, but also with him during their rest days, but she had never seen Layfon like this before.

“What’s wrong?”

She didn’t ask him like that.

A part of it was because she knew now wasn’t the time to ask something like that, but she knew the real reason was her curiosity for what Layfon was going to show her next.

“.....”

Nina quietly increased the density of her Internal type Kei. Being able to do this in a blink of an eye was thanks to Layfon’s training as well. The unique breathing method she used when using Internal type Kei was also the result of taking Layfon’s advice. He told her to keep her breath the same as it normally was, and as a result she managed to master Internal type Kei.

When she first started, she would get exhausted very quickly. It felt like she couldn’t properly control the Kei which burned within her, but now she could stabilize her Kei easily.

She could feel her muscles expanding beneath her skin. It wasn’t just her muscles, even the bones which held up her body was filling with Kei, making them harder.

Her body was like a spring, coiling up and gathering energy, and then releasing it all.

The target that she had locked on to hadn’t changed; it was still the left shoulder.

She brought her arm down in a direct stroke from up high.

She released all her Kei at the moment of impact.

“Wu...”

Again, her wrist sent out a signal of pain as Nina looked at an unperturbed Layfon.

This time Layfon moved. Grabbing Nina's right arm which was targeting his left shoulder, he punched her with the other hand in the stomach. The Kei which he released from his fist caused Nina to be flung against the opposing wall.

Her back rammed into the wall, then Nina fell onto the ground with a crash.

"What the hell's going on..."

Layfon didn't hold back with his strike at all. Nina stood up quickly.

Layfon stood there showing no signs of being injured, completely still.

"Do you understand what I just did?"

"No, filling your whole body up with Kei, I have no idea what you did" replied Nina, shaking her head.

It was true; that's all she had figured out from all that.

Her right wrist was aching. It was the evidence that all the power in her strike had been deflected back easily. If she hadn't loosened her grip at the moment of impact, the recoil would probably have been even greater.

Layfon carried the first aid kit over, deftly treating Nina's wrist.

"Ah, I'm sorry."

"...It's ok."

He sprayed her wrist with a cooling mist to ease the pain, then used a bandage to wrap it up and secure it. Nina concentrated her Internal-type Kei near her wrist. Even though she didn't expect any real results, at least it would speed up her recovery.

"What was that you did back there?"

Compared to the pain in her wrist, she cared about that more.

That move was probably what Layfon was going to show Nina.

Even if it was like that, she couldn't understand it at all.

"It didn't feel like striking a person at all, it felt as if I was hitting something very hard."

"That was the Heaven's Blade Successor Reverse's move."

"It was a Heaven's Blade Successor's move?"

The Heaven's Blade Successors of Lance Shelled City Grendan were really powerful Military Artists who could single-handedly take Filth Monsters.

And standing in front of her, Layfon was also a Heaven's Blade Successor before he came to Zuellni.

“This technique is the only reason Reverse became a Heaven's Blade Successor, and it's no surprise.”

“Is it really that powerful of a technique?”

No doubt it was; deflecting Nina's technique so easily.

But relying on just that technique to become a Heaven's Blade Successor seemed a little surprising.

Layfon is very strong.

He warded off two attacks on Zuellni by the Filth Monsters by himself.

But during those battles, Nina was standing aside and watching.

That stunning scene made you forget to breathe.

And the second time, fighting that mature form Filth Monster, Layfon performed moves which were impossible for Nina.

But most importantly of all, when he was facing such a huge existence, he didn't show any signs of fear.

To be able to do all that by himself, that was the definition of strong.

And that's why Nina started having thoughts of not being able to do anything by herself...

“Kongoukei...(Diamond Kei) That's what this technique is called. It defends against all attacks and then causes them to rebound; the strongest shield. And then there is the strongest Guan Dao (halberd) wielded by Cauntia, which can cut through anything. This pair's combination attacks have massacred large numbers of Filth monsters.”

“...So that's why.”

She understood that reasoning. A team, which was made up of two people who had reached a genius level in their offense and defense, would surely be a formidable combination.

But Layfon shook his head as Nina thought of this explanation.

“There’s Cauntia who only attacks and completely disregards defense, and there’s Reverse who only defends and never bothers with offense. Think about it carefully, and imagine the situation.”

With that body, she takes on the relentless attack of the filth monsters with such concentration that she barely blinks. Can you imagine that, Captain?”

Nina didn’t reply and was frozen on the spot.

When they were battling the mature form filth monster, Nina acted as the bait.

At that time the filth beast was coming closer and closer, pressuring her, and Nina was so scared that she couldn’t move at all. She thought it was going to be the same as a battle, so she didn’t think that there would be any problems. At that time, she never even imagined she might be torn into shreds by those gigantic teeth.

She decided that she would imagine herself in such a situation more often.

What kind of people would be there...

“The basic idea of Kongoukei is to use Internal type Kei to reinforce your body and simultaneously follow the Kei of an attack and reflect it. It’s actually very simple in theory. But the hard part is getting the timing right and to always be staring at the opponent with a persistent glare, and to do that you have to have a very strong will. You have to do those two things.”

As he said ‘To always be staring at the opponent with a persistent glare’ she already thought that it was possible for her to master his technique.

But, if it was as he said, then it shouldn’t be that easy to learn. After all the training, Nina finally understood this from her experience.



“Owowowow....”

Nina woke up to excruciating pain in her muscles. How long had it been?

Even before, she hadn’t ever been like this before.

Now she thought about it, recently every time she had forgotten her restraint and pushed herself too much she had done something that made her whole body sore with pain.

But practicing by herself for self training all the time, to the point of being hospitalised, which was the catalyst for Layfon to start training her, providing Nina with very valuable training sessions.

Ignoring the pain, she sat up with that blank look of having just woken up, adjusting her Kei breathing. This was her latest daily routine she had to go through.

Her ultimate goal was to be able to maintain her Kei breathing even when she was sleeping, but right now, she still couldn't do it.

It wasn't actually to flood her lungs with Kei, but it was to stabilize the flow of Kei coming from her Kei organ in her back...that was called Kei breathing.

As she proceeded with her Kei breathing, she unconsciously looked about her room.

Looking at her bed, her study desk, and her wardrobe, you could immediately tell a private room; it was Nina's living space. The toilet, the showers, and the kitchen were all shared.

Nina lived in the girl's dorms.

This was built a few years ago as practice for the Architecture Students for their graduation. The designer had called it a work of art, and you could see this clearly from the outside of the building. It was built in an archaic wooden house style, and on the inside, everywhere you looked you could see carefully designed ornaments. The three shared rooms were also very spacious and luxurious, making people who lived in other apartments and dormitories feel envious.

But the thing was, that place wasn't very popular.

The main reason was that it was too far away from school.

And another reason was the noise pollution.

Originally, the land nearby was prepared for Architecture Students to undergo training, so they would build many different structures, or knock down the older buildings. The reason that the girl's dorm that Nina lived in hadn't been knocked down was that the person who designed this returned to his home city after graduating and won an award for the design, so they kept this building as a memorial of sorts.

A house without people living in it would quickly fall into disrepair, so they turned it into a so-called girl's dorm and rented it out. But when it got dark, the lack of people felt creepy to many residents, so there were very few people who lived in that dorm.

Because of all the terrible conditions, the rent was low, so Nina decided to live here.

“Hoo...”

Nina had finished adjusting her Kei breathing, and now fully awake, she used her Internal type Kei to ease the pain in her muscles. This level of muscle soreness only needed maintain some sort of Kei in the area, and the pain would be gone by around noon.

Internal type Kei, or Katsukei, could be used to reinforce the body and remove fatigue. If in an emergency one fully released all their Internal type Kei and continually reinforced their body, afterward there would be very scary side consequences waiting for the user. Nina had experienced this period of aftershock herself. However, if it was used appropriately, one could achieve accelerated recovery.

Feeling a lot more comfortable, Nina placed a panda plushie that she had been hugging all that time onto the jutting windowsill beside her bed. The plushie had been mended in several places, and gave an overall appearance of being very old and worn.

That plushie was one few things that Nina had brought here from her hometown. It was a present from her grandfather when she was little, and she wouldn't be able to sleep peacefully if she wasn't hugging it.

Wearing a set of light pink pajamas, Nina walked out of her room, going to wash her face.

As soon as she walked into the hallway the mouth-watering smell of melted butter assaulted her.

Nina hurriedly looked at the clock hung on the wall beside the stairs. It was an ancient clock that had to be wound, telling Nina that breakfast was about to start. Nina quickly walked towards the washing basin, washed her face, and then returned to her room to change.

Just as she finished changing...

The clock sounded out with a ring and simultaneously, a voice called out “Breakfast is starting~~~~”. At the same time a clanging sound reverberated with the other noises around the dorm at a level far beyond ear splitting.

Put simply, it was the sound of metal hitting metal, but to call it a weapon created solely for pissing people off wasn't excessive at all. Any alarm clock in existence couldn't possibly create a sound as annoying as this.

“Woah!”

After a while, she heard the ringing again. Normally, she got up well before the sound went off, but she had overexerted herself in yesterday's training session, so she slept in a little.

Even if she lived this irregular life, the only schedule she strictly followed was her mealtimes. That was one of the rules of the girls dorm.

“I'm up! I'm up already!”

Shouting at the top of her lungs from her room loudly, Nina scrambled out of her room.

The girl beside the stairs was holding a soup spoon and was beating a pan. The noise this made was known as the most effective weapon designed to wake people up in the morning.

“Hehee... Nina you lazy sloth”.

As she said this, she stopped hitting the frying pan and pulled out her earplugs.

“Haa...I'm sorry.”

Seeing that the noise had stopped, Nina apologized in a relieved manner.

This girl's name was Selina Vin. She was a fourth year Alchemy student, and she was also the dorm manager.

The reason that she was the dorm manager was because of all the people who lived here, she was the only one who could cook. People who could control food were the greatest people in the world, as decreed by the last dorm manager who graduated last year.

“But it's been a long time since I've whacked the frying pan like this, so I'm a little happy.” Saying this, Selina went downstairs first.

Nina helplessly chased after her.

All of the people who lived in the dorm were already seated at the table in the dining room.

“Morning, Nina.”

“Morning, Leu”

The person who called out to Nina was another person who lived in this dorm, and after replying, Nina also took her place at the table.

Today’s breakfast was toast fried in butter and dipped in milk, along with salad and tea.

On a table which could seat ten people, there was only enough food for three.

That is to say, these three people were all of the people who lived in this all girls dorm.

“It’s been such a long time since I’ve heard that sound she uses to wake people up.”

“Yeah, sorry about that.”

Selina also put on an expression which said ‘can’t help it’ and sighed.

“The others who used to live here have all graduated, so now it really feels a little lonely.”

“No, that’s not it. Only two people graduated from here” said Nina calmly as she spread honey across the toast.

“But it’s because nobody new came to live here.”

“Anyway, it’s not a problem that has just started. It started ages ago” muttered Leu, staring into the distance.

“Part of it’s also because of the way Selina wakes people up; it leaves most of the new people here traumatized and they all leave this dorm.”

“But isn’t that because it was really hard to wake that girl up?”

Looking at Selina frowning with displeasure, Nina shook her head helplessly.

“Well...even if she wasn’t scared away, there would only be four people. In this dorm for ten people there isn’t even half that.”

At least she had to reassure her first.

“But isn’t having only three people manage this huge dorm too much work? We can’t clean the empty rooms up properly, and we can’t clean up the lawn outside properly... and recently there’s been more mice, so don’t you guys think it’d be better if we called in some more people?”

“No.” Facing Selina who was whining, Leu cut in “I don’t think the mice have anything to do with the number of people living here, but there have been some pretty annoying sounds coming from the ceiling.”

“...Eh?”

Nina moved her feet under the table slightly, and her toes touched something. It was a something that was quite hard.

“That’s why I have a proposal. Ah, you can’t reject this proposal. No matter what you say, I’m the dorm manager. Ahem!”

Listening to Selina who had probably puffed up her chest, Nina looked under the table.

“That’s why I want to increase the number of people in this dorm.”

“...you don’t even know how you’re going to do that, and we all know we can’t just increase the number of people so easily just because we wanted to.”

“That’ll never happen, yeah?”

“This dorm has a pretty unfortunate environment, so I doubt many students would be willing to come here.”

“Hem hem hem~”

Pretending to listen to what Leu and Selina were saying, Nina had put all her attention into looking for the something under the table.

(...What is that thing?)

There was a normal plate placed there.

On the plate, there were the dishes leftover from last night. There wasn’t any problem, seeing as plates were made for dishes to be placed on them. There wasn’t any problem with that.

The question was, what was a plate doing on the floor? And next to the plate, there was a chipped soup bowl, with some milk inside. Why was this.

“Then, I’ll introduce it to everyone.”

“Introduce?” Asked Leu in surprise. The talk across the table was still continuing.

“Is there already someone coming to live in our dorm?”

“That’s exactly right~~~Steven-chan, welcome~~~” As Selina held extended her ‘welcome’ there was a creepy noise. “Shu~~~” “...What is this?”

Leu looked at the thing that flew out from under the table with a surprised expression. It must have been ordered to stay under the table until this moment. Under the table, there were many plates with all the leftovers from last night. She obviously heard Selina’s introduction, but that was a completely inadequate explanation of the phenomenon in front of her.

“Steven-chan.”

“No, I’m not talking about that.”

“That is something my friend from the Cultivation Department sent me from another city. Originally they bought a squirrel-type egg which was meant to exterminate mice for us, but they made a mistake and they got a pet instead.”

“Haha, and you can’t return stuff you bought from other cities as well.”

“Yeah, but if they just threw this thing out, it’s a bit too cruel, so they looked for people who were willing to keep him.”

“Then it’s him who’s going to live here from now on?”

“Yeah, he’s really cute, isn’t he?”

“Well, I don’t really hate pets. I’m not afraid of them either. But still, if we were going to get a pet, we should have just gotten a guard dog to look after the house.”

“Arah, there’s no point in keeping a guard dog. We don’t have any criminals or delinquents in this area.”

“I think a the fact that person like you who has no sense of urgency managed to live peacefully up till today is the real mystery...If it can’t catch any mice, then there’s no point at all in having it as an extra member of the dorm. He isn’t even a person.”

“Eh~~~~~? I can’t?”

“Well, I guess you can, but have you figured out a solution for his litter?”

“No problem.”

“Really. Then it’s up to Nina then? Is it ok?”

As for Selina’s question, Nina couldn’t answer it.

She was drenched in cold sweat, and it wasn't stopping.

Below her feet, there was a terrifying creature.

It was a creature she could grab with one hand, eating the leftovers in the dish like a wild beast. It looked like it was pretty hungry.

Aah, it's slender body gave out a feeling of immaturity.

It had grown long claws in order to run around the ground more easily.

In its mouth, there were small, sharp teeth tearing at the leftover food.

...It was a ferret.

“Aaah! Waaah!!!!”

“Nina?”

That creature lifted it's head and licked it mouth, it front legs rubbing its face before it stood up, looking about at its surroundings.

Looking at Nina.

Those glossy, round eyes were filled with curiosity.

“Shu~”

It was a very weak sound.

“Yaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhh!”

Nina let out a deafening cry and jumped onto the table.

“Ni-Nina?”

“What's wrong?”

The two of them stared stunned at Nina, who was shaking on the table.

The ferret was frightened by Nina's cry and hugged Selina's leg, hiding behind it.

“...Nina, do you hate animals?”

“...No, it's only those that I can't stand”



“Arah...”

Seeing Nina holding her head and shrinking away, the two looked at each other.

In the end, they took Steven the ferret back to Selina’s room and continued their breakfast.

“Though I never thought that Nina would be afraid of ferrets.”

“It’s pretty surprising.”

“...If you two want to laugh, then laugh.”

Seeing her shoulders still quivering slightly, the two couldn’t help not laughing but didn’t make a noise, and Nina just sat there pretending to calmly eat breakfast. But her veins near her temples were still throbbing.

“But why is it that you’re only afraid of ferrets? I mean, in the inter-city battles, you’ve met far scarier people than that little creature.”

“Is it a physiological reason?”

In response to Leu’s question, Nina said definitely “It was that thing’s fault in the first place.”

“It’s fault...Nina, what exactly did the ferret do?”

“Aah, just thinking about it scares me. It was when I was five. Because my uncle loved animals, he kept a lot of pets and livestock at his house. At that time, I often went to that uncle’s house to play...”

“Uhh...if it’s like that, why are you afraid of ferrets?”

“On my fifth birthday, everyone in my extended family came to wish me a happy birthday. My uncle also came. He told me there was a surprise waiting for me in my bedroom. Even though I wanted to see what it was immediately, he told me to wait until the birthday party was over. So I had no choice but to be patient and wait.”

Nina shivered as she recalled it.

“Well...what happened?”

“Yeah, what next?”

“My uncle prepared a ferret for me. Originally, it was meant to be safely housed inside its cage, I don’t know if it had something to do with the metal lock being broken, but somehow that ferret got out of it’s cage.”

“So that’s why you’re afraid of ferrets?”

“If would be great if that were all. That thing ... my precious plushie...”

“Plushie? You mean the one in your room?”

“Yeah. It was chewing my precious Mitessha with tearing noises.”

Recalling the scene, Nina continued to quiver.

What the young Nina saw when she returned to her room was an evil monster using it vicious teeth and tearing a hole Mitessha in the stomach and was pulled out the cotton stuffing within into long thin strands.

“Aiya.”

“To me, Mitessha isn’t just a precious plushie it got from my grandfather. It’s a precious friend who keeps me company through the night. Even though it was so important, that thing... that thing...”

With her mother’s help, Mitessha was restored to his former glory, but on his body there was an irrevocable scar.

From then on, every time she saw a ferret, she would remember what happened back then and she would be so terrified that she would start shaking.

“Then, can’t I keep him?”

After breakfast, the three of them were drinking tea together.

“Wuu...”

Looking at a very sad Selina, Nina was speechless.

“Nina, that’s a trick she uses all the time” reminded Leu quietly.

She knew this as well. As soon as Selina was in a situation that was disadvantageous to her, she would put on a childlike appearance. It was her solution to everything.

Even though Nina knew this...

“I can’t...?”

“Wuu...”

She couldn’t do anything against this expression of Selina’s. And her everyday meals were always made by this person who they always wanted to thank. When it came to any of her requests, they always felt that it was hard to deny her.

(No, quickly remember, Nina Antalk. Selina wants to keep a ferret. That horrific beast. Have you forgotten Mitessha’s tragedy?)

Nina continually shook her head, reminding herself in her heart.

Ok, I’m going to refuse...as she thought this, she looked up at Selina.

“If that child doesn’t find an owner he’s going to be gotten rid of. He’s very pitiful...am I still not allowed to keep him?”

It was completely unfair to be saying this sort of thing with an expression as if she were going to cry.

“Ok, ok...I understand.”

As she said this in a tiny voice, Leu who was sitting beside her quietly said “Idiot.”

“Really? Really? Thank you so much!”

“On one condition! Quickly tell him to never get close to me!”

“Ok, I got it.”

Seeing Selina happily make her promise, Nina showed a trace of glumness.



Noon that day.

Layfon was startled to see a languished Nina come into the training area.

Could it be because of yesterday’s training? Aware of the possibility, Layfon was worried. Nina showed an exhausted smile and shook her head.

“It has nothing to do with yesterday’s training. It’s just, this morning...it was like that.”

In response to a vague reply like that, Layfon cast a confounded look over to Nina, but she didn’t attempt to explain it any further.

“Let’s just train for now. What are we doing today? Are we continuing what we did yesterday?”

Nina thought that she would need that kind of strong defense.

“Today we’re doing basic training.”

“Why? I want to get the essentials of that move.”

“I think you’ve already got the basics of that move. I said it yesterday too, Kongoukei is a very simple Kei technique. If you just memorize the technique, you’ll be able to do it very quickly. But to use it correctly is a different thing.”

“That’s why we have to...”

“That’s why, just by memorizing we cannot understand the true nature of Kongoukei” asserted Layfon, and Nina closed her mouth.

“Concentration isn’t something which will be easily trained, and if you want to be able to bring out Kongoukei’s original use, raising your basic abilities is very important. And if your foundations are very strong, then your overall abilities will be raised as well. No matter how you look at it, isn’t it very good?”

As he said this, Layfon walked towards one side of the room, and started to prepare for training.

Nina watched Layfon’s back quietly.

Layfon seemed even further from Nina. Nina only saw the inter-platoon battle before her...and a bit further away, the inter-city battle.

But Layfon looked even further, thinking of doing battle with filth monsters.

This was the original purpose of Military Artists, right? She knew that it was the Military Artist’s job to fight the filth monsters that attacked the city.

But the inter-city battles with other Academy cities... the battle with other Military Artists from other cities was unavoidable.

“Then, what am I supposed to do about that area...Waah!”

Halfway in her sentence, Nina fell backwards to the floor, and frowned.

On the ground, many balls the size of fists rolled around. These were things which Nina bought with the platoon's budget according to Layfon's request.

"But that sort of thing is perfectly normal for Military Artists."

The two were practicing their stances on top of the rolling balls.

As they practiced the basics of being aware of Kei within their weapons, they had to be careful of the balls they were stepping on and insert Kei into the balls to stop them from rolling. If it was just standing on the balls, even Nina could do it as she was right now. But to do it as she was practicing her stances was very hard. As she continued to step on the balls and adjust her stances, she had to use her nerves to adjust the direction of the Kei flow.

"Indeed, battling with filth monsters is different from fighting other military artists, but the only difference is the fighting methods, as the essence of the Kei technique hasn't changed."

Nina moved about slowly, while Layfon leisurely stepped between poses. The balls he stepped on didn't move at all. Seeing this, Nina realized just how great the gap between herself and Layfon was.

"Let's just use Kongoukei as an example. You don't know how strong your opponent's attack will be. You don't know how much power you need to defend against the attack. For argument's sake, you don't even know who your opponent is. Even with your standards now, you might still run into some trouble. But in order to get the greatest result, isn't it better to be working hard for that? You'll never waste hard work. "

"...Speaking of which, are you practicing properly right now?"

"I am, wouldn't you say that I am doing training very seriously?"

"You're actually holding back to coordinate with me, right?"

"I haven't actually thought about that..."

Being asked that question all of a sudden by Nina, Layfon scratched his face uneasily.

"Well, I certainly wouldn't do this in individual training, and this place isn't a specialized facility, so I can't do it properly, so doing this seems a lot more appropriate" said Layfon, balancing on a ball with a single leg.



Seeing this change, Nina observed Layfon's feet.

Thick Kei rotated around Layfon in a whirl.

The first thing that Layfon had taught Nina was how to observe an opponent's Kei. As she observes the movements of the body, she also has to capture the flow of her opponent's Kei. If she did that, before her opponent used any moves she would be able to detect any changes in the flow of his Kei.

She could nearly...do it. But she didn't understand it. If she could see the flow of the Kei, then as her opponent used any techniques she would also be able to see the change in the flow.

Even though she understood this, that's all she could do. If she reproduced the flow of Kei, in theory she could use the same technique, but she couldn't do it in reality.

(Ah...it's true.)

Layfon was full of unbelievable aspects to him. Geniuses were hard to understand in the first place. And Nina herself was a rare student who was made a platoon member as a first year, so many people around her might think she was a genius as well, but she wanted to deny it. She didn't actually think that she was a genius, all she did was work harder than people expected her to. Even though she always felt that no matter how much she did she was always short of something, she still kept on working hard.

Layfon easily reached a level she could never reach no matter how hard she worked.

Even if that was the case, when people praised him, he accepted it unenthusiastically. He thought that it was something that was perfectly normal. He was a little proud.

After Layfon had taught her the basics to Kei, she felt it even more. Layfon was filled with an even greater aura that made everything he did seem perfectly natural for everyone else. Of course he would be like that.

Of course, he could do it all.

He never thought that he wouldn't be able to achieve anything.

If someone did point out a problem, he wouldn't accept it, as if he lost to someone else.

Perhaps Layfon was also aware that things that he told others to do were a little difficult for them. That's what Nina felt. She couldn't complete the exercises Layfon had set for her, but she wouldn't feel impatient; she wouldn't start yelling curses at herself.

Even though he was proud, but he wasn't indifferent.

(Ah, it really is...)

Nina mumbled again to herself in her heart, and then she renewed her training with the stances.

He was a hopeless genius,

hopelessly proud,

and hopelessly gentle.

When that bit of gentleness wasn't seen in his Military Arts, his whole person would seem completely unreliable, but when he did show it, it made one's chest feel tight just like that.

That sort of change was completely unbelievable, it seemed difficult to accept.

(Why...is it like this...)

Inadvertently thinking of this, Nina shook her head trying to chase the thought out of her head.

Now wasn't the time to be thinking about those things.

Why did Layfon make others think like this...it really is unbelievable, and

(It really does make people angry.)

I guess I'll try and see...thought Nina. No matter what, she wanted to try it out. No matter what it was that she could learn from him, she would try and learn it.

In order for her to protect this city, she had to turn his power into her own.

“Shu~~”

Remembering the cries of the evil beast, Nina was so terrified she nearly lost it.

“Ah, Nina.”



After leaving the training area, Nina and Layfon walked towards the nearby shopping

street. They had agreed earlier that they would go to a Military Arts specialist store and have a look around. They needed to resupply on the anti-slip perishables, as well as look at some other methods of training.

They were nearly at the large store when she was stopped by a call from Selina.

And then, there was that evil monster's cry.

"Wh-Why did you bring that to this kind of place?"

Nina protested with an expression of terror. The Devil's spawn named Steven was running around Selina in circles.

"Because I need to buy a leash for this child when we go out for walks, and I have to buy some other things that he needs" replied Selina awkwardly as she stood in front of a pet store.

"But in comparison...Nina, you..."

Selina smiled at Nina teasingly.

"Nina, you guys are getting pretty heated up over there, right?"

As she said this, Nina finally realized the state that she was in.

"That..."

Layfon's awkward face was just in front of her.

"...Eh? Eh? Waa Waaaa!"

Noticing that she was tightly holding onto Layfon, she suddenly let go with a shriek. Her cheeks were burning hot. She knew that right now her face was probably beet red.

"No need to be shy."

"It's totally not what you think!"

Even as she said that with a red face, Selina pretended not to hear.

"Ah, Nina, I'm going to take Steven for a walk, so I'll leave these things for you to take home."

She forced the large paper bags she was holding onto Nina, and then leading Steven along she walked away.

“When we get back, I’m going to tell you all about what Steven did today.”

“Wait...”

Eh, we have to buy things as well...Even though she wanted to say this, she knew that Selina wouldn’t listen to what others say, and she was also slightly afraid of Steven, so she was unable to put up a more demanding front.

“...Do you hate animals?”

Layfon asked Nina as her extended hand dropped powerlessly to her side.

“It’s not like that.”

Looking at Selina’s gradually shrinking shadow, her shoulders dropped powerlessly as well. Other than shake her head in helplessly, Nina couldn’t do anything.

As a result, they had so many things that she was forced to ask for Layfon’s help to carry it. No, it wasn’t that Nina bought a lot of things, but it was Selina who actually bought too much.

“She didn’t think of the consequences at all, geez.”

Nina complained quietly, walking towards her dorm.

Even though this sort of thing happened, she still felt a little annoyed.

Today was really way to strange. She felt like she couldn’t control her mood properly.

Layfon followed silently behind her. Layfon was holding what Selina bought for Steven. They didn’t know what was inside, but it was surprising that to keep Steven that she would need such a large thing.

Layfon noticed where Nina was looking, she was looking his way. The thing wasn’t really heavy for a Military Artist, but it was still pretty big. Before she had seen through the thin gap in the paper bag, Layfon looked over and she turned around immediately.

After they arrived at the dorm, she placed the stuff they bought in the kitchen while Layfon sat in the drawing room waiting. Nina returned to her own room.

As she changed into her casual clothes, she thought about making some tea for Layfon. The snacks Selina had baked a couple of days ago still had many left over.

As she was changing, she couldn’t help it and she started humming. She looked beside her bed.

Her bed was placed beside the wall, and next to it there was a windowsill. On the windowsill, Nina had left some miscellaneous items she had as a girl there as a decoration.

In the middle, there was something that felt different from normal. It was a blank, white space, there was a strange feeling.

“...Why?”

She stopped humming.

Something that was meant to be there was gone. She realized instantly that something was gone, that she was missing something. Thinking this... She calmly organized her memories again, and she looked around her room with a tense expression.

It really was gone.

Mitessha was gone.

Nina was feeling slightly dizzy, and she held onto the side of her desk to stop herself from falling over.

“Why...?”

Still carrying a feeling of uncertainty, Nina put on a serious expression as she went through her memories again.

This morning, her day had been completely messed up by that devil Steven, but before that, as Nina woke up she had placed Mitessha in his special place.

After that... What happened after that. Even though she wasn't too sure, but she couldn't remember moving Mitessha. She still remembered that to escape Steven she ran out of the room and quickly changed and left the dorm.

What did she do at that time? No, Mitessha should still be in the same spot.

She couldn't answer that question with her memories.

Which meant that something happened when Nina wasn't in the room. It was impossible for her to have moved Mitessha, so something or someone had moved her poor panda plushie.

As Nina was thinking about this, there was a light knocking sound at the door.

“Umm... senpai?”

On the other side of the door, was Layfon's voice. Right now Nina didn't have any time to spare to worry about Layfon.

"Ahhhh...I really am an idiot."

Making a cold sound that surprised even herself, Nina looked up. Layfon had opened the door and was looking over at her with surprise.

"Poor Mitessha, I just left him there and went out, I bet he hates me now."

"That...senpai?"

She understood that Layfon was calling to her, but if she didn't get her conclusion of her chest, she couldn't calm down.

"I really am an idiot. At that time, how horrified must he have been, as he saw his own death nearing. Even if it was like that, I still fell to my own horrors, and left him behind and ran away myself. It's perfectly normal for me to be hated now."

"Senpai? Hello?"

"Mitessha couldn't move, so he lost his life and departed. I have to do everything in my power. If I don't correct my mistakes...yes, if I don't do that then..."

"Senpai? Please return to earth now..."

As he said this, Layfon gradually got further away from Nina. Nina was probably blaming herself for not taking responsibility.

"But Mitessha hasn't returned, has he?"

"Who is this Mitessha you're talking about?"

"I have to do it."

"Do what?"

Letting out a miserable cry, Nina had already lost all signs of answering Layfon.

"I'm home~"

A completely carefree voice came from downstairs.

It was Selina

That means, if Salina was here, that was here as well.

“Coming.”

As Nina muttered to herself, she pushed Layfon out of the way and ran towards the front door.

“Wuu...isn’t anyone home?”

At the front door, Selina was carrying Steven who was testing his claws and looking around the room. There was nobody on the first floor.

“And I thought Nina had come back.”

Selina had already forgotten that Nina was afraid of Steven.

No, she actually thought that because of how cute the little thing was, that they definitely could make it up to each other and have a good relationship.

Selina thought of this as she heard footsteps upstairs.

“Ah, Nina thanks for carrying...”

Smiling like always, Selina was waving at Nina, then she froze.

Nina walked out with a scary expression on her face.

For some reason she was holding a pair of restored Dites...Metal whips.

“Nina...?”

While she was still mumbling to herself, stunned, Nina had already walked over in front of her.

She didn’t have time to be afraid. She stood up immediately, but as soon as she did, she got knocked over by a strong blast of wind.

“What are you doing?”

This time the person crying out was Layfon.

Why are you getting in my way?

Nina’s eyes were shining fiercely.

Using his sword, he pushed back the metal whips, Layfon’s back shaking slightly.



Nina's whole body was overflowing with Kei. Like a broken pipe. Even her breathing was mingled with Kei, as if she was fighting some monstrous being from a nightmare.

"Saying that I'm in your way..."

Layfon was shaking slightly as he replied.

"If I don't do this, Mitessha won't return."

"So that's why I'm asking, who is he?"

"Shut up!"

Nina roared as she rushed and pushed Layfon out of the way getting closer to Selina yet again.

The target was the ferret Selina was holding on to.

"I'm going to take you down! I'm going to take back Mitessha!"

"Ah, I can't take it anymore."

Layfon went and whacked Nina's completely open back. He wanted to knock her out with that blow, so he adjusted his power accordingly. Nina was sent flying by this Kei-filled attack and she landed outside in the front garden.

Seeing Nina down, Layfon frowned. If it was a Military Artist, it would have been fine, but being forced to hit his senpai left a bad aftertaste in his mouth.

"What's wrong...?"

Asked Selina who stood there stunned, staring at the fallen Nina. The ferret she was holding in her arms was fidgeting a lot.

"I don't know what's going on either...what's Mitessha?"

"Eh? Mitessha? Mitessha is..."

Just as Selina is about to answer, Layfon felt a killing intent bubbling out from Nina.

"Is it..."

It really is.

"Mwahahahaha..."

Nina, who was supposed to be knocked out, stood up again and she was still releasing Kei like before.

“I’m sure I hit you with my Kei.”

Why...as he was thinking, Layfon realized something.

“...Kongoukei?”

Is it? Successful? At this sort of time? In these circumstances?

“Mwahahahaha...”

“Eh~ No way!”

Facing Nina who was releasing a bestial killing intent and slowly closing in, Layfon felt somewhat powerless instead of nervous. How to say it, he wasn’t exactly happy with the fact that Nina had grasped a technique he had taught her. Layfon had also experienced times where he couldn’t use a technique but suddenly used it under pressure, but never in a situation like this.

“Return him.”

Nina spoke in a human language, her two eyes drilling into the ferret.

“Ah.”

Steven leaped out of Selina’s arms.

“Trying to run!”

Nina started to run chasing after Steven who escaped from the front door into the front yard.

“Ah, ah...could it be...wai-wait!”

Looking like she suddenly remembered something, Selina went to chase after Nina and the ferret whose traces had since disappeared.

“I am going to take back Mitessha!”

“That’s why I’m asking who the hell is he?”

There weren't many people about at dusk so Nina and Layfon’s shouts reverberated in the air.

As the sun began to set Leu returned from the library, saw the front door wide open, and scowled.

“They really make people worry.”

Leu went into the dorm shouting, “be a bit more careful next time” but nobody replied.

Such a worrisome thing as this must have been caused by Selina. She probably got carried away since Nina agreed to let her keep the ferret. If she didn’t remind her properly...As she grumbled away to herself he walked up to her room.

“That’s right...”

Remembering something, Leu went downstairs, into the drawing room. Both their common room and their drawing room were filled with piles of magazines the three bought.

Leu picked up the plushie which was placed in the corner of the sofa.

“If I don’t put you back, Nina’s probably going to go crazy.”

Saying this to the panda plushie, she walked upstairs.

After Nina left, Selina and Leu wanted to see if Steven could actually catch mice, and placed him up in a place where there might be a nest in the ceiling. Even though he was surprisingly successful, Steven was treating catching mice like a game. With the ferret showing off his live catches to Leu in a self-satisfied manner, Leu could only sigh in resignation. Well, he did manage to catch the mice. Selina also said happily “Like this, I’m sure Nina will accept Steven now.” But what would the final result be?

Well, why was Mitessha in the drawing room?

As they were looking for a way to get up into the ceiling from the second floor, they found that they could only go up to the ceiling from Nina’s room. Even though Selina had the master key to all the rooms in the dorm, but she was still a bit guilty about just going into someone else’s room. And she was going to bring a ferret which Nina hated into her room. Remembering Mitessha, and Nina’s tragic past, they didn’t want to put Mitessha with the ferret even for a second. That’s why, Leu placed Mitessha into the drawing room with good intentions. But she ended up forgetting him there.

“But where did those guys disappear to?”

For some reason, the door to Nina’s room was wide open, and placing Mitessha back into the room, Leu could only respond to her stomach’s complain with a sigh.

“Ahahahahah, what’s wrong Layfon?”

“Ah! I can’t take it anymore! Why did I have to teach you this move!”

As he fought Nina with his sword in the air, Layfon complained with remorse.

“Nina~~Listen to me~~” said Selina on the verge of tears.

By the time her words reached Nina’s ears, it was because Nina was down on the ground with fatigue from using too much Kei, and night had long fallen.

From then on, whenever Steven saw Nina he would escape at lightning speed. Speaking objectively, this was a very strange occurrence.

Interlude 03

“Speaking of which, there are normally a lot of people who take care of us.”

“Huh? Oh, you mean Mei-Shen and them, right?”

“Yeah, what kind of people are they?”

“The three of them seem like childhood friends. They were all born in the transport city... You’ve been there too right?”

“Oh, yes. But I stayed for just under three days.”

“Yeah, and the lodging facilities are the best.”

“That’s right.”

“Still, what kind of people are they?”

“You might have already seen Naruki because she’s in one of the platoons.”

“That person with the tanned skin?”

“Yeah, that’s her. She’s also part of the City Police. Mifi is a very open girl, and she works at the journalism department. As for Mei-Shen, even though I know her pretty well...” he sighed, “Well, cooking. If it’s one thing I’ve to say about her cooking, it’s her dessert. She’s very good at making sweets.”

“Oh? Then all your desserts and snacks were made by her?”

“Yeah, but it’s just that I don’t really like eating sweets.”

“Same. I don’t eat too much stuff with a lot of sugar in it. But you’re licking a lollipop right now.”

“But still, I need my sugar.”

“Yeah, yeah. Father used to say that if two people licked a lollipop at the same time it would bring about hatred.”

“Why would he say that...”

“Then, do you refuse to eat her sweets?”

“No, sometimes I eat them as well. I’m eating a controlled amount of sugar.”

“Huh?”

“Mei-Shen is a really nice person, and when I was really busy she made me bentoes for lunch.”

“...Wait for me!”

Innocence Wander

The bell that signaled the end of classes was also a signal for the start of yet another battle. The start of the lunch break was also the starting pistol of the race between military artists for lunch. The ordinary students who didn’t want to go to the cafeteria could easily buy lunch by asking students in the Military Arts department to buy it for them. Thus, the military artists charged out of the classroom simultaneously as the classes ended, flying towards the canteen. Occasionally even the older students who were teaching those classes would also join the fray, so naturally nobody tried to stop them. Of course, if public property was damaged, or if people started fighting and were caught by the city guards they would be punished. Having nothing to do with that storm-like event, Layfon leisurely walked to the nearest park. Inside the park there was a small pavilion with a table, and it was a very suitable place for lunch.

".....Is there anything special going on today?" Layfon stared at the food on the table. Although he already thought the bento he was carrying in the basket today was excessively large, he never thought that what it contained was also incredibly luxurious, and the effort put into making it was different from normal as well.

".....It's not like that" quietly replied Mei-Shen as she lowered her head, blushing.

"Hey, as long as I can eat great food it's all good."

"Ok..."

Although Naruki and Mifi were with Mei-Shen all the time, they didn't know why Mei-Shen put in so much effort today.

For some reason, Mei-Shen seemed a little strange today.

But right now the atmosphere made it seem hardly appropriate to ask "what's wrong", so Layfon began to eat silently.



“Heaven’s Blade Successor”

Recently, this phrase had continually appeared in Mei-Shen's mind. She knew that it was a phrase whose meaning represented something superior. That was why she was so concerned with it. To a passerby who had no idea of what was going on, the easiest solution would be to ask the person directly. But no matter what she did, Mei-Shen couldn't bring herself to ask Layfon. That was because it was a phrase that appeared in a letter privately addressed to Layfon. That letter was accidentally placed together with other letters for Mei-Shen, which explained why she had it. Although she immediately realized that this letter was delivered to the wrong place, why did it have to be delivered to her mailbox? ... Mei-Shen thought silently, resenting this fact. Of course, Mei-Shen couldn't just go and ask Layfon about a word appearing in a letter addressed to him that she couldn't have ever heard of or seen before. Moreover, Mei-Shen hadn't apologized to Layfon for peeking at the letter and had completely missed the best chance to ask him about it. And who was the person who wrote the letter to Layfon, a girl named Leerin? Although she wanted to find out, it was difficult for Mei-Shen to open her mouth and ask. She was afraid of asking. The only thing that was clear was that this girl named Leerin knew the Layfon from before Zuellni very well.

Without knowing why, Mei-Shen felt very discontent.

"Have you heard of the phrase ‘Heaven’s Blade Successor’?" Instead, Mei-Shen decided to ask the people who were beside her in the dormitory's shared kitchen. In order to live together in the student dormitory, Mei-Shen, Naruki and Mifi shared this 3 bedroom and 1 dining room dorm. Because they had been best friends since childhood, they weren't

uncomfortable with each other. Mei-Shen really liked this sense of spaciousness in the kitchen.

"Heaven's Blade Successor?" Mifi was stuffing her face with Mei-Shen's cake as she tilted her head asking, "What's that?"

"I think it's a phrase referring to a Military Artist....." said Mei-Shen without much confidence. She then imitated Mifi and together they began to stare silently at Naruki. Layfon was a Military Artist, so this phrase must be specifically referring to something about them. Naruki, who was also a Military Artist, was the most likely out of them to know what the term meant.

"Heaven's Blade.....I haven't heard of it before."

Seeing Naruki shaking her head, Mei-Shen lowered her head in disappointment. However, Naruki seemed to have remembered something. "A person who received the Heaven's Blade...right? It really is a pretentious name but at least it isn't as absurd as the Joeldem's Knights of the Crossroad. Well, every City has its own customs when referring to military artists, so I think Heaven's Blade something is just another nickname for them."

Mifi nodded her head in agreement.

"Oh yeah, if we went to the library and researched the phrase in the Database of Cities I'm sure we'll understand what it is. So, where did this phrase originate from?"

"Ah.....That's...."

"Well, the only one that could catch your interest would be that one."

"Yeah, and plus the phrase is about Military Artists."

"Ah, that's ... that's not it." "There really is only one, we can't be wrong."

"Well, ah ~~ let's go to the library tomorrow."

"Yeah, I was going to go there for work anyway to interview all the people in each Platoon and I wanted to research some topics about Cities that could become articles."

"Oh, it sounds interesting."

"Then do you want to go to the library together?"

"If there is time."

"Mi-chan is a bit of a workaholic."

Looking at the two people who had made a decision on their own and ignored her, Mei-Shen sighed in silence as their conversation drifted further and further away from their original discussion.

The next day, after lessons had ended, the three took the monorail to the library. After showing their student ID's at the reception area, they entered the library. They sat down at the designated window, and the computer terminal booted up immediately. All the information in the academy city was relayed across organized lanes like fast moving traffic. After all of that information is entered into the library centre, students are able to search for information at a library terminal, and can also download data that they need onto USB drives. Although they also kept physical books, the majority of them took the form of data that Zuellni published.

“Then let me search for information on Grendan.” Mifi typed the keyboard with practiced ease. Chrome Shelled Regios Grendan was Layfon's home city, and was strong in military arts. Many powerful individuals were born in Grendan's many training grounds. There was a reason for Grendan's fame among other Cities, and this was the Salinvan Guidance Mercenary Gang. This gang travelled from city to city via free roaming buses, hired by cities to fight against Filth Monsters or to participate in battles. The number of Filth monsters slain by their hands was innumerable, and in many victorious battles they had made a major contribution. Moreover, they taught the cities fighting skills and battle tactics. The Salinvan Guidance Mercenary Gang was made up of an overwhelming number of Military Artists from Grendan. Originally, Grendan was just another autonomous City, but its reputation for fierce fighters made it well known across the globe. Therefore, almost all the citizens of Cities knew of the word “Grendan”. They had all heard of that city which produced large amounts of military fighters, yet any other details about Grendan were unclear to them. That's why it could be possible for Joeldem, Zuellni and Grendan to have completely different customs and for Mei-Shen to have no way of knowing. The phrase “Heaven's Blade Successor” she obviously didn't know either. “How's it going?” asked Mei-Shen as Mifi stared at the screen, humming.

“I still haven't found it.”

“Really?” Naruki, who was standing behind them, leaned over for a closer look.

“There are no matches in Grendan's dictionary, and after searching I didn't find any related content at all.”

“Then what about places other than Grendan?”

“I thought about this too, so I tried it as well, but there were no results either.”

“Sigh~~”

“Naruki scratched her head, thinking.”

“How about asking Layfon himself?”

“.....That, that's...”

“We can't? I think that's the easiest way to find out.”

“Um... It's best if we don't. ”

Although Mei-Shen was a shy girl who didn't talk to others very much, it was rare for her to keep her best friends Naruki and Mifi in the dark. Mei-Shen was concealing the truth from her friends, yet at the same time she had to rely on those friends whom she was hiding things from, and this made her feel terrible. She was on the verge of tears.

“Well, if that's the case, then we can only try and find out from other Military Artists. We are going to the Military Arts department for the interviews anyway, so why don't you come along?”

Although their search was futile, Mifi's face didn't show the slightest sign of discouragement. For Mifi, not being able to find information was something that happened regularly.

“...Well” Since Mei-Shen knew Mifi was trying to help, she just silently nodded.



After classes on the next day, the three friends began their journey towards the Military Arts department. The moment Mei-Shen stepped into the entrance, a painful memory surfaced in her mind and she stopped moving.

“Eh? What's wrong?”

“... Nothing.” Shaking her head, Mei-Shen recalled the time when she stood here agonising over whether or not she should give Layfon the letter that was accidentally sent to her. If she hadn't met Felli here, what might have happened...? She still wouldn't have had the confidence to give it back to him as if nothing had happened. Anyway, recently

she had been incessantly gloomy about the contents of the letter. Mei-Shen felt that the consequences of her mistakes have begun to get out of hand.

“Let’s go.” Naruki held out her hand to an agonising Mei-Shen.

“Even though I don’t know exactly what you are thinking about, if you want to find out, we have to get moving. Just like how you decided to work at the bakery store before. ” Naruki held out her hand sincerely, and that look in her eyes reflected the same warmth and sincerity.

“...Ok.” Quietly nodding, Mei-Shen grasped the offered hand.

“We have to interview four Platoons today, and the first is the 1st Platoon.”

Although the Military Artists’ grounds seemed very large from the outside, it was in reality divided up by various screens into a multitude of small areas on the inside. The streets were very narrow and some seemed like they were squashed in a gap between buildings. Mei-Shen and her friends lost their way several times before finally arriving at their destination.

“Hello everyone,” Mifi said. Mei-Shen became nervous when she felt Mifi’s voice penetrate the soundproof walls that divided the area. The walls vibrated at her voice.

As soon as the door was open, sound waves even louder than before hit Mei-Shen’s eardrums. This noise subsided with Mifi’s continued greeting. The sudden silence frightened Mei-Shen and she gradually edged her body behind Naruki. Mei-Shen thought that her weakness was lamentable but Mifi stood there without wavering in the slightest.

“I’m a reporter from the Weekly Look’n Magazine here for the interview, first year General Arts Student Mifi Rotten and these are my friends.”

“Yeah, I’ve heard.” Taking a towel from a woman who seemed to be supervising, the tall student wiped his sweat and made his way over. He was the commander of the first Platoon, Vance Haldi. As he stroked his beard his penetrating gaze examined Mei-Shen and her friends.

“Lets go to the lounge outside for the interview; you guys, continue training,” he directed the second half of his sentence to the platoon members. After they replied in unison, the platoon members continued with their training. Mei-Shen and the others followed this tall man who exuded dignity completely unlike any other student into the lounge room.

“I have read some of Weekly Lookn’s reports.”

Reddish bronze skin, two wriggling silkworm eyebrows, his clearly delineated face and his sloppy beard... it seemed like he embodied both good and evil with his outward appearance, although it didn't seem like he was an evil person.

“But, I felt that the content of some of the reports encouraged gambling.”

That’s because Vance had the role of representing all of the students in the Military Arts department. He was the head of Military Arts.

“Ahahaha! There is nothing like that. ”

“The journalist’s name was different from yours, so it couldn’t have been you. Well, you should pass on what I just said to your superiors.”

“Ok.”

Just like that, under intense scrutiny even the brave Mifi couldn't help but cringe a little.

“Oh, then I’ll begin the interview. The inter-platoon battles have gone on for nearly half a year. Up to now, how do you feel about it?”

“How do I feel about what?”

“For example, how you felt about some of the more difficult opponents, or if the 1st Platoon are currently in their peak condition, or things like that...”

“Inter-platoon battles are just sideshows; the key problem is the formal inter-city battles that we have afterwards.”

“Really? Okay then, how do good do you think your platoon is?”

“We can’t assert that we have already reached our limits and achieved peak condition but we can only try to improve ourselves as much as we can in the limited time that we have.”

“Hehe, it really is tough. Then how do you see the other platoons, and are there any platoons that seem strong to you?”

“Mmm... They all have their strengths and weaknesses. The third platoon’s average strength is very strong yet they have few other skills. My first platoon is the same. The fifth and sixteenth platoons are suited for surprise attacks, but if the opponent realises their plan before it can be executed it’s all over for them. The important thing is to see through the opponents’ plan and what has currently appeared.....”

“The fifth, tenth, and seventeenth platoons are the ones which have won multiple times.”

“The tenth eh? Last year in the inter-platoon match they had impressive results. Even though they changed many members this year they aren’t short of wonders. Also, the combo between the captain and vice-captain of the platoon is exceptional. When it comes to combos, the fifth platoon isn’t bad either, even though the way they work together is not quite the same.”

“What do you think of the seventeenth squad?”

Hearing Mifi ask that question, Mei-Shen immediately became perturbed and couldn't stay calm. It was the platoon Layfon was in. Mei-Shen was very concerned with how others viewed Layfon and she wanted to know what the first squad commander thought.

“Captain Nina Antalk’s command is brilliant. Because she has a small platoon she thinks very carefully about what to do and how to do it. However, the platoon’s greatest weakness is that they lack numbers. Even though their offensive ability is highly ranked among the platoons, their defence is far too weak. When they are on the offensive they are very strong, but if they are defending, they are always passive.”

“On the topic of the seventeenth platoon, how good is that well known attacker Layfon?”

“The seventeenth platoon’s offensive force relies mainly on him. Even though you can’t overlook Sharnid’s sniping ability, Layfon’s ability to kill with one strike makes him a fearful existence.”

Hearing Layfon being praised by the strongest person in the Military Arts department, Mei-Shen felt very happy.

“But the fourteenth squad did come up with an idea to go against that terrifying sword with a shield of their own. Although it was quite significant, the plan failed. That is the power of the seventeenth platoon.”

“Is that so... Then I wish you the best of luck in your inter-platoon matches.”

“I want to graduate from this school, so no matter what happens, I will give my all to protecting this city. That is all.”

“Thank you for accepting our interview.” Mifi hurriedly nodded and bowed; Mei-Shen and Naruki quickly following suit. Vance nodded, preparing to leave the lounge room.

“Oh yeah, that’s right,” Mifi spoke as if suddenly remembering something. “Yes?”

“I want to ask you something, is that ok?”

“What is it?”

“Have you heard of the phrase Heaven’s Blade Successor?”

“...What is that?”

“Oh, it’s a rarely used term that I don’t understand. I think maybe that as the head of Military Arts, you might know something about it. ”

“I don’t know. Then, I’ll be leaving first.” Seeing hope radiating from the look on Mifi’s face, Vance answered with a stiff expression, turned and left without looking back.

“It seems like he knew something eh?”

“Yeah, even though he knew he hid it from us.”

After Vance left, Mifi started talking to Naruki.

Why? Mei-Shen felt a little insecure. Why did Vance not tell them what he knew but hid it instead? Doesn't that mean he didn't want anybody to know what a Heaven’s Blade Successor was?

“Well, it seems things have gotten interesting.” Completely different from Mei-Shen’s reaction, Mifi’s eyes lit up, showing a look of curiosity.

“Trying to hide it from me only made me want to know it more.”

“No comment.”

“Huhuhu. If it’s like this, then we’ll go and ask some other people. Ok, let’s go.” What Naruki said to Mifi obviously didn't register as she stood up with her face full of determination. Mei-Shen was beginning to feel less and less secure.

The next place Mifi had to go to was the tenth platoon. As before, Mifi knocked the door with uncertainty, and the person who welcomed them was filled with the grace of three people; woman of great beauty. After being lead to the lounge room yet again, Mifi began her interview. This beauty’s name was Dalshena Che Matelna and it seems that she was the vice captain of the tenth platoon. Her golden, long curls of hair overshadowed the lights in the room, dulling them. Wearing altered fighting gear and a cloak with red texture matching its white lining, she was clothed like a knight.

“I’m very sorry, but please be brief.”

“Ah, ok.” Against her icy-cold demeanour, Mifi couldn’t hold her ground.

“Um... After successfully qualifying for the inter-platoon battles, how do you see your position right now?”

“Obviously I have things I am dissatisfied with, but it’s true that the platoon is in great condition when they battle. I hope that we can maintain this state for the proper battle.”

“Out of all the platoons, which one do you think is the strongest?”

“The first platoon. The head of Military Arts, Vance’s strong and indestructible fighting style is truly fearsome. The members of the platoon are well suited to that fighting style and aren’t bad either.”

“The other platoons who have qualified include the fifth and the tenth platoon. What do you think of them?”

“The fifth platoon’s main strength lies in Gorneo and Shante’s Carrying Attack. Gorneo’s alchemy attacks aren’t as easy to use as you make it out to be. Gorneo’s rational thinking and Shante’s use of her instincts form a fearsome combination. The thing is, you could probably estimate the limit of their combat powers.”

“Then what about the seventeenth platoon?”

“As for their main offensive force Layfon, the limit to his power is unfathomable. Even strong individuals like the head of Military Arts, Vance could be no match for him. But that’s all there is to that platoon. Even if he took on the whole of the opposing platoon alone, that won’t change the fact that he is only one person. The only reason for their recent victories is because he has been able to smooth out results with individual performances. Other than that, there is nothing noteworthy about that platoon.”

“Thank you very much for your co-operation. Then, I still have one last question which is unrelated to this interview...

“Have you heard of the phrase Heaven’s Blade Successor?”

“Heaven’s Blade? No, no I haven’t. Where did the term originate?”

“I think it came from Grendan.”

“Then I think you’d better find Gorneo, because that’s where his hometown was.”

“Really? Thank you so much.”

“Don’t worry about it you guys are working hard as well. The Military Artists are doing it in their own way, and so are you guys, doing the best to make sure our city can keep on existing.”

After the interview, Dalshena’s cold expression was like frost that had finally melted, revealing a warm smile. Watching her pure and radiant smile, Mei-Shen and the others couldn’t help but let out a sigh of relief, gazing at Dalshena’s back as it receded into the distance.

“Uwah, she was so cool.”

“Yeah, how do I describe her, she’s such a noble person.”

“...Yeah.”

The three girls stood there in a dreamlike trance looking in the direction in which Dalshena left.

“I heard that Dalshena-san was the eldest daughter of Iahaimu. He is the Head of The City of Hourin.”

“...Really?”

“So that's why. It seems to explain her grandeur.”

“I can’t put my finger on it, but she really is cool.

“Yeah, she is.”

“Ah, but I didn't know you knew that kind of stuff as well.”

“I know a little about her. Dalshena-san even has her own fan club. The amount of detail in those fan club reports of hers almost goes overboard.”

“It might not be a good idea, but I feel like reading the contents of that report.”

“Do you want me to bring it next time?”

“No, no thanks, I’ll give that a pass.”

The three continued with their conversation, they couldn’t get over their uncontrollable emotion. It was overwhelming.

Next up was the fifth platoon. The three girls who were wrapped up by Dalshena's graceful air floated to their next destination, and were lead to the same lounge room for the interview. This time they chatted to more than one person. The Captain of the fifth platoon, Gorneo Luckens was a tall man with a bulky stature comparable to that of the Head of Military Arts, Vance. His body was completely bound with muscle, and his robust neck supported a large head, which he held with a serious manner. Instead, the face reflected an affable expression, leaving a cute impression of the giant. That impression was further reinforced by the presence of a young girl tightly holding onto his shoulders. The red-haired girl distinctly contrasted with Gorneo, with a staunch little face, a petite frame and along with her headstrong personality and her inability to shoulder any responsibility gave the impression of childishness. Nevertheless, this young girl was actually a fifth year student at Zuellni and she was about twenty years old. Her name was Shante Laite and she was the vice-captain of the fifth platoon.

"Are you okay with that?" Shante was in a bad mood and was swiping at Gorneo's head continually.

"It's okay, it happens all the time." Gorneo calmly answered Mifi's question.

Mei-Shen timidly glanced at Shante and Shante immediately growled at her with a "Grr!"

"Ah!"

"Grr!"

"...Uwah..."

"Still not going to stop?"

Even though she was rapped by Gorneo's huge knuckles, Shante had no intention of stopping. However, she suddenly stopped.

"Huhu..." After wriggling her nose several times, Shante used her legs and, clinging onto Gorneo's head, she leant closer to Mei-shen.

"That... that's..."

"You, you smell nice."

"...Huh?"

"Ah, that's because Mei-Shen likes cooking."

“Yeah, there’s a nice smell on her body.”

“...Ah”

Seeing Shante rapidly sniffing the air, Mei-Shen took out a paper bag from her school bag, and that was the leftover cookies.

“Uh, there’s only these left.....”

“Is it for me?”

“If you want them...”

Mei-Shen put the cookies on the table. Shante leapt off Gorneo’s shoulders and went to Mei-Shen. She then started eating the cookies without a word.

“I’m sorry.” Gorneo lowered his head in apology.

“Ah... No, not at all.”

“She’s lived in the wild for too long.”

“...Ah.” Even though she didn't know what was going on.

“Then, can we start now?” Shante was eating the cookies voraciously next to Mei-Shen. Mifi felt at a loss for what to do but decided to push on with the interview.

“After qualifying in the inter-platoon battles, as a captain, are you pleased with your team’s performance?”

“If I were pleased so easily, then everything would be finished by now. It’s because we know what we are lacking that we feel unsatisfied.”

“Are there any platoons that you are especially concerned about?”

“I want to learn the first platoon’s stable command that can react to any scenario with creative versatility and the individual strengths of each member. They are the role models my platoon is striving for.”

“Which platoons do you think you should watch out for in the future?”

“All of them, but the most dangerous is still the first platoon. If we can’t beat the first platoon then it signifies that we cannot beat the previous generation of Zuellni. If there is no change from two years ago then the results will be the same as two years ago as well.” Gorneo’s words carried a sombre tone through his gloomy speech.

Two years ago, before Mei-Shen arrived at Zuellni, Zuellni suffered a heavy defeat in the Inter-City battle. Now, Zuellni had only one Selenium mine left, leaving them no choice of retreat. They must not lose! In Gorneo's words one could hear this determination resounding firmly along with his beliefs the same conviction echoed in Vance and Dalshena's words.

At this moment, that was what Mei-Shen felt. Normal students could never feel that heavy burden. Whether it was studying, working at night or playing around, female students followed fashion trends while male students played various ball sports, or common interests of both sexes, movie stars or singers, made up everything in a normal student's life. Even to Mei-Shen, who could live happily as long as Naruki and Mifi were by her side, looking at the peaceful classroom atmosphere from afar, felt that it was very interesting.

On the other side, the world was like that. This was also Zuellni, Academy city Zuellni! A city with only students, it was a gathering ground for people to grow, and they had to use their own abilities to make the information they gathered into their knowledge. There were no adults acting as protectors. If it was your world, you had to protect it on your own. This city was a place like that. Right now, she felt that heavy burden; even within the resting rooms you could hear it, and echoing along the dividing walls of the Military Arts area the striking sounds of each platoon let the world feel that heavy burden. As long as you understood the true meaning of that heavy, heavy sound, you would never forget it. This resolution and will to fight rang out as thunderous crashes in the Training Complex for Zuellni to see.

“Thank you for accepting our interview.”

Mifi continued the interview and seemed to have finished it as Mei-Shen sat there blankly, swallowed up by the sound of training.

“Before you go, can I ask a question?”

Shante was licking the crumbs off the biscuit wrapper. “Yes?” Gorneo picked her up in one movement and held that position as he replied to Mifi.

“Have you heard of the phrase Heaven's Blade Successor?”

“...Where did you hear this?”

“We heard it by chance...And other people we asked said it was a phrase originating from Grendan, so I thought that Gorneo-Senpai, since you were born in Grendan, would know what it means.”

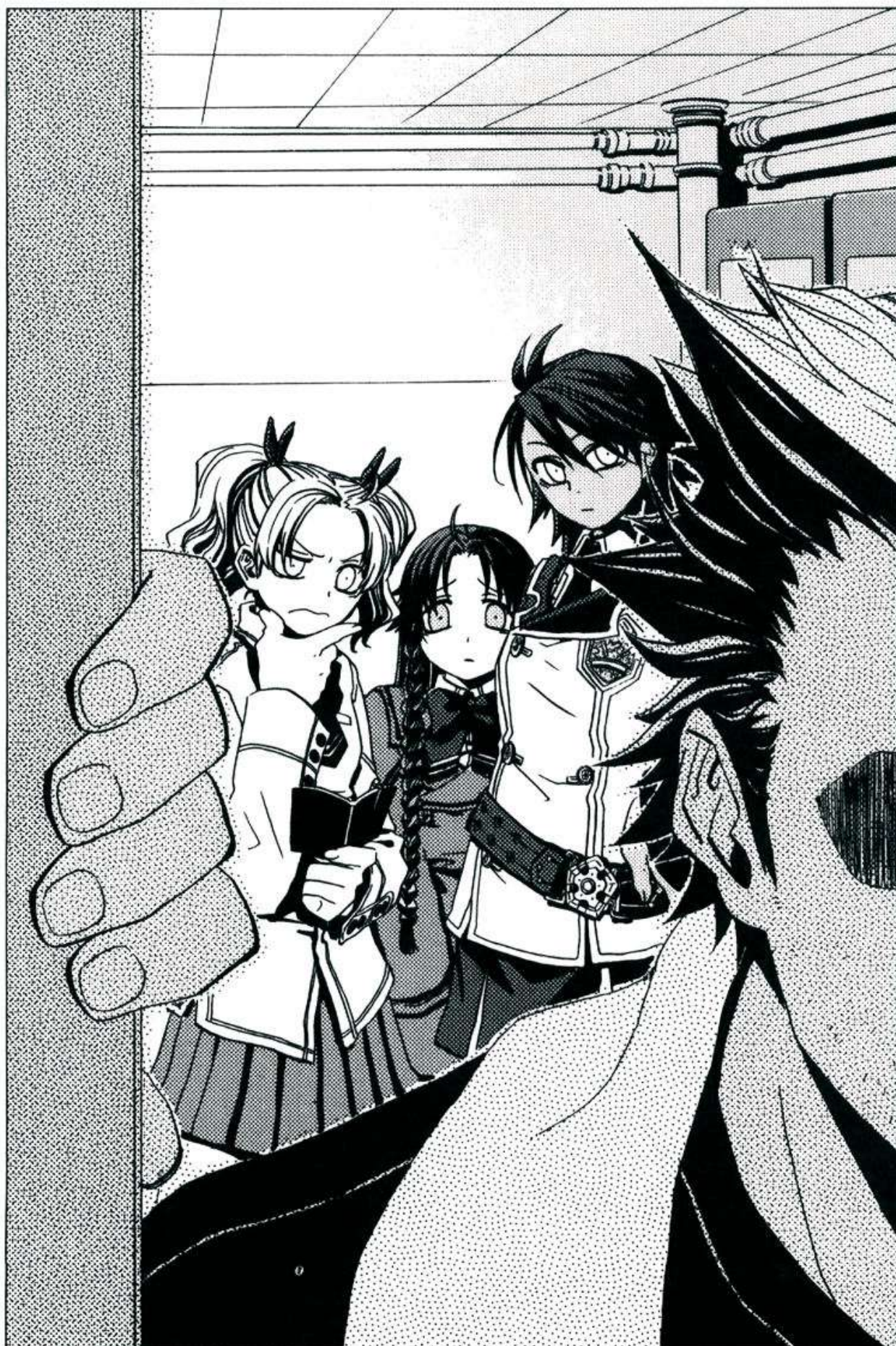
“It's a journey and a goal.”

“...Huh?”

“Almost everything in the world is like that. Some are driven by what they want but do not have, and for others it is necessity that leads them to their goal. Only by achieving those goals can we continue to move forward, and if we do not continue to do so then we have reached the destination, the summit of the peak. The Heaven’s Blade Successor is one of those peaks. Perhaps people who know of that phrase wish to attain that rank, or perhaps they must. Yet if they do not know of it at all, then they can never aim for it in the beginning.”

“...Uh huh.”

“If you don’t really want it, if you don't really believe that you need it, then your lack of interest will hold you back and where you are standing will be your final destination.”



Finishing his speech, Gorneo turned his back to Mei-Shen and the others. Shante climbed up along his arm settling down onto his shoulders, but she continued to stare at Mei-Shen.

“What’s your name?”

“Huh? Oh... Mei-Shen.”

“Mei-Shen, is it? Thank you, you really are a nice person. Come play next time!”

“Don’t swindle anyone else out of their cookies!”

“Bye bye!” Shante pretended not to understand what Gorneo was saying, and waved. A glowing smile spread across Mei-Shen’s face as she weakly waved back.

“Uwah! That was terrifying.” Mifi released the breath that she had been holding for the whole time in a large sigh.

“Jeez, it felt like I stepped on a Filth monster’s tail!”

“Yeah, and we can’t ask Gorneo-senpai about it any more seeing as how he’s already sealed his lips.”

“Yeah, that means the only person left is...”

The two of them turned and looked at Mei-Shen and she knew what they wanted to say. Compared to asking any other people born in Grendan, there was another, much easier way to find out, but Mei-Shen couldn’t do it. It was only because she couldn’t do it that Gorneo thought they were nuisances. Vance looked like he didn’t want to tell anyone either. Just what is going on? Mei-Shen felt very uneasy. Just what did the phrase Heaven’s Blade Successor entail?

Mifi looked at the annoyed expression on Mei-Shen’s face and found it hard for her to open her mouth. “Uhh... Well, the last platoon we are supposed to be interviewing is the seventeenth platoon...”

Mei-Shen’s expression instantly stiffened.

“There’s no way out! The magazine had planned to make an article about all the platoons that performed well in the inter-platoon matches,” Mei-Shen murmured quietly like she would an apology. She knocked on the door of the seventeenth platoon and held onto the door handle at the same time.

“Hello everyone!” In response to Mifi’s cheery greeting, the door swung open. Her voice echoed within the room. This room was originally very quiet but shouts from within that could match those yelling in training exploded across it, making it seem a little out of place. Embarrassed by this unexpected situation, even Mifi couldn’t stop her face turning red as she turned into a statue.

“Aiyaya... Mifi? And why did you guys come?” From inside the room came Layfon’s voice.

“...Uhh... What exactly are you guys doing?” Mifi asked, puzzled. Since she was standing in the doorway, Mei-Shen, who couldn't see what was going on, stood on her toes to look inside. Inside the room, hard metallic balls were rolling all over the floor.

“Oh, we're training.”

“Is that so?”



Layfon, Nina and Sharnid were standing on the metallic balls which were rolling all over the place, while Felli expressed no interest as she sat aside on a seat reading a book. Although standing on continually rolling balls was by no means an easy feat...

“Wow, that’s amazing. Is that for practising balance?”

“You’re partially correct. This is a kei exercise, and through controlling the flow of the internal-type kei we aim to control the body’s balance, and at the same time we try to use external-type kei to keep the balls stationary.” As Layfon answered Mifi’s question, he waved his Dite downwards at his feet a couple of times. Naruki eye’s widened as she saw the ease with which Layfon moved about on the balls while waving his Dite around.

“So the interviewers are you guys?” Nina, who was also standing on the metallic balls asked in surprise.

“Ah, Yes, that's me. I’m the reporter from Weekly Look’n.”

“It must have been a busy day. Then, shall we begin?”

“Ah, don’t we need to go somewhere else?”

“No, just here is fine.”

“That's right. The interview with me, the most handsome man in Zuellni, is something that happens once in a lifetime, so I should treat you guys to a drink. Layfon, quick, go get some drinks for these ladies.” Sharnid leapt off the metallic balls lightly, landing in front of Mifi and her friends.

“I think they didn't come here just to interview you. Well, where you conduct the interview doesn't really matter, so let’s just talk here.” As Nina pointed to the chairs, Felli wordlessly got up and left the seat continuing to read as she leaned on the opposite wall.

Sharnid tossed a coin. Sighing, Layfon caught it in one hand and was about to go to the vending machine when...

“.....Ahh, let me help.” Mei-Shen followed Layfon to the vending machine.

“I’m sorry.” The soft drink cans dropped from the vending machine with a bump.

“Eh?” Layfon picked up the soft drink cans. The finger that selected the fruit juices did not hesitate and it seemed that Layfon had already figured out the tastes of everyone in the platoon. This was proven by how he asked what flavour Mei-Shen wanted (he still didn't know what flavours we like) and she felt a little disappointed.

“I came without asking for your permission.”

“That’s nothing to be worrying about, since we were going to have a break anyway.” Layfon carried the cans for everyone and stood up, and after Mei-Shen asked that she carry half, Layfon gave her the cans that she, Mifi and Naruki had asked for. Even though it was a rare opportunity for the two of them to be together without anyone else... yet she couldn’t think of anything to say, so she could only follow Layfon in silence. She gazed at the back of Layfon as he walked ahead of her. It was his back, the back that had protected her at the opening ceremony of the school. At the time in that long line of people, a disturbance suddenly caused everyone to start pushing and shoving, and in the mess of it all a surprised Mei-Shen had slipped and fallen over.

If she had stayed like that any longer she would have been injured by the stampede of the crowd. It was at that time that Layfon had saved her, brushing aside the swarms of people and pulled her back to her feet, stopping her from being trampled to death. That might have just been a coincidence; even so, she could not forget the back that had protected her.

Heaven’s Blade Successor... That was Layfon’s past and she wanted to know what it meant. If she were asked why she wanted to know so badly, then her only reason would be that she wanted to understand more about Layfon. Mei-Shen couldn’t think of any other reasons as to why she wanted to know. After she looked at his letter without his permission she had felt guilty, and as for the fragments of his past mentioned in the letter, did her simple desire to know merit her attempt at digging out all the information she could?

Mei-Shen didn’t know how to answer. She was also guilty about not asking Layfon directly but instead asking others to gather information about him. Mei-Shen didn’t know whether what she was doing was right or wrong. (But...) She really wanted to know. Losing her chance for apologies, she decided to remain silent and stop thinking about the person named Leerin. The person who wrote that letter. Leerin was in Grendan, and Layfon was in Zuellni. If he could successfully graduate from here, then Mei-Shen would have a whole six years with him.

“...Mei?” Layfon turned his head in surprise, staring at Mei-Shen who was standing rooted to the floor.

“...Ah, sorry about that.”

“What’s wrong?”

“...Nothing.” She replied, shaking her head. Mei-Shen didn’t want Layfon to see her expression right now, so she lowered her head. She suddenly understood what she really wanted to do. No, that wasn’t it; she already knew what it was. In fact, she should have found out a long time ago. Even though she realised, she tried to not think about it, because that was the only way she could avoid reality. She really was a terrible person. Mei-Shen had six years, and those six years was time that Leerin would never have with Layfon. She turned this into an advantage and accepted it. ‘Advantage’... This word was suggestive of a scheme. It was perfunctory, ugly, and terrible beyond comparison. Her self that thought to take advantage of that was too ugly. Why would Mei-Shen think like that? That left her disappointed and anxious. She was attracted by that back, attracted by that back which had once protected her and was now in front of her eyes. There was a person who knew that back a long time ago; there was a girl who understood the Layfon from before Zuellni very well. Every time she thought of that, she couldn’t bear it. The ‘advantage’ that Mei-Shen had thought of was just something that she had come up with after intense thought about this issue. Even though she did have an advantage time-wise, when Mei-Shen thought about what she would be able to achieve in these six years she felt insecure. When she realized that her world was one limited to a world always with Mifi and Naruki she wondered how much she could do. When she realized that she had very little choice over her actions, she felt a deep horror welling up inside of her. In order to dispel those fears, in order to keep herself from feeling the anxiety caused by Leerin, an existence that she couldn’t see, and in order to take herself out of a state of ignorance of his past, she decided that she needed to know. (I really am serious.) Mei-Shen sat there thinking to herself resolutely.

When Layfon opened the door, sounds of laughter came out from within.

“This really is difficult,” Naruki muttered to herself, scattering the metallic balls everywhere as she fell to the floor in embarrassment.

“That wasn’t bad for your first try,” Sharnid said as he continued to stand on the metallic balls. He switched to one foot balancing on the balls and moved about with ease. Beside him, Mifi and Naruki “oohed” in amazement.

“I’ve clearly started practising before you did,” Nina said quietly with indignation.

“That’s because I normally move about carefully without others noticing,” Sharnid smugly replied and jumped off the balls.

“Well... that means that your technique will continually improve.”

“I see.” Mifi nodded her head with an “Oh” as she wrote in her notebook. The extension to the interview was almost completely about carrying out different types of training.

“Then, are there any platoons that catch your attention?”

“All of them. Our platoon’s weakness is extremely obvious. All the teams will probably pick up on it. In order to become victorious we can only try to find a way to overcome the weakness. There is no point in saying which platoons are strong because no matter which platoon it is they are all stronger than we are. All of us recognize that point very clearly.”

“But your battle records are very good.”

“That battle record might not represent our actual strength, but our constant good luck is an irrefutable truth. I hope that our luck will be effective only when we are in an unforeseen pinch, like when we are seen through by the enemy and they begin to hinder our attacks, or when we are ambushed by the opponent’s traps. If we rely on luck like that, then defeat won’t be far away. That’s why we’re working hard to prevent that kind of stuff happening.”

“Keke. Then, would you please say some final words for the readers?”

“I like this place, so that is why I joined the Military arts department. That is all.”

“Thank you very much for accepting our interview.”

Ending the interview, everyone started drinking the juice as they chatted about anything that came to their minds. Sharnid made innocuous jokes as Nina sat aside laughing bitterly, and seeing them, Mifi joined in too. Naruki was still sulking over what happened before, and dragged Layfon to help her continue her challenge against the metallic balls. Felli kept an expression saying “this has nothing to do with me” on the whole time. Mei-shen enjoyed the relaxed atmosphere that had spread across the room as well. Without knowing why, she felt anxious. Mei-Shen thought that if she could fit in with everyone here, then she felt that the world that she was experiencing got a little bigger.

But...

“Oh yeah, have you guys heard of the phrase ‘Heaven’s Blade successor’?” With this sentence, Mifi tore apart the serene mood.



Mei-Shen didn't blame Mifi, as her strong sense of curiosity was without malice. Mei-Shen knew a long time ago that Mifi would be unable to resist the enticement of unfamiliar things. Even though she clearly knew this, she still went and discussed her problem with Mifi, so she had no right to blame her. After class, Mei-Shen had arrived at the park near the Alchemy Complex, alone. Not long before, she and Mei-Shen had been eating ice cream together. At that time, she tried to open her mouth and ask, but she could only think about it and never act. As she reminisced, she stepped into the garden where night would soon arrive.

There was a guest who had arrived already, and even though there was clearly a seat next to her, she was still standing. Seemingly hearing Mei-Shen's footsteps, that person turned her head.

It was Felli.

Her silver-white hair swayed with her body, contrasting against the mood of the falling sun.

"You really came by yourself."

"...Yes." Mei-Shen stood in front of Felli, so nervous that she thought her heart would leap out of her chest. After arriving at school, she found a note on her desk. On it said 'there is something I would like to discuss with you alone', and it specified the time and place. Mei-Shen came alone, because the person who had asked her to come was the Psychokinesist, Felli and it would be impossible to trick her. If a psychokinesist wished, then they could even count the number of bugs that were in the garden. It was impossible for Naruki and Mifi to hide from her.

"... I thought you wouldn't come."

"I thought you wouldn't come either."

When she picked up the letter from the desk, she was seen by two other people. The letter had been read by all three people, and they decided together that Mei-Shen should go alone. Although Mifi held onto the idea of going together until the end, she met fierce resistance from Naruki.

"This is a critical moment, and I think that if we do not obey this condition, then Mei-Shen will have no way of intervening in any matter." Even though the Layfon they met in the classroom seemed calm and no different from normal, Mei-Shen felt that something deep within him was forcing him to put up that kind of expression, and it seemed very wearing. Mei-Shen hated that feeling when she was helpless and couldn't do anything. She wanted to see his back.

“Without beating around the bush, please forget that phrase from yesterday.”

Heaven’s Blade Successor.

When Mifi said that word, Mei-Shen felt that the temperature in the entire room had fallen. Mifi’s question was like detonating a bomb, and the cracks created from the explosion separated Mei-Shen and the others from the seventeenth platoon.

Felli and the others knew what ‘Heaven’s Blade Successor’ really meant, and they knew what that phrase had to do with Layfon and his past. Mei-Shen didn't know. At that moment, she clearly felt the difference.

“...Why?”

“It has nothing to do with you, and I don't want an excessive burden on him.”

“...But” She wanted to know. She wanted to get closer to Layfon. Would forgetting this phrase allow her to get close to Layfon? No, it could only divide them further apart.

Just as Mei-Shen was about to open her mouth, Felli said “Just to satisfy your own curiosity, does revealing another person’s past make you happy?”

“...That’s not it.”

“But that's exactly what you guys are doing. You are unnecessarily digging up the past of another person, in order to please yourself. And then, what are you going to do afterwards?” Of course she knew, she knew just how despicable her actions were. Just because she was afraid of that person in Grendan called Leerin, and in order to patch up the difference between them, Mei-Shen wanted to know what that word meant, and at the same time she realised how inferior her actions were.

“...I didn't think that doing so would please myself.”

But... But...

“But, it still want to know. Even though I don't know what will happen if I do know ...but when I think about it, I feel afraid. Why must it be kept a secret? When I think about that fact, I feel afraid. ”

“Why?”

Because if she knew, then perhaps her regard for Layfon might change a little. In Mei-Shen’s heart, her feelings for Layfon might change. She was afraid of that, and she was so afraid she was trembling. If her feeling changed like the flipping of a palm, then Mei-Shen felt that she would definitely see herself as low and despicable. Even now, she was extremely jealous;

jealous of the people in the seventeenth platoon who understood what she did not. She was jealous of the fact that even though they knew the truth about Layfon they still regarded him as a comrade. Layfon said that he would not return to Grendan. Was it that wasn't that he didn't want to return, but that he couldn't return? In the phrase "Heaven's Blade successor" was there hidden the reason that prevented his return? Was it because of that reason that Layfon had given up the path of the Military Arts? If it was the case, then what Mei-Shen was doing now was undoubtedly poking into Layfon's unhealed wounds.

"Then why do you want to know?" Felli asked Mei-Shen for a reason.

"I..." Even if she knew the reason hidden within the phrase, the people in the seventeenth squad still saw Layfon as a comrade.

She wanted to protect.

She was very regretful.

It was as if she had been cast out of Layfon's world that she was regretful.

"I..."

The sound quivered.

"... Because I like Layfon... Because I like him."

That's why she wanted to know, but she was afraid that if she knew, her current relationship with Layfon might collapse. She didn't wish for her feelings to be trapped within herself. She wanted Layfon to understand. Even if it was only one sided to Layfon. She wanted to know about Layfon's past, even if she didn't really want to dig out everything about Layfon, but instead she wanted to verify, that even if she knew of Layfon's past, that her feelings for him would not change.

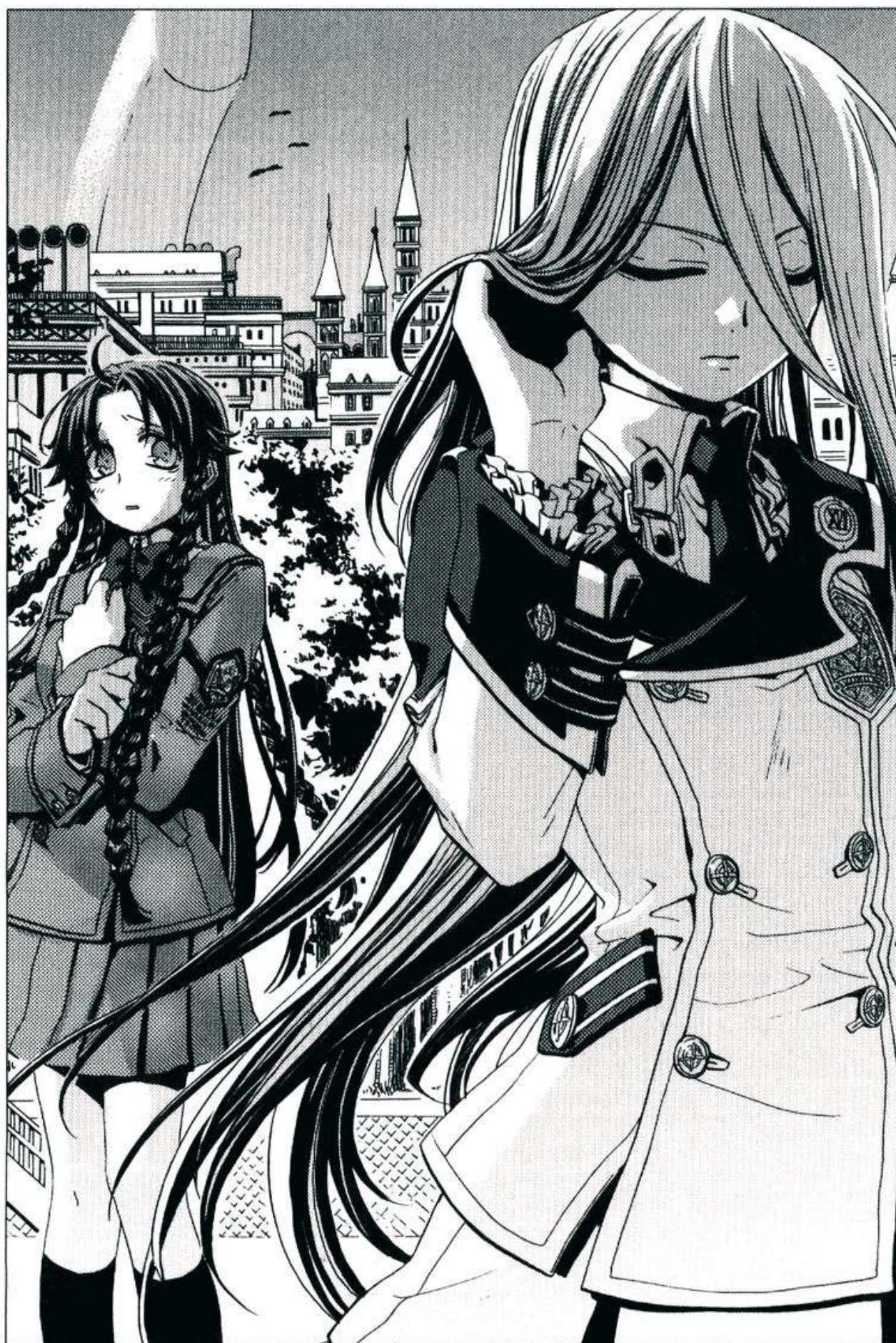
"If you don't verify it, will you have no confidence in your feelings?"

"...Yes"

Felli's voice was reproachful, but Mei-Shen nodded without disguise.

"...Gingerly using the paws to test out the ground as you proceed. You only think about the step ahead, but think nothing of what the consequences are after. That isn't a very smart method."

"..."



After she knew, how would Layfon see Mei-Shen... That's what Felli was trying to say. Was it possible for everything to stay the same...?

"Well..." Facing Mei-Shen, whose expression was beginning to stiffen from fear, Felli continued to speak. "If that is how you do things, then there isn't much left for me to say."

After she said this, Felli turned away and left.

"That..."

"I have nothing to say to you anymore, and the last thing is a piece of advice." Felli said this as she was leaving. "I don't know if you want to know, or if you don't but either way it's very difficult."

Mei-Shen noticed that after saying this, Felli sighed.

(Ahh... I see...) Watching Felli's shadow leaving the garden, Mei-Shen felt ignorant. (There are many people who like Layfon.) And she, she was definitely...

"Hu..." Accompanying her nervousness, loneliness, and weariness, finally recognizing this problem, Mei-Shen laid on the ground, exhausted.

Deep within herself, she felt that... there were a lot of hardships ahead of her.

Epilogue

She seriously couldn't stand him...

On her way back to her accommodations at Zuellni, Leerin repeated this silently to herself again and again. Because it was going to be a long time before the next roaming bus arrived, there was nearly nobody staying here, and the hotel had a very empty feel to it.

"What are you talking about, 'very cheap'? No matter how slow you are, there's gotta be a limit. Do you want to participate in the Slowness World Series?"

Leerin angrily grumbled to herself as she placed her luggage beside the bed and just lay like that on the bed.

She was alone now.

It wasn't because she hadn't lived alone for a long time, it was just that it felt like she had been suddenly thrown into a silent world, and it brought Leerin an empty feeling.

It really had been a hectic day. With the help of Savaris she had managed to cross two fighting cities and reunite with Layfon.

If she were to describe it with words, it would only take a sentence or two, but she had experienced a really long day. On her way here on the roaming, bus crossing paths with filth monsters, she realized for the first time how terrifying their existence was.

There was no other way that any other city had a group of Military Artists such as the Heaven's Blade Successors with such immense power. Nor were they blessed with the leader of the Heaven's Blade Successors: the Queen. That's why, in comparison to other cities, filth monsters weren't really a big issue. That's why, destruction was more likely for the other cities; at least that's what people who lived in cities without Heaven's Blade Successors said.

But as she thought about Layfon standing on the battlefield, her feelings suddenly became complicated.

But as she had never seen Layfon being injured as much as this time before, perhaps it was true that other cities were even more dangerous than Grendan.

Leerin continually pondered this question. Was it more dangerous in other cities or in Grendan... Whichever one was actually more dangerous was of little consequence, as this question swirling though Leerin's head was unimportant.

That was just a buffer of sorts.

A necessary buffer for her to accept reality.

“.....”

Wriggling silently on her bed, she reached into her luggage bag with one hand.

As she touched what she wanted, she tugged it out of the bag. It was a wooden box wrapped up in a cloth. It was something very important that her adoptive father had entrusted to her.

It was to be given to the Psyharden successor, a katana Dite.

It was the proof of her adoptive father's forgiveness, the proof of her adoptive father's apology.

It was also the proof of the bond between them.

"I still haven't given it to him yet."

It wasn't that she was too busy and forgot to give it to him. But Leerin couldn't just give it to Layfon like that.

Maybe he would be so happy that he would start crying.

If Layfon started crying, what would she do? Would she be happy as well? Of course. But, that's not the only thing she would feel...

"It really is a mess, eh?"

Her eyes turned a little warm. There was something rising up from her throat.

They would probably start crying together.

But, she didn't want to start crying with him. She couldn't say to him, "Isn't this great?"

Because, before that, there were other things that she wanted to say.

"I'm so happy that Layfon's safe."

She was alone in this room. A place where nobody could hear anything, where Layfon couldn't hear her, where nobody else could hear her.

And so, she couldn't bear it any more.

"I'm so happy..." said Leerin openly, her wrists covering up eyes that were overflowing with tears.