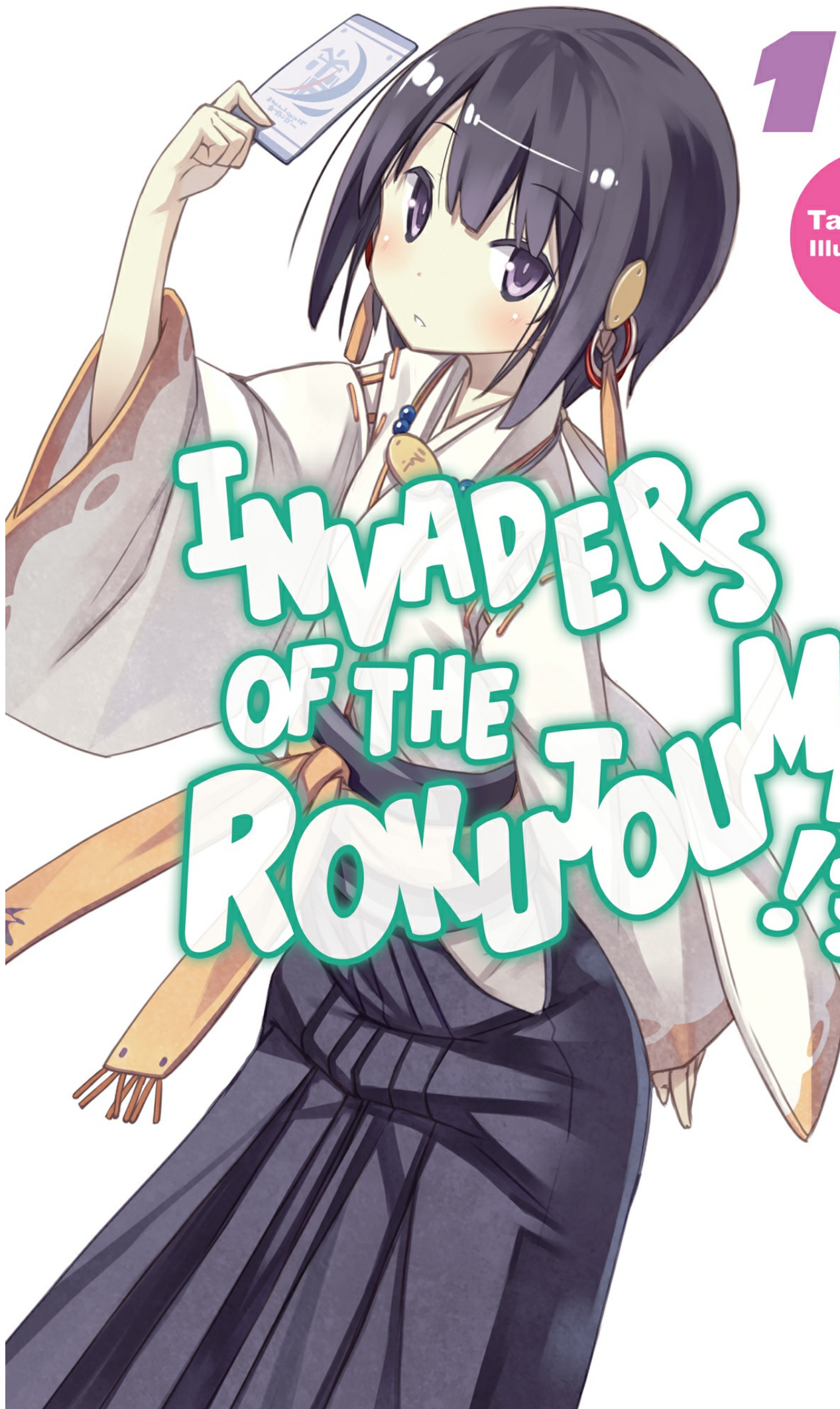


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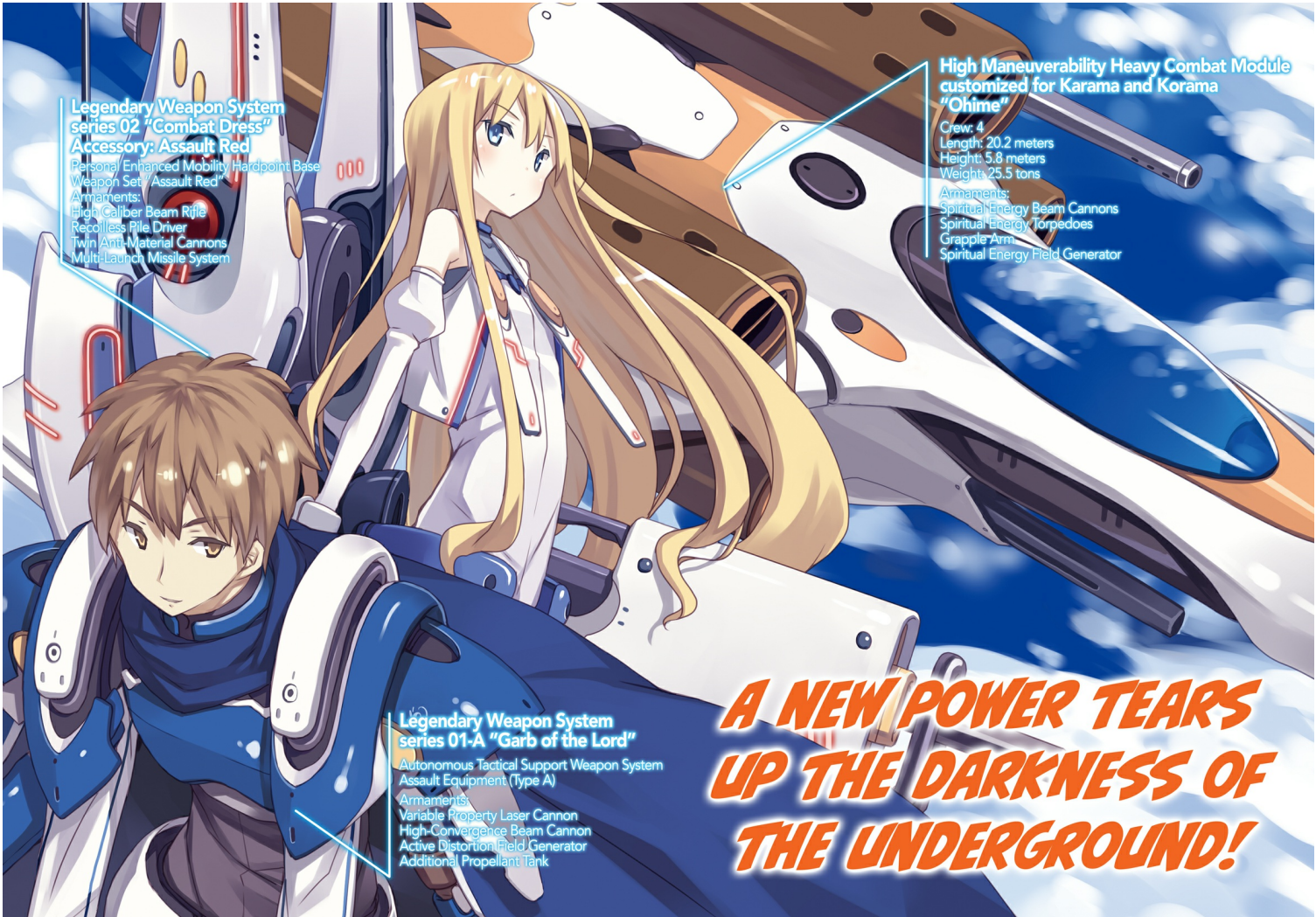
Takehaya
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INVADERS OF THE ROKUTOU![!]



TO THE
UNDER-
GROUND!





**"YOU DON'T MIND
ME INTRUDING?"**

**KIRIHA, FOR SOME
REASON, HAD ONLY
EMERGED FROM THE
HOLE LEADING
UNDERGROUND FROM
THE WAIST UP.**



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STUDENTS OF KISSHOUHARUKAZE HIGH SCHOOL



KASAGI SHIZUKA

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



MATSUDAIRA KENJI

Koutarou's childhood
and best friend.



SAKURABA HARUMI

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



SATOMI KOUTAROU

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



**UNDERGROUND
DWELLERS**

KURANO KIRIHA

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

RESIDENTS OF CORONA HOUSE

INVADERS OF THE ROKUJOUMA!? FACTIONS MAP

MAIN BODY



AIKA MAKI

A former member of the evil magical girl group, Darkness Rainbow. She currently lives together with Shizuka.



GHOSTS



HIGASHIHONGAN SANAE

The ghost girl haunting room 106, reborn into the land of the living.



NIJINO YURIKA

A girl who came to warn about the dangers of room 106. Turns out she's an actual magical girl.



THEIAMILLIS GRE FORTHOR

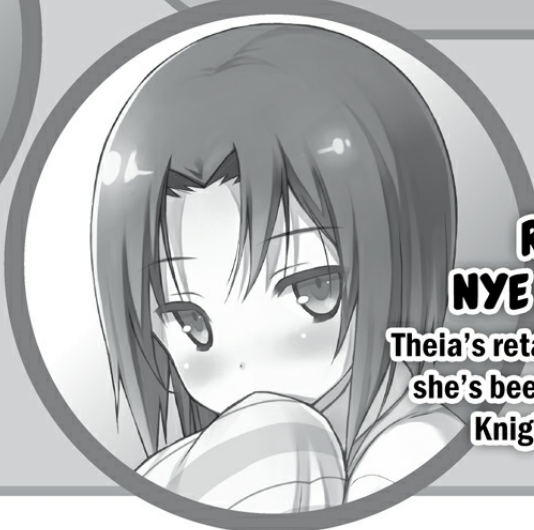
A princess who came from outer space as part of a trial for imperial succession. Currently in exile alongside her mother.



**CLARIOSSA
DAORA FORTHOR**

A former rival princess to Theia. Lately, Koutarou's been relying on her whenever something comes up.

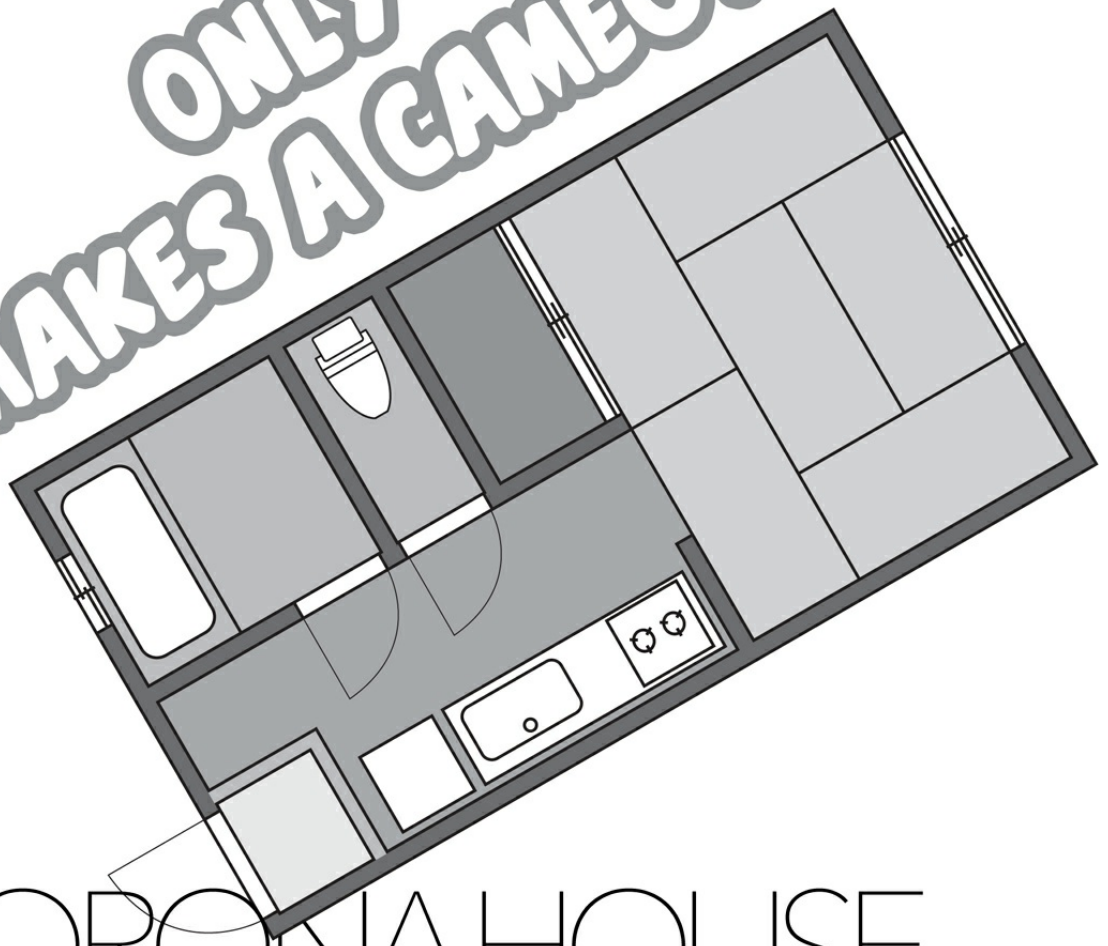
ALIENS



**RUTHKANIA
NYE PARDOMSHIHA**

Theia's retainer and assistant. Lately, she's been training under the Blue Knight, who she admires.

ONLY
MAKES A CAMEO?!



CORONA HOUSE
ROOM 106

To the Underground World

Sunday, July 4th

To the five Sun Rangers, the Forthorthian weapons they had been loaned were complete mysteries. While they had only been equipped with nonlethal weaponry to keep the conflict at hand from getting any more serious, they still far surpassed any weapons known to Earth. All five of them were simply amazed.

“What the heck is this? I’ve never seen a taser gun that fires bullets.”

“Hayato-niichan, this looks like a bazooka. Is it seriously nonlethal?”

“Kenichi, wouldn’t this suit you? They said it’s called a shock sword.”

“Huh, I think you’re right. Daisaku, would you spar with me a little?”

“Yeah, sure. Let’s all get a feel for the new gear.”

While they were all stunned at first, they couldn’t let it get the better of them with the battle so close at hand. In order to prepare for it, they began with some light sparring exercises.

“How is it, Daisaku?”

“Hmm, it seems like there’s a bit of delay between the hit and when the zap comes.”

“I see. So I need to respond faster than with the usual blade...”

A loud bang rang out elsewhere in the room.

“A direct hit. Well done, Hayato-niichan.”

“What an unpleasant gun. It hits exactly where I aim.”

“Ah, so that’s why you hit slightly above the mark.”

“Yeah, it looks like I don’t need to compensate for anything with this.”

The group continued like that for a while, and just as their practice was about to come to an end...

“Oh?”

Megumi spotted several small silhouettes behind some steel drums—children of the underground people. The Sun Rangers were currently in the conservative faction’s stronghold, and the young children had come to spy on them.

“What are you doing here? We’re practicing fighting, so it’s dangerous.”

“...Are you heroes of justice?” one of the children peeking out from behind the steel drums timidly asked Megumi.

The children had heard the adults talking about a group of transforming heroes—which was really what they’d come to see.

“That’s what we’ll always strive to be.”

“...Are you going to defeat the underground people?”

That was what the children were worried about most. Still naive to the ways of the world, they didn’t fully grasp the conflict at hand, and the last thing the children wanted was to become enemies of heroes of justice.

“No, it’s not like that. It doesn’t matter whether you’re a surface dweller or an underground dweller. We are only going to stop the bad people who are hurting others.”

“Then... you’re our allies?”

“Are you bullying anybody?”

“No, we wouldn’t do that! We all get along!”

“Even with the people of the surface?”

“Yeah! We even went together to a festival the day before yesterday!”

“What good little boys and girls you are. And as long as you’re good boys and girls, we’ll be your allies.”

As Megumi smiled, the children let out sighs of relief and came out from behind the steel drums, one after another. There were seven of them in total, and they all looked at the Sun Rangers with sparkling eyes.

“You transform, right?!”

“Yes, we do.”

“I want to see it!”

“Hmm, let me ask the others... Everyone, could you come over?”

“Sure thing!”

When Megumi called for them, Kenichi and the others walked over to her and the children. On the way, Kenichi spoke to the other Sun Rangers with a serious expression on his face.

“Everyone, we have a lot of responsibility on our shoulders.”

“I know. We’re not the same as we were last year.”

“I can’t just sit around eating anymore.”

“It’s a little embarrassing, honestly.”

The Sun Rangers were indeed different people than they’d been a year ago. They were still in the grand process of developing and honing their skills, but they knew better than ever what was important—and who they couldn’t let down.

That’s why they had made up their minds. Regardless of what happened, they would fight in a way that they could be proud of. In a way they could boast to the children about.

Koutarou and the others were currently in the stronghold of the People of the Earth’s conservative faction. The stronghold was originally a shelter that had been prepared in the event of an emergency, but it was now being used as their base of operations. Koutarou and the others had gathered there to swiftly decide on a strategy and ready themselves for the coming battle with the radical faction.

Right now, they were in the conference room in the middle of a strategy meeting with some leaders from the conservative faction. Professor Roppongi was also there on behalf of the Sun Rangers. Since they were busy training with their new weapons, they left the meeting to him. And said meeting had been

going on for quite some time now.

“...Then let's go over what's been decided.”

Kiriha, who was the commander of the entire operation, was leading the meeting. Once the entire strategy had been decided on, she went over it with everyone part by part, a serious expression on her face all the while.

“Theia-dono will lead the surface team: Ruth, Shizuka, Maki, the Sun Rangers, and a unit of eighty troops from the conservative faction's combat force, for a total of eighty-nine men in all.”

For the upcoming battle, Koutarou and the others had decided to divide their numbers. They were split into a surface team that would seize control of the earthquake weapon, and an underground team that would capture the radical faction's leaders.

Members of the surface team were largely chosen for their abilities to use large-scale attacks. Theia and Ruth had their battleship, Blue Knight, and Shizuka held the power of a dragon inside of her. And after spending some time analyzing the information they had gathered so far, they realized there was a chance that Maya had cast some kind of spell on the earthquake weapon. For that reason, Maki would be accompanying the surface team as well.

The Sun Rangers were also appointed to the surface team, not only because they were more suited to battle above ground, but also for political reasons. Dealing with a threat on the surface was closer to their original duty than intervening in foreign political matters. It was decided that this would be the easiest way to keep the surface and the underground from coming into serious conflict.

On top of that, eighty members of the conservative faction's combat force under Kiriha's direct command would be joining them. Because the conservative faction's forces were relatively small, that was about the maximum amount of soldiers they could muster. Any more than that might also make transportation difficult, so everyone decided capping the unit at eighty would be appropriate.

“The underground team will consist of Koutarou, Yurika, Harumi, and Sanae under my command. We'll be joined by another twenty conservative faction

troops, making a total of twenty-five of us.”

The underground team, on the other hand, was going for flexibility over numbers. They had the calm and quick-witted Kiriha in the lead, Koutarou who fought using all kinds of powers, Yurika and Harumi who could use magic, and Sanae who could sense and detect enemies better than anyone with her psychic powers. They could adapt to just about any situation, and with a smaller team, they could avoid fighting as much as possible.

Even with Kiriha’s subordinates, they still only numbered about a quarter of the surface team. That would be considered an advantage in terms of mobility and strategy when it came to the narrow passageways of the underground, so they’d decided a twenty-man team achieved the optimal balance between fighting power and stealth.

“Clan-dono will stay on standby in the air, and the Cradle will provide support where needed.”

Clan was an exception and wouldn’t be part of either team specifically. Instead, she would be helping both. In that, she had two primary jobs: she would relay communication between the two teams, and provide support for either in combat.

Since the battle would likely be occurring both on the surface and underground simultaneously, it would ordinarily be impossible for the teams to communicate. Forthorthe’s gravitational wave technology would change that, but it still wouldn’t be easy to connect to the team underground. As such, tech wizard Clan would stay on standby to organize communications for the operation. With her help, the two teams should be able to coordinate flawlessly. On top of that, she’d be able to assist with everything from analyzing information to transferring supplies. While such jobs were relatively mundane, they would be critical in the fight to come.

“The underground team will move first, and once we’ve located the enemy’s base, both teams will begin their attacks simultaneously. Since each team will act as a diversion for the other, the timing of the joint attack is of utmost importance.”

Currently, the position of the earthquake weapon was all but confirmed, but

the radical faction's main base still hadn't been located. While there were some leads, they would have to search for it before they could really make their move. Once they found it, they'd launch a simultaneous attack on both the base and the earthquake weapon.

"The mission will begin as of 19:00 today, and we'll roll out after the sun sets."

As it was summer, the sun would set around 7PM. Their movements would be less obvious under cover of darkness, and since not being noticed would be an important part of the operation, they'd be moving out after the sun went down.

"That is all for the outline of the strategy. Any questions?"

Once she finished reviewing the plan, Kiriha looked around the room. She looked more serious than ever; smiling simply wasn't an option for her today. And she wasn't the only one. The same was true for the other girls as well. This was their first time ever launching a full-scale attack like this.

"...Then this concludes the strategy meeting. Everyone, begin your preparations."

Not a single person had questions. Every one of them knew exactly what they needed to be doing in the battle ahead of them—one fiercer than anything they'd ever faced before.

As a leader of her tribe, Kurano Kiriha had very few people she could truly be herself around. One of that select handful was her father, Kurano Daiha. She was currently in her private room, in the middle of a call with him.

"...The radicals have come to demand that we surrender right away, and they're dangling the existence of that earthquake weapon of theirs in front of us."

"So that really was their goal..."

"By feeding you information directly, they eliminated the need for us to confirm it, which doesn't give us an excuse to buy any time... Maguz is tough."

"How are you planning on responding?"

“I can’t tell you over the call... How pitiful. I’m not even able to speak frankly with my own daughter.”

“I know how you feel.”

At this critical juncture, Daiha couldn’t openly talk with his daughter for fear of magical surveillance and interference. But the same was true for Kiriha. Even though she was talking to her own father, she couldn’t share her mission plans with him. It was a sorry situation to be in. As such, Kiriha’s expression remained quite serious. It was a look that didn’t suit her.

“I will inform you of the details at a later time. Until then, act according to your own judgment, Kiriha.”

Since Kiriha couldn’t tell him anything, Daiha didn’t know that she was planning to launch an attack on the radical faction. Seeing the determination in her eyes, however, he had an idea that something was afoot. As her father, he had a certain degree of insight into her, and he could tell that whatever it was, it was something big. Things made a lot more sense to him when he realized that was probably why Kiriha had called. So though Daiha might have looked calm on the surface, he was uneasy on the inside and wanted to encourage his daughter in some way.

“Thank you very much, chief.”

“I’m glad I got to see you. By the way, Kiriha, there’s talk about arranged marriage—”

“That won’t be necessary. I’m capable of finding my own fiancé.”

“You still remain unmoving on that point... You really do look just like her.”

Daiha smiled. Despite the circumstances, Kiriha finally flashed a slightly more girlish expression when he brought up marriage. While that was the most he could do right now over a video call, Daiha was satisfied that he was at least able to get a word in edgewise as her father.

Once the call was over, Kiriha leaned back in her chair and let out a sigh. She’d gotten the chance to see her father before the battle. Now all that was left was to do her best. The next thing she knew, someone was calling out to her.

“So that’s your father, Kiriha-san?”

It was Koutarou, who had come to her room looking for her.

“Koutarou... you were listening?”

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to eavesdrop.”

Koutarou presented a document to her. It was what he’d come to deliver—a long list of items that had all been checked off. In other words, preparations for the mission were now complete. The document was a formality to let Kiriha know that everything was in place.

“How much did you hear?”

“From the part about your arranged marriage.”

“Then you didn’t hear anything.”

“Sure sounded like it. Sounds like talk of marriage for you is a big deal.”

“Does that worry you?”

“The only thing that worries me is whether or not you’re happy.”

“Then you don’t need to worry. I already have plans laid out for the future.”

“Then that’s good.”

Kiriha smiled, and upon seeing that smile, Koutarou felt like there was no need for him to say anything more. He’d been worried that Kiriha was feeling down and keeping it all to herself again. But it seemed either her talk with her father had cheered her up, or he’d simply been mistaken in the first place. Either way, there was no longer a reason for him to worry. And so Koutarou decided to change the subject, even if it was to something relatively insignificant.

“But still... it’s pretty strange.”

“What is?”

“At first you came to invade, but now you’re working your hardest to stop an invasion.”

“The invasion I desire isn’t one based on stealing.”

“But because you hid all that for so long, you ended up throwing me for quite a loop.”

Kiriha’s invasion was an honorable and dignified one. One that would keep people safe and happy. While the People of the Earth were technically illegal immigrants and breaking the law, she was doing the right thing in choosing a peaceful invasion.

But she hadn’t revealed all that to Koutarou at first. That was for two reasons. The first was to buy time, and the second was because she didn’t know what kind of person he was. As such, she caused him a good amount of undue worry over her intentions.

“Thinking back on it now, it was all pretty strange. You claimed that you would be mass producing weapons like the haniwas for your invasion, but you also spoke sympathetically about what it was like to be stolen from and hurt... I should have connected the dots back then.”

“I’m sorry for deceiving you. But in doing that, I was able to silence the radical faction for a time. What’s more... I was able to reunite with my first love.”

Kiriha smiled as she spoke and put a hand to her chest. Just underneath it was her card—the one she’d gotten as a present from the boy she loved back when she was still a child.

“I’m not angry. I know you were in a tough spot.”

“Thank you, Koutarou.”

Seeing Kiriha smile, Koutarou could see a bit of the girl he’d met eleven years ago. The girl whose eyes had sparkled upon seeing the surface world for the first time, and who was heartbroken when she couldn’t ride the rollercoaster. As Kiriha and her younger self overlapped in his mind, a certain wish blossomed inside of Koutarou.

“Say, Kiriha-san...”

“Yes?”

“Once all of this is over, let’s go ride that rollercoaster.”

Ever since she was a child, Kiriha rarely asked for anything for herself.

Koutarou knew she might be holding back even now. But once the battle was over, there would be no need for that. Taking her to the rollercoaster might be the perfect first step to getting her what she really wanted.

“Koutarou...”

But that was when something unforeseen happened. Still smiling, tears began streaming from Kiriha’s eyes.

“H-Hey, what’s wrong?”

Not expecting her to start crying, Koutarou looked at Kiriha with a worried face. She looked back up at him with tearful eyes.

“You just said something that can never be taken back... Do you realize that?”

Kiriha put both hands over her chest, holding back the feelings that were on the verge of bursting out.

“Kiriha-san...”

“You can’t be so dense that you don’t understand what saying that right now means to me... and Kii...”

Inside of Kiriha was a lonely little girl named Kii who rarely showed herself. They coexisted in her mind, and the rollercoaster held a special significance to them both. So Kiriha—both as an adult and as a child—knew it was something truly special to be asked to go ride the rollercoaster after everything was through and done.

“I know. But... there was nothing else to be said.”

Koutarou was well aware of what he’d said and what it meant. He’d chosen those words on purpose. Considering the relationship they’d built, it was all he’d needed to say. There could be nothing more appropriate than that.

“Then... there’s something I want to ask.”

“What?”

“Would you mind if I hugged you right now...?”

“Do you even have to ask?”

Koutarou smiled smugly and spread his arms out.

“Koutarou!”

Kiriha sprung up from her seat and leaped into Koutarou’s arms, embracing him with both of hers. Koutarou responded by hugging her back. She continued crying in his arms, her shoulders gently trembling.

“There you have it, so let’s hurry up and put an end to all this.”

Koutarou patted Kiriha on the back and held her like that as she cried.

“Of course... I love you, Onii-chan...”

Kiriha had a new goal, and she would give this mission her all to that end. Though she continued to cry for a while, strong, positive emotions filled her chest.

When the clock hit 7PM, it was time for the mission to start. Koutarou, the girls of room 106, and the Sun Rangers gathered in the entrance hall of the base. Koutarou and the rest of the underground team would be the first to depart. The others had come to see them off.

“Koutarou, you get it, don’t you? You’re only allowed to lose against me. I won’t forgive defeat at anyone else’s hands. Win, and come back unharmed.”

“Don’t be so unreasonable, Theia. But you guys be careful too, okay? You already stand out enough as it is, so don’t get reckless.”

“Kiriha-sama, please stay safe. And please take care of Master.”

“Thank you, Ruth. I’ve looked through the manual for Koutarou’s armor; there’s no need to worry.”

“Sanae-san, make sure you come back in one piece so you can wear your knight’s uniform.”

“Yeah! Hmm, if you’re indigo, Maki, I wonder what color I should be... Heehee!”

“Ugh, my stomach hurts...”

“Oh, even you’re nervous, Yurika-chan?”

“I... I ate too much... Ugggh...”

“Let’s go on a diet together once this is all over.”

“Harumi, the PAF will last for at least another 24 hours, but bear in mind that you should change your power pack when you have the time to do so.”

“You mean to always be prepared for the unexpected. Got it, Clan-san. I’ll be careful.”

Koutarou and the nine girls wished each other good luck and said their farewells. If everything went according to plan, they wouldn’t meet again until the battle was over. That’s why their parting words were all a little more solemn than normal.

I guess that’s to be expected. Even though they’re all strong, they’re still just normal girls...

Koutarou could easily tell that the girls were nervous. It was the same kind of nervous energy he’d felt before major battles in past Forthorthe. Clan was the only other person in the group who knew what that was like.

“Sun Rangers, take care of everyone. They’re all strong, but they don’t have a lot of actual combat experience.”

Koutarou bowed his head to the Sun Rangers. Since they were part of the surface team, they would be accompanying Theia and the others in his place. And though the Sun Rangers were less powerful than Theia and the others, they far outranked them in terms of actual experience. Koutarou would be counting on that experience to guide the entire group.

“Please leave it to us, Baron-san. The only thing the five of us can take pride in is our experience.”

“Baron-sama is counting on me! Baron-sama! On meee! I’m sooooo haaappyyy!”

“Megu-chan, they’re talking about important things here, so let’s get out of the way for now.”

“I think about it from time to time, but... Megu-nee-chan really just spins in circles, doesn’t she?”

“Even in this kind of situation, she’s the same as always... You just might be

right.”

“I’m counting on you, Sun Rangers.”

“You got it.”

Koutarou and Kenichi lightly bumped fists. A promise between warriors was the same, regardless of the day and age.

“Koutarou.”

As if waiting for that moment, Kiriha called for Koutarou. When he looked over, he saw that the underground troops were all gathered. From room 106, there was Kiriha, Sanae, Yurika, and Harumi. They were joined by twenty of Kiriha’s subordinates. So with Koutarou, the underground team numbered twenty-five strong.

“We’ll be off now. Again, you guys be careful.”

Koutarou bid his final farewells to those that would remain behind for now, and moved to join up with the rest of the underground team.

“Men, make sure you return alive!”

“Master, leave everything here to me during your absence!”

“Nijino Yurika! Watch out for Maya-sama!”

“Kii, you’re not alone! Rely on your allies!”

“Everyone, stay safe!”

Several different voices called out to Koutarou and the departing team. Each made him want to stay, but he forced himself forward and caught up with the rest of his team without looking back. From here, they were headed underground. It was time for the mission to start.

Koutarou and his team were travelling underground via an old passageway that had been sealed for several decades. In order to keep their movements secret from the radical faction, Kiriha had wanted to take as hidden a route as possible. There were several different paths that led underground, but this one in particular led to part of the underground city that had been abandoned due

to the decline in population. And since no one lived there now, the passage to it had been sealed off long ago. It was like the whole place had been forgotten by time. That made it the perfect infiltration route—as long as they could break the seal and get in.

“All right, I’ll take a look on the other side.”

With her ghostly powers, Sanae was able to leave her body and inspect the other side of the sealed door.

“Come back soon, Sanae-chan!”

The Sanae who was left behind when she left her body—in other words, Sanae-san who’d been hospitalized—saw her off with a worried look on her face. Aware of that look or not, the ghostly Sanae disappeared through the solid door.

“How does it look?” Koutarou asked.

“U-Um... It doesn’t look like there’s anyone around.”

It was Sanae-san who answered, reporting on what Sanae-chan was seeing. Even when Sanae-chan left her body, the two of them weren’t completely divided. They were still connected through spiritual energy. So while it looked like they had split up, they still shared a soul and their senses. Rather than being two people, they were two versions of the same girl.

“It looks like there are bats, moles, and bugs though.”

“Eeeeeek!”

Upon hearing that terrible word—“bugs”—Yurika shrieked. She hated bugs.

“You’re okay with beetles, aren’t you?”

“I hate spiders, disgusting creepy-crawlies, and anything venomous!”

Her lip quivering, Yurika frantically sprayed insect repellent all around her. When she learned that she would be going underground, it was the very first thing she’d packed.

“Karama, Korama, open it up.”

“Ho! Got it, Nee-san!”

“Leave it to us, ho!”

While Yurika was still spraying away, Kiriha gave the haniwas the order to unseal the door. First, Karama connected its personal spiritual energy generator to the door via a cable. That revived the door’s control panel, which Korama analyzed to undo the lock. In total, the process took them about ten seconds. Since the door was so old, the haniwas had no problem at all deciphering its outdated technology. It was a cinch.



“Koutarou, please open it, ho!”

“We’ll leave the physical labor to you, ho!”

“Okay, okay.”

Since he stood out too much while wearing it, Koutarou didn’t have his armor on currently. But even without it, he was still the strongest of the group. He grabbed the door and pulled on it with all his might. It let out a grating screech as it slowly slid to the side. Sanae-chan then returned through the open gap.

“I’m back!”

With a cheerful smile on her face, she hugged Koutarou’s back.

“Sanae, I’m not the one you should be returning to. Try over there.”

Koutarou pointed at Sanae-san.

“Hurry and come back, Sanae-chan!”

Since she was so shy, she couldn’t help feeling bashful over standing next to her beloved Koutarou. She wanted to merge with Sanae-chan again as quickly as possible.

“You know, if you love him, then just say so.”

“Don’t be mean!”

“Sanae, hurry up and go back to normal. We’ve got to go.”

“But you can see better in the dark this way, Koutarou. Look.”

Sanae knew the circumstances, and wasn’t actually playing around. Since Koutarou’s spirit sight was an ability that came from Sanae, she could naturally use it much better than he could. And when she clung to him, she could confer more of her power than normal. Enhanced spirit sight was indeed convenient when walking down a dark tunnel without any light.

“I see. Then let’s proceed like this.”

“If you appreciate it, then you better praise me.”

“You did good. Very good.”

“Heeheehee...”

“In this state, I should take the lead. Everyone, follow me.”

“Let’s go!”

“Wait! Don’t leave me behind!”

Koutarou proceeded through the door with Sanae-chan still on his back. Sanae-san chased after them in a panic. Seeing Koutarou and the others like that, Harumi and Kiriha smiled at each other.

“What a mysterious sight.”

“I never thought I’d so literally get to see someone getting ahead of themselves like that.”

“You could say that again. Heehee.”

“P-Please waiiit!”

Harumi, Kiriha, and her subordinates also followed after Koutarou and both Sanaes. From there, they all moved deeper underground and set foot into the domain of the People of the Earth.

While the passageway leading into the city was old, it was sturdily built. The walls and floors were made out of something similar to concrete. Despite not having seen use for decades, there were no signs of dilapidation. It certainly showed off the People of the Earth’s constructional skills.

“It has a similar vibe to Kiriha-san’s base.”

That was Koutarou’s first impression upon seeing the passageway. The simple yet sturdy structure reminded him of Kiriha’s secret room underneath room 106.

“They were built using the same traditional methods, after all.”

“I see... With all your advanced techniques and technology, even stuff like concrete is considered ‘traditional’ for you.”

“We excel at technology that’s impervious to both moisture and pressure.”

“You might do well to patent all of this stuff...”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

The party progressed down the old-yet-modern passage. In the lead was Koutarou, carrying Sanae-chan on his back. After him came Kiriha, Sanae-san, Harumi, and Yurika, with Kiriha's twenty subordinates bringing up the rear. Normally such a large group would be quite noisy, but thanks to a spell that Yurika had cast to silence their footsteps, there was hardly a noise to be heard as they moved along. They were also scanning for enemies using spiritual energy and using other magic to conceal their presence. They were ideally equipped for stealth.

"Koutarou, stop!"

"There's something there!"

As Sanae-chan leaned forward on Koutarou's back and peered ahead, Sanae-san grabbed his hand and stopped him. Being two in one, their coordination was perfect.

"Sanae, what is 'something'?"

"It doesn't seem to be human. It feels a bit like Karama-chan and Korama-chan."

"There are two corners up ahead, and it's just past there. It's getting closer, but it doesn't seem to have noticed us yet."

"Kiriha-san, what do you think it is?"

"It's probably an automated spiritual energy weapon like Karama and Korama. They're perfect as guards for remote places like this."

Spiritual energy weapons used the spiritual energy their own souls emitted in addition to the ambient spiritual energy around them to move. As a result, they were very low maintenance and would last until their parts were simply worn out. They were very useful for guarding places where intruders were very rare, but not unthinkable.

"Are you guys good in places like this?"

"No, ho! We don't like dark and narrow places, ho!"

"The radical faction has some of us that do, though, ho!"

"You mean like the clay dolls that attacked at the amusement park?"

“Probably. The radical faction probably placed guards here just in case.”

The spiritual energy weapons that the conservative faction employed were primarily used as everyday guards and servants, and were given souls similar to humans. Because of that, they felt lonely when left alone. This was especially true for Karama and Korama, but that kind of tendency was common among the conservative faction.

However, the radical faction only used their spiritual energy weapons as weapons, plain and simple. As a result, their souls were far more mechanical. In fact, what controlled them was much closer to a computer program than a soul. They were true automatons. That was why they never complained regardless of what kind of job they were given, and why they never felt lonely. While they were efficient, they were mere tools. The radical faction had no attachment to them, whereas the rest of the People of the Earth felt the same way about them that the Japanese would about tsukumogami—tools that had gained souls after many years of care and use. That was yet another important difference in the ideology between the factions of the underground dwellers.

“So what do we do, Kurano-san? If we don’t decide soon, that clay doll will find us.”

Harumi was right. They didn’t have long before the presumed spiritual energy weapon of the radical faction closed in on them. They needed to think and act fast.

“Let’s go back and take a detour. I don’t want us to be found, and we can’t go and destroy it.”

Kiriha swiftly made a decision. She believed that a lone spiritual energy weapon deployed here would be to detect intruders rather than to stop them. With that in mind, it was best to simply let it pass by. If they let it find them or if they destroyed it, the radical faction would be alerted to their presence.

“All right, then let’s go. And Yurika, could you power up your camouflage spell just in case?”

“Okay.”

Following Koutarou’s orders, Yurika readied her magical staff. Everyone

waited for her to finish her spell and then turned back the way they'd come.

As Kiriha suspected, what Sanae had detected was a clay doll spiritual energy weapon. It was several times larger than Karama and Korama, and had a more angular shape befitting a weapon. With their superior numbers, they could have easily overcome it, but such dolls were still dangerous opponents one-on-one.

Koutarou and the others avoided the clay doll and detoured around it. With the help of Yurika's magic, they did so undetected. Currently, Koutarou was back in the lead as they were making their way down the passage once more.

"Say, Kiriha, how far are we?"

"Just a little further up ahead is an elevator. If we use that, it should take us quite deep. Distance-wise, we're probably less than halfway, but it shouldn't take too long to get there."

"Hmm, so we've still got a ways to go. Hey, Harumi, are you okay?"

"I'm okay. Thank you, Higashihongan-san."

"If anything happens, you let me—the real leader—know right away, okay?"

"Heehee, okay."

After getting past the clay doll, the group made it to their next objective without running into any more trouble. Said objective was a transportation elevator that led to the underground city. Since the clay doll was using it, it was still operational.

"So we're getting on this?"

Upon reaching the elevator, Yurika casually reached out for the call button on the elevator's lit-up control panel.

"Wait, stop!"

But Koutarou grabbed her in the nick of time.

"Kyah! Wh-What is it?!"

Surprised by his sudden actions, Yurika stared at Koutarou wide-eyed. After confirming that the button hadn't been pressed, Koutarou let out a sigh of

relief.

“Give me a break, Yurika. If we call for the elevator, they’ll know we’re here.”

“Ah, r-right... Sorry,” she apologized, turning bright red.

If the radical faction were to ambush them, the elevator exit would be the ideal place. And if they realized that Koutarou and the others were on the elevator, it would be easy to spring an attack on them as soon as they arrived at their destination.

“We’re already in enemy territory, so be more careful, Yurika.”

“R-Right...”

Seeing Yurika nod, Koutarou let go of her and shrugged. Now free, she chased after him with her eyes, her cheeks still flushed.

I-Is that all? He could have some reaction after hugging a girl like that...

Yurika knew good and well that now wasn’t the time to be thinking about anything like that, but she couldn’t help being a little disappointed that Koutarou wasn’t more aware of what he was doing.

“Kiriha-san, there’s gotta be a workaround, right?”

Oblivious to what Yurika was going through, Koutarou called out to Kiriha. After watching them for a moment, Yurika looked down at herself and sighed.

“Indeed. It does seem to have some security on it, but it’s decades old. It’s no match for our present technology.”

“Ho! Leave it to us, ho!”

“Ho, ho! Now it’s our time to shine, ho!”

Karama and Korama began messing around with the control panel. Bypassing it was tedious work that involved deceiving all kinds of security systems, but as Kiriha said, the haniwas didn’t seem to have any trouble with it whatsoever.

An hour had elapsed since the team had passed through the first door in the tunnel. From there, they’d made their way to the elevator, taken it down, and then followed a set of stairs. And now, at last, Koutarou and the others reached

the underground city.

“So this is Kurano-san’s hometown...”

Seeing the underground world for the first time, Harumi stared at it all in wonderment, her eyes wide open. Before her spread out a splendid vista of a nighttime cityscape, which at first glance didn’t look like it was underground at all. Seeing her reaction, Kiriha smiled.

“That’s right. This is the largest city of the People of the Earth, which was built up over hundreds of years—Sial.”

Her proud smile revealed that this city held a special meaning to the People of the Earth. According to legend, their ancestors were driven from their original homeland after committing a grave sin. At the end of their exodus, they reached the area around Kisshouharukaze City, where they settled and established their civilization anew. Though they had advanced technology, as penance for the sin they had once committed, they refrained from taking power and confined themselves to a small area.

Supported by their advanced technology and culture, their peaceful lives continued there for a long time. But as time passed, the people living around them began to advance as well. There were also territorial disputes, which naturally generated friction between the two civilizations. When that friction came to a head, the People of the Earth’s ancestors decided to move underground. While it would have been a simple feat to suppress the less advanced people with their superior technology, their ancestral legends proclaimed that such a use of power would spell their ruin. So instead, the majority of them decided to peacefully move underground. Only a small handful of them remained on the surface. That was when the People of the Earth became known as the People of the Earth.

Life after that was far from easy for them. But the People of the Earth united to face their problems, and worked together to build the splendid town of Sial underground. After hundreds of years of improvements to it, it evolved into a splendid modern city. It was a symbol of the path they’d chosen over conflict. The People of the Earth’s ways of peace had led to prosperity. And so not only was Sial home to a great many of the People of the Earth, it was an important

cultural touchstone.

“But... this side is dark,” a puzzled Sanae observed.

The People of the Earth’s city was built inside of a massive cave, filling it up entirely. As it was currently night and the lights they had to emulate the sun were off, there were instead lights beaming out of windows here and there from buildings all across the city—except for in the south. The north was beautifully lit up, but the opposite side of the city where Koutarou and the others had entered was completely dark.

“This is the old district. With the decrease in our population, this side of town isn’t in use anymore,” Kiriha explained with a wistful expression.

The prosperous People of the Earth had suffered a decline as the surface developed. Their current population was less than half of what it had been at its height. As a result, the southern district of the city had been abandoned. There simply weren’t people to fill it now. But thanks to the excellent construction of the buildings there, the district remained the same despite no one living there. It was like a fresh ghost town. Proof of the People of the Earth’s decline. To Kiriha who was born and raised down here, seeing the uninhabited district made her sad. When she looked upon it, she felt like part of her people’s unity and pride had been lost.

“So where do we go now?”

“We’ll group up with our allies at an old guard station. This way.”

Kiriha led the team down a road of the old district. Their destination was a building that had been used by city guards in the past. On the surface, it would be something similar to a police station. They would join up with additional conservative faction forces there and prepare for the battle with the radical faction.

“Clan. Come in, Clan.”

As Koutarou followed Kiriha, he opened up a channel with Clan via his bracelet.

“What is it?”

A hologram of Clan quickly answered him. Since she was on standby as everyone's backup, she was ready and waiting for any incoming calls.

"We've reached the People of the Earth's city. Can you pick up a signal from the transmitter?"

The transmitter Koutarou was referring to was one of five he'd planted on trailers leaving the radical faction's surface weapon factory. They'd managed to track it until it went underground, and Koutarou wanted to know if Clan could find it again because he believed there was a high chance that it would lead them to the radical faction's base.

"Please wait a moment."

Clan remotely accessed Koutarou's bracelet in an attempt to locate the signal.

"It seems it's still some distance away. All I can tell you is that it's somewhere to your north. If you give me some more time, I can analyze the signal better."

Unfortunately, Clan couldn't get a clear read on its position just yet. Koutarou would either have to get closer to the source, or give her more time to process the data she was picking up.

"Go ahead and analyze it, please."

"I'll contact you once I've got something."

"Please do."

Just as Koutarou and Clan finished their call, there was an explosion to the north on the populated side of the city. It wasn't that large of an explosion, but it didn't end at one. Like a roar of thunder, explosions began going off one after another. Completely taken by surprise, Koutarou and the others stopped and looked to the north. There they saw a furiously burning fire taking over most of the nightscape in the aftermath.

"Was there an accident...?"

"That can't be it, Harumi-chan! Ho! There's nothing over there that could explode, ho!"

"Ane-san, based on the distance and sound, it's very likely that those were explosions from handheld firearms, ho!"

“Not good. The radical faction made the first move.”

Kiriha’s expression stiffened. It was hard to believe that the conservative faction would launch an attack here and now. Based on their policies, they would at least wait until they officially rejected the radical faction’s demands for surrender. It seemed far more likely that the radical faction had gone on the offensive because the conservative faction was taking too long to comply with their demands.

“Kiriha-san, let’s hurry and rendezvous with our allies! We can go from there!”

“You’re right. Thank you, Koutarou... Everyone, follow me!”

The situation was growing more and more tense by the minute. They didn’t have any time to hesitate.

Sortie

Sunday, July 4th

Thirty minutes after Koutarou and the others departed, the surface team led by Theia began moving out. Their destination was an uninhabited island off the coast of Kisshouharukaze City that housed a secret base of the radical faction. It was supposedly where they were keeping a weapon of mass destruction that could devastate both the surface and the underground. The objective of Theia's surface team was to take out that weapon, the Earth Dragon.

The remaining girls of room 106, the Sun Rangers, and eighty of Kiriha's subordinates were in the Cradle's cargo bay as they waited to arrive at their destination. The air was tense and everyone wore a stern expression. They all knew this was a battle that could decide the fate of the world.

"This is the first time I've seen this kind of vehicle."

"We have a bunch of strange tools too, but... this is on a league of its own."

Of everyone there, the Sun Rangers seemed the most off their game. But rather than the coming battle, it was the odd ship they were riding in that had them shaken.

It had a peculiar design they had never seen before that relied heavily on curves. While they had heard the sound of thrusters during takeoff, it was flying far quieter than any plane. On top of that, the flight was incredibly smooth. The ship hardly shook at all. All the guides and signs on board were written in strange letters. There wasn't a single word of Japanese—or the more international English—to be found anywhere.

At first, the Sun Rangers thought that it might be a secret weapon from a foreign country. But that confidence gradually diminished. It felt like more like something from a different world, particularly to clever Kotaro and observant Hayato.

“Everyone, I know it’s strange, but let’s not think too much about it. We all have our secrets. What’s important is simply that we can land on that island without being detected thanks to this thing, and that’s all we need to know for now, right?”

Kenichi had his own doubts and questions, certainly, but he had no intention of pursuing them. The Sun Rangers would participate in the battle, but that was ultimately unofficial. They couldn’t make their existence publicly known, so they understood that some of their allies present might be in the same situation. And as long as they were all on the same side, it was best for everyone if no one forced the issue.

“Thank you for your consideration, Red Shine.”

Theia gave a bit of a forced smile. Technically speaking, Theia was an invader and therefore the Sun Ranger’s enemy. They might end up in a sticky situation if she had to tell them the truth right now, so Kenichi’s consideration was quite welcome.

“Not at all. It goes both ways.”

“Our circumstances might be complicated... but there’s one thing that’s certain.”

There was much she couldn’t say, but there was something she felt she had to make clear—that she and the others were the Sun Rangers’ allies.

“We only fight against those that Koutarou has decided to fight. We don’t take up arms against anyone else.”

“Those that Baron-san has...”

“You don’t have to believe us. But... at least believe in Koutarou, who’s honest to a fault. We all do, and we’re united for him.”

What connected Theia and the others was the time they’d spent together. There was no real explanation for what had brought them together in the first place... except for Koutarou. Explaining their relationship would be hard, but she thought that if they could believe in Koutarou, they still might understand. She didn’t have any other way to prove that they were all on the same side.

“If we’re following Baron’s lead, then we don’t have to worry.”

Kenichi nodded with a smile. He too believed in Koutarou. His goal was simply to become a splendid hero that could stand up to Baron Demon. And if he was leading the way now, Kenichi had no reservations about following.

“That’s right, everyone! The moment Baron-sama showed that serious expression of his, it no longer mattered who these girls are! You’re both so silly, Kotaro and Hayato!”

“The preserved food on this ship is really delicious. Whoever makes this couldn’t possibly be a bad person.”

Megumi and Daisaku were unwavering. They completely trusted Koutarou and these people from the very start. While they were both gullible in their own ways, their judgment this time was correct.

“We’ll want to avoid any developments that would make the children cry, right?”

“Yeah. To honor the name of the Sun Squad, we have to walk the path of justice.”

Kotaro and Hayato soon gave up on trying to figure out the true nature of the Cradle. While they were curious about the surprising things happening around them, neither of them wanted to doubt Theia and the others. Nor did they want to let down the underground children they had just met.

“Thank you, Sun Rangers. You really are... the real deal.”

“We still have a long way to go.”

“Naturally. The real deal always aims for new heights.”

“Devil Princess-san...”

“I’m counting on you today, Sun Rangers.”

“Of course! We’re looking forward to fighting alongside you!”

While there was no denying the tension in the air, morale was high within Theia’s team. They all knew they were in for a fierce battle, but knowing their allies had their backs made going forward a little easier.

The surface team landed on the southern coast of the island in question. The radical faction's base lay in mountainous territory to the north of their drop-off point. While Clan's Cradle was highly adept at stealth, it was best not to get overconfident and proceed the rest of the way on foot. Accordingly, Clan retreated after unloading Theia and the others. They would need to make it to the base on their own from here, which would mean staying as hidden as possible as they approached. Step one was to secure their immediate surroundings before setting out.

"There's no sign of the enemy," Shizuka reported.

Since it was well after sunset now, it was quite dark out. But with the power of Fire Dragon Emperor Alunaya inside of her, that hardly mattered to Shizuka. Combined with her heightened ability to sense presences, which she'd honed through martial arts training, she could detect all manner of living things around her. None of them at the moment were human.

"I can't sense any mana either."

Maki, who was standing next to Shizuka, added on to her report. She had examined the area with a spell and hadn't detected any traces of other magic. She had been worried that Maya might have cast a magical defense network around the area, but that didn't seem to be the case.

I can't imagine that Maya-sama would let her guard down... Is it that much harder for her to use magic with her mechanical body, or does she have some other goal...?

Maki knew her master better than anyone. So even though she couldn't sense any nearby mana, she wasn't taking that for granted.

"Ruth, how does it look?"

"There are no reactions on the EM, gravitational wave, or spiritual energy sensors. It seems like this region is outside of their area of precaution."

Ruth was in charge of the scientific approach. She was operating a device floating overhead and scanning the area for other signals. In addition to its original equipment, the device had been modified to additionally detect auras

and spiritual energy. None of the sensors were getting any reactions, however, so the area seemed to be fully clear.

“Hmm... So that’s a successful landing, then.”

Upon hearing their three reports, Theia nodded approvingly. After that, the Sun Rangers spoke up with their own assessment.

“It’s probably because there’s a mountain in the way.”

“But we can’t let our guard down. If it were me, I’d monitor this side of the island using cameras from the top of the mountain.”

Though small, there was a mountain on the island, making it difficult to survey the entire island. The Sun Rangers’ experience told them the northern side would be more properly patrolled, while the southern side was likely only monitored remotely.

“Devil Princess-san, let’s hurry on ahead. Though it might be night, we’ll stand out here.”

“You’re right. Men, advance without letting your guard down.”

Theia listened to the Sun Rangers advice, swiftly made her decision, and led the way forward herself. If everything went according to schedule, Koutarou and the others would arrive at the underground city in half an hour. Their attack shouldn’t begin until after that, but she wanted to have room to spare when the time came.

Though it was an uninhabited island, it was still just off the coast of Japan. There wasn’t anything particularly special about it. The flora and fauna were familiar, and the climate was the same as the mainland. It even seemed like people had lived there once upon a time, as there were gravel roads left here and there.

The surface team calmly advanced towards the enemy base. The members, apart from Ruth, were all incredibly fit. Their steps were confident and light as they went.

“It’s times like this that I’m grateful for magic.”

Even the less athletic Ruth could keep up with everyone thanks to Maki's help. She'd cast two spells on Ruth—one to make her slightly stronger and the other to keep her cool. Both effects were minimal, but they had a perfect synergy for tasks like this. Thanks to that, Ruth was able to keep pace without fatiguing herself.

"I'm glad I could be of help, vice captain."

"Much appreciated, Indigo Knight-dono."

While the Satomi band of knights had an impressive prestige since it was founded by the Blue Knight himself, there were currently only two members apart from Koutarou. Currently, their only real weapon was their teamwork, but that teamwork was indeed impressive.

"Aw, that all sounds fun... Maybe I should join too."

Shizuka watched on enviously. She was part of the cooking society at school, but as the name implied, cooking was all they did. To her, the Satomi band of knights sounded more like a fun athletics club.

"You would be most welcome. The majority of our members being noncombatants is a bit of an issue."

The captain, Koutarou, and the vice captain, Ruth, were both without a doubt knights. But Maki was essentially their accountant, and Sanae and Harumi were hoping to join as resident chore-doer and secretary respectively. At this rate, it wouldn't be long before the band of knights was more like a school club. Theia, who believed that a band of knights should be exactly that, wanted more soldiers to join.

"Then how about padding the numbers as a princess knight, Theiamillis?"

"The mysterious and beautiful knight that appears in the Satomi band of knights' time of need. And to think that her true identity is me, Princess Theiamillis, of all people... Hmm, that wouldn't be too bad either."



Theia imagined herself wearing cute armor with a flower motif and a jewel-studded mask to conceal her face. She didn't hate the idea of doing the protecting rather than being protected once in a while. But Shizuka quickly interrupted her thoughts.

"Wait, Theia-chan," she said, the smile vanishing from her face. "There's something there. Behind the bush in front of us."

Shizuka's sharp senses had alerted her to a hostile presence just ahead.

"Nobody move. Ruth, fifty meters ahead at eleven o'clock."

Theia signaled for the troops behind her to halt with a raise of her hand. She then had Ruth search the place Shizuka had indicated. She knew based on the look on Shizuka's face that this wasn't just some critter. Danger was approaching.

"Your Highness, it seems to be a pack of medium-sized beasts. Four in total."

"Not good... There's a magical reaction, too. They were either made from or strengthened by magic."

Ruth and Maki quickly worked together to identify the hostiles as magical beasts.

"Everyone, get ready for combat. Don't treat them like they're ordinary animals. Defeat them on sight!"

Theia determined that there was no way to avoid a fight here.

The southern side of the island has been turned into these magical beasts' territory. They're the ones patrolling the area. They catch their own food, and naturally heal from minor wounds... They're the ideal guard for a large territory over an extended period of time.

While the radical faction had spiritual energy weapons that could work as guards, they didn't work well on constant patrol over a large area. While they could gather spiritual energy from their surroundings, maintenance was an issue as far as wear and tear on parts was concerned.

In that regard, living creatures were self-sufficient. Especially ones enhanced by magic. Creating large numbers of them would be difficult considering the

manual labor of magic involved, but large numbers weren't necessary in a situation like this. A few magical guard dogs could be released into an area, and they would roam it until they died. In that sense, the radical faction was making excellent use of the magic they had available to them. And if that was the case, these magical beasts were undoubtedly here to attack. Any delay in reacting could prove fatal.

"Break into squads under the command of your squad leaders!"

The girls of room 106 spread out, each of them leading a squad of twenty conservative faction soldiers. That was their pre-designated arrangement for battle.

"Sun Rangers, I'll leave you to your own. Fight according to your own judgment."

"Roger that."

The remaining five, the Sun Rangers, were treated as a flying column. They would work semi-independently both to respect their political situation and to put their combat experience to full use.

"They're coming. Everyone stay calm—"

Before Shizuka could even finish speaking, four beasts leaped out from the bushes. At first glance they looked like dogs, but they were far bigger. Perhaps it was more accurate to say they were magical weapons based off of dogs.

"Graaagh! Graaagh! Grrrrr!"

Angered by invaders in their domain, the beasts barked and snarled as they charged towards the surface team. They moved far faster than any dog. If anything, they were closer to cheetahs. They also appeared to be somewhat intelligent, and moved in zigzag patterns like gazelles to dodge incoming fire. Their targets were the girls in charge. Their instincts told them who the leaders of the enemy pack were.

In response, the surface team formed two lines to defend against the beasts. However, since they were thrown off by the beasts' swift movements, the spiritual energy beams they fired flew wildly off into the distance. Dashing their

way through the rain of fire, the extraordinary beasts closed in on the girls quickly.

“Blue Knight! Emergency deployment of the distortion field!”

But if the beasts were extraordinary, then the girls were even more so. The first among them to go on the counteroffensive was Theia, with her excellent sense for battle. While blocking the claws coming at her with a barrier, she scolded the twenty restless soldiers under her command.

“Men, don’t bother taking aim! Simply fire straight forward! Cut off its path! Now!”

Rallying under Theia’s command, the soldiers all fired as one. It was almost like one massive shot. Because they were all aiming for the fast-moving beast last time, there had been twenty missed shots in roughly the same place. But now with them all firing at the same time straight ahead, they covered a massive, sweeping plane.

“Graaaaagh!”

The beast jumped into the air without hesitation. Its speed saved its hide. It escaped with only singed fur, but it had taken a massive blow to its pride. Determined to crush the arrogant human that had dared offend it so, the beast scanned the crowd for Theia. Once it hit the ground, it would come right for her.

“Hmph. Even if you’re enhanced, your instincts when faced with danger are still that of any normal dog.”

However, as the beast locked eyes on Theia, it realized its defeat. She had a fearless smile on her lips and a dangerous gleam in her eye. The beast had made a grave mistake in assuming she was the smallest and weakest of them all. Its instincts now told it that it was facing a wolf in sheep’s clothing.

“Blue Knight, Recoilless Pile Driver.”

“As you wish, my princess.”

That golden wolf’s mane fluttered as she attacked the airborne beast. From her front legs, massive golden claws appeared, and the freefalling beast had no

way to avoid coming down on them now.

A kaboom rang out.

The mechanical pile driver—the wolf’s claws—was a weapon that shot a hammer head by detonating gunpowder. Simply put, it was a close-range cannon. The ejected hammer was driven into the beast’s side and demonstrated its incredible destructive power by taking it down in a single shot.

“That’s Theia-chan for you. She beat it right away.”

Impressed by Theia’s handiwork, Shizuka brandished her own fists. When it came to pure combat capability, Shizuka was far stronger—especially with the power of Alunaya. But Theia had the upper hand when factoring in the strength of her twenty subordinates. Shizuka was only an amateur commander. She was too used to fighting by herself, and therefore couldn’t make full use of her squad. Knowing that, however, she was particularly impressed with what Theia could pull off.

“But I can’t stand here admiring her! I have to work hard too!”

Shizuka swung her leg and kicked the beast leaping at her. The kick struck the beast’s front leg, but it quickly compensated and landed as if nothing had happened. It was favoring that leg now, but it hadn’t suffered any decisive damage.

“Everyone, please!”

With the beast preoccupied for the moment, the conservative faction troops under Shizuka’s command began firing again. Spiritual energy beams rained down on the beast. Several of them hit, likely because the beast has been somewhat slowed by Shizuka’s attack. The hits wore it down, but weren’t enough to defeat it. Enraged, it opened its jaws to maul one of the nearby soldiers.

“Not on my watch!”

Shizuka rushed the beast and prevented it from attacking her troops. That pattern had repeated itself a couple of times. Shizuka would protect the soldiers from the beast, and they would provide her with covering fire. With her

lack of experience, however, she naturally stayed on the defensive.

“Should I help?”

“It’s not your turn yet, uncle!”

Shizuka’s fist struck the side of the beast’s face. Suffering from the damage it was accumulating, it was starting to panic and rush into attacks. As such, Shizuka had caught it completely off guard and thrown it off balance, allowing the soldier it was aiming for to escape all harm. Confirming that with a side glance, Shizuka continued her attack.

“What does gaining a little weight hurt? It’s not you’re actually getting heavier in reality.”

“I don’t even want to *seem* like I’ve gotten heavier!”

The dragon inside of Shizuka was happy to help if she needed it, but she considered that a last resort. Considering what still lay ahead of them, she wanted to avoid wasting mana. Furthermore, the consequences after the fact would be dire for her pride.

“Won’t you be more desirable to the other sex with a more substantial figure?”

“That only makes sense to a dragon like you, uncle!”

In this case, Shizuka had made the right call. Having taken quite a beating now, the beast was no longer able to avoid her attacks. The scale was drastically tipped in her favor.

“Human boys like girls that are small and cute!”

Shizuka unleashed a final kick with all of her strength that struck the side of the beast’s head, rendering it unconscious.

“I don’t believe any girl who can defeat monsters bare-fisted would be considered small and cute...”

“Don’t be mean, uncle!”

And so Shizuka’s fight ended with her victory, though she didn’t seem too pleased about it.

While Shizuka fought by taking the front line herself, Maki took the opposite approach. As a magician, she fell back and focused on supporting the soldiers.

“Keep it up. Everyone stay calm and continue attacking.”

Maki was most skilled with mind manipulation and reinforcement magic. Really, anything that affected the mind or the body. As such, she used her spells to buff her squad and hamper the enemy.

“Graaagh! Grrrrr!”

Her soldiers were shooting true to their mark. Only about 10 percent of their attacks hit, but they were far more accurate than the other squads. That was the result of a spell she’d cast to improve their reaction time. As a result, they could better keep up with the beast’s movements, and were gradually chipping away at it. The beast was so focused on trying to dodge that it never found an opportunity to charge forward, only snarl and roar in anger.

“Amplify Fear.”

Maki unleashed a spell that cornered the beast even further—not physically, but mentally. As the name implied, it amplified the fear the beast was feeling, fueling its agitation and robbing it of its calm. It proved quite effective. The beast was reacting slower and with less precision, which made it even easier for the soldiers to hit. There was no need for Maki herself to attack.

“Force Field. Modifier: Area Effect.”

She only needed to protect the soldiers with a defensive spell from time to time. And it wasn’t particularly hard to block attacks from a slow, wounded beast.

While it was still in the battle, the beast could neither effectively attack nor defend. This only agitated it further. Essentially, the more it fought, the further into a corner it was driven. It was a frightening strategy fit for a mind manipulation specialist.

“Grrr! Graaaaaaaaagh!”

Eventually, the beast completely lost it and charged at Maki. It ignored the beams raining down on it and forcibly broke through the line of soldiers to leap

at her.

“Tiny Memory Flash. Modifier: Touch Trigger.”

Maki, on the other hand, was completely calm. She simply incanted a spell, and an indigo light wrapped around her staff. Holding it like a spear, she readied herself for the incoming beast.

“Graaaaagh!”

“I’m sorry... That said, you won’t remember in a moment.”

The tip of Maki’s staff made contact with the beast. As it did, the precast magic on it flowed into the beast. It was a favorite a spell of Maki’s—one that erased the past few seconds of its target’s memory. The beast, who had no idea what had hit it or what happened, suddenly lost track of Maki, who should have been standing right in front of it. With its memory forcibly rewound by a few seconds, it simply looked like she’d teleported away.

“I’ll leave the rest to you.”

Maki calmly walked away from the befuddled beast as the soldiers pelted it with a barrage of spiritual energy beams. Unable to even defend itself, it took the vast majority of them directly and collapsed motionless to the ground.

While the other three girls were succeeding, Ruth alone was being pushed back. Since she was better at managing information than herself on the battlefield, she was a bad match for the swift beast.

“Everyone, please don’t step out of the distortion field!”

Ruth was wearing powered armor and acting as a shield for her squad. Compared to standard individual barriers, the output of the armor’s barrier was much higher. It performed more than well enough to block the beast’s attacks, with her squad attacking from within its safety. Since Forthorthian barriers couldn’t block spiritual energy, the spiritual energy beams passed right through it, making one-sided attack possible.

“Gragh! Grrr!”

The beast, however, moved swiftly enough that the soldiers couldn’t hit it. As a result, neither side could seize the advantage.

This isn't good...

Irritated by the situation, the beast moved around Ruth in an attempt to attack the soldiers from behind. Ruth desperately tried to prevent it, but since the beast was faster, she was at its mercy. At this rate, Ruth would run out of stamina before the soldiers' beams could finish the beast.

"Are you okay?!"

"Sun Rangers!"

Realizing that Ruth was having a hard time, the Sun Rangers had come to back her up.

"Megu-chan, drive it away with your gun!"

"Be careful, Daisaku-kun!"

Red, Yellow, and Pink Shine placed themselves in the way so that the beast couldn't get behind Ruth's squad.

"Wind is south-southwest; velocity of one meter. Humidity is 68 percent. There's no need to correct with this wind speed and direction."

"Roger, moving to shoot... Firing!"

Going on the offensive were the two remaining Shines, Blue and Green. Working as a team, they were sniping from a distance. Avoiding their attacks should be difficult.

"Graaagh!"

"Miss!"

"Damn, it's too fast!"

"Hayato-niichan, nothing will come from complaining."

"I know, I know! Loading the next round now!"

But it was equally difficult to hit the swift, agile beast. It was hard just getting it in the scope. They'd have to properly get the beast in their sights before they could get off a good shot.

"We have to stop it from moving somehow..."

“There’s no need to worry, Red-san. Now that you are here, we can win for sure.”

“Huh?”

“Please use this data.”

Ruth sent data to the weapons that the Sun Rangers were using—which was a simple feat for her considering they were using borrowed Forthorthian weapons. And since they were allies now, it only made sense for them to work together.

“What is this data?”

“It’s a simulated model of this monster’s habits. Though the accuracy is low, you should be able to roughly predict the timing of when it stops.”

Ruth had been gathering information on the beast while staying on the defensive, mapping its attack patterns and other data. She was originally planning on using it herself to counterattack, but fortunately the better-equipped Sun Rangers had shown up. So she passed off her intel and stuck to defending while leaving the attacking to them.

“We can do this, Hayato-niichan!”

“All right!”

Referencing Ruth’s model, Green’s shooting support computer projected where it predicted the beast would be in two seconds in Blue’s scope. According to her calculations, the prediction was about 60 percent accurate. It wasn’t all that high, like she’d said, but it was far better than what they’d been working with.

“Niichan!”

“Firing!”

Bang!

“Miss!”

“Reloading!”

Blue’s first shot missed, but he prepared to try again without missing a beat.

The beast then slid into the center of his scope just as predicted. And there, it stopped for a moment. They weren't about to let a chance like that slip past them.

"Now!"

"Firing!"

Bang!

The bullet fired from Blue's rifle hit the beast dead center, just where he'd aimed. It was a special taser bullet that discharged considerable voltage upon making contact with its target. Overcome by it, the beast's body seized up and stopped moving, but it looked like one shot wasn't enough to fully incapacitate it.

"Megumi, the legs!"

"Got it!"

But the Sun Rangers didn't stop their attack there. Using her gun, Pink shot out the beast's legs. Unable to bear its own weight, the beast fell to the ground.

"Let's go, Daisaku!"

"Yeah!"

Finally it was Red and Yellow's turn. Yellow acted as a step and threw Red high up into the air. After flipping once, Red held his sword out in both hands. Directly below him was the collapsed beast.

"This will finish you!"

Red brought down his blade right down on its head as it struggled to get up. The blade unleashed a shock similar to Blue's bullets. Suffering from both the impact and the shock, the magically strengthened beast lost consciousness.

The four beasts were defeated within a few minutes of Shizuka first sensing their presence. Each one was now lying incapacitated on the ground.

"Devil Princess-san, I know how this might sound, but... Is it really okay to not kill them?"

Though they were originally dogs, they were now modified weapons. Once they regained consciousness, they would probably still be hostile. It was a miserable state of existence. The Sun Rangers' concern was quite justifiable.

"It's unfortunate... but strategic convenience wins out this time. Though they might not be intelligent enough to contact their owners on a regular basis, whoever's in control of them will probably know if they die."

Theia had avoided killing the dogs because she was thinking ahead. Her intuition told her that they shouldn't use lethal force. Without them, there would be no guard on this side of the island, and surely the radical faction had some kind of safeguard in place to inform them if that happened. Theia and the others' goal was just to reach the secret base undetected, and to that end, they needed to keep risks that might give them away to a minimum.

"I see... That's very reasonable."

The Sun Rangers seemed convinced, but not so much Ruth, who was listening in. She smiled as she turned to Theia.

"Your Highness, you can admit that it's just because you felt sorry for them."

"I don't really..."

"Really?"

"...I-It's because I felt sorry for them."

Theia's strategic reasons for not wanting to kill the dogs were perfectly valid, but she also had a personal reason not to.

"I'm sure that Satomi-kun would praise you."

"Yeah, Satomi-kun looks like he'd like... animals."

"W-Well, I guess everything worked out all right... Just to be safe, Maki, could you keep them asleep for a while?"

If the beasts woke up, they would very likely become a threat again. That's why Theia wanted to make sure they'd stay down for the duration of the battle at hand.

"For better or for worse, that's the kind of magic I specialize in."

Maki's signature magic was indigo, meaning putting someone or something to sleep was right in her wheelhouse. Maki as she was now found that a little regrettable, and smiled grimly at herself as she solemnly accepted her duty.

"It would be a huge help. Please get to it ASAP."

"...As you wish, Your Highness."

In Maki's moment of darkness, Theia's bright smile felt so very reassuring. It was like she was telling her it was okay for her to be as she was, regardless of what that was.

Maguz's Identity

Sunday, July 4th

As Koutarou and the others were making their way through the abandoned city district to meet up with their allies, several explosions had gone off in the north side of town. For each explosion, another fire took shape, and in the end, the flames lit up the nighttime city better than the streetlights. Listening closely, they could even hear what sounded like gunfire in the distance every now and then. Sensing how fierce the battle must be, everyone grew tenser.

“What is the meaning of this, Maguz...?”

The most mortified of all, Kiriha bit her lip. The radical faction had demanded that the conservative faction surrender by threatening to use their earthquake weapon, so they should have at least waited to hear an answer before attacking, but this defied all logic. They didn't know exactly what had happened, but one thing was clear: Kiriha and the others were being led by the nose by the radical faction's leader, Maguz.

“Calm down, Kiriha-san,” a calm and composed Koutarou said as he placed his hand on Kiriha's shoulder. “In large-scale battles, unexpected things are going to happen. The commander's job is to adapt to that and make adjustments accordingly, not make sure everything goes according to the plan.”

Among the underground team, only Koutarou had real experience in war. Not modern war, certainly, but while weapons and strategies had changed throughout the ages, the role of a commander hadn't. As a result, he knew exactly how to respond at a time like this.

“...Thank you, Koutarou.”

Upon hearing his words, Kiriha took a deep breath. She managed a small smile, and put her hand over Koutarou's on her shoulder.

“I'm glad you're with me.”

“Everyone’s like that at first. I was too. Besides, having you rely on me doesn’t feel too bad. No, not bad at all.”

Koutarou gave Kiriha an encouraging nod, though he was really thinking about something else.

If anything, the radical faction are the ones in trouble...

The radical faction lacked experience in war as well. Having hidden underground for hundreds of years, they haven’t done battle for at least as long. So while they might have weapons training and experience with skirmishes, they had no idea what it was really like to stand against an army.

That’s why no matter how proud they were of their heritage, claimed to be warriors, and spoke of honor and justice, it was all just theoretical. While they might believe that they understood war from studying past battles, they knew nothing of the real deal. This would be a war between novices. The radical faction was just rushing into the game.

That’s what Koutarou feared. A war like that was like a fight between children, meaning that they didn’t know how to hold back. Koutarou was worried they might swiftly do something that couldn’t be undone. He was worried about the earthquake weapon.

“But Kiriha-san... in order to end this battle, you’ll need a considerable amount of resolution.”

“I know. No... I believe I understand.”

Kiriha nodded. She was well aware of how dangerous the radical faction was. And seizing control of the situation alone might have been too much for her.

“That’s why...”

Kiriha trailed off there. She couldn’t show any further weakness in front of her subordinates. Instead, she simply squeezed Koutarou’s hand.

“...”

Koutarou didn’t say anything either, but he knew what she was feeling and squeezed her hand back just as hard.

The guard station where Kiriha and the others would meet up with their allies was a small building several decades old. When the old district was abandoned, its walls were still their original beautiful white, but now they had turned a reddish-brown from all the dirt and dust. There were cracks in the concrete and windows, clearly showing how much time had passed since it had been used. While it wasn't as deteriorated as an equivalent building on the surface would be from the wind and rain, it still looked like you'd expect an abandoned building to.

"A-Are you really okay with this, Sakuraba-senpai?"

"Okay with what?"

"The bugs! This building is full of bugs!"

"Ah... Well, the ones coming straight at me are scary, but other than that..."

"I hate the creepy-crawly ones and the ones with lots of legs!"

"Like that one?"

"Kyaaaaah! Satomi-san, Satomi-san, save me!"

"Sanae, now's not a good time, so can you go play with Yurika?"

"Okay."

As Koutarou and the others entered the building, they found their contacts from the conservative faction already waiting for them.

"Kiriha-sama!"

They ran up to Kiriha upon spotting her. Their job was to report the underground situation to Kiriha and relay to their main force what she and her team would be doing.

"It's good to see you. What's the situation?"

Keeping the greetings brief, Kiriha urged them to get to business as they were short on time. At her behest, the leader of the group stepped forward.

"About that... The radical faction has raided our base. It seems like they got impatient waiting for our answer concerning their demands of surrender..."

The contact representative debriefed Kiriha on the situation.

Yesterday, the radical faction had revealed the existence of their earthquake weapon and demanded that the conservative faction surrender. Since the radical faction would be all too happy to launch an attack on the surface if they surrendered, the conservative faction didn't think that was an option. They had reached the consensus that attacking the surface would eventually lead the People of the Earth to ruin. And so the conservative faction had said they needed to consider the issue in order to try and buy time. If they refused outright, the radical faction might choose to use their earthquake weapon anyway, or even try to seize control of the conservative faction through military force. The conservative faction had to complete their preparations before that happened.

But the radical faction wasn't patient. They either got tired of waiting, or realized that the conservative faction had no intention of surrendering. After a full twenty-four hours had passed, the radical faction moved on the conservative faction. They attacked the executive branch and the legislature, the army base and the offices and homes of those influential in the conservative faction. The attackers were armed radicals, clearly part of an army under the radical faction's control. While it may have been small in scale, it was without a doubt a military coup.

The attack began as a surprise attack, which allowed the numerically inferior radical faction to overwhelm the conservative faction. With the attack, the conservative faction's chain of command was cut, forcing the troops to act individually—essentially rendering their advantage in numbers useless. On top of that, the radical faction was using weaponry that the conservative faction had never seen before. Effectively, the overall combat power of each individual radical faction soldier made them worth multiple conservative soldiers. At the current rate, the conservative faction would be utterly dismantled. They had to regain control of the situation quickly or defeat was inevitable.

Fortunately, many of the faction leaders had escaped. The conservative faction wasn't reckless enough to move ahead without a plan when they knew this was all a possibility. They were currently moving to hiding places prepared for just such an emergency in order to regroup. If things went well, they might

even be able to turn things around.

Once the contact representative finished their report, Harumi, who had been quietly listening in, tilted her head and tugged on Koutarou's sleeve. She was curious about the differences in what the radical faction was saying and what they were doing.

"Satomi-kun, why did the radical faction go ahead and attack? They even threatened that they would use the earthquake weapon if the conservatives didn't surrender."

"I can think of two reasons." Koutarou demonstratively raised two fingers. "The first is that they might not be able to use the earthquake weapon yet. However, that isn't very realistic."

"Why is that?"

"If it wasn't, they wouldn't have bothered feeding Kiriha-san information about that. They wouldn't do that unless it was complete or close to it."

If the earthquake weapon, Earth Dragon, was incomplete, informing their opponent of its existence would only be a liability. It wasn't a viable threat until it was in the final stages of completion.

"I see... Then what about the second reason?"

"If they use the earthquake weapon, they'll be unable to use the underground's manpower and production facilities. The radical faction will want to make use of those if possible."

During the war in past Forthorthe, Koutarou had seen the same thing happen. Even if there was an ultimate victory, there were always huge losses if a town got caught up in a battle. Any competent commander would avoid that kind of pointless destruction.

As expected, leaving his minion Tayuma aside, we should really be cautious of the mastermind, Maguz. He's thinking ahead...

If that was the reason they hadn't used the earthquake weapon yet, it was clear that the utmost care needed to be taken when dealing with Maguz.

Especially after seeing the magically enhanced weapon Yurika had brought with her.

“So doesn’t this all mean that the situation is bad?” Sanae asked.

“What do you mean?” Yurika asked in turn.

“If the evil underground people start to lose this fight, won’t they cause an earthquake?”

“Ah...”

Yurika’s eyes opened wide. Sanae was right.

The radical faction was currently winning, meaning they had no reason to break out their ultimate weapon. But if they were driven into a corner, that would change things. Despite wanting to save the underground facilities, if they got desperate enough, they might revert to their original plan and use the earthquake weapon to lay ruin to everything. If they couldn’t win, production facilities and manpower meant nothing.

It was Kiriha who ultimately answered Sanae’s question. She had already found the answer.

“Everything relies on our underground team and Theia-dono’s surface team. We must suppress the radical faction’s base while Theia-dono and the others destroy the Earth Dragon. And as quickly as possible, at that. That is our only remaining chance of victory.”

The radical faction still wasn’t aware of the presence of Kiriha and the others. They could use that to their advantage and spring a surprise attack on their base. If all went well, they would put an end to the battle underground, and if Theia and the others destroyed the Earth Dragon at the same time, they could avoid a massive tragedy.

“The problem is how we find the radical faction’s base, but—”

“There’s no need to worry, Kii. I’ve located the transmitter.”

Clan chimed in from Koutarou’s bracelet. He’d activated the comms so she could listen in on the conversation too.

“Onee-chan...”

“I promised you, didn’t I? That I would see to it that you won?”

Koutarou adjusted his bracelet to display a hologram of Clan. She had a proud and powerful expression on her face—the very image of a princess.

After getting the coordinates from Clan, Kiriha moved into action right away. She told their contacts from the conservative factions the details of her plans, and left a message for the conservative leaders that they should refrain from making any drastic moves that might upset the radical faction once they regained control of their forces. She then took her team and headed towards the designated coordinates.

“That’s a gloomy face you’ve got there, Kii. Is there something on your mind?”

“Onee-chan, what’s the margin of error on these coordinates?”

Kiriha whispered to the comms device connected with Clan. She didn’t want her subordinates to hear, so she spoke in a voice that only Clan and Koutarou could hear.

“Well, there is some jamming on their end, so the analysis isn’t perfect... but at most I’d say it’s plus or minus fifteen meters.”

“Fifteen meters...”

“What about it?”

“Actually... a retainer that has served my family for ages lives at the coordinates you gave us. It’s someone you and Onii-chan have met before.”

“Is it that old man from back then?” Koutarou chimed in. He was standing a bit away from Kiriha but he was on the call as well.

“Yeah...” Kiriha nodded lightly.

The “old man from back then,” as Koutarou put it, was the elderly gentleman who’d come to the surface to get Kiriha when she ran away from home as a child: Kasumi Kouma.

The Kasumi family had served the Kurano family for many generations, and Kouma was no exception. He had been Daiha’s attendant for many years. He had also served as Kiriha’s guardian after she lost her mother, but reverted to

his former position when she came of age. He also had many children of his own and a splendid successor by the name of Raiga. It was said that eventually Raiga would serve as Kiriha's attendant.

Kiriha couldn't imagine that Kouma wished ruin upon the surface. She could say with confidence he'd been one of the most loyal subjects of the conservative faction.

"Clan, is it possible you just miscalculated?"

"I wish that were the case..."

Koutarou and Clan both understood how Kiriha felt. They didn't want to believe that the gentle old man they'd met back then was plotting this behind everyone's back. But Clan's analysis of the transmitter had revealed with certainty that the trailer from the weapons factory was parked by Kouma's home. And if Kouma was working with the radical faction, it would explain why they had been unable to find any leads on Maguz. If information was leaking from Daiha's aide, it made perfect sense that the radical faction was always one step ahead.



“I wish it was just some kind of mistake...”

Kiriha bit her lip. She was in a tough position, caught between two people she trusted dearly.

“It’s still not certain yet, so let’s hurry and confirm it for ourselves.”

“Yeah. Sorry for making you worry, Onii-chan, Onee-chan.”

“We don’t mind. It’s just between us, right, Veltlion?”

“Yeah, of course.”

“Thank you... both of you...”

“It’s about time for our commander to return.”

“Yeah!”

Kiriha wiped away her tears and raised her head. Kouma’s home was right around the corner.

As the Kasumi family was a distinguished family that had served the Kurano family for many generations, their estate was considerable and had a large gate to it. The large, traditional Japanese-style gate welcomed Koutarou and the others who were rushing towards it. Strictly speaking, it was nothing compared to the Higashihongan family property, but since they were underground, things were on a considerably smaller scale here. The status of the Kasumi family was certainly comparable to that of the Higashihongan family.

“I just hope someone is still here... Excuse me!”

Kiriha knocked on the gate with a stern expression. She was visibly anxious, but doing her best to brave through a tough situation.

“Yes? Do you have some business— Kiriha-sama?!”

A male employee of the Kasumi family peeked through a small window. Since it was a pressing time, he seemed quite reluctant about answering the door, but upon seeing Kiriha, he hurriedly opened the gate. Since Kouma had served as Kiriha’s guardian, Kiriha’s ties with the Kasumi family ran deep.

“Is uncle... Is Kouma at home?”

“The master only just returned. However, he has said that he will be leaving right away.”

They’d lucked out. Kouma was at home. When the radical faction had launched their surprise attack, he’d been at the legislature. He’d managed to escape and was on his way to one of the safe houses, and had only temporarily stopped by at home. It was sheer luck that Kiriha happened to catch him.

“My lady?!”

That was when Kouma himself appeared from the mansion. A large bag was hanging over his shoulder, filled with important documents. He had braved the risks of returning home for the sake of protecting these documents.

He’s gotten a little older, but it’s definitely the old man from back then...

Koutarou recognized him. Just as Kiriha said, they had indeed met before. While Koutarou was taken a little by surprise at seeing him again after all this time, Kiriha ran right up to him.

“Uncle!”

Kouma ran towards her too. They met just inside the gate, and Koutarou and the others soon approached.

“Why are you here?! No, more importantly, it’s dangerous here! Let’s escape together!”

“Uncle, I have something important to talk about. That’s why I’m here.”

Kiriha skipped the greetings and cut straight to the matter at hand. Kouma was an influential person in the conservative faction. His home hadn’t been attacked since he was at the legislature, but if the radical faction found out he’d escaped, they’d come here next. That was, unless the worst case scenario was true and Kouma was working together with the enemy. Either way, there was no time to lose.

“Something important? Is that more important than escaping?”

“It is.”

Kiriha nodded with a stern expression. Seeing that, Kouma’s expression naturally grew sterner as well. They had known each other for so long that they

could understand each other's feelings right away.

"Uncle, we are currently looking for the radical faction's base. There's no way to stop this battle other than to strike at the heart of the radical faction."

Kiriha spoke in a firm voice. She still had hope it was all a mistake.

"I understand the circumstances, but... why did you come here then?"

Kouma inclined his head in confusion. Koutarou didn't think he was lying. If it was all a ruse, he was quite the actor.

"We attached transmitters to five trailers leaving the radical faction's weapon factory. One of them led us here."

As Kiriha spoke, she looked Kouma right in his eyes so she could read what was going on behind them.

"What?! My lady, are you saying that I'm working with the radical faction?!"

Kouma was suddenly enraged. His face turned red as he raised his voice.

"That's not it! There's a chance that this is all part of the radical faction's plans!"

Upon seeing Kouma's reaction, Kiriha gradually grew more convinced of herself. Kouma really was just Kouma. He wasn't part of the radical faction. But even so, she'd still had to make sure.

"But the fact of the matter is that the transmitter's signal is coming from this place! Please let us search the mansion, Kouma! This is our only lead!"

Before knocking on the Kasumi family gate, they had confirmed the location of the signal with Clan. This is where it was coming from. So regardless of how the transmitter had gotten there, finding it might yield a clue that could get them to the radical faction's base. Though Kiriha believed in Kouma's innocence, she couldn't back down.

"I understand. I have nothing to hide from you, my lady. If you say it will help in the battle against the radical faction, then search to your heart's content."

Kouma willingly obliged. He no longer seemed shaken in the slightest. To Koutarou, the elderly man only looked like a loyal subject aiding his master.

With Kouma's consent, the party quickly began searching for the transmitter. Clan was in charge of leading the effort. Following her directions, Koutarou and the others made their way towards Kouma's garden.

"Kii, please continue straight forward. The transmitter's signal is coming from 70 meters up ahead."

"So that's it... I've found a building that seems to fit the bill."

"Be careful, Kii. The radical faction might be hiding somewhere."

"Thank you. I will."

In the garden behind the mansion were several storehouses. One of them seemed to be where Clan was guiding Kiriha.

"It looks like this is the place. Kouma, could you open it up?"

Kiriha looked up at the storehouse in question. Like the mansion, it was built in a traditional Japanese style, and was quite large. Large enough to easily conceal a trailer, in fact.

"My lady, are you sure this is it?"

Standing before the storehouse, the calm Kouma's expression clouded over.

"It seems like it. Is there a problem?"

"No..."

His expression still cloudy, Kouma stepped up next to Kiriha and put his hand on the door in order to unlock it. The building was old, but the lock was computer controlled. Kouma input the password in a familiar fashion.

The password is incorrect.

"Oh?"

However, the door didn't open. The panel beeped and displayed a message saying that the input password was incorrect.

"That's strange..."

Kouma tried entering the password again, but the results were the same.

“What’s wrong?”

“Well, my lady... it seems that the password has been changed.”

“Is that so?”

“I haven’t heard anything about this...”

Since the storehouse kept valuables like family heirlooms, Kouma would always receive a report if the password has been changed. But lo and behold, the password had been changed and he was none the wiser. It was quite the conundrum.

“Could this be...”

“What is it, Kouma?”

“No... Since it’s come to this, let’s destroy the door.”

“You don’t have to do that. I’ll just open it from the inside.”

Quick to the punch, Sanae split into Sanae-chan and Sanae-san. She was going to pass through the door and open it in her ghost form. Seeing all this, Kouma’s eyes went wide.

“This is... a surprise.”

“Or do you need a password from the inside too?”

“N-No, you should be able to open it from the inside normally.”

“Cool! Then I’ll be right back.”

“Be careful, Sanae-chan...”

“I’ll be fine. Well, I’m off!”

Sanae-chan passed through the door as Sanae-san worriedly saw her off. A few seconds later, the clack of a locking mechanism disengaging could be heard. Sanae-chan then poked her face through the door and beckoned the others over with a smile.

“Okay, come on in, guys!”

“Thank you, Sanae... Then let’s go.”

Kiriha thanked Sanae and took the lead as she opened the door. And from there, the party entered the warehouse in question.

The inside of the warehouse was dark. It was impossible to see anything until Kouma flipped a switch on a nearby wall to light up the old lamps around the warehouse, illuminating the place.

Like the outside, the inside was done in a traditional Japanese style. With the lights on, the storehouse had a warm feeling to it. But something in stark contrast to that warmth stood in the middle of the storehouse. It was the trailer that Koutarou and the others had seen in the radical faction's factory.

"Satomi-kun, that's the trailer, isn't it?!"

"Yeah, there's no mistaking it."

Since Harumi had seen the trailer in person before, she recognized it at a glance. The same was true for Koutarou, who'd seen it up close and personal at the factory. He approached it to be sure, and removed the transmitter attached to the undercarriage. That was tangible proof it was indeed the very same trailer.

"Yup, here's the transmitter. This is the one for sure."

"But... how can..."

In a panic, Kouma ran up to the trailer and opened the door. The moment he saw what was inside, he furiously shook his head in denial.

"Impossible! This cannot be! It's a lie! Tell me it's a lie!"

The majority of the contents had already been carried away, but with what still remained in the trailer, one could easily imagine who it belonged too. There were firearms, sets of body armor, tactical vehicles, and the like. It was the same equipment that the radical faction was using against the conservative faction at this very moment.

"I-If this is here... If this is here, then..."

Kouma slumped to the ground on the spot in tears—but not because his connection with the radical faction had been exposed. He was innocent. In fact,

the trailer being stored in this warehouse without his knowledge pointed to someone else's guilt. Faced with the truth, it was unbearably sad for Kouma.

"Raiga... why did you...? Didn't we both swear... to serve the Kurano family...? Why would you... join the likes of the radical faction...?"

Kasumi Raiga was a smart and considerate man loved by all. He was even expected to become the Kasumi family's successor. He was Kouma's pride and joy. And this was his personal storehouse.

Assuming that Kasumi Raiga was involved with the radical faction answered a few lingering questions, such as why the conservative faction couldn't get any leads to the radical faction, or how the password to the storehouse had been secretly changed. If Raiga was leaking information to the radical faction, of course they would always be one step ahead. And since it was his personal warehouse, changing the password to it would be easy. The list went on. And as things stood, Raiga's involvement was all but certain. The only remaining question was how deeply involved he was.

"Uncle, cheer up. We don't know for sure that Raiga is part of the radical faction. He might have been forced to cooperate under threat."

"I can only hope... that is the case..."

Even if Raiga had a connection to the radical faction, there was a considerable difference between him being forced to cooperate and doing so of his own free will. And in order to figure out which one it was, Kiriha and the others were now headed for Raiga's private room inside the mansion. There, they would try and find further information regarding the radical faction.

"I feel bad for him..." Yurika mumbled, looking at Kouma.

Harumi, who was next to her, nodded. She was so very sensitive that tears were already forming in her eyes.

"Just how painful must it be... to learn that a family member might be an enemy?"

Imagining her own parents betraying her, Harumi couldn't hold back her tears.

“But, Koutarou, this isn’t his fault, right?”

Sanae too felt for Kouma, but more so because she felt badly for a parent being blamed for their adult son’s recklessness. It was a more black-and-white way of thinking, quite befitting of the straightforward Sanae.

“I’m sure it’s more complicated than that when it’s your own child involved. That’s probably hard for us to imagine since we’re still kids too.”

“Hmm...”

Sanae crossed her arms and began thinking. It was certainly something to chew over. There wasn’t an easy answer. That was where Sanae-san called out to Sanae-chan.

“Well, um, Sanae-chan... If Koutarou-san suddenly became your enemy one day, how would you feel?”

“How...? That would never happen!”

There was absolutely no way that Koutarou would ever become Sanae’s enemy. That was set in stone for Sanae-chan. Even if Koutarou ever became a bad guy, she would too right along with him.

“But that’s what just happened to Uncle Kouma.”

“Then... I guess I kind of understand.”

To Sanae, being left behind would be way more problematic than Koutarou suddenly becoming a bad guy. Realizing that was what had happened to Kouma made it easier for Sanae-chan to understand. And with that realization, Sanae-chan merged with Sanae-san and held Koutarou’s hand.

“What’s wrong?”

“Koutarou... if you ever become a bad guy... then make sure you take us with you.”

Sanae tightly squeezed Koutarou’s hand.

“Okay. If that time comes, I will.”

Koutarou nodded and squeezed the worried Sanae’s hand back.

It had been a while since Kouma last visited his son's room. He had been busy dealing with the radical faction, and Raiga would always come visit him whenever it was necessary. As such, there hadn't been a need for Kouma to visit Raiga's room.

"Just when did Raiga grow so much...?"

Kouma picked up a photograph of his younger self with a small boy. That was how Raiga had looked twenty years ago. He was over thirty now, but to Kouma, he was still that small boy in the picture. Because of that, he would sometimes inadvertently make Raiga angry when he treated him like a child. But now, even those were good memories.

"I guess he's really an independent adult now..."

He was sure that he'd known everything about his son when he was younger. But now, that confidence was waning. There was something like a fog inside of him that he couldn't see past. And as his father, that both saddened and distressed Kouma.

"Uncle... Raiga is still your son. You can believe in him."

"Thank you, my lady..."

Kouma wiped away his tears and returned the photograph to its place. After that, he looked around the room. There were mostly tools lying about, but mixed in with them were keepsakes here and there. There was the board game they'd always played together, Raiga's old sports uniform, and the books Kouma had read to him. Since Kouma had lost his wife early on, he'd given his all to spending as much time with his son as possible. Those memories filled Raiga's room. And standing there in the middle of it, Kouma simply couldn't believe what was happening. There was no way that Raiga had joined the radical faction. He prayed in his heart that Raiga was only being threatened and forced to cooperate. After all, he was still Kouma's little boy—smiling innocently in his mind like in that old photograph.

"Let's believe in Raiga, uncle... I know he won't let you down."

"My lady... Yes, you're right..."

Kouma nodded and sat down on the sofa that Kiriha had led him to. She had

to search for clues while she could, but she couldn't leave the distraught Kouma be.

"Uncle Kouma..."

Sanae watched Kouma and Kiriha.

"All right, I'll do my best here!"

Kouma wanted to prove his son's innocence, and now that she understood that, Sanae was more enthusiastic than usual. Normally she would think of a job like this as a pain, but now she was taking the lead in the search for clues.

"Yurika, can't you do something with your magic?"

"Do something? Like what?"

"If he's being threatened, couldn't there be something like a hidden camera or microphone? I'm asking if you can find something like that with magic."

"I see... You're awfully clever today, Sanae-chan."

"I'm the captain, after all! So, can you do it or not?"

"I'll give it a try. I think I might be able to if I follow the flow of electricity."

"I'll leave that to you, private!"

At first Sanae hadn't been very invested in proving Raiga's innocence, but now she was really getting into it. It seemed she'd matured a little by sympathizing with Kouma and putting herself in his shoes. Watching the now eager Sanae, Harumi smiled.

"Satomi-kun, we can't lose either."

"You're right. Let's give this our all too."

"But... rather than aimlessly searching for clues, we should narrow down what we're looking for like Higashihongan-san and Nijino-san did."

Raiga's room was large, and since he was helping Kouma with his work, he had lots of documents regarding the politics and history of the People of the Earth. Trying to search through it all, even with twenty people helping, would take way too much time.

Sanae and Yurika are working under the assumption that he is being threatened. In that case, we should...

Koutarou decided to work under the opposite assumption. In other words, he would try and look for clues that Raiga was voluntarily working with the radical faction. Sadly, it was a job someone had to take, and it wasn't something he wanted to push on Sanae or Kiriha. That's why Koutarou thought it would be best if he and Harumi did it. Truth be told, he didn't want to involve Harumi either, but there was a limit to what he could do on his own.

"Senpai, we should look for the clues that Sanae and Yurika aren't," he whispered to Harumi so that no one else could hear.

"You mean we should look for evidence that Raiga-san is voluntarily cooperating with the radical faction?"

"Yes. It's not a pleasant job, but... please lend me your help, Sakuraba-senpai."

"I understand. It's just something that has to be done."

Harumi flashed a sad smile, and when she did, she looked just like someone else to Koutarou. A girl with silver hair and blue eyes. But it was only for a moment. The silvery sheen vanished from her hair in the blink of an eye. Koutarou was taken aback for a moment, but quickly recollected himself.

"Sakuraba-senpai, I'll examine the history books. The radical faction should have some interest in those."

"Then I'll take a look at the accounting books. If he's working with the radical faction in secret, then there's probably a trail of it."

Koutarou and Harumi split up in their search. They were both looking—and hoping—for the same thing. Rather than evidence Raiga was the enemy, all they wanted to find were clues that could lead them to the radical faction's base. Really, that was what everyone in the room was wishing for.

About ten minutes after the group had split up to search Raiga's room, one of their contacts from the conservative faction came bursting in.

“Kiriha-sama!”

“What is it?”

Leaving the searching to Koutarou and the others, Kiriha approached the contact. When she did, they ran up and whispered to her in a quiet voice that only she could hear. And the moment she heard what the contact had to say, her expression changed.

“Aaaaaah!”

But at almost the exact same time, Sanae let out a loud cry, so nobody noticed the look on Kiriha’s face. Everyone naturally turned to look at Sanae.

“Koutarou, Koutarou, look! I found a weird button!”

“What?!”

Sanae picked up a thick book and opened it to show to Koutarou. Inside, there was a small plastic box containing a hidden button. Since it had been concealed by hollowing out the book, there was no way of knowing it was there without opening the book. In her quest for hidden cameras and microphones, Sanae had happened upon it by chance.

“I don’t know anything about this... Raiga, are you really...?”

Kouma unsteadily approached Sanae and took the book. And with a trembling hand, he pushed the button. With a click, the button began glowing red and the nearby bookshelves parted. Since they were loaded with books, there was a heavy dragging sound as they slid to the sides. But once moved, they revealed a large safe that had been built into the wall.

“Sanae, can you open it?”

“I think this one’d be impossible.”

Since the safe was locked, Koutarou was hoping that Sanae could open it the same way she had with the storehouse door, but she shook her head. Unlike a normal door, there was no way to open a safe from the inside. It wasn’t a lock that Sanae could do anything about it.

“Then I’ll do it.”

Yurika raised her hand and approached. She sounded the same as ever, but there was a strong light in her eyes. They were the eyes of a magical girl.

“You think you can?” asked Koutarou.

“I think it will work if we dissolve the area around the lock with acid.”

Yurika held her staff, Angel Halo, in both hands. Seeing her so full of confidence, Koutarou moved away from the safe to let Yurika at it.

“Then go for it.”

“All right... Acid Splash!”

Yurika pointed her staff at the lock and used a very brief incantation. It was a basic spell that sprayed strongly acidic liquid, but since it was a basic spell, the liquid only remained acidic for a short period of time. It was more than enough, however, to destroy the locking mechanism. And since the acid didn't remain potent for very long, the rest of the safe and its contents were unharmed. Yurika had chosen her spell well.

“It's open.”

The acid had melted away the lock surprisingly quickly. With nothing holding it shut, the door swung ajar and a pile of documents could be seen inside.

“Kiriha-san?”

Kiriha reluctantly approached the safe and picked up one of the documents. Seeing it, her eyes went wide. It was a large map covered with all kinds of symbols and markings.

“Hahh... Sadly, it seems this is the worst possible situation...”

What she had in her hands was a map that was part of a plan for a military invasion of the surface.

In addition to the map and other plans for a surface invasion, there was sensitive information from the conservative faction hidden within the safe. Someone being threatened wouldn't go out of their way to build a safe like that. And even if he was being coerced, it seemed hard to believe someone in that situation would be receiving strategic information about attack plans. So as

of right now, all signs seemed to point to Raiga stealing conservative faction secrets from under Kouma's nose and using them to help plan attacks. In other words, that Raiga was voluntarily cooperating with the radical faction. Moreover, that he had a high position with them.

"Bad news, Clan."

"What's the matter?"

"It seems like the son of the chief's aide is working with the radical faction, and he's probably not the only mole in the conservative faction."

"Which means we'll have to do this alone. And quickly."

"Yeah. Where are Theia and the others right now?"

"According to their most recent report, they are about to reach their designated location."

"Let me know right away when they get there."

"I understand."

Koutarou showed a bitter expression after his talk with Clan. The situation was exceptionally bad. The radical faction had the upper hand in their attack, and the conservative faction couldn't seriously fight back until the earthquake weapon was dealt with. And now that it was revealed Kouma's son was working with the radical faction, they had every reason to suspect that he wasn't the only one. That meant, to be on the safe side, they couldn't work together with the conservative faction to find the radical faction's base. If they did, as soon as they found it, the radical faction would know.

"Satomi-kun, what do we do now?"

"Well... let's start by examining the strategy plans. We might be able to discern the location of the radical faction's base from them."

The strategy plans they'd found included ones for the attack going on right now. If they could figure out things like where soldiers had been deployed from, it might help them accurately narrow down where their base had to be. There was still hope.

"That sounds like something Kiriha would be good at."

“It’s just a race against time...”

Even after narrowing down their search area, there was no telling how long it would actually take them to find the base. Luck would play a big part in it.

“Yurika, could you call over Kiriha-san?”

Kiriha had left to escort the distraught Kouma to his own room, but they needed her now more than ever.

“Okay!”

Yurika put down the documents she was holding and accepted her new job with a smile. She was starting to get a headache from looking at all the numbers and symbols, so she welcomed the change in assignment, and gleefully dashed out of Raiga’s room while humming.

“Satomi-saaan! Bad news!”

Yurika returned a few minutes later, but her mood had done a complete one-eighty.

“Kiriha-san is gone!”

The reason was made clear quickly—Yurika couldn’t find Kiriha. Considering the situation, that was a major problem that could have fatal consequences.

“What do you mean, she’s gone? Yurika, explain yourself!”

“I don’t really understand either! But the people in the house said that they saw Kiriha-san go outside a little while ago!”

“Why would she...?”

Koutarou had no idea why Kiriha would leave. He couldn’t think of a single reason for her to go. If anything, it was the opposite—now was when they needed her here. Doubt and impatience overcame Koutarou.

“Everybody... May I have your attention for a moment?”

That was when Kouma, who had followed Yurika, entered the room. Though he was still distraught over his son, he was also the man who had served as the chief’s right hand for many years. He’d switched gears in order to fulfill his own role.

“I see, you do indeed look familiar... How strange...”

“Kouma-san?”

Kouma stood in front of Koutarou and looked at him curiously. But only for a brief moment. He then moved on to the main topic.

“My lady, Kiriha-sama, has left for the radical faction’s base.”

“What?!”

Koutarou’s eyes shot wide open. Going into the radical faction’s base on her own was nothing short of suicide. Besides, Koutarou and the others hadn’t even figured out where it was yet.

“The contact from before brought news with him... That Chief Daiha has been captured by the radical faction.”

Kouma spoke with a deeply saddened look on his face. Since his own son might be involved, he felt personally responsible.

“Using Daiha-sama’s life as a bargaining chip, they demanded that Kiriha-sama present herself.”

“Preposterous! Why didn’t you stop her?!”

“I tried many times. However, Kiriha-sama said this was the only way...”

“But...”

Koutarou ground his teeth in frustration. Knowing her personality, there would be no way of stopping her despite the danger she was walking into. That was just the kind of girl she was.

“Koutarou-sama, I have received something from my lady.”

As he spoke, Kouma pulled something out from his pocket and presented it to Koutarou. It was a foil trading card that had lost its sheen.

“This is...”

“My lady told me to return this to you. And she left a message with it: ‘I will leave the rest to you.’”

It was the card that Koutarou had given to Kiriha eleven years ago. He was

well aware of how much she treasured it. But now... she was giving it back. And Koutarou knew just what that meant.

“Kiriha-san is prepared to die...”

Kiriha had resigned herself to death before heading into the enemy base. That’s why she’d returned the card she treasured more than her own life to Koutarou. That was the safest way of protecting it.

The Invaders' Battlefields

Sunday, July 4th

Theia and the surface troops got into position fifteen minutes after Kiriha vanished. They had snuck up to the northern part of the island near the radical faction's base, and were observing it from there.

"It's smaller than I thought."

That was Shizuka's first impression upon seeing it. The base surrounded by a steel fence was larger than Corona House, but far smaller than Kisshouharukaze High School. Shizuka had imagined an enormous compound like something out of a movie, so this was a bit of a letdown. Lit up in the dark of night, it has something of a lonely, austere impression to it, making it look even smaller.

"Shizuka-sama, that is just the entrance. Most of the facility is built underground so that it won't stand out."

Ruth smiled and showed Shizuka a hologram on her bracelet. It was a hypothetical 3D model of the facility that Ruth and Clan had put together by analyzing the information they'd gathered. It showed that the top part of the base was just the tip of the iceberg, with the remaining 90 percent underground.

"I see. I guess it is a secret base, huh?"

Since it was built to house a weapon of mass destruction, it was designed to be as covert and unobtrusive as possible. Considering the technology available to the surface dwellers—including observation satellites—it was a matter of course for them to build the majority of the base underground to avoid detection. Since they weren't planning on using aircrafts or other such vehicles here, there was no inconvenience to them in doing so.

"Too bad we're about to blow this secret wide open. Men, are you prepared?"

Theia and the others would be raiding the base and destroying the earthquake weapon, Earth Dragon, that should be inside. They had avoided contact with the enemy until now, but that was about to change. They'd have to defeat the enemies in their way to complete their objective from here on out.

"Anytime. I'm ready to fight. Even if I'm going up against Maya-sama."

Maki strongly grasped her staff and nodded. The moment they landed on the island, she had prepared herself for a battle against her master, Maya. There was no sign of hesitation in her eyes. And if she lost against the radical faction's soldiers, there was no way she could win against Maya, so she didn't fear a battle against them either.

"You can count on me, Theia-chan. I'd much rather be fighting than anxiously sneaking around like this."

Shizuka was more than ready for a fight. With her invincible body and earnest attitude, she'd be much more comfortable in battle than worrying about blowing their cover.

"I'm starting to get nervous."

"Calm down, Kotaro. If you let your nerves get the better of you, you won't even be able to do things you normally can."

"But you're trembling too, Hayato-niichan."

"Kotaro, Hayato, we're all scared. That's why we fight together. Right?"

"Kenichi is right. Let's focus on doing what we can."

"Yeah. That way, our triumphant victory feast will taste all the more delicious!"

This battle was different from the small skirmishes the Sun Rangers had been in before. It would be a fight to determine the fate of the world—both above and below ground—and the Sun Rangers were all appropriately nervous. But that was part of the beauty of it. They were confronting their fears together, and each helping to support the others in their time of need. And the sight of it gave courage to the conservative faction soldiers around them. That kind of

inspiration was probably the true essence of real heroes, but the Sun Rangers seemed unaware of it.

Next, reports that preparations were complete came from one squad after another. Confirming that her entire team was ready, Theia nodded.

“We were all born and raised in different places, but we must win this battle no matter what—that is what ties us all together. Now, let us forget our differences and band together! It doesn’t matter how ungraceful our fight is; we will destroy the Earth Dragon and come out victorious! Men, follow me!”

At Theia’s dauntless declaration, her eighty-eight allies replied in unison...

“Yeah!”

Aliens, a magical girl, a normal high school girl, the Sun Rangers, and a troop of underground soldiers. They came from different walks of life, but they now they were all walking down the same path together.

Theia made the opening move. Far surpassing the others in terms of firepower, she was cut out for exactly that job. That’s why she began her attack as she jumped through the bushes.

“Blue Knight, multi-launch surface-to-surface missiles! Destroy that annoying fence!”

“As you wish, my princess.”

Obedying to Theia’s orders, two large hexagons appeared slightly above and behind her shoulders. They were missile launchers, and as soon as they were ready, their launch ports opened and fired their missiles—six apiece. The twelve missiles headed straight up from Theia before curving downward towards the radical faction’s base.

Their target was the fence around the base specifically, and with a series of loud booms, the steel fence was blown clean away. With that, nothing else stood between them and the base.

“Ruth!”

“Yes! Deploying distortion field!”

Ruth took over the front line and deployed the barrier built into her armor over a wide area. She would serve as the group's shield until they reached the entrance to the base. True to her title as guardian knight, it was a fitting role for Ruth.

"Mirror Image. Modifier: Effective Area, Large."

Maki's specialty, mind manipulation, included illusion magic as well. She created copies of all eighty-nine members of their team and placed those copies around the real ones. In doing so, she made it seem like their force was much bigger, and simultaneously lowered the odds of any one person being hit by an attack. It was a very calculated way of defending.

"Let's close in before they can recover! Run as fast as you can!"

Following Theia's orders, the surface troops advanced as one. In total, there were about ten radical faction soldiers protecting the entrance. They had been thrown into disarray by Theia's sudden missile strike, but they wouldn't stay panicked forever. Once they had their wits about them, they would call for backup and counterattack. Theia and the others needed to close the distance before that happened.

"Your Highness, they're firing!"

At around a hundred meters out from the base, small sparks began flying off of Ruth's barrier from where bullets were striking it. It seemed the radical faction had officially begun their attack. While it wasn't much of a problem right now because their numbers were so few, once the backup arrived, things could get much more dangerous. Having judged the situation thusly, Theia gave her next orders.

"Blue Shine, shoot that cable that's coming out from the lookout post!"

"Leave it to me! Kotaro!"

"Got it! Live ammunition loaded. Night vision scope activated. Distance: 180. Wind is northwest at a velocity of two meters. Humidity is 55 percent."

Blue and Green temporarily broke rank to get into sniping position. Partially because they were using Forthorthian weaponry, their preparations were swift. In a matter of seconds, they already had the target in sight.

“Niichan, that weapon doesn’t need corrections, so just shoot!”

“Firing!”

The bullet left the rifle along with a solemn sound. And since it was travelling at over a thousand meters per second, it had already hit its target by the time that sound could be heard. The bullet flew straight on course, easily severing the cable extending from the lookout post and destroying the roof behind it.

“Direct hit!”

“All right! Let’s go, Kotaro!”

“Yeah!”

Done with their sniping, the two Shines got to their feet and quickly caught up to Theia and the others. Theia had a satisfied smile on her face and praised their work.

“Well done, Sun Rangers! With this, their reinforcements will be delayed!”

The cable that Theia’d had them shoot was a communications line. It was both their link to call for reinforcements, and how they relayed camera feeds. With it destroyed, reinforcements would have to wait until they switched to an emergency line—which should be just long enough for Theia and the others to reach the entrance to the base.

“Your Highness, I’m detecting metal up ahead! It’s a minefield!”

Ruth was relaying warnings from her bracelet. The area just outside of the fence had apparently been littered with landmines up to about ten meters, which would make quick, messy work of any intruders who thought that the fence was their only problem.

“What a nuisance! Blue Knight, fire all the remaining missiles! Open a path for us!”

“As you wish, my princess.”

The missile launchers hovering over Theia’s shoulders fired a second round of missiles. All twelve of them rained down on the minefield. There was an even grander explosion than before, which kicked up a cloud of dirt and debris that concealed the entrance of the base from sight. The blast shook the ground like

an earthquake, rattling even the nearby trees.

“The way is clear!”

“Men, we’re pushing through!”

Theia and the others charged the minefield before the smoke had even settled. The shockwave from the blast assaulted them as they ran in, but thanks to Ruth’s sturdy barrier, they were all unharmed. With the minefield blown away, there was no longer anything keeping them from entering the grounds to the base.

“Theia-chan, they’re lying in wait for us!”

But they were still in danger, as Shizuka sensed enemies past the lingering smoke. It seemed the enemy had realized that Theia was clearing a path to the base by blowing away the minefield, and they’d decided to wait for her there.

“Don’t worry!”

As Theia shouted that, ten radical faction soldiers appeared through the smoke. They weren’t incompetent. After seeing what Theia had done to the minefield, they’d switched from rifles to grenades and bazookas. Ruth’s barrier was powerful, but it couldn’t protect against attacks from below or above, which was exactly what they were aiming for now.

“Maki!”

“Flash!”

The next moment, Maki in the rear unleashed a spell that created an intensely bright flash of light. As since the radical faction soldiers were all watching the approaching group, they all got an eyeful. The light was so bright that their night vision goggles were rendered useless, effectively leaving the soldiers blind.

“Now, attack!”

The radical soldiers hurriedly removed their night vision goggles, but it was already too late. They were all shot by the conservative faction troops and lost consciousness.

When the ground team entered the base, they immediately found a tunnel

leading underground at a gentle incline. It was about twenty meters wide, and was illuminated by intermittent lighting. Assuming that it was meant to accommodate trailers, it was quite well made for the job.

The large weapon on Theia's left arm, her mechanical pile driver, let out a belch of exhaust. She had just fired it to destroy the entrance gate. Using the weapon at full power generated a great deal of steam as exhaust, and standing tall amidst it, Theia gave off a rather powerful impression.

"Um, Devil Princess-san, wouldn't it be better if we infiltrated the base more quietly according to plan?"

In awe of Theia's overwhelming power, Red Shine timidly offered his opinion on the operation. According to their original plan, the surface team would infiltrate the base cautiously. Since this was unknown enemy territory, everyone agreed it would be best to move slowly and steadily. But now they were rushing in with brute force. Things had gone well so far, but there was no guarantee that would continue to be the case.

"I would like to, but... hearing how the situation underground is going, that's not an option."

"Is it that bad?"

It was there that Blue Shine joined the conversation. Amongst the Sun Rangers, he had the most tactical and military knowledge.

"Indeed. The radical faction lost their patience waiting for an answer and attacked. If we don't destroy the earthquake weapon before the conservative faction gets into position for a proper counterattack, things will get ugly."

"And the conservative faction has to counterattack or else, huh?"

"That's right. Which is why we don't have the time to take things easy here."

"Hayato..."

"Steel yourself, Kenichi. This is the decisive moment."

"...Right. Let's do our best since we don't have any time to spare."

With Theia and Blue in agreement, Red had no objections. He trusted in his teammate. Besides, they were already in enemy territory. Taking their time

here very well may be a fatal mistake.

“Men, from this point onward, we move in squads. Do not move on your own under any circumstances.”

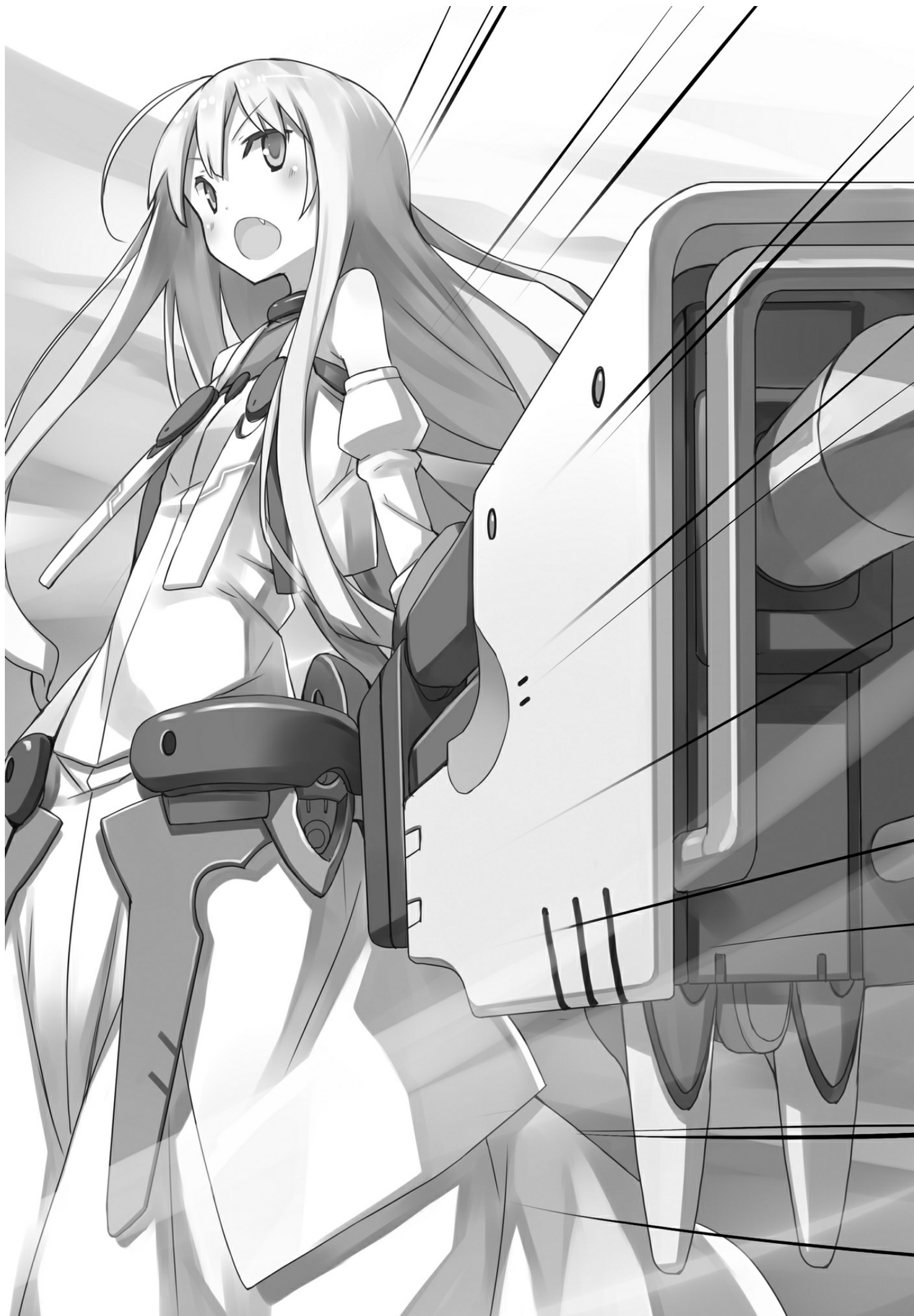
They had moved as a unified group thus far, but now they would break into their respective squads. Each girl from room 106 would lead a unit of twenty conservative faction soldiers. That would be their smallest denomination now, with the exception of the Sun Rangers who would act as a flying column, striking at the enemy weak spots or backing up their allies where needed. Maintaining that composition would be essential for them to come out victorious.

After forming up their squads, the surface team proceeded down the tunnel. After about a hundred meters, the tunnel came to an end and their view opened up. The tunnel was connected to a large cave created by the People of the Earth's technology. It was several hundred meters wide, and despite being underground, it was completely lit up. A globe like the sun itself illuminated the entire cave from overhead.

“It seems like the Earth Dragon is in there.”

In the middle of the cave, directly underneath the globe, was a building resembling a warehouse. It was over a hundred meters across, and since they knew the Earth Dragon was, according to its design plans, several dozen meters in size, it seemed like the ideal place to keep it.

“I'm reading a big energy reaction from there as well. It is almost certainly in that building.”



The computer in Ruth's armor estimated the energy within the building from the trace amounts leaking out. According to those calculations, it was enough energy to support a city—all coming from within the building.

"It looks like they're getting serious as well."

Shizuka could spy armed radical faction squads standing between them and the base, far outnumbering the guards they'd had on the surface. They had over a hundred men in addition to mechanical soldiers, automated soldiers, and assault vehicles. Their formation was solid as well, with the mechanical and automatic soldiers in the front with assault vehicles behind them. Their human soldiers were stationed all the way in the back to provide support for the machines.

"It looks like they never intended to help the troops on the surface. They wanted to settle this down here." That was the conclusion Maki reached upon seeing what Shizuka did.

The girls had been worried about the radical faction trying to cut them off at the tunnel, so they'd pushed through before they had the chance. But doing that would have only helped the radical faction if they were relatively matched for numbers. With the radical factions far outnumbering the surface team, then they could fight in an open space to make use of their superior numbers. There was no point to fighting in a narrow space that would restrict them.

"So they think they can win in a frontal attack, do they? Ha! I'll make them pay for underestimating me."

Theia flashed a chilling smile. While she had grown physically and mentally since coming to room 106, she still had her pride. Nowadays she was more easygoing with her friends and could even joke around, but she would never forgive an enemy who dared to belittle her. And right now, the thought that the radical faction was looking down on her enraged her.

"Now, now. We would never underestimate you, Princess Theiamillis," said a voice from a nearby speaker.

"That voice is...!"

"Elexis!"

It was a voice familiar to both Theia and Ruth. Indeed, it was Ruth's former fiancé who'd betrayed them in the end. He was a man that Ruth would never forgive.

Shortly after his voice came through the speaker, a half-transparent hologram of Elexis appeared in front of Theia and the others. He was as refined and handsome as usual, which rubbed both Theia and Ruth the wrong way.

"I assure you it's because we aren't underestimating you that we've chosen to fight here, where we can bring our full force to bear. After all, doing so on the surface would have drawn a little too much attention."

Theia and Ruth were surprised by Elexis's sudden appearance, but it also explained a great deal. For example, why the technology the radical faction was producing weapons with was so exceptionally high.

"You bastard... How dare you show your face to me? And as an ally of the radical faction, no less."

Theia angrily glared at the hologram. To her, Elexis wasn't simply just any enemy. He'd tried to kill Koutarou, which made him the worst of the worst. Her sharp glare seemingly pierced through the hologram and reached Elexis directly.

"I misjudged you. Goals and means aside, I believed you at least had your pride."

Ruth felt the same way, and she sent a squally chilling glance at Elexis.

"You wound me... However, we do have a goal. It's something we have to accomplish, even if it means me casting aside my pride."

"We'? Could it be... Are you working together with Maya-sama?"

Maki had been silently listening in, but she sensed Maya's involvement in Elexis's nonchalant comment. And with that, she could stay quiet no longer.

"Whoops, you were Maya's apprentice, weren't you? What a careless thing of me to say."

Elexis had a happy smile on his face. He had really taken quite a liking to Maya. When he was with her, unexpected things happened one after another—

including Maki's appearance now.

"Is Maya-sama here?!"

"That's not for me to say. Koutarou-kun has gotten angry at me for not treating my allies well before. But I think you'll find out if you make it all the way to me."

"Then I'll be right there. So just you wait."

"There you have it! Now, brace yourself, Elexis! Now that we know that you're here too, we definitely won't back down! We'll make you regret crossing us!"

"I'll prepare some snacks and tea and await your arrival, princess."

With that, Elexis cut the hologram and the speakers fell silent. Not a moment later, the radical faction troops began advancing. Seeing that, Theia ordered her allies to do the same.

"Let's go, men! We'll disperse these pests, beat down Elexis, and destroy the Earth Dragon!"

And so the surface team's battle began.

The underground city built by the People of the Earth, Sial, was intended to become a second home to them. It was a monument to their traditions and culture, and even bore the name of their original home. And in fact, many of the People of Earth grew to consider Sial their home.

Yet now, Sial was burning. While Kiriha was being taken to the radical faction's base, she could see the flames through the window of the car. Bullets were flying through the streets, and wounded citizens lay on the ground. The executive branch of the People of the Earth's government had been hit first, leaving the city paralyzed. Explosions were erupting all over, and more than half of the temples to the Goddess of Creation had been blown away.

The nation, their traditions, their history, their beliefs... even the people themselves. The very identity of the People of the Earth was being trampled on the path to ruin. But what made the problem even more complicated was that

it was other People of the Earth who were responsible for this.

To the radical faction, the city of Sial was not a symbol of tradition, but a symbol of defeat and humiliation. Despite having superior technology, the People of the Earth had been robbed of their homeland and chased underground. They'd done the proud thing and refused to take up arms against the surface dwellers, but the radical faction rued that decision. To them, Sial was nothing more than a prison. That's why they believed returning to the surface and reclaiming their land wasn't wrong—it was justice. And to that end, they had no objections to using military force. In fact, they believed it was their right. Moreover, they ultimately believed that being ruled by superior people would make the surface dwellers happy as well. It was only just for them to take their rightful place on the surface—or so the radical faction believed.

The radical faction had been unhappy ever since the People of the Earth had been driven underground. They had no love for Sial. At best, it was just a refugee camp. Which was why they wouldn't hesitate in destroying it as a means to regain their real homeland—the surface.

So in essence, the current battle was a civil war between two parts of the People of the Earth's heritage. A tragic crisis of identity. One they hadn't been able to resolve among themselves. And at this rate, it would be a tragedy that spread to the surface.

In the face of that, Kiriha didn't fear for her own life. And after seeing the state of the city, her resolve only grew stronger. A strong light shone in her eyes even as stood face to face with Maguz.

Kiriha had been taken to the radical faction's base, which was located in the oldest neighborhood of the new district. The radical faction had formed a long time ago, so their secret base had been around for quite a while. Originally, the area where it stood was supposed to be designated as part of the old district and abandoned as well, but members of the radical faction with administrative power had secretly removed it from the list. It would stand out too much if people were visiting a particular area of the old district time and time again, after all. The conservative faction was also wary of a radical base being built in the old district. But little did they know the radical faction already had a base—

right under their noses. Thanks to that, this neighborhood was effectively in their blind spot, allowing the radical faction to continue operating in the shadows unbeknownst to the conservative faction.

“Kasumi Raiga... To think that you were Maguz...”

“If you stand behind the light, nobody can see you... It’s a proverb from this cursed underground, but it is unmistakably true.”

Meeting Kiriha in the deepest lair of the radical faction’s base, the command room, was Kasumi Raiga. He was suspected of being involved with the radical faction, but as it turned out, the truth ran deeper than that. Not only was he involved with the radical faction, he was actually their mysterious leader, Maguz.

Kiriha stood in the center of the command room facing Maguz, who was sitting in the commander’s seat. Her hands and feet were chained, leaving her unable to move. On top of that, there were armed soldiers surrounding her. As a result, the chances of her breaking free were nonexistent.

“Have you ever even considered how the light felt?”

Kiriha glared at Raiga—at Maguz—with angry eyes. Despite being in such a disadvantageous situation, her resolution remained firm. She was the acting commander of the surface invasion. She would never show weakness to the enemy.

“I have. That’s why I tried so hard to make him understand.”

Despite being showered with Kiriha’s angry words and dirty looks, Maguz showed no sign of minding any of it. Instead, he smiled. In a few years, he would be in his forties, but his smile was overflowing with the innocence of youth. Seeing it, Kiriha suspected that a great deal of people had been drawn in by it.

“However, I have run out of time for that. In the end, my message never reached my father’s heart. How truly regrettable.”

Maguz sadly lowered his shoulders. He wasn’t lying. The man known as Maguz honestly regretted not being able to recruit his father.

“Of course. How could the distant words of some unknown stranger reach Kouma’s heart? If you had spoken to him as Raiga, he might have listened.”

“What did you say?! You impudent little girl!”

The words “unknown stranger” hadn’t angered Maguz, but Tayuma who was standing next to him. He shouted at Kiriha like he was about to maul her right then and there. He was indeed a loyal dog.

“How dare you talk to Maguz-sama like that?!”

“I don’t mind, Tayuma.”

“But—”

“It’s fine, Tayuma. What she says is true.”

“Maguz-sama...”

Angry as he was, when Maguz said something, Tayuma reluctantly closed his mouth. He looked like a dog that had been scolded by its owner.

“Indeed, it is as you say. If I had personally tried to convince my father, he might have joined our cause. But obeying your child’s wishes is not the same as true understanding. And that would have been unfortunate.”

Maguz struck back. He seemed neither angered nor shaken up. He had a perfectly composed argument. In a way, he behaved himself in a manner befitting the Kasumi family heir. That rubbed Kiriha the wrong way.

“You have no ground to stand on. That argument would only be valid if you’d actually spoken to Kouma directly. And you didn’t, meaning your grand words now are all hollow.”

“As expected from the daughter of the Kurano family... How strict. However, if I had spoken to my father directly, he would have realized my identity even if I’d hidden my face. So if I’d failed to convince him there, it would have all been over. That wasn’t a risk I could take.”

“You’ve shown your true colors, Raiga.”

With her stern eyes still trained on Maguz, a smile appeared on Kiriha’s lips. It was a callous smile she never would have shown Koutarou and the other girls of

room 106.

“There is no justice in you. All this is only for your own convenience.”

Fearing being exposed, Maguz had never tried talking with Kouma himself. And the moment he'd made that decision, there was no justice to be found in him or his cause. Justice never gives up before trying. Even children knew that.

“Tch...”

There, the confidence vanished from Maguz's face for the first time. Unable to come up with a rebuttal to Kiriha's declaration, his expression grew displeased. Justice was a grave concern for the radical faction because they believed themselves to be righteous. They had resorted to military force precisely because they believed justice was on their side. So for Kiriha to offer a direct challenge to that, Maguz was a bit shaken.

“...Then I shall do so the next time I meet with my father.”

However, Maguz soon recovered. After helping his father with his work for so long, he was skilled at dealing with people and negotiations. He wouldn't let his emotions get the better of him.

“So you'll capture Kouma, deprive him of his freedom, and force him to listen to you? That's some idea of justice, Raiga.”

“That sharp mind and insight of yours... I should have talked to and made you an ally sooner.”

“There's no point. That would only have been possible more than eleven years ago.”

Any kind of persuasion would have been useless on Kiriha after she met Koutarou. She would never do anything that might bring harm to the surface, and she would never have followed Raiga, who sought to do exactly that.

“Hmm, more than eleven years ago...? I wouldn't have thought to make you an ally back then. So it sounds like we would have ended up like this regardless.”

“Yes, you being taunted by a young girl was something that was decided eleven years ago.”

“Then let us end this roundabout discussion. I’d prefer not to lose any more ground.”

Maguz’s smile vanished and he rose from his seat to face Kiriha. Being taller, he looked down on her, which gave him an even more overpowering impression.

“We have captured Chief Daiha. Surrender at once and have your troops cease their attacks. If you do, I guarantee both your and Chief Daiha’s safety.”

“What value does a guarantee from a man with no justice hold?”

“...I don’t think you have any choice but to believe in it.”

Maguz’s glance grew colder and colder. His feelings towards justice were strong.

“Before all that, is the chief even still alive?”

That was the most important question for Kiriha. Nothing else could happen before she confirmed that.

“A fair point. Tayuma.”

“Yes, sir. Indigo warrior, bring Kurano Daiha to us.”

Tayuma called to outside the room. When he did, a door opened to the room and a lone woman entered.

“Okay, okay, you sure know how to work a woman to the bone, really...Go on, it’s your turn.”

The woman wore a rather revealing indigo outfit. Seeing her and hearing her voice, Kiriha couldn’t escape the feeling that they’d met somewhere before.

“Father!”

“Kiriha?!”

But it only lasted for a moment. She lost all interest in the woman when she saw Daiha enter the room. Her heart was filled with emotion at their reunion.

“I’m glad to see you well...”

Confirming that her father was safe, Kiriha let out a huge sigh of relief.

“Why did you come, Kiriha?! You knew what would happen if you did!”

However, Daiha’s reaction was the opposite. He was in a panic to see his daughter in the enemy base. Even as chief, he wasn’t the kind of father who could remain calm knowing his daughter’s life was in danger.

“But you’re my only family.”

“I see... You’re right, Kiriha...”

But in the end, he ended up accepting her decision. After losing her mother as a child, Kiriha would never abandon Daiha. She had stronger feelings about family than most girls her age, and Daiha knew that better than anyone.

“I’m sorry, Kiriha... Because of me, even you’ve gotten...”

“No, it’s fine this way...”

Tears started forming in Kiriha’s eyes. It was that much of a relief to see her father’s face. Regardless of what fate lay ahead of them, they would at least be together. But one thing was for certain—neither of them would make it out of this alive.

“Now then, let us hear your answer, Kurano Kiriha! Do you surrender, or do you choose death?”

“Surrender is not an option. We are the proud People of the Earth. If you want to kill us, then just go ahead.”

Kiriha was in a horrible situation, but fortunately she’d at least been able to reunite with Daiha. And after getting to see her father one last time, she wished for nothing else. She wouldn’t trade their lives for the safety of the surface and the underground. No, she was planning on dying together with Daiha.

“...What a foolish choice, Kurano Kiriha.”

Maguz was astonished by this unexpected development, but soon collected himself and directed a sharp glance at her. He was growing frustrated that things weren’t proceeding according to plan.

“If my choice is foolish, then what about yours? If surrender is so wise, why attack the surface? You don’t even know what you’re doing!”

Kiriha wiped away her tears and let out a dry laugh. She was a descendent of the proud People of the Earth. While they might retreat for the sake of the weak, they would never give in to a villain's threats. She was the very definition of a dignified ruler.

"Wahahaha, well said, Kiriha! Raiga, you are indeed the fool here!"

Daiha joined Kiriha and laughed loudly. He felt the same way she did. Neither of them had any intention of bowing down before the villain in front of them. The apple never falls far from the tree, as they say.

"Curse you! Very well, I'll grant your wish right now!"

Enraged that Maguz was being taunted yet again, Tayuma pulled out his pistol and pointed it at them. He looked more than ready to pull the trigger.

"Wait, Tayuma. You can't kill them."

However, Maguz stopped Tayuma yet again.

"Why, Maguz-sama?!"

But this time, Tayuma didn't relent right away. Having gotten too worked up, he questioned Maguz for his reasons.

"We are fighting on the side of justice. Even if they are our enemies, killing them for personal emotions is absurd."

"F-Forgive me..."

Realizing that he was personally about to tarnish Maguz's honor, Tayuma hurriedly apologized. He went to kneel, but Maguz beckoned him closer before he could do so. As Tayuma rushed over, Maguz whispered something to him.

"I see... That is a splendid idea, Maguz-sama."

Upon hearing Maguz's instructions, a twisted smile crept across Tayuma's lips.

On Maguz's orders, Kiriha and Daiha were moved out of the command room. The duty of escorting them fell on Maya. Despite the seriousness of the situation, she seemed to be having fun. Her presence here, however, puzzled Daiha.

“Where are you taking us, girl?”

“To your execution chamber.”

“Execution chamber? Didn’t Maguz say he wouldn’t kill us?”

“Only because there were other soldiers present at the time.”

“I see.”

“You and your daughter will be executed, but the official word will be that you fled overseas. Rather than having you die at the hands of the radical faction, it would be more convenient if you just abandoned the conservative faction to save your own skins.”

“So they’ll drag our reputation through the mud as payback for before...”

“Seems so. While he’s got a sharp mind, that Maguz is quite a petty man...”

Secretly executing Daiha and Kiriha while proclaiming that they’d fled was a ploy to lower the conservative faction’s morale, but Maya believed that Maguz’s desire for revenge played a big role in his decision. He wanted to ruin their reputation as compensation for hurting his pride. While Maya didn’t object to his plan outright, she couldn’t take any pride in his way of doing things, and she didn’t feel very good about helping. Discussing the matter, her ill humor shone through for a brief moment.

Kiriha stared at Maya from the side. She looked familiar to Kiriha, but she couldn’t be sure she recognized her. It had been so long. Filled with doubt, she continued to stare at Maya. Eventually, Maya noticed and looked back at Kiriha.

“Now that I think about it... You’re Kii, aren’t you? How nostalgic. It’s been about eleven years since we last met.”

“So you really are the woman from back then...”

“You remembered! Allow me to reintroduce myself. I am Maya, Maki’s master.”

“Maki’s...?”

Upon hearing Maya’s introduction, gears began turning in Kiriha’s brain.

If the woman from eleven years ago is Maki’s master, then...

Kiriha began pondering the relationship between her, Maki, and the people around them. Dissident magic users and the underground's radical faction had connected over a decade ago, and Sanae and Kiriha had been the ones to pay the price. Meanwhile, Maki, as Maya's disciple, had fought against Yurika for quite some time. There was a complex web of connections between people who'd appeared to have nothing to do with each other.

Depending on the circumstances, our fighting over room 106 might also be... No, that's overthinking it...

Kiriha felt like seemingly random pieces of a puzzle were coming together. She didn't know what the bigger picture was, but she was certain that it was completely different from what she'd imagined when she first arrived in room 106.

"But still, to think I'd end up killing you again..."

"What?!"

Daiha, who had been quietly listening to them talk, shouted out in surprise. He had heard about what had happened eleven years ago, but he was surprised to learn that the culprit was now right in front of him.

"Heh, it's like history's repeating itself. Who knows... maybe that boy is on his way here too?"

"That boy' ...? You mean Koutarou?"

When Maya mentioned Koutarou, Kiriha's train of thought came to a dead halt. His involvement was something she couldn't ignore.

"Koutarou won't come. He has an important mission. Even if he does show up, it won't be to save me."

Kiriha adamantly shook her head. She had actually allowed herself to be captured by the radical faction for one more reason on top of seeing Daiha. And that was to find their base. She knew if she went along with the radical faction, Sanae would be able to track her with her spirit sight. Sanae could easily detect the auras of people she was familiar with, and Kiriha had left behind her most prized possession. Sanae's abilities were far superior to what Koutarou's had been eleven years ago, so she was certain Sanae would be able to find the place

right away.

But it was still an extremely dangerous move. Kiriha didn't see any way she'd leave with her life once she was captured by the radical faction. But that was a trade she was willing to make for leading Koutarou and the others to the base. She had come prepared for that ending. Otherwise, both the surface and the underground would end up turning into bloody battlefields. All she could do was put her hopes in her friends.

Now, all that was left was for Koutarou and the others to attack the base after making proper preparations. Though Kiriha and Daiha would be dead by then, everything else should go well. Kiriha had left her card behind in part to tell Koutarou she was prepared for that. She wanted him to forget about her and save what he was meant to. That devoted desire of hers hadn't changed since that day eleven years ago.

"You really are a strange girl. You're doing exactly what you did eleven years ago."

Maya smiled at Kiriha, less like she was looking at an enemy and more like she was looking at an old friend.

"People don't change in just ten years."

"I think so too."

Maya stopped their conversation there, but she pondered the logical conclusion of it in her mind.

That's right. People don't change just because of the passage of time. And in that case...

Maya smiled. Lately, things hadn't been going how she would have liked... but she got the feeling that was about to change.

Despite being tied to a pillar in the execution chamber, Kiriha was calm. She had been prepared for this from the very beginning. Instead, it was her father, Daiha, who was getting upset. He had steeled himself for death the moment he was kidnapped, but with Kiriha joining him, things had changed. Not being able to do anything for his daughter whose life was in danger was painful for him as

a father.

“I’m sorry, Kiriha... Please forgive your useless father.”

“There’s nothing you could do. Just know I was happy to be your daughter.”

With Daiha apologizing for the umpteenth time, Kiriha showed a gentle smile. She had no regrets about the situation. She wasn’t upset with her father, or anything else for that matter. She regretted nothing about the choices she’d made that had led her here.

I returned to the surface and reunited with Onii-chan... I no longer have any regrets. And I’m sure that Onii-chan and everyone will be able to defeat the radical faction. There’s nothing left to worry about...

Kiriha’s eyes were clear, but Daiha deeply regretted getting his daughter into this situation. He hated to see her like that. She should have been living her life as a normal girl. He felt it was far too cruel for her to die shouldering the problems of her tribe.

“Yes... I too am proud to be your father.”

However, Daiha held those feelings back and bid his daughter farewell. He didn’t want to bother her by bringing up something that neither of them could do anything about now. He at least wanted the two of them to go out smiling.

Kiriha and Daiha lovingly said their goodbyes. It was a touching scene, but Tayuma who was watching them didn’t feel even an inkling of sympathy. He had the eyes of a stray dog staring down its prey.

“Heh heh... hahahaha! Maguz-sama, at last the time has come for the accursed Kurano family to meet its end!”

Tayuma, Maguz, and Maya were looking down into the execution chamber from an observation balcony. The overly excited Tayuma was pressed up against the window as he eagerly watched Kiriha and Daiha. Because the Kurano family had humiliated him over and over again, he couldn’t be more thrilled at their demise.

“The Kurano family acts as the pillar of the conservative faction—both in politics and morale. With them gone, the conservative faction will collapse from

within. Our victory is at hand.”

In contrast to Tayuma, Maguz’s eyes were chilling. But he too felt nothing of sympathy for the Kuranos. The difference between them was hot and cold, but they both loathed Kiriha and Daiha as enemies.

“Hmm... Even though you served them for so long, you sure seemed awfully quick to give the order to execute them.”

Compared to the other two present, Maya was the only one who seemed to feel anything at all for the unfortunate father and daughter. She prioritized herself, while Kiriha and Daiha prioritized the whole. Though there was a difference in what they considered important, she admired their resolve in facing their problems. In her words, both good and evil had their ways of blooming.

“Indeed, I have served the Kurano family for over twenty years. Mind you, those were days of submission. But all the while, I have been sharpening my fangs.”

Maguz—or rather, Raiga—had served the Kurano family together with his father, Kouma. Their family had done so for over four and a half centuries. But to him, it was a humiliating legacy of servitude. He felt the same way about the Kuranos that the radical faction did about the surface dwellers. For better or worse, Maguz was the true embodiment of the radical faction’s sentiments.

“...I guess you have a lot going on too.”

Maya said nothing more, and ended their conversation with that vague comment. As expected, the situation wasn’t very agreeable. That was the only way Maya could interpret it.

She had saved Maki from that slave merchant because she needed her talent, but looking back at their relationship now, she felt like that hadn’t been all there was to it. That was why Maya was willing to give it her all and crush Maki if she stood in her way as an enemy. That was simply how she lived.

And it was why Maya didn’t like that Maguz felt nothing whatsoever for the underground and its people. Maguz was already on the cusp of entering his midlife, but based on the way he spoke, he’d grown up without ever taking a

real look at his surroundings. There was a big difference between acting with full knowledge and acting in ignorance. To Maya, Maguz was like a child.

Elexis would never behave like this... I guess it's because he's been shut in this small underground world...

While she didn't like it, pointing that out wouldn't do her any favors. So instead of continuing the conversation, she chose to change the topic. There was something else she wanted to know.

"By the way, may I ask you something, Maguz?"

"I don't mind."

"That codename of yours, Maguz... Does it have some kind of origin?"

"It does. I took it from the name of our ancient leader. It was forbidden amongst the People of the Earth to speak his name, as he was a leader who strove to use military force to obtain supremacy. Because of that, there are now very few that know his true name."

The People of the Earth's ancestors were chased from their homeland as criminals. The reason for that was their leader, who went by the name of Maguz. He'd tried to rule the world with force, and was thusly stripped of his position and exiled. That was why the People of the Earth now always sought to avoid conflict. Because they were aware of their people's sins in the past.

"That is why I chose it. Using force, I will reclaim our home. He was a true ruler, a legend who bravely chose to fight. His name was—"

"Maxfern?"

Maya spoke the name before Maguz could. Hearing it come from her lips, Maguz was quite taken aback.

"...I am amazed you know of that name."

In the legends of the People of the Earth, said leader's name was Maguz Fern. Though the pronunciation was somewhat different, such distortion was only natural after being passed down orally for so long. In fact, that lent credence to the tale.

"We have a similar legend too, though speaking of it is also forbidden."

Maya gave the surprised Maguz a cheerful smile.

So that really was it...

That was what Maya had wanted to know. She wanted to confirm the legend shared between her people and the People of the Earth.

“Now that I think about, you were from the lost seventh tribe. It’s not all that strange for you to know it.”

Maguz soon remembered Maya’s origin and nodded. Considering they shared the same roots, it was perfectly believable that she had such knowledge.

“We both have a hard time with worthless ancestors, it seems.”

“I just have to not worry about it.”

“...I expect great things from you.”

As they reached a pause in their conversation, the soldiers in the execution chamber signaled that their work was done. Seeing that, Tayuma turned from the window to look at Maguz and Maya.

“Maguz-sama, it seems the preparations for the execution are complete.”

“Then let’s begin right away.”

“Yes, sir... Begin the execution!”

Receiving orders from Maguz, Tayuma gave the soldiers the signal through the window.

Execution methods underground didn’t differ much from those on the surface. Since they were at a military base, the radical faction chose the simplest method available—death by firing squad. There were four men assigned for each person to be executed. Three would be given guns with blanks, and only one would have live ammunition. It was a precaution taken to safeguard the soldiers’ mental health by making it uncertain who’d fired the kill shot.

“Finally, huh...?” Daiha mumbled while looking at the four shooters lining up in front of him.

Death was near, but he was unafraid. The only irritation he felt was over not being able to protect his daughter.

“Father, keep your head held high until the end. You can’t show weakness to these people.”

Kiriha kept her firm attitude. Despite staring down her mortality, she felt neither fear nor regret. She simply stood there in a dignified fashion.

“...You’ve grown strong, Kiriha.”

His daughter’s composure was a saving grace for Daiha. If she had been screaming and crying, he too would have surely lost his calm. It was redeeming, but also a little sad. He was happy that his daughter had matured, but he still wanted his little girl to be a little girl.

“No, I was just thinking that we’ll get to see mother soon.”

“You’re right. I’ll think about the same, then.”

Kiriha and Daiha smiled at each other one last time.

Eleven years ago, Kiriha had lost her mother, and Daiha his wife. That’s why, though they were sad that they would die, those feelings were softened by the thought that they would soon be reunited with a lost loved one. Their fate was sealed, but they weren’t wrong for accepting it this way.

Onii-chan, I’ll leave the rest to you... I’m sure you can protect the People of the Earth and the people on the surface... and all the girls of room 106...

Kiriha only wished that she’d been able to do more. She hadn’t been able to find the radical faction’s base on her own in time, and so ended up having to rely on Sanae’s abilities. She was also leaving the fighting to Koutarou. But while she was disappointed that giving it her all hadn’t been enough, she didn’t regret anything. She was leaving things in the hands of the people she trusted most. She had no worries about the future. That’s why she was able to choose such a reckless strategy in the first place.

“Take aim!”

Following the captain’s orders, the eight shooters leveled their guns. Four muzzles were pointed at Kiriha, and four at Daiha. While staring into those black

holes, Kiriha thought back on everything that had happened until today.

Their meeting in room 106. The days they'd fought over the small apartment. Their beach vacation where Sanae had been kidnapped, which forced the girls to work together for the first time. There was also the school play where they all began to learn more about each other. Then Christmas, the second play, the ski trip... At first they had only fought with each other, but as time passed, Kiriha could only remember pleasant memories. That's why she thought she'd lived a happy life.

I was able to find Onii-chan and confirm that he's safe and happy. And though it was only for a short time, we were able to live supporting each other. That's enough for me. Onii-chan, please protect everyone...

Her bonds with her friends had grown deep. She had spent every day happy and experienced a love unlike anything else. Indeed, Kiriha had been happy. That was how she truly felt. That's why she had to stop the fighting as quickly as possible. Kiriha wasn't the only who'd spent the last year being happy. There was happiness both above and below ground that shouldn't be sacrificed.

"...I love you, Onii-chan..."

Kiriha smiled as she whispered those words and closed her eyes. The muzzles were already trained on her. Once the captain gave the order, it would all be over.

"Fire!"

And just as the captain called out to the firing squad, there was a loud sound from above and the ground shook a little. The shooters fired at the same time, but for some reason, their bullets didn't harm Kiriha or Daiha.

"J-Just what...?"

Confused, Kiriha opened her eyes. In front of her was a familiar, manly figure clad in blue armor. She would never mistake it. It was her beloved, Koutarou.

What had protected Kiriha and Daiha from the bullets was the barrier created by his armor, after he had destroyed the ceiling and entered the chamber, as well as Harumi and Yurika's defensive spells. They had made it in the nick of time.

“Sorry I’m late. Are you okay, Kiriha-san?”

Koutarou turned his head a little to look over his shoulder at Kiriha. But the moment their gazes met, large tears fell from Kiriha’s eyes as she cried out to him.

“Onii-chan?! Why did you come to save me?!”

“It’s been a while since I heard you say something like that...”

That was what she’d said to him eleven years ago. It was the same question she’d hurled at him when he prioritized saving her over his mother.

“The people close to you will be in danger! Everyone on the surface and underground will be! I’m not worth it! Don’t you understand?!”

Kiriha feared that many would be sacrificed for her sake. That’s why she wanted Koutarou and the others to sacrifice her instead. She wanted them to take their time in preparing and challenge the radical faction only once they were good and prepared. A certain victory would be the only way to make sure everyone was safe.

“No, not at all.”

Despite Kiriha’s desperation, Koutarou disappointedly shook his head.

“I... We’re stupid, so there’s only one thing that we understand”

“And what is that?!”

“That Kiriha-san and Kii are important to us.”

When they learned that Kiriha had left them to face her death alone, Koutarou and the others all felt the same way. They had to save Kiriha as quickly as possible. They knew that Kiriha wanted them to go on without her, but they still couldn’t stand to leave her behind.

“Besides, I could never accept that. I don’t believe you should have to sacrifice your happiness for everyone else’s!”

Ever since leaving past Forthorthe, Koutarou had wondered whether sacrificing one to save the many was really the right choice. It was what Alaia had done for the sake of her people. However, no matter how hard he thought

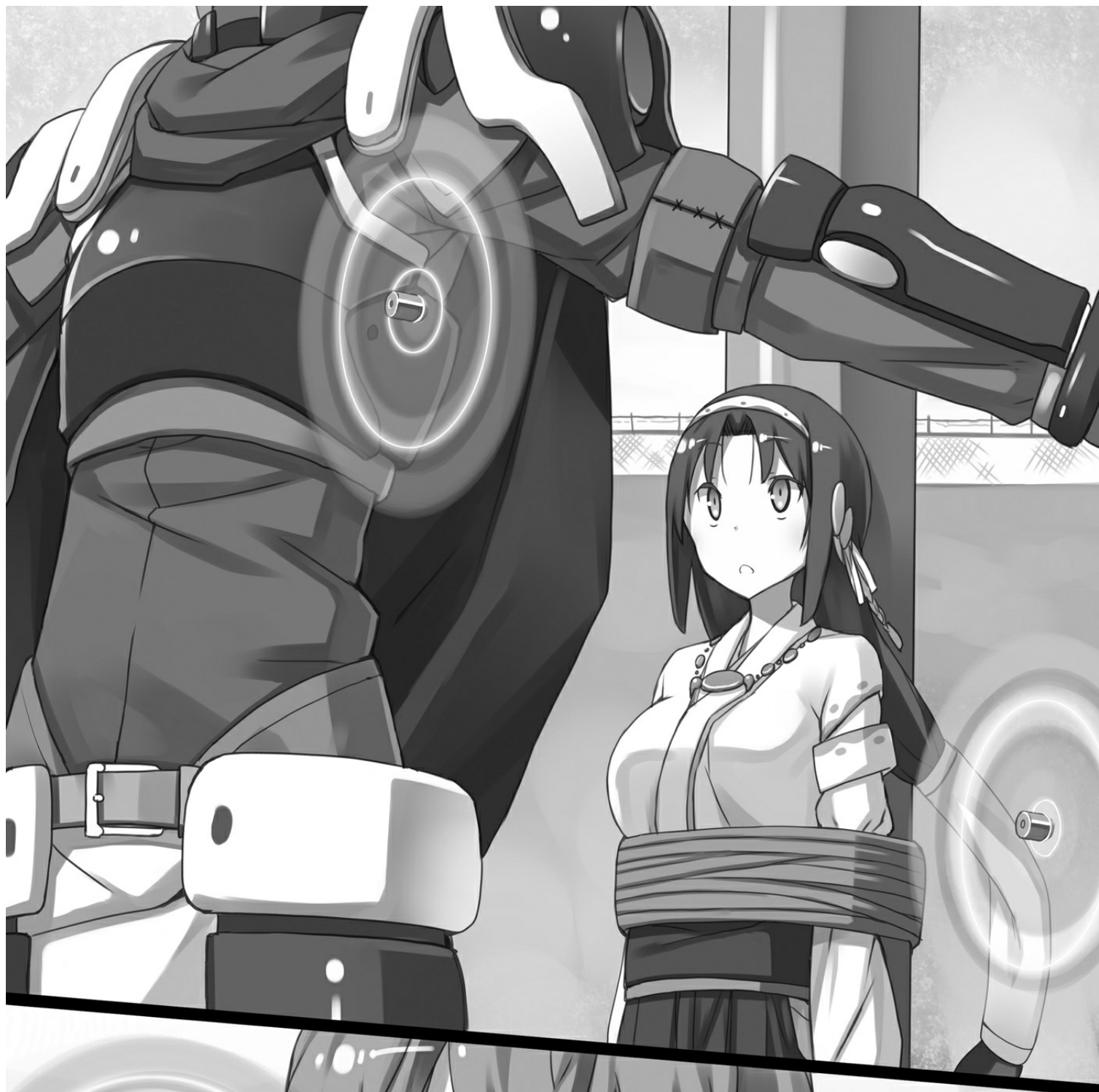
about it, Koutarou just couldn't accept it. That's why he wasn't about to let someone close to him make that same mistake again.

“So I'll beat down these guys and bring you back safe and sound! And protect the surface and underground on top of that! *That's* the right path!”

In order to obtain the right end, he couldn't use the wrong means. That would make him just as bad as the radical faction. He wanted to stand for something, and he knew he had to walk down the right path to get there.

If he didn't, he would surely falter somewhere along the way. Even if he managed to reach the right destination, if he got there by walking the wrong path, it would all be meaningless. In order to make sure everyone was happy, he needed to take the high road, no matter how difficult that may be. That was the future Koutarou wanted.

“Onii-chan... Okay, I understand...”



Thanks to Koutarou's decisive words, strength returned to Kiriha's eyes. She too knew she had to walk the right path. She'd felt so rushed earlier that she'd chosen poorly, but now she could see things clearly.

"Lend me your strength, Koutarou!"

"That's more like it, Kiriha-san! Everyone, you hear that?!"

"Leave it to yours truly, Sanae-chan!"

"The time has come for me to fulfill my duty as a magical girl!"

"Let's do our best, Kurano-san!"

The new path Kiriha was about to choose was an extremely difficult one, but she wouldn't be walking it alone. Koutarou, Sanae, Yurika, and Harumi, as well as Theia and the others on the surface would be with her. And she knew she could reach her ultimate goal with their help.

Maya's eyes gleamed when she spotted Koutarou standing magnificently behind his brightly shining barrier.

You did well to come, my boy!

Maya didn't like Maguz's way of doing things, so while she didn't say it out loud, she welcomed Koutarou's arrival. She was so overjoyed, in fact, she'd have done a little dance if she could.

The radical faction soldiers, however, weren't smiling like Maya was. The moment Koutarou and the three girls had jumped down into the execution chamber, the firing squad fell into complete disarray.

The majority of the soldiers present were a disorderly mob with no actual combat experience. Only a handful of them had fought against an anti-invader squad like the Sun Rangers, and even those who had didn't have much experience. The radical faction always far outnumbered the Sun Rangers, so while the Sun Rangers managed to grow and learn from their encounters, the same wasn't true for the radical faction. They were far from battle-hardened, and as such, it would take some time for them to regain their cool amidst the chaos.

“What are you doing?! Get it together!”

“E-Everyone, reload! Switch over to real bullets!”

Upon hearing Tayuma’s irritated shouting, the captain of the firing squad hurriedly gave orders to his men. Their weapons were loaded with a mix of blanks and live rounds. They wouldn’t be able to put up a proper fight like that, so they all switched over to what they knew were real bullets.

While the shooters were confused and reloading, the haniwas cut the ropes binding Kiriha.

“Thank you, Karama, Korama.”

“Ho! We’re glad you’re alright, Nee-san, ho!”

“Take us with you the next time you are kidnapped, ho! Don’t be so reserved, ho!”

“Yes, I will do just that. I’m sorry.”

“We and Nee-san are one, ho!”

“When we die, we die together, ho!”

Meanwhile, Sanae, Yurika, and Harumi set Daiha free. He’d never met them before, but under the circumstances, he greeted them all warmly.

“I’m sorry about this, girls. Are you Kiriha’s friends?”

“Yeah. We didn’t get along at first, but now we’re real close.”

“Kiriha-san was always kind.”

“I was surprised to learn she was from the underground, though.”

“Thank you, it seems my daughter is blessed with good friends.”

Next, Daiha looked over at Koutarou.

“...And that must be Koutarou, huh?”

Koutarou stood between his allies and their enemies, protecting them with the barrier generated by his armor. While the soldiers were disoriented, the party had only been able to rescue Kiriha and Daiha because Koutarou was defending them all.

“You know him?”

“I’ve heard about him from Kiriha. A weak yet strong man, unable to live his life the way he wants. From the look of it, he’s exactly as she described him.”

Based on his conversations with Kiriha—and now seeing how he was carefully guarding his friends—Daiha sensed Koutarou was the kind of man who only knew how to walk straight forward in a twisted world. He might repeatedly crash into walls and hurt himself, but he would only ever walk straight ahead. And as Daiha watched him now, Kiriha took her place next to him.

“Koutarou.”

“I’m really glad you’re okay... Don’t go too far, okay? You’ll step outside of the barrier.”

“I know. But I will always walk by your side.”

“I don’t want any more repeats of today, okay?”

“Yes. I’m sorry.”

Kiriha looked up at Koutarou with eyes filled with trust and affection. That much was obvious even to Daiha.

Of course Kiriha would fall for him. For all her cleverness, she too will only walk straight forward...

Daiha had complex feelings about his daughter’s beloved. However, Koutarou had saved Kiriha several times now, and this time, he’d even saved Daiha too. As such, he felt like he had no room to oppose her wishes. He was just thankful that Koutarou seemed to be a nice boy. He was a doting parent, certainly, but he was truly relieved from the bottom of his heart. There were more serious matters at hand now, however.

“Fire! Fire! Don’t leave any of them alive!”

Tayuma flew into a rage from the observation balcony and continued to shout orders to attack. In response, the soldiers in the execution chamber—the eight shooters and their captain, plus an additional four guards—pulled the triggers on their guns at once.

Thirteen bullets rained down on Koutarou and the others, but each and every

one was repelled. Simple firearms didn't have the power to pierce through a complex barrier made of the distortion field from Koutarou's armor, the spiritual energy field from the haniwas, and Harumi and Yurika's magic—all of which had different characteristics.

"Damn it, again! Curse you, you little brat!"

Seeing the bullets so easily deflected, Tayuma ground his teeth like he'd been personally insulted. His irritation was specifically directed at Koutarou, who had turned the tables when they should have had this in the bag. It was the same as what had happened several months ago when he attacked the surface. Proudful Tayuma glared at Koutarou with a vengeful, burning rage.

"Calm down, Tayuma. Did you forget why we gathered that data at the factory?"

In contrast to Tayuma, Maguz remained calm. In a nonchalant gesture, he waved his right hand at a subordinate standing by in a corner. The subordinate then quickly began operating a nearby panel.

"R-Right!"

Realizing Maguz's intentions, Tayuma just barely managed to get a hold of himself. As he did, the large door leading to the execution chamber opened and a radical faction combat squad entered.

The squad consisted of twenty-four mechanical soldiers created with spiritual energy technology, behind which were twenty-four heavily armed infantrymen, and eight large automated machine guns. From the combat data collected at the factory, the radical faction had surmised this would be enough firepower to defeat Koutarou and the girls.

"Maguz-sama, please retreat."

"And where do you suggest that I retreat after I abandon our stronghold?"

"Th-That's... I understand, Maguz-sama..."

"We'll finish this here! We're joining too, Tayuma!"

"Yes, sir!"

On top of the original thirteen soldiers and the additional fifty-six units that

had just entered, Maguz and Tayuma descended to the execution chamber. The two of them were armed with spiritual energy weapons and magic. They also wore armor made using spiritual energy technology that had been decorated in traditional People of the Earth fashion, based on old documents they had regarding warfare.

Their armor included large helmets and strong plating that covered their entire bodies. Maguz was wielding a longbow, and Tayuma a longsword—both of which had been custom-made for them with magic. They held power that easily surpassed modern weaponry. Since Maguz and Tayuma both came from families known for their bravery, they were quite skilled at handling traditional weapons. Thanks to that, they were far more dangerous than the soldiers armed with firearms.

With Maguz and Tayuma entering the fray, the radical faction's forces numbered seventy-one in all. Each unit of their large force had a weapon leveled at Koutarou and his team—a meager six in comparison. Even with how the battle at the factory had gone, Koutarou and the others seemed to have no chance of winning now.

“Don’t think you’ll be getting out of here alive, brat!”

With such an overwhelming difference in forces, Tayuma didn’t hesitate to threaten Koutarou. But even against such odds, Koutarou remained confident.

“It won’t be that hard, Tayuma.”

“What?! You sore loser!”

“I’m not a sore loser. Well, you’ll find out soon enough.”

“You wish! I’ll crush you before you can try anything!”

“The fact that it won’t be difficult is the difference between Kiriha-san and you guys... Not that you’d understand.”

“Then I’ll start by killing that girl!”

Tayuma roared as he pointed at Kiriha. However, Kiriha didn’t even flinch. In fact, she was pretty much ignoring him as she addressed Maguz.

“Raiga... Is there no way to convince you to stop this battle?”

“You might think it wrong, but having abandoned battle for several thousand years is what’s truly wrong. It’s not like I wish for the battle to continue on forever, but we must stand up for ourselves.”

The People of the Earth had avoided fighting throughout their long history underground. Maguz took issue with that. It was only natural for friction and conflict to occur between living beings. Running away from it every time would eventually leave you nowhere to run, and being backed into a corner would spell ruin. That was how he felt about the People of the Earth being driven underground. There were times it was necessary to take up arms to defend oneself or do what was right. That was what he wanted the People of the Earth to do, though his idea of what was right wasn’t necessarily shared by everyone. But that didn’t matter to him.

“If we don’t stand up for ourselves, we will be ruined! That much is obvious if you observe the history of the surface!”

Kiriha also knew that there were times when there was no other choice but to fight. That’s why she had taken up arms to stand against the radical faction. But what the history of the surface had taught her was every single nation that had turned weapons on its own people had, without exception, been ruined. That was why Kiriha and the conservative faction had tried to avoid conflict with the radical faction all this time. It was also the same reason why the People of the Earth had avoided battle for so long.

“We are different from the surface dwellers. We are superior to them.”

The superior should dominate. The inferior should obey. It was that simple to Maguz. He believed it was the destiny of the People of the Earth to rule. However, their ancestors had chosen not to do so and instead headed underground to avoid battle. Those who remained on the surface threw away their culture and assimilated with the surface dwellers. They feared taking responsibility and delayed mankind’s advancement at the hands of the People of the Earth by some several hundred years. But if the People of the Earth took over now, they could make up for that lost time. It would open up a bright future for everyone.

“You don’t decide who is superior and who is inferior! Are you going to

choose the path to ruin because of your elitism, Raiga?!”

All throughout history, there had been plenty of megalomaniacs who believed they were superior enough to rule the world. But there were too many pitfalls when it came to putting that into practice. They had to prove their superiority by maintaining it at all times. And even if they could actually do that, they would still eventually age and die. What happened then? Was there an heir just as superior? And what happened if someone even more superior appeared?

“I don’t need to decide—it has already been decided! I will forever rule under the name of Maguz! Combining our spiritual energy technology with magic, it’s within reach!”

All the problems that arose from rule by the superior caused such rulers to seek foolish things, including eternal life and omnipotence. History was riddled with rulers that had been deluded by such vain quests which were ultimately a waste of time. Ironically, it was their attempts to remain superior that got in the way of doing just that. That held true even in the twenty-first century.

In short, rule by the superior was inherently flawed and self-defeating. That’s why, even if there was short-term success, it would never last. That’s why Kiriha would never fall for it.

That same had been true for Maguz once upon a time, but after he discovered magic, his pride and ambitions flared up. Immortality and omnipotence seemed like very real possibilities with magic and spiritual energy technology working together. The development of the Earth Dragon was just a testament to what they could achieve. Maguz’s ultimate goal was to elevate himself to a higher level of existence and rule the world for all eternity.

“That would only lead to battle between immortal monsters! Why don’t you use your superior intellect to think before you act, Raiga?!”

If there truly was a way to obtain immortality and omnipotence, then others would eventually find it out. It would be impossible to protect a secret for all eternity. The secret might be stolen, or perhaps others might come across it on their own. But one way or another, it would spread. And eventually, a battle would break out between immortal and omnipotent monsters. In the end, there would still be misery.

“Oh, I have! And this was the superior choice!”

Maguz believed that absolute justice was on his side, and he would do anything for that sake. Surprisingly enough, past the calm in his eyes burned with an insanity that made even Tayuma’s pale in comparison.

“If it’s possible, then someone, even if it’s not us, will eventually reach it! That’s why we must get there before anyone else, or we will be the ones who are ruled! We need the power to protect ourselves!”

“So you would rather open the gates of hell yourself so no one else can...? How foolish.”

Even with things at this stage, Kiriha still wanted to reach a peaceful resolution through negotiation. But there was no way she could talk Maguz down in such a short time, not when he was so self-assured of what he called justice. The conservative faction would be defeated before she did.

It was just as Theia-dono said... There isn’t enough time to reach my ideal... We are fools who can do nothing but push forward...

Thus, Kiriha finally made up her mind. She would defeat Maguz and put an end to his ambitions. She had to keep him from opening the gates of hell. Even if she stopped him here, they might face the same problem somewhere else someday. But if she didn’t, this could mean the end of happy days for both the surface and the underground.

“Maguz, I understand your goals, but I absolutely cannot allow you to proceed.”

Kiriha readied her weapon. It was a long naginata capable of manipulating fire and electricity that Clan had sent over for her.

“You would do well to remember this: we are proud People of the Earth! Maguz, we won’t let you rule over anything!”

Kiriha looked magnificent and beautiful with her naginata in hand. The radical faction soldiers that stood against her instinctively held their breath. Ironically enough, it was Kiriha who had rejected the idea of forced rule that truly had the qualities of a supreme leader.

Hearing Kiriha's declaration, Maguz lost his temper and grew ever more enraged.

"Then I will begin my reign right here and now by destroying you! My soldiers, kill them!"

He no longer had the expression of a calm leader. It had been replaced with the expression of a cruel, cold-blooded beast baring its fangs. His heart was just as twisted as Tayuma's.

"I'm sorry, Uncle Kouma. Your son has gone to a place from which he can no longer return..."

Koutarou mumbled sadly to himself as he looked at the attacking crowd of enemies. He had no sympathy for Raiga, but he was heartbroken to think of his father. Koutarou, like Kiriha, strongly valued family.

"What are you mumbling about, brat?!"

However, Tayuma brought him to his senses. Seeing Tayuma stand in front of the soldiers prepared to shed blood for his self-righteous, egotistical, diluted sense of justice filled Koutarou's heart with anger. An anger that grew even greater fueled by the sadness he felt.

"Did you go mad seeing the superior power of your superior opponents?!"

"I'm glad you're here, Tayuma! You really put things into perspective for me!"

Thoroughly angered, Koutarou extended his right hand forward as if he meant to strike Tayuma. But what came next wasn't an attack.

"Cradle, give me my sword!"

Koutarou issued an order to Clan's spaceship above the surface via his bracelet.

"As you wish, my lord."

Clan's spaceship, the Cradle, obeyed his order without delay.

"Come, Signaltiin!"

"Call sign confirmed. Coordinate axis fixed. Commencing transfer of Signaltin."

A black hole appeared in front of Koutarou's extended right hand. It was a hole in space-time created so that the Cradle could deliver the sword to Koutarou.

"Hmm...?"

When Koutarou grabbed hold of Signaltin's handle from the hole, he noticed something strange. In addition to the first space-time hole, another six had surrounded him. Inside them were devices each a little larger than soccer balls. They emerged from the holes and floated towards him without command.

"Clan, what is this?"

"It's additional equipment that Theiamillis-san and Pardomshiha prepared for you. It's called the Garb of the Lord."

"Theia and Ruth-san did this?"

While he understood the situation, Koutarou was still puzzled. It was then that a hologram with two choices appeared in front of him. One read: "Become the emperor." And the other: "Do not become the emperor."

"It seems like Elfaria-san was also part of its development."

"It sure looks like it..."

Koutarou touched the "become the emperor" choice while wryly smiling. It was the startup order for the additional equipment, but Elfaria had put her own twist on it. It was almost certainly some kind of joke or prank.

"Engaging legendary weapon system series 01-A: Garb of the Lord. Garb of the Lord has been put under control of the maneuver suit."

The Garb of the Lord linked to Koutarou's armor via gravitational waves, and was put under control of the armor's AI. After that, its various parts began flying around and automatically connecting to the armor itself.

"I see, so this is what it is..."

The additional equipment referred to as the Garb of the Lord was a supplement to Koutarou's armor. It came in six main pieces: a pauldron for both the left and right shoulders, a breastplate that covered his chest, a matching plate that covered his back, and guards for each leg. To top it all off, a

decorative mantle hung down behind him. Its overall design was in the standard smoothly-curved Forthorthian style, and it was colored blue and white just like the uniforms of the Satomi band of knights. With it all, Koutarou's armor became more extravagant, to the point of looking regal.

"Your Excellency, Lord Blue Knight, this ship, the Cradle, will pray for your fortune and glory in place of the nation of Forthorthe."

"Hahaha, you're leaving yourself wide open, brat! Did you give up already?!"

The ten or so men around Tayuma all trained their guns on Koutarou. The guns they were using were different from the ones the firing squad had. These were all larger caliber firearms intended to be used against vehicles. No matter how strong his barrier was, it wouldn't stand up to that many powerful shots at this range.

"Nah, I'm simply dumbfounded by my friends' mischievous trick."

Koutarou readied Signaltin and tried to close in on the soldiers before they could attack.

"Detecting use of force against enemy troops. GoL will begin its attack."

"H-Hey?!"

However, the first to attack was neither Koutarou nor the enemy. It was the additional equipment now on Koutarou's armor—GoL, or the Garb of the Lord.

"Activating right shoulder laser cannon. Neutralizing enemy forces."

The combat algorithm that Ruth had created for GoL was based on Theia's attack patterns. As a result, it was quick to take action and didn't hesitate to use force.

"Wai—"

Before Koutarou could even object, GoL opened the right pauldron and began its attack using the built-in laser cannon. The laser cannon swiftly altered its aim and intermittently fired off beams. At first glance, it looked it was firing wildly and at random, but it was actually focusing on the enemy's weapons to rob them of their ability to attack. It had also inherited its accuracy from Theia.

"Could this be from back then...?"

Before Koutarou could do anything himself, the additional equipment had defeated the enemy on its own. It reminded Koutarou of something—the “Theia’s New Super Koutarou” plans she’d drawn up once. Of course, like Kiriha had predicted, its scale had been dialed back to make it more realistic and practical. But it was still unmistakably Theia’s crazy idea brought to life.

“Curse you, brat! Mechanical soldiers, move up front!”

With GoL blasting their weapons right out of the hands of the infantrymen, the mechanical soldiers created with spiritual energy technology took the front line. These mechanical soldiers were equipped with the same kind of spiritual energy field that Karama and Korama used. And since GoL had restricted its firepower to only blast away weapons, its lasers were easily blocked by the mechanical soldiers’ fields.

“Exchanging right shoulder weaponry. Activating high-convergence beam cannon. Beginning bombardment.”

“I told you you’re too fast! Clan, what’s going on?!”

“GoL is a completely automated system! You just fight against the enemies you want to fight against! GoL will carve open a path for you!”

“So that’s what it’s doing! I’m not sure if I like it or not!”

GoL would make way for the emperor. And just as Koutarou got his head around its purpose, the new weapon on his right shoulder began its attack. This time, it was a highly powerful beam cannon. It wasn’t as accurate as the laser version, but it had a lot more oomph. While it wasn’t powerful enough to outright destroy the mechanical soldiers, it had no trouble overloading their barriers.

“Sanae-chan God Arrow!”

“Thunder Lance! Modifier: Change Element, Mana Energy!”

“Gather, spirits of the wind! Become an arm to strike down my enemy! Fly, Air Sledgehammer!”

And as long as their barriers were down, the girls could attack. They unleashed their attacks on the mechanical soldiers whose barriers had been

compromised by GoL's beam. The mechanical soldiers excelled at both offense and defense, but they hardly stood a chance here. In no time at all, three soldiers had been reduced to scrap.

"Impossible! That easily?!"

Seeing this result left Tayuma wide-eyed. According to their calculations, they should have been able to win with ease with the forces they had. Yet five heavy infantrymen had been disarmed and three mechanical soldiers had been destroyed in the blink of an eye. No one had expected it, and the soldiers were just as shaken as Tayuma.

"Let's go, Koutarou!"

"Yeah!"

"It's our turn, ho!"

"It's finally our time to shine again, ho!"

Not missing their chance, Kiriha and Koutarou stepped forward. Since both of them were protected by strong barriers, they were well prepared for cutting into the enemy line. Their targets were Tayuma who was leading the soldiers in the front, and Maguz commanding them from the rear. They were planning on ending this battle by defeating the two lynchpins.

"Fire! Fire! Don't let them get close!"

But by the time they'd closed half the distance between them, Tayuma and his men had recovered. Nineteen infantrymen with heavy artillery and the eight large machine guns opened fire at Koutarou and Kiriha at once.

With twenty-seven weapons going off together, it sounded like the air itself was roaring. These were all heavy-duty firearms meant for serious warfare. Koutarou's and the haniwas' barriers wouldn't be able to stand up against them for long.

"Protection From—"

Yurika tried casting a spell on Koutarou and Kiriha that would help protect them from the bullets.

"Look out, Yurika!"

However, right before she could finish, Sanae pushed her to the side. Not a moment later, a hail of bullets showered down just where she had been standing. It was an attack from the original thirteen soldiers in the execution chamber.

“Owowow...”

“Get up, Yurika! I won’t last for long!”

“Sanae-chan, thank you!”

Sanae jumped over and lent Yurika a hand. Meanwhile, the shooters continued firing. Sanae was repelling their attacks with her psychic powers, but since she lacked fine control over them, it was quickly draining her energy. Standing still for too long was dangerous.

“Sakuraba-senpai, protect Satomi-san and Kiriha-san!”

As she got up, Yurika called out for their other ally, Harumi, to support Koutarou. However, Harumi simply shook her head with a confident smile.

“They’ll be okay. Let’s calm down and deal with our own opponents... Come, spirits of earth! Meld into rock and become a shield to protect us! Defend, Armor of the Earth!”

With Harumi’s hair glowing silver, she cast a defensive spell on herself and the others instead of Koutarou and Kiriha. It was powerful and easily repelled the firing squad’s bullets.

“Sakuraba-senpai! Satomi-san and Kiriha-san are in dang— Huh?”

Yurika was surprised by Harumi’s actions, but when she looked back at Koutarou and Kiriha, she saw that they were advancing without even a care for the bullets flying at them.

“H-How?”

“Hmm, simply put, we have that maniac to thank,” Sanae said with a smile at the confused Yurika.

The GoL that Theia and the others had built didn’t just have weapons built into it. It also came with several other special abilities, one of which was a large barrier generation device in the left shoulder.

Koutarou's armor had always had a barrier generation device built into it, but since the armor itself was based on an ancient design, it couldn't practically carry a very large one. It took form over function in that sense.

However, that wasn't the case with GoL. It had been designed explicitly to fit large weapons in the right shoulder and a large barrier generation device in the left. The pauldrons weren't big just because they looked cool, but to draw out the armor's maximum possible performance.

The barrier generation device got its energy supply from the battery built into the back plate of the armor. As a result, it was far more powerful than before. Normal firearms had no effect on it whatsoever.

"Karama, Korama, limit the spiritual energy field to only defend against spiritual energy! Leave the rest to Koutarou!"



“Roger! Changing attribute to prioritize spiritual energy defense!”

“We’ll show you what we can do when we get serious, ho!”

Forthorthian barriers, distortion fields, were ineffective against spiritual energy. But the haniwas had no problem handling it. And since their spiritual energy field normally worked against all kinds of attacks, limiting it to just blocking spiritual energy raised its potency considerably. As a result, they could now easily handle the volley of spiritual energy attacks.

“I’m counting on you, Signaltin!”

And when it came to magic, they would be protected by Signaltin’s ability to dispel mana. The magic the heavy infantryman were using was limited to spells cast on the bullets they fired. And all they did was increase the bullets’ firepower and accuracy, so there wasn’t all that much mana in them. So the moment they entered Signaltin’s range, they were reduced to normal, mundane bullets, which were no match for the distortion field.

“That’s how it is. So we’ll defend Kiripapa and defeat the ones over here for now. Once we’re done, we’ll go join Koutarou and Kiriha,” said Sanae.

With that, spiritual energy began flooding out of her. She was mimicking Harumi’s PAF, strengthening her body, but her spiritual energy was so concentrated that she was literally glowing. When it came to inner power, Sanae was second only to Shizuka.

“O-Okay.”

Realizing that Koutarou and Kiriha really didn’t need any help, Yurika redirected her staff at the nearby soldiers. The thirteen of them were their first priority.

“So I’m ‘Kiripapa,’ huh? Hahaha.”

Daiha smiled happily as he readied his own weapon. It was a Kurano family treasure, a katana that Kouma had left with Koutarou and the others. When Daiha took it in his hands, it started to faintly glow. The blade was covered in spiritual energy.

“Let’s go, everyone. Don’t push yourselves too hard. Let’s just start with what

we know we can handle.”

Last to ready herself was Harumi. Her hair shined silver as she stared at the thirteen soldiers without fear or hate. To her, the radical soldiers were still Kiriha’s kinsmen, so she felt no hostility towards them. She simply recognized that she had to stop them. She held her hands in front of her chest and focused mana into them.

No wonder Kiriha always looks like she’s having so much fun. With this group, being from the underground is hardly anything. But perhaps it’s because they’re all special that they can truly understand each other...

Watching the three girls, Daiha felt that Kiriha truly was lucky. She’d made some wonderful friends.

“I’m sure I’ll get laughed at for being a doting father...”

That’s why he was determined to protect them all. He wouldn’t let the radical faction lay one finger on his daughter or her friends. Resolute, he gripped his katana firmly.

Realizing that normal shooting wouldn’t be effective, Tayuma had his subordinates reorganize their formation. The remaining twenty-one mechanical soldiers would take the front while the accurate but slow-moving automatic machine guns stayed behind. The remaining nineteen heavy infantrymen split into two groups and spread out to the flanks. They would put as much stress on Koutarou’s barrier as possible, and then finish him off at close range with the mechanical soldiers.

“At least you’re as cunning as always, Tayuma!”

Koutarou readied Signaltin and squared off against the incoming mechanical soldiers. In total there were ten of them closing in, five for Koutarou and five for Kiriha. Attacking with any more than that in close quarters would only work against them, so the remaining eleven hung back to provide supporting fire.

“Enough of your dribble! Is that something you should really be saying when you’re relying on great powers?!”

“And is that something *you* should really be saying when you’re relying on an

earthquake weapon?!”

“Justice is on our side! For the sake of justice, any and all means are forgiven!”

Falling for Koutarou’s provocation, Tayuma stepped forward with his longsword in hand. With him entering the melee, the mechanical soldiers’ formation became slightly disordered.

That makes it a little bit easier to fight...

The mechanical soldiers’ weapons were magically enchanted blades. If they touched Signaltin, he could negate the magic until it regenerated, but they still functioned as normal blades. And if the magical part broke through their physical and spiritual energy barriers before being dispelled, it could still harm Koutarou or Kiriha.

On top of that, the mechanical soldiers further away had hand cannons that Koutarou could sense mana from. Since he couldn’t tell what they’d been enchanted with, it would be troublesome if they opened fire in the middle of the melee. Fortunately, considering that they hadn’t fired yet, that likely meant they had limited ammunition.

But that was partly why he’d taunted Tayuma into joining the fight. With him in the middle of things, it would be harder for the mechanical soldiers to use ranged weapons.

“Koutarou, we can’t split up and do this on our own!”

“Koutarou, we have decided to synchronize and move together with your armor, ho!”

“Take care of Ane-san, ho! Show them how well you get along, ho!”

“All right! Let’s go together!”

Koutarou and Kiriha advanced while repelling the enemy fire. The mechanical soldiers met them halfway, with the four out in front entering their range first.

“Out of the waaay!”

With her naginata, Kiriha had the longest reach, which allowed her to make the first attack. She swung her naginata as she gave a loud cry. Since she was

going up against mechanical soldiers, there was no hesitation in her attack. Reacting to Kiriha's unbridled fighting spirit, electricity gathered in the blade as she struck the approaching mechanical soldiers.

Of the two in front of her, the first was cut in half. Since her naginata was covered in spiritual energy and electricity, it had exceptionally high attack power. But after cutting through the first soldier, it lost too much power, allowing the second soldier to block it.

"I guess it won't be that easy!"

Koutarou clicked with his tongue as he crossed swords with the two that had approached him. They weren't all that impressive on their own, but they had the advantage in numbers. Staying guarded against multiple enemies was always more difficult.

"Maybe it will be!"

However, Kiriha still seemed confident. And her reason soon revealed itself.

Koutarou's right shoulder began shining, and the three mechanical soldiers in front of Koutarou and Kiriha were smashed into pieces. It was a bombardment from the beam cannon built into Koutarou's right pauldron. But having the opponents he was just about to defeat obliterated right in front of him, Koutarou was a little disappointed.

"Looks like the armor will win this on its own..."

If the radical troops showed any openings whatsoever, GoL would finish them off. Its attacks were so swift, powerful, and accurate that it made Koutarou wonder if he could actually win just by standing still.

"GoL will cover for us! Let's push through, Koutarou!"

"Yeah!"

Koutarou and Kiriha wiped out the other incoming mechanical soldiers as they continued their advance.

"Not good, ho! We're losing to the armor's decorations, ho!"

"Let's show some guts, ho! We can't lose to some soulless machine, ho!"

Thanks to GoL, the haniwas following after Koutarou and Kiriha had some breathing room and could focus on more than just defending. They fired beams from their mouths to knock out the human soldiers, and they attacked the mechanical soldiers with fire and lightning. Thanks to GoL's defending and counterattacking, Koutarou and the others became more aggressive overall. Their attacks increased in frequency and speed, and they took down enemy after enemy.

"C-Curse you, you damn brats! Don't get full of yourselves!"

Tayuma excitedly stepped forward and swung at Koutarou with his longsword infused with spiritual energy and mana. He had a good reason for being so worked up—he'd already lost over 30 percent of his troops. Despite having an overwhelming advantage in numbers, seventy-one against six, the radical faction hadn't been able to wound Koutarou or any of his allies yet. On top of that, they were now twenty units down. This was turning into a disastrous defeat, but Tayuma was frantic not to let it end like that.

"Koutarou, leave the small fries to me!"

"You got it!"

Up until now, Koutarou and Kiriha had been working together, but they would need to split up to deal with Tayuma. Koutarou would handle him while Kiriha held back the surrounding troops.

"Dieeeeee!"

Tayuma's spiritual energy and mana laden blade broke through the armor's barrier and the haniwas' spiritual energy field. Koutarou and Tayuma's swords clashed with a loud clang. While Signaltin temporarily erased the magic on Tayuma's sword when they collided, Tayuma was wearing powered armor, so the blow itself was still incredibly impactful. Koutarou's armor had to use its maximum output to block it.

"The hell I will!"

Koutarou used both hands to push Tayuma back. When it came to the armor's physical strength, Koutarou's had the advantage. Forthorthian generators were superior in output.

“Braaaat!”

However, Tayuma’s was more agile. He quickly righted his posture and came at Koutarou again. Since his armor was made using spiritual energy technology, it was superior when it came to reacting to its user’s movements. On top of that, Tayuma was a master with the sword. His armor assisted his already swift and powerful swings, and helped him bring his blade down on Koutarou.

“No you don’t!”

His own sword wouldn’t make it in time, so Koutarou focused on his left hand. He was still wearing the gauntlet that let him create fire and electricity. Using its power, Koutarou created a fireball to counter Tayuma’s attack.

However, Tayuma’s armor was equipped with a spiritual energy field, the underground’s version of a barrier. It excelled at defending against natural phenomenon, and since Koutarou’s fireball was just a natural phenomenon created through converting spiritual energy, it didn’t harm Tayuma.

“Guh!”

However, with the flames blocking his view, Tayuma relented in his attack and distanced himself. Humans, like any animals, had a natural, instinctive fear of fire.

“You’re pretty good, brat...”

After getting some distance, Tayuma turned the tip of his sword on Koutarou once more.

“That’s my line. Aren’t you pretty old?”

Koutarou also pointed his sword at Tayuma. With their blades leveled at one another, their fighting spirits flared up.

“I can’t retire until I fulfill my duty for our great cause!”

“Then we’ll just have to force you into early retirement!”

“You’re full of crap, brat!”

Having lost his temper, Tayuma attacked Koutarou again. Koutarou calmly held Signaltin at the ready as he approached. GoL was actively assisting Kiriha

all the while, but Koutarou himself was focused only on Tayuma.

“What’s the matter?! Weren’t you going to make me retire?!”

Tayuma unleashed a quick series of attacks to pin down Koutarou. Since multiple enemies surrounded him, his barrier and weaponry couldn’t focus on just Tayuma. On top of that, Harumi was busy dealing with other enemies and was unable to assist him. That meant that Koutarou had his sword skill alone to rely on to fend off Tayuma. Tayuma came from a long line of warriors, and his skill with a blade was considerable. On top of that, his armor made him more agile than Koutarou, which left Koutarou on the defensive. He was being cornered. But even so, he was smiling.

“No, I said *we* would.”

And there was a good reason for that smile—he’d realized that he couldn’t lose.

“Sorry for keeping you waiting, Koutarou!”

“Kurano’s daughter?!”

The next thing he knew, Tayuma’s sword was intercepted by Kiriha’s naginata. Tayuma looked at her in surprise. She should have been busy dealing with the other troops.

“Don’t forget about us, ho!”

“The brothers of flame and thunder, Karama and Korama, are here, ho!”

With Tayuma stopped in his tracks, Karama and Korama assaulted him with fire and electricity. Since Tayuma had just launched his attack, part of his spiritual energy field was down. And part of the haniwas’ attack managed to make it through that gap.

“D-Damn it! You damned automated dolls!”

Tayuma’s armor was scorched and he had received a slight shock, but it was hardly enough damage to take him out. As expected, they’d need to get in more than just a partial hit. In order to avoid taking an attack from Kiriha and the haniwas together, Tayuma took a great leap backward to distance himself from them. As he did, he realized why Kiriha had suddenly come to support

Koutarou.

“Impossible! This easily?!”

What he saw was the original squad of thirteen in the execution chambers collapsed on the floor. It was Harumi and the others’ doing. Defeating the thirteen soldiers with the weakest firepower wasn’t all that difficult. And once that was over with, Harumi and the others had moved on to helping out with the other enemies. That took a great load off of Kiriha and the haniwas’ shoulders, allowing them to move to Koutarou.

“Tayuma, our real fight starts now.”

The beam cannon on Koutarou’s right shoulder turned towards Tayuma. At the same time, the barrier generation device in Koutarou’s left shoulder adjusted its output. With Koutarou and Kiriha close by, GoL shrunk the barrier’s effective area and made it thicker.

“What?!”

“We don’t like... how you radicals do things,” Koutarou said, leveling his sword at Tayuma once more.

“Who cares if you don’t like it?!” Tayuma shouted out in rage.

Kiriha too readied her naginata and said, “We’re angry, Shijima Tayuma. Now, brace yourself! We’re going to completely destroy this false justice you speak of!”

The two haniwas were by her sides. Both she and Koutarou were serious. All of their equipment was pointed towards the enemy in front of them, towards Tayuma.

“Then it’s time for me to join in as well.”

“Maguz-sama?!”

“I have to protect my own justice. From people like you, that would look away from reality...”

Maguz, who had been surveying the battle from the rear, moved up to right behind Tayuma. He was holding a large bow in both hands that he had aimed at Kiriha.

“It’s dangerous, Maguz-sama!”

“Tayuma, it’ll be even more dangerous if you fall. We should work together here.”

“...I understand. But please focus on protecting yourself. You are our hope.”

“I shall.”

Koutarou and Kiriha. Tayuma and Maguz. The two pairs pointed their weapons at each other, completely unable to come to an agreement. There was no peaceful solution to their current standoff. Kiriha had desperately been trying to avoid it, but there was no longer anything she could do but fight.

“Let’s go, Koutarou!”

Kiriha took the lead and began running. Even as she did, she had her naginata at the ready and kept her surroundings in mind. Kiriha was a pacifist, but now that she had decided to fight, she was determined to win.

“I’ll follow your lead, so do your thing!”

Koutarou followed after Kiriha. As he did, he gave orders to the AI in his armor. Since he was going to let Kiriha take the lead, he needed to give his armor and GoL more detailed instructions than just to support them.

“I won’t let you!”

Maguz fired an arrow at the swiftly approaching Kiriha. The arrow was infused with pure spiritual energy and had spells cast on it to increase its speed and strengthen the arrowhead. And since the bow itself had been made under the assumption its user would be drawing it while wearing powered armor, it had power equal to that of a cannon.

“Nee-san!”

“It’s not a problem!”

The haniwas moved to protect Kiriha, but before they could, she unleashed the power hidden within her naginata. A surge of electricity created a huge electromagnetic field that threw the arrow off course.

The arrow sailed by Kiriha with a sound that was less like cutting though the

air, and more like ripping through it. While she was spared thanks to the electromagnetic field, Kiriha would have been in serious trouble if it had hit.

“Now it’s my turn, Maguz!”

“I won’t let you, little girl!”

Kiriha moved to attack Maguz, but Tayuma stood in her way. He swung his sword in a wide arc in an attempt to cut her in half.

“I’m your opponent, Tayuma!”

Koutarou swiftly swung Signaltin and a crimson blade was formed from the arc he cut through the air. It was a basic attack spell, and while its power was weak and it couldn’t reach far, it was enough to slow down Tayuma.

“Curse you, brat! You’re always getting in my way! I hear you were even the one who got in the way of the incident eleven years ago!”

“That’s because you’re always up to no good with your evil schemes.”

“Justice is with us! And since you’re getting in the way, you’re the evil one here!”

“I couldn’t care less about what you call justice! I’m fighting for everyone’s happiness!”

While the crimson blade halted Tayuma, Koutarou stepped between him and Kiriha. Meanwhile, Kiriha swung down her naginata and sent a lightning bolt flying at Maguz.

“I won’t let you do as you please, Maguz!”

“It’s no use!”

However, Maguz didn’t even try avoiding the lightning as he nocked a second arrow. But his reaction, or lack thereof, was perfectly natural. He knew that the moment Kiriha’s lightning bolt touched his barrier, it would be readily dispersed. Maguz’s armor had been created with defense as its number one priority. Not only was he the commander, but he also wielded a weapon that required him to be stationary. A strong barrier was an absolute necessary.

“That might be the case if it were just me.”

“What?!”

“Ho! You’ve forgotten about us, ho!”

“Raiga, you still have a long way to go, ho!”

The next moment, Karama and Korama’s attacks assaulted Maguz. Karama used flames and Korama lightning.

“Guaaaaaaaaah!”

Scorched by the flames and shocked by the lightning, Maguz let out a scream.

Karama and Korama, who were lacking in power, had been able to attack Maguz because he was focused on Kiriha and because they had small frames. While Kiriha was distracting Maguz, the haniwas had landed on the ground nearby. They then walked right up to him and unleashed their attacks at his feet. Even the powerful barrier generated by his armor didn’t fully cover his feet, so as to not obstruct his movement. And with Korama and Karama’s small size, they could attack him through the gap between the ground and where his barrier started.

“Guh! C-Curse you! You are but mere automatic dolls!”

While the attack had bypassed Maguz’s barrier, he was still wearing sturdy armor. Though he felt pain from the burns and numbness from the shock, he hadn’t taken enough damage to slow him down. If anything, now that his pride that had been hurt, he was quicker than ever to counterattack.

“He’s angry, ho!”

“I’m sure he’s making a scary face, ho!”

The haniwas swiftly flew up into the air to flee Maguz’s reach. Their joking remarks and taunting behavior angered Maguz even more and stripped him of his calm. He sent arrow after arrow up after them, but with their small size and agility, not a one hit.

“Maguz!”

“What an oversight!”

Kiriha’s naginata collided with Maguz’s barrier. The blow wasn’t enough to

break through, but it brought Maguz back to his senses. With that, he gave up on chasing after the haniwas and turned his focus on Kiriha again.

“You seem to be in a fluster because things aren’t going to plan, Maguz!”

“That’s not true at all! If I kill you here, my plans will all work out nicely!”

Maguz drew an arrow with all of his might and fired it at Kiriha, standing just past his barrier. At such close range, she would feel the full brunt of its power. A point-blank shot was the strongest Maguz’s longbow could deliver.

“This is why I said you were in a fluster.”

Kiriha didn’t even try dodging the arrow, and simply stood there smiling.

“What?!”

The arrow pierced Kiriha’s chest, but when it did, she vanished like smoke. And when one Kiriha vanished, another appeared from some dozen centimeters to the side. This one was the real Kiriha—Maguz had fired at an illusion.

“That’s how things like this happen.”

Kiriha thrust her naginata forward, right through the hole in Maguz’s barrier that had been opened for his arrow.

“Guaaah! Impossible! How could you fool me so?!”

Her naginata struck Maguz’s hand holding the bow. The blow shattered both his gauntlet and the bow, leaving Maguz’s left hand exposed. Though it was bleeding, the armor had protected him from the worst of the attack. Maguz quickly readied a new weapon.

“But I won’t let it happen again!”

What he pulled out was a large gun. It was the same as the mechanical soldiers’ guns, but it could also fire magic. It had been specially made just for him. It was his ace in the hole.

“Take thiiiiisss!”

Maguz fired three times. For some reason, however, he wasn’t firing at Kiriha, but in a direction where no one was standing. But the fired bullets suddenly changed direction after leaving Maguz’s barrier and came straight for Kiriha. As

they did, each changed into two bolts of lightning. The gun had fired lightning magic.

“Hahahaha, surely you can’t avoid this!”

Maguz laughed loudly, convinced of his victory as the six lightning bolts rained down on Kiriha. Blinded by the flash, Maguz lost sight of her.

“They’ll keep on coming, Kurano Kiriha!”

Despite that, he had no intention of stopping his attack. Before the flash even died down, he had his finger back on the trigger. Once he could see again, he would attack again.

“Though you can use magic, you’re a novice when it comes to combat magic, Maguz.”

But that was when something surprising happened. When the flash vanished, Kiriha was right in front of Maguz.

“What?!”

His eyes shot open wide in surprise. It didn’t seem like Kiriha had been hit at all. Moreover, she was inside the effective area of his barrier. He didn’t know how, but something had allowed her to slip through it.

“This ends here, Maguz!” Kiriha shouted as she swung her naginata at Maguz.

“I won’t let you!” he shouted back, pulling the trigger.

At this distance, even if we both hit, I’ll come out on top because of my armor!

He fired three times just like before. He wouldn’t miss at this range, and sure enough, the bullets flew straight for Kiriha. According to his calculations, there was no way he could lose here.

“...This is why I said you’re a novice, Maguz.”

“Whaaat?!”

But Maguz was left surprised once again. The Kiriha who was attacking him vanished like smoke a second time. In her place, another Kiriha appeared where Maguz had fired his first round of lightning bolts. He’d attacked yet another illusion.

“Hahaha, which one of us here is the novice?! You’re hurt all over from the electricity!”

Surprised as he’d been, this time Maguz wasn’t shaken. He could now see that Kiriha had actually taken damage from the lightning bolts. Her protection had been imperfect, and some of the electricity had badly burned her. So he continued to laugh at Kiriha, once again convinced of his victory.

“A magic battle is a battle of creativity, Maguz. Since you can only think conventionally, you’re doomed to lose.”

Despite her burns, Kiriha was smiling. At this point, she’d already won.

“Guaaaaaaaaah!”

The next moment, an explosion went off in Maguz’s armor. It was the pipe supplying the armor with power from its generator. It was one of the few weak points of the armor. And after taking a hit there, Maguz’s armor suffered severe damage. The barrier vanished, and the armor ceased functioning.

“Nee-san is a genius, ho!”

“Nobody else could come up with that kind of strategy, ho!”

The ones that had attacked Maguz were Karama and Korama, who had snuck inside of his barrier. Everything had gone according to Kiriha’s plan.

“Ugh, I see... So that’s what the second illusion was for...”

That was where Maguz realized he had fallen for a trap.

The second illusion was to get him to open up a hole in his barrier. When he used his gun, the armor’s system automatically created a hole in the barrier for him to fire through. If they knew where that opening would be, the haniwas could infiltrate it. That was where the second illusion came in. Koutarou had created it according to Kiriha’s wishes.

Kiriha had only used two basic illusion spells. That was all she required to overcome Maguz, who was repeatedly firing off higher level spells. It was a complete and utter victory for Kiriha thanks to her creativity.

“Surrender, Maguz. Surely you can’t move anymore.”

Kiriha walked up to Maguz and turned her naginata on him. She was burned all over, but it didn't seem to impede her movement any. Maguz, on the other hand, was all but stuck now that his armor had lost power. The defensive suit was reduced to nothing more than a heavy shackle.

"You should know my answer, Kurano Kiriha."

"Will you say the radical faction will continue fighting even without its leader?"

"That's right. Even if I'm not the one in charge, we can still at least reclaim our homeland."

Maguz had accepted his defeat, but a dark fire continued burning in his eyes. It was the smoldering embers of madness.

"I'm sorry to hear that, Kasumi Raiga."

"No, I am Maguz. The leader of the radical faction."

"Then, Maguz, take responsibility for what you've done."

Confirming his madness, Kiriha swung her naginata down on him. While the blow was light, the electricity it unleashed caused Maguz to faint.

"Why didn't you use that indomitable spirit for the sake of your people...?"

And so Kiriha defeated Maguz and came out on top. However, her expression was far from bright. She knew that even victory in this battle was defeat in a sense. That's why she couldn't bring herself to celebrate it.

With the fall of Maguz, the radical faction soldiers' movements grew noticeably duller. There were still twelve of them fighting, but having lost their commander, unrest spread and their morale plummeted. They still had several mechanical soldiers and the automatic machine guns left, but with the people ordering them around in a panic, they would never bring their full strength to bear. They couldn't stand up against the attacks from Harumi and the others, and eventually fell one after another.

"Why?! Why can't we win?! We should have had enough forces! We analyzed the data from the factory and had more than enough troops! So how did this

happen?!”

Maguz’s defeat came as a huge shock to Tayuma. To him, Maguz was the very embodiment of justice. He was their savior who would use his vast knowledge and excellent leadership to cut a path into the future for the People of the Earth. Losing him was devastating. Looking at him and the other fallen soldiers, Tayuma recoiled and stepped backward, utterly shaken. Unable to accept the reality before him, all he could do was scream and shout.

“It’s only obvious. There’s something you didn’t take into consideration.”

“And what is that?!”

“Kiriha-san’s kindness. In other words, love.”

“Love?! Preposterous! Who needs love when you have justice?! Justice is on our side!”

“You lost precisely because you don’t understand that. If you understood how proud a leader Kiriha-san is, then victory would’ve been yours.”

When Kiriha fought, she always tried to make sure her allies came out as unscathed as possible. And since her enemies were her fellow People of the Earth, even if they were the radical faction, one could still say that they were her allies in a way. She had never forgotten that, and fought to prevent casualties on both sides.

However, this fight in particular was different. Cornered with no way to back down, she had prepared herself to face casualties both among her enemies and her allies. Of course, she didn’t want that. But if she was going to ask others to be willing to sacrifice themselves, she was prepared to do the same. It was the only way she knew how to do things.

And with that resolve, Koutarou and the others were far stronger today than they had been in the battle at the factory. Walking into this fight unafraid of getting hurt, they were willing to take greater risks than normal. That was the reason why Koutarou had said that just escaping alive would be easy.

“Or maybe it’s the other way around. You don’t care about the lives of your allies at all, so you’re always fighting at your limits. You’re fundamentally different from Kiriha-san and the others who hold back their powers for

others.”

“As if I could accept something so vague and mushy! All we need is absolute justice! Rule under absolute justice will lead to eternal prosperity!”

Tayuma believed in the radical faction’s cause, and he believed that Maguz would become their ruler. But with Maguz defeated, that belief was starting to waver. But he didn’t want to accept it. He couldn’t. To deny it, he yelled his beliefs as loud as he could like he meant to reaffirm them.

“Surrender, Tayuma. Your justice wasn’t absolute at all.”

Koutarou turned his sword towards the reeling Tayuma. As he did, Harumi and the others lined up behind him. Their side of the fight had just ended too. And with that, all of the radicals in the execution chamber, aside from Tayuma, had been neutralized.

“D-Damn it! But if I call for reinforcements—”

Tayuma moved to use his armor to call for reinforcements. He simply couldn’t accept defeat.

“Why?! Why is nobody answering?! This is an emergency!”

However, he got no reply from the command room he was supposedly connected to. Since he was Maguz’s right hand, the operator always answered as quickly as possible.

“It’s no use. This base is already under the conservative faction’s control.”

It was Kiriha that answered Tayuma’s question. She then placed herself strategically to block his retreat. She had no intention of letting him get away.

“There is no longer anyone who will stand with you. Surrender, Tayuma. It’s over.”

Kiriha coolly declared that the battle was over, and not just in the execution chamber. When Koutarou and the others barged into the execution chamber, a conservative faction force was infiltrating the rest of the base. They’d cut off the communications from the inside, occupied the command room, and neutralized the base in its entirety. The base no longer had any resistance to offer.

“No, not yet! This isn’t over yet! Maya!”

“All right, all right. You really do work me to the bone...”

But there was still one person capable of fighting. A single woman wearing an indigo outfit. Maya, a magician of Darkness Rainbow who had mechanically replaced parts of her body after being seriously injured in order to return to active service.

The magicians and the radical faction shared technology, but they had made it a policy not intervene in each other’s battles. It was meant as a measure to make sure that they didn’t get in each other’s way, which was why Maya had sat out both today and during the battle at the factory.

But there were exceptions to everything. Maya owed the radical faction two favors. One for restoring her body, the other for information she’d received from them regarding the People of the Earth. In return, she’d promised to lend her aid if they ever really needed it. She’d repaid the first favor by breaking Tayuma out of jail, and she planned on repaying the second right now.

“Maya?!”

“It’s been a while, boy.”

Maya seemingly appeared from out of Tayuma’s shadow and gave Koutarou a big smile. It was so bright that Koutarou almost forgot the situation he was in for a moment.

“But sadly, I don’t have the time to play with you...”

“Maya, help me and Maguz-sama escape!”

Tayuma had called for Maya so that she could get him and Maguz out. Using her magic, he thought they should be able to escape without a problem.

“It would be impossible for me to save both of you in this situation.”

However, Maya shook her head. In the past she might have been able to help both of them escape, but having lost the majority of her body, she no longer had that much mana. It put her at quite a disadvantage at times like this.

“...Then there’s no choice! Just save me!”

“Oh, you’ll leave Maguz behind?”

“I still have a way to turn this around! I can always take him back later!”

“So that’s what you mean. I understand.”

Realizing what Tayuma was up to, Maya nodded and raised her right arm. A miniature staff had been built into it, which she was going to use to cast a spell to get them out of the base.

“Koutarou!”

“I know!”

Seeing that Tayuma and Maya were about to escape, Kiriha and Koutarou charged at them. They had to catch Tayuma to truly end this battle.

“Recall Precast Teleport.”

However, Maya swiftly activated her spell. It worked so quickly that by the time Kiriha and Koutarou reached them, Tayuma and Maya were already wrapped in mana. Not even Harumi and Yurika’s counter spells had made it in time.

“Fuhahahaha, this isn’t over yet, brat! We will definitely win! Because justice is with us!”

“Goodbye, boy. Let’s meet again someday.”

Tayuma and Maya vanished, leaving behind only the blue light of her spell. Maya had used a teleportation spell, and while she didn’t have the same range with it she once did, it was more than enough to get them out of danger in an emergency.

“Damn it, they got away!”

“Koutarou, we can’t give up yet! They should be headed towards the island!”

“I see! They’re going to use the earthquake weapon!”

Tayuma’s goal was to use the earthquake weapon to cause catastrophic damage to Sial and to the conservative faction. It would cause war to break out on the surface, leaving the conservative faction with no choice but to give in to the radical faction. After that, it would be a simple matter to have them release

Maguz.

“Let’s go after them right away! There’s no time to lose!”

“Yeah! Everyone, let’s go!”

Right after Tayuma and Maya disappeared, Koutarou and the others dashed out of the execution chamber. They had to join up with Theia and the others as quickly as possible and stop Tayuma from using the earthquake weapon.

The Ends of Ambition

Sunday, July 4th

The battle between Theia's surface team and the radical faction soldiers protecting the earthquake weapon, Earth Dragon, was going back and forth.

The surface team consisted of Theia, Ruth, Shizuka, Maki, the Sun Rangers, and eighty conservative faction soldiers for a total of eighty-nine troops. That was a considerable force, but the enemy had more than twice their numbers. They had close to a hundred regular soldiers in addition to another hundred mechanical soldiers and assault vehicles. The machines took the offensive, putting the surface team in a very dangerous situation.

Fortunately, the surface team consisted of members who excelled at fighting against multiple enemies. There was of course Theia and Ruth who could fight using space battleship weaponry, but also Shizuka who could take on a great many foes in her half-dragon form. Then there was Maki, who could use her mind manipulation magic to confuse and disorient the enemy. As a result the battle was progressing evenly despite the enemy having the surface team outnumbered.

"Ruth, have you been able to pinpoint the Earth Dragon's location?!"

Theia called out to Ruth as she targeted a large tank with her large-caliber beam cannon. That tank was an unmanned automated vehicle, and the moment it detected the energy from Theia's beam cannon, it activated its barrier.

"Your Highness, I can't detect the energy that the Earth Dragon should be radiating. Considering its size, that shouldn't be possible."

"How insolent!"

Theia repeatedly fired off beams. While the tank withstood the first shot, it didn't hold up against the second and third. The strongest land-based weapon

they had hadn't been made taking into consideration that it might be attacked by space-age weaponry. The tank's turret was blown off and it stopped dead in its tracks.

"I believe it's being shielded to keep us from detecting it."

"So they know what we're after... Curse you, Elexis..."

In order to break free from their current situation, Theia wanted to destroy the Earth Dragon by bombarding it with Blue Knight's main weaponry. However, a bombardment from orbit would draw a considerable amount of attention, so she wanted to finish it in a single attack. To that end, she needed the Earth Dragon's exact location.

The unmanned fighters that Ruth was controlling had the ability to detect and analyze energy radiated from the surroundings. With them, it should be possible to locate the Earth Dragon even from outside the building considering its scale.

But when Ruth put them to work, she couldn't detect anything from the building they thought was housing the earthquake weapon. Not even electromagnetic radiation basic electronic equipment would give off. That told her something was likely concealing whatever was going on inside, which meant they'd been prepared to handle Forthorthian technology. It was a distinct possibility if Elexis was involved.

"I also have bad news, Your Highness."

Theia could see Ruth in the corner of her eye, manipulating her unmanned fighters to take hits for their allies. The barrier created by the swarm of fighters working together was powerful, and it repelled the bullets fired from the automated heavy machine guns.

"Did something happen to Koutarou and the others?!"

Theia's expression froze. She wasn't worried for her own fight, but for Koutarou and the others who were out of her reach.

"No, that's not it. The battle underground ended in Master and the others' victory. However, one of the enemy officers managed to escape and is headed this way. It's someone we've fought before, a man called Shijima Tayuma."

“That terrible and vile man, huh...?”

Theia frowned as she recalled Tayuma. And it wasn't just her. None of the girls of room 106 thought well of him. He was the kind of man who had no qualms about attacking innocent civilians. Since Theia had been like that in the past as well, it felt like a rude reminder of her own foolishness.

“That's not good. If he's coming here after losing, he can only have one goal in mind.”

Theia also understood what he was trying to do now. He would indiscriminately use the earthquake weapon to destroy those he didn't like. It was something she in the past might have done.

That's right... My invasion was wrong... However, thanks to everyone else, I was able to correct myself... so I have to stop him!

Tayuma's desires were like a specter of Theia's past. It haunted her, so she was especially determined to put a stop to his ambitions.

“Your Highness, is something the matter?”

“There's no time to be dawdling around. We're forcibly breaking through.”

As Theia said that, she exchanged her weapon for a rapid-fire paralysis gun and fired at a group of nearby radical faction soldiers. Her aim was true and her bullets were headed straight for their targets. They were all easily blocked by the soldiers' barriers, but Theia had taken that into consideration.

“Haaah!”

With the soldiers stopping in their tracks under fire, Shizuka leaped at them. She'd used the Fire Dragon Emperor's powers to transform into her half-dragon form, and was even stronger than usual. Her sweeping kick sent flying every soldier in its path. Spiritual energy barriers were useless against her attacks.

“I would love to hurry this up, so I agree!”

Shizuka was all in favor of Theia's plan and eagerly looked around for the next enemy to defeat. There was a time limit to her draconic powers. While she was stronger than anyone else, she ran out of fuel quick. And once she used up that power, her weight would increase while it recharged. So for her own sanity, she

wanted to end the battle as quickly as possible.

“I think that’s a good idea too. It seems like reinforcements keep on coming, and there’s a limit to my magic as well.”

As a voice came through Theia’s bracelet, Maki appeared rather far up ahead. At the same time, her squad of twenty conservative faction soldiers began attacking in unison with her. Their target was the enemy squad commander in the rear, and the soldiers around him. The goal was to confuse the enemy by sneaking around them and attacking their commander from behind.

“Please charge ahead! We of the Sun Rangers will serve as your rearguard!”

The Sun Rangers held the enemy at bay with gunfire and bought time for Maki’s squad to fall back. With that, the entire surface team was on the same page.

“All right, then its decided! Ruth, I’m using the Combat Dress!”

“The Combat Dress? But it is still in its test stage...”

“If I don’t use it now, when will I?!”

“As you wish, my princess. Transferring the Combat Dress.”

As Ruth operated her bracelet, a large space-time hole appeared behind Theia. The Combat Dress they were talking about was Theia’s new weapon—a machine that covered about half of Theia’s body. Its design certainly resembled a dress, and its pure white and gold coloration only strengthened that impression.

The Combat Dress fitted itself around Theia’s body and began tightening up. Meanwhile, Theia’s bracelet began blinking as it opened communications with the dress.

“Engaging legendary weapon system series 02: Combat Dress. The dress has been put under control of your bracelet. Princess, please select your accessory.”

“Assault Red.”

“As you wish, my princess.”

A red line was added to the Combat Dress, and several weapons appeared

from black holes. They attached themselves to the hard parts of the Combat Dress with connectors that had been prepared for exactly this scenario. Theia now wore a white dress with streaks of red and gold, with large cannons on her shoulders, missile launchers at her waist, a large-caliber beam rifle on her right arm, and a recoilless pile driver on her left arm. This was Theia's new weapon, the Combat Dress.

Strictly speaking, the Combat Dress wasn't in itself a weapon. It simply allowed Theia to fly with a flight unit on her back and served as a base for various other weapons to anchor on. Since the weapons she was using were drawn from her usual arsenal, her actual attack power hadn't changed. But by wearing the dress, she could use multiple weapons at the same time which increased her flexibility, and she had the power of flight which increased her mobility.

Normally, with a weapon summoned, it was hard for Theia to move around with it. There were some weapons that moved on their own, but those were few in numbers, and since they moved at various speeds, it was difficult to get them to properly cooperate with her. That's what had inspired the Combat Dress. It affixed her weaponry to her and gave her the power of flight, solving all the problems she ordinarily had with her summoned weapons. Effectively, the dress turned Theia into a small fighter plane.

Through the combined powers of gravity manipulation and thrusters, Theia lifted up off the ground. When she did, the safety devices on her weapons were deactivated. She was now like an unchained beast. A golden lion with both power and speed.

"Men, follow me!"

Quick to act, Theia charged towards the radical faction troops in front of her. Her royal crest that had been engraved into the Combat Dress stood out well, even from afar.

"Leave the big threats to me! Don't bother with the small fries! Advance!"

"Theia-chan is as hasty as always..."

"Let's go, Kasagi-san."

“I’m sorry for all of the trouble.”

Shizuka, Maki, and Ruth chased after Theia. Behind them were the Sun Rangers and the conservative faction soldiers. This would begin the decisive part of their battle.

The anti-material guns that Theia was firing had enough power to pierce through the barriers of the tanks and destroy them completely. If people had been inside, it would have been terrible, but fortunately they were automated vehicles, leaving Theia to shell them without concern.

“That makes eight!”

Theia’s bombardment destroyed yet another tank. The battle was progressing rather one-sidedly now since the tanks were unable to counterattack Theia, who was freely flying through the air. They were easy targets for her.

“Your Highness, gunfire coming from two o’clock!”

“Whoops!”

However, she couldn’t let her guard down. Since the soldiers and their mechanical counterparts were using handheld firearms, they could all take proper aim at her. That said, they weren’t using anti-air weaponry, so their accuracy and power were both low. Ruth would also restrain the enemy forces with her unmanned fighters at the appropriate times in order to protect Theia.

“We’re going to keep on pushing forward!”

Theia destroyed powerful weapons one after another as she advanced. She easily stood out on the battlefield. Many of the radical faction soldiers were completely focused on her as she soared through the sky, taking out her enemies like a bird of prey.

“Everyone, take care not to split up!”

“Thank you, people from the surface.”

“Surface or underground, it doesn’t matter! Let’s just hurry on!”

“Yes!”

The conservative faction soldiers pushed forward along the path that Theia had cleared for them. The Sun Rangers brought up the rear at the back of the formation. They and the conservative faction soldiers protected each other as they continued to forge ahead. Thinking of them as an anti-invasion squad and invaders from the underground, it was a bizarre spectacle to behold. But not a single person present batted an eye. No, right now they were all teammates working together to destroy the Earth Dragon.

“Say, Aika-san...”

Shizuka glanced over the conservative faction soldiers and the Sun Rangers as she ran. She seemed to like what she saw, as a smile formed on her lips.

“When you look at them like that, don’t you get the feeling Kiriha-san’s invasion succeeded a long time ago?”

“You’re right. It certainly does feel that way...”

People from the surface and the underground had joined forces for a common goal. Neither side was attempting to rule over the other. They were respecting each other and working together as equals. This was the result of Kiriha’s long, hard-fought invasion. It hadn’t been a mistake to protect the pride of both parties.

“And that’s why we have to win this battle here.”

“You’re absolutely right, Aika-san. Justice always wins!”

Strangely enough, Shizuka spoke the same words Tayuma did, but their meanings greatly differed. And now was the time to stand up for that difference. Shizuka and Maki took such feelings to heart as they continued running. The entrance to the building was just ahead of them.

Since the Earth Dragon was inside this building, it had been built to be extra sturdy. That was also true for the main gate, which was a thick metal door blocking intruders from entering. But after the joints had been shot by beams several times each, followed up by a direct hit from the recoilless pile driver, not even the strongest of doors could endure. Before the steam exhausted from the pile driver could condense, the door fell inward.

“We’ve finally reached it...”

As expected, Theia was the first to step inside the building. She hadn’t taken a single hit yet, meaning that her Combat Dress was still as white as it had been when she summoned it.

“Ruth, how does it look?”

“I’m getting a reaction. It’s still being shielded, so all I can tell is that it’s up ahead.”

The hologram that Ruth was projecting from her bracelet showed a large circle. It represented the Earth Dragon’s estimated position, but it wasn’t all that accurate.

“So we only need to go straight forward? I like it when things are simple and easy to understand.”

“You’re right. That might be just up our alley.”

Shizuka and Maki nodded at each other. Apart from Ruth, the girls from room 106 on the surface team all preferred the straightforward. So to them, this was a welcome development.

“Devil Princess-san, we can’t afford to take our time!”

“Hurry, Devil-nee-chan!”

The Sun Rangers, who were serving as the rearguard for the team, took cover inside the building and held off the radical faction forces coming after them. They were chasing down Theia, and flooding towards the building by the moment.

“All right, let’s go, men! Keep up with me!”

“Theia-san is so reliable at times like this.”

“She’s always been a little forceful, but now it’s working for her in a good way.”

“Her Highness is maturing, after all.”

After being momentarily halted by the gate, the surface team got on the move again. With Theia still in the lead, they ran down the main passage. Since

they would be able to get a more accurate reading on the Earth Dragon's location the closer they got, just standing around wouldn't help them at all.

"You've finally made it inside, Princess Theiamillis," said Elexis's voice from a speaker along the passageway

Theia didn't stop when she heard it, but her expression grew more severe.

"What is it, Elexis?!"

"It's a host's duty to welcome his guests. Well, it might be a little ill-mannered to do so through a speaker, I must admit."

"Enough with your nonsense!"

"For the time being, I have prepared some entertainment. Please enjoy yourselves."

Elexis sounded awfully cheerful, like he was genuinely welcoming guests into his home. Maybe that really was his intention, but Theia and the others felt nothing but enmity towards him.

"We don't have the time to play around with you. We're in a rush."

"Then please reach me within eight minutes."

"What a detestable fellow... Just you wait! I'll be over there to punch you out soon!"

Theia was getting irritated. She didn't like Elexis' playful attitude or the time limit he'd given them. She understood that he meant that the earthquake weapon might be ready to use soon, but she didn't understand his motive for telling them that much. Since she refused to believe he was trying to help her, she only felt like he was making a fool of her.

"I will await your arrival."

With that, the speaker fell silent. At almost the same time, Shizuka and her heightened senses detected a presence approaching them.

"Theia-chan, something's coming. It's just around that corner."

"I'm detecting several metal and energy reactions. I believe it's automated weaponry intended to defend the building."

“So this is the so-called entertainment...”

Before long, Elexis’s automated weapons appeared from around the corner. It was a crowd of robots like the clay dolls and haniwas, but wearing armor. They were true marvels, the byproduct of the underground dwellers’ spiritual energy technology and Forthorthian science, all imbued with magic. They were specially made robots designed to defend critical sites.

“Not good... The magic I specialize in hardly works on robots.”

Maki frowned when she saw the robots. Her signature mind manipulation was practically useless against mindless beings. In other words, she would have to get through this without relying on her expertise. It would be a rough fight for Maki, but that wasn’t the only problem...

“Heh... Heh heh heh...”

Ruth’s low laughter echoed down the passageway. She was normally quiet and serious, and when she did laugh, it was much more of a cute giggle. That’s why no one smiled to hear her laugh now. No, that haunting sound sent shivers down their spines.

“I’ve fooound yooou...”

Before anyone realized what was happening, Ruth was holding a metallic handle in each hand. A glowing blade slowly rose out of them. They were Ruth’s treasure that she always kept on her at all times. The swords of light that her ancestor, Flairhan, had used in the legends of the Blue Knight—beam swords.

“Vice captain?”

“Not good! Ruth, keep it together!”

“I am keeping it together, Your Highness. I am well aware of the situation. Oh yes, very aware.”

“Aw jeez, I’m staying out of this.”

“I am truly grateful that Master isn’t here...”

Ruth swung her beam swords around like a tornado. Nothing caught in it would survive. That was how sharp and deadly her swordsmanship looked.

“If he were to see so many specimens of this bug, Master would certainly be captivated by them...”

Ruth stopped spinning her swords and glared at the group of robots. There was a gleam in her eyes—a light perhaps more dangerous than the beams of her swords.

“That’s why I will send you to hell together with the rest of these things before Master finds you, Hercules-chaaaaan!”

Ruth was exuding a strange aura. One of murderous obsession. And the target of said obsession was the group of automated weapons that happened to have the shape of beetles. Faced with the overwhelming pressure coming from Ruth, the robotic beetles that were supposed to have been simple, mindless automatons instinctively flinched and stepped back.

“Divine retributioooooon!”

Ruth charged in with her two beam swords. Her movements were completely different from normal. She was like a predator going in for the kill.

“There’s no helping it now, men! Support Ruth!”

Theia hurriedly offered Ruth covering fire. She couldn’t abandon her childhood friend in a dangerous situation like this.

“I don’t think she needs support, honestly...” said Shizuka with a wry smile.

Ruth had a knack for the blade thanks to her lineage. Moreover, she never missed a day of training, so her strength and stamina had risen considerably. The only thing that held her back in combat was her peaceful nature. But once Ruth spotted the beetles and lost her temper, that problem resolved itself, temporarily transforming her into a master swordsman. Right now, she could probably even best Koutarou.

Shizuka was smiling because she knew that. However, there was still the one in a million chance something could go wrong, and nobody knew what might happen with Ruth so enraged. So Shizuka chased after her with superhuman speed.

“So the vice captain is actually really strong with a blade...”

Maki felt a sense of admiration as she cast enhancing and defensive spells on her two charging allies. She had always respected Ruth as an excellent superior, but that was for her ability to gather and analyze information. But right now, seeing her swinging her two beam swords splendidly in combat, Maki reevaluated her opinion of Ruth. She wasn't from a distinguished family of established knights for nothing.

“She's only like that when she's going up against beetles though.”

In contrast to Maki, Theia was dumbfounded. As her childhood friend, Theia knew better than anyone that Ruth was incredibly scary when she was angry. However, she felt like Ruth went too far when beetles were involved. That was just how much Ruth loved Koutarou, but her expression of love was a bit too extreme. Theia was normally extreme herself, but she had something of an old-fashioned outlook on romance.



“You still continue coming!”

With support from Theia and the conservative faction soldiers, Ruth destroyed the beetle robots one after another. Under the ruthless attacks from her beam swords, the robots were practically defenseless as they were dismantled. She left a path of destruction and robot parts in her wake. She was mowing them down like a real tornado now.

“...O-Oh? Why am I holding beam swords...?”

In total there had been thirty-six beetle robots blocking the passage. Ruth had destroyed them all in just over three minutes.

Thanks to Ruth’s unexpected performance, Theia and the others managed to get closer to the Earth Dragon before Elexis’s time limit expired.

“Your Highness, there’s no doubt about it. The Earth Dragon is just past this door.”

“I see. Men, you did well to come all this way! We’re almost there now!”

The results of the energy analysis indicated that the Earth Dragon was just beyond the door in front of them. As long as they destroyed it, their long day would come to an end. The end was in sight now.

“I know that it’s been rough, but we’re one final push away! We’ll destroy the Earth Dragon and return home triumphantly! Do you understand, men?!”

Without waiting for her allies’ reply, Theia used her cannons and pile driver to break down the door. Morale was high enough that there was no real need to wait for their response. She knew what they would say. Her troops were dirty and wounded, but their spirits were high knowing they were staring down the end of the battle. They all eagerly followed Theia into the room ahead.

“Welcome, Princess Theiamillis and company.”

Elexis’s bright voice greeted the team. He was sitting in front of a gigantic device as big as a building in the center of the room. That gigantic device was the Earth Dragon that Theia and the others had come to destroy.

“Elexis!”

“What a barefaced lie. This is the opposite of a welcoming.”

Upon seeing Elexis’s face, Ruth and Theia’s expression grew stern. To Ruth, Elexis was her former fiancé who had conspired with Theia’s rivals. To Theia, he was someone who had been after her, Koutarou’s, and her friends’ lives.

“How harsh.”

Elexis still wore his confident smile. However, that wasn’t because he had a means of defeating Theia and the others. He was genuinely happy to see them.

Indiscriminate destruction won’t bring about anything. I’m truly glad you came, Princess Theiamillis, Ruthkania-sama...

According to his own sense of aesthetics, Elexis found the senseless destruction of the surface and the underground undesirable. While restoration followed destruction, it wasn’t efficient to restore something that had been completely and utterly destroyed. Destruction without creation, destruction simply for the sake of destruction, was something that Elexis detested. However, since he had a contract with the radical faction to supply them with technology, he had no choice but to fulfill his obligations. He was a businessman, after all. But now Theia and the others had appeared, which was indeed a most welcome sight.

“Elexis, was it?! Where is Maya-sama?!”

Maki was feeling something different than Theia and Ruth. Coming here was a chance to see her master. That personal desire of hers served as a stronger driving force than her sense of duty, which motivated her to spit those words at Elexis.

“So you’re Maki... You’re as serious and strong-minded as she said.”

“I’m not here to play with words! Where is Maya-sama?! She’s here, isn’t she?!”

“I’m afraid she’s—”

Elexis was about to honestly answer Maki’s question. Maya had made him promise to do so when she arrived, after all. But before he could, he was interrupted by someone else’s voice.

“I’m right here, Maki.”

Maya herself appeared in the room. She had been underground previously, but had just arrived here at the remote base.

“Maya-sama?!”

When she saw her, Maki’s eyes went wide. Maya was Maki’s savior, her master that had taught her magic. She was also the previous Darkness Navy. While they were now enemies, Maya was still special to her.

“You’re hasty as always, Maki... I even told you I’d prepare a stage for us to fight.”

Maya felt the same way about Maki. While fate had turned master and apprentice against each other, Maya had no intention of denying the relationship they shared previously. The People of the Earth’s radical faction denied their history underground and abhorred the conservative faction for embracing it. And in that sense, she and Maki were much more like the conservative faction.

“Are you planning on destroying the surface and the underground, Maya-sama?!”

“I don’t really have any intentions of doing that... but my accomplice seems to, so I’ll probably end up helping out.”

“That’s right!”

Someone else had appeared in the room. It was Shijima Tayuma, the radical faction commander who had escaped from the underground with Maya.

“The surface and the underground will both be destroyed, and a new history will rise from the ruins! The People of the Earth will reclaim their homeland and lead mankind to the next stage! What a brilliant history it will become!”

Tayuma was set on using the Earth Dragon. By spreading mass destruction throughout the underground and surface, the People of the Earth would be forcibly dragged into war. Doing that would negate any meaning in the People of the Earth fighting amongst themselves. Maguz would be released, and a new order would be constructed with him in the center. The world would be as it

should, with the superior ruling and the inferior obeying. A bright future supposedly awaited the People of the Earth.

Achieving that future would be justice. And Tayuma would use any method necessary to do that. The sacrifices created by the use of the Earth Dragon were but a small means to a great end.

“We won’t let you, evil invader! We Sun Rangers will stop you for the sake of the future for both the surface and the underground!”

The five Sun Rangers took a stance as Red Shine bravely decried Tayuma’s intentions. Their appearance wasn’t as awkward and uncoordinated as it had been before. Now they unmistakably looked like heroes.

“The sun will light up our future!”

“Fuhahaha! If you want a brilliant future, then just shut up and watch! Well, either way, you didn’t make it in time! The Earth Dragon is already activating! You’re too late!”

Tayuma grinned and laughed triumphantly. The time limit that Elexis had given them was almost up. Once it was finished charging, the Earth Dragon would activate and the battle would end with massive casualties on all sides.

“Sorry for keeping you waiting, Theiamillis-san.”

“I was running out of patience! Send it over to me right now!”

“I’m already working on it.”

However, Theia hadn’t given up yet. She was talking to Clan about something.

“What are you trying to pull, little girl?! Even if you attack now, you won’t be able to destroy the Earth Dragon before it activates!”

Small attacks wouldn’t stop the earthquake weapon. Even if everyone attacked together, it still wouldn’t be enough. Tayuma was convinced of the radical faction’s victory and sneered at Theia.

“No, we’ve won.”

“What?! What’s the point of a sad dog barking now?!”

“Your Highness, the coordinates have been input into the fire control

system.”

“Fool, did you think that what you could see is all there was to my power?!”

Theia smiled. It was a predatory grin she only showed to her enemies. It wasn't the smirk of a sad dog, but of a proud lion.

“Blue Knight, bombard the given surface coordinates! Give them a taste of your main weaponry!”

“As you wish, my princess.”

The people of the surface weren't stupid. They would definitely notice the existence of Blue Knight if it attacked repeatedly from orbit. That's why Theia only had one shot, and she had to make it a good one. It had to be a shot to destroy the Earth Dragon for sure. That was why Theia and the others had had to get as close as possible in order to send the most accurate location data possible to Clan, who calculated the bombardment point. And now, the steel knight floating up in space looked down its sword towards Earth.

Rather than a sound, there was just a shockwave and vibrations. Blue Knight had fired its massive beam cannon. The beam came straight down from above, piercing through the roof of the building and right through the Earth Dragon. Since the beam far surpassed the speed of sound, the air around it moved at supersonic speeds and created a shockwave. And when the beam struck, it hit the ground with great violence. It was like there was an earthquake.

“Wh-What is this?!”

Shaken by everything that was happening, Tayuma stood there aghast. He couldn't believe what he was seeing. A massive pillar of light had pierced through the ceiling and the Earth Dragon. The pillar of light had only appeared for a mere moment, but the results of it were devastating. Black smoke rose from the hole that the pillar of light had torn up. Anything it touched was completely destroyed. In fact, the control computer was screaming that it had lost contact with the Earth Dragon.

“Just what is going on?! Is this really happening?!”

Tayuma staggered backwards and fell onto his butt. He couldn't believe his own eyes. Admitting the reality before him would be the same as Tayuma

admitting that the radical faction had lost. He couldn't accept it.

"There was no explosion, and there's no fire spreading. The results are just as Clan-sama simulated."

"Very good. Well done, Clan."

"This might sound strange coming from me, but... I can't forgive someone who would attack their own people with weapons of war. I'll gladly help as much as I can this time."

Blue Knight's bombardment had been meticulously calculated by Clan. Since the Earth Dragon was a weapon intended to create a massive earthquake, it stored an extraordinary amount of energy. In destroying it, Clan had to make sure not to carelessly unleash that energy and cause an explosion or worse.

After analyzing the blueprints they had found in the factory yesterday, Clan had determined where she'd need to shoot the device to destroy it without blowing it up. And once Theia and Ruth determined the Earth Dragon's exact position, Clan did the math and forwarded the necessary data to Blue Knight. Clan's calculations were extremely precise, resulting in the fired beam simply destroying the target without causing any secondary damage.

"How does it look, Elexis?"

"It's no use. They've shot through only the mana and spiritual energy converter. With this, it doesn't have sufficient energy to function. Even if we managed to activate it... it would be a magnitude 2 quake on the Richter scale at best."

Elexis, who was operating the control computer, gave Maya a defeated shrug. What Blue Knight had shot was the part of the weapon that converted mana into spiritual energy—essentially the heart of the Earth Dragon. According to Elexis's estimates, it would take at least two weeks to repair. And between now and then, the Earth Dragon was largely useless.

"N-No way, I won't accept this kind of result!"

"Whoa!"

Tayuma pushed Elexis aside and began messing around with the computer.

Elexis made room for him and shrugged once more as he looked at Maya. Maya herself smiled wryly and tilted her head. Unable to accept reality, Tayuma was desperately trying to activate the Earth Dragon. But Elexis and Maya both knew that his efforts were in vain, and the results were just as they expected.

“Damn it! Why... Why won’t it work?!”

Tayuma slammed his fist into the operating panel. The surface cracked and was rendered unusable, which wasn’t really a problem considering the Earth Dragon wasn’t operational anyway.

“Why does everyone side with them?! We’re the ones who are in the right! We’re the oppressed trying to reclaim what’s rightfully ours!”

Tayuma finally accepted that the Earth Dragon had been destroyed, but his feelings were still rampaging. He still couldn’t accept that they had lost.

“Surrender, Tayuma!”

“There will be no surrender! We are the proud People of the Earth!”

Tayuma firmly rejected Theia’s demand for surrender. He would rather choose death than defeat. He and Kiriha were polar opposites except when it came to their pride.

“Elexis, Maya! Can’t we do something?! Is this it for the radical faction?! Do we have no choice but to vanish as we’re chained to the underground?!”

This was supposed to be the beginning of a new era. The People of the Earth were supposed to return to under the sun where they would prosper for all eternity under their ruler, Maguz. They would lead all of mankind to the next stage.

Yet that future was about to be sealed away. With how things were looking now, they would either end up returning to the darkness or merging with the people on the surface and vanishing altogether. Both fates seemed like ruin to Tayuma, so he continued to struggle against the inevitable.

“There might be one way...”

“Maya?”

Elexis looked at Maya, who was suggesting an alternative to the Earth Dragon,

with a skeptical expression. He hadn't heard anything about this.

"That's it! Please do it!"

In contrast, Tayuma looked thrilled. He was willing to grasp at straws of hope right now, regardless of what the outcome may be. Anything would be better than losing to the conservative faction.

"However, I can't guarantee your safety. With what I'm thinking of, you might be able to win, but you won't come out unscathed."

"I don't care! Losing here is the same as dying, anyway! I will gladly give my life for the glory of the People of the Earth!"

"If you're that resolved, I'll do it."

Maya raised her right arm over her head. As she did, her mana began flowing out from the miniature staff built into her right arm. And using that overflowing mana as a stimulus, she called forth even more mana. It was the mana they would have used to create an earthquake with the Earth Dragon—that was just how much of it had been gathered here.

"Not good! We have to stop Maya-sama!"

As a magician, Maki knew just how terrifying that much mana was. It was clear that even just causing it to explode would do terrible damage. To prevent that, Maki transformed her staff into a sword and charged at Maya. Since she was using magic to strengthen her body, she moved as quickly as a bullet and instantly closed the distance between her and Maya. She raised her glowing red sword overhead and swung it down on Maya.

"Maya!"

However, before the sword reached Maya, Elexis stepped in front of her to cover her. He used the barrier generation device he was wearing to protect Maya.

Maki's sword and Elexis's barrier collided. Unable to withstand the blow, Elexis's barrier collapsed. It had exceeded its damage tolerance and the generation device broke down. Since it wasn't a large barrier like the ones used in armor, it was no match for Maki's powerful attack.

“Move!”

“Whoa!”

Maki pushed Elexis aside and attacked Maya again.

“Permanent Metamorphose. Modifier: Overdrive.”

However, Maya had finished her spell before Maki could hit her. All of the mana that Maya was manipulating poured into Tayuma.

“Kyah!”

The aftereffect of the activated spell blew Maki away. That was just the extent of the power of the mana Maya was controlling. Tayuma, who was now in the center of that vast mana, didn’t know what was happening.

“M-My body is hot! Maya, what is this?!”

Enveloped in orange light, Tayuma anxiously looked around him. Since he had no knowledge of magic, he was somewhat afraid of the unknown phenomenon taking place.

“Tayuma, your body is changing into something else. Imagine what you desire. The spell will respond to it.”

“So that’s what it is! Fuhahaha, I can tell that there’s an enormous power inside of me!”

Now that he understood and accepted the situation he was in, the mana started flowing into Tayuma. His body began glowing orange as he absorbed the magic. And once he had absorbed it all, the glow became so bright that it was hard to look right at him.

“I can win! I can win with this! I have obtained the ultimate power! I have become the true supreme existence!”

What Tayuma desired was immortality, ultimate intellect, and finally, the overwhelming power to force others to obey him. Those were the three required elements for a dictator to fulfill their twisted dream of ruling forever.

Tayuma’s body grew stronger in accordance with his ambitions. The orange mana altered his body and made it larger. In the process, the armor that he was

wearing broke. However, he no longer needed armor. He'd gained power that far surpassed that.

"Maya, what did you do to him?"

"I allowed him to freely use the mana that had been gathered within the Earth Dragon. Nothing more, nothing less. He's free to do whatever he wishes with it. He will change as he himself desires."

Elexis and Maya looked up together at Tayuma, who was in the process of transmogrifying. Even as they talked, his body was continuing to enlarge. He was already over ten meters tall. Tayuma's desire for power didn't know when to stop.

"I see. But Maya... Why did you feel like helping him again? I thought you didn't like the way he did things."

"I still don't. But it's not as bad if he's willing to take the risk on himself. And besides, we've known each other for a long time."

"So it's something like your final parting gift?"

"Oh? Do I strike you as someone so considerate?"

"Yes, but I like that strange sense of courtesy you have."

With that, the two of them turned their backs on Tayuma. They were planning on leaving the rest to him while they escaped. Any obligations they had had already been fulfilled. The rest was Tayuma's problem. And besides, they had their own goals, so they decided to withdraw.

"I wonder how serious you are. I'm sure you've tricked a lot of women with that side of you— What's this?!"

However, shortly after they started walking away, Maya sensed a strange presence behind her and hurriedly turned around. Her eyes shot wide open in surprise. For when she turned around, she saw Tayuma... but his appearance had far exceeded her expectations.

"What is it?!"

Catching on to Maya's reaction, Elexis turned around as well. When he did, he too saw Tayuma's strange appearance. The light from Tayuma's body had

changed at some point. It was no longer orange. Though calling light black might seem wrong, that was exactly what it looked like to Elexis. And inside of that black light, the giant Tayuma was changing from something human into something else... something like a four-legged beast.

“I don’t know what he did, but Tayuma is summoning power from a higher dimension!”

“Power from a higher dimension?”

“It must be the power of some god or devil! Or he himself might be trying to turn into one! Either way, this is dangerous! We should get away from here right now, El!”

“Okay, let’s go!”

Maya and Elexis turned their backs on Tayuma once more. They didn’t know what he was trying to become, but it was clear that they didn’t want to stick around for it.

Maya hadn’t been the only one to notice the abnormality with Tayuma. When he surpassed ten meters in height, Theia ordered her allies to retreat. The room where the Earth Dragon was kept was large, but it was still too small for them to run away from a giant. Once Tayuma began emitting a black light, she didn’t hesitate to order a retreat. He was now an unknown opponent, and his gigantic figure was only getting bigger. If they were going to fight, they would need to do so in a more open place.

“A-Aika-san, what is happening to that Tayuma person?!”

Shizuka in her half-dragon form noticed the strange phenomenon going on with Tayuma right away. She was beyond bewildered.

“It seems like Maya-sama used the mana within the Earth Dragon to transform him... But during the transformation, some other power began influencing him... like he’s turned into an unexpected monster...”

Maki was puzzled too. While the mana was vast, Maya had only used a transformation spell. The activated mana had been the correct orange color at first, but it had changed to black at some point. That should be impossible with

normal magic, but Maki recognized this impossible phenomenon.

That black mana... It looks like the mana when I stole the power in room 106, but... could this be the same...?

The black power enveloping Tayuma looked familiar to Maki. Last year, when Maki attacked room 106 for the first time, she had managed to gain control of a fraction of the power gathered there. It too had been black mana.

But why is that here? No, it's too rash to assume they're the same... though it's undeniable that a massive amount of mana and a twisted desire has summoned forth a similar power... Could I have been turned into a monster as well?

Back then, Maki had also come into contact with black mana, though on a smaller scale. She'd also been filled with hatred and anger. If she'd used the mana on herself rather than others, she too might have made a terrible transformation. Just thinking about it sent a chill down her spine.

"What's wrong, Maki? You're falling behind."

"Theiamillis-san..."

Lost deep in thought, Maki had inadvertently slowed down. Noticing that, Theia grabbed her hand and began running together with her. Feeling the warmth from Theia's hand, Maki let out a sigh of relief.

The current me is fine... I won't become absorbed by that!

In the past, when Maki had come into contact with the black mana, Theia had bombarded her with Blue Knight. But now, Theia was worried about her when she was feeling anxious. She was even holding her hand. Hate beget hate the same way friendship beget friendship. Having seen the light, Maki no longer had anything to fear. She squeezed Theia's hand back and started running faster.

Theia and the others encountered several squads of radical faction soldiers before they reached the exit of the base. However, they all knew that Maguz had lost, that the Earth Dragon had been destroyed, and that an unknown monster had appeared inside the building. Moreover, their chain of command was in disarray, so they didn't know what to do. As such, the radical faction

soldiers kept their distance from Theia and the others and let them escape. They wanted to avoid the risk of fighting against them when they didn't understand the situation. The radicals had families too, and they weren't eager to die for no reason. Of course, Theia and the others wanted to get away as quickly as possible as well, so they didn't stop to attack the radicals who weren't attacking them either.

"Phew... We finally made it outside."

"Ah!"

"Kenichi, where're you going?! That monster is coming!"

Once they got outside the building, Red Shine split off from the group. Blue Shine called out to him, but he didn't come back.

"There are injured people here! Help me out!"

Red Shine had gone to help a group of injured people that couldn't move on their own. Since it would be dangerous to leave them there, he rushed over to help them.

"But Kenichi-niichan, those are radical faction soldiers."

"And what about it?!"

The other four Sun Rangers had hesitated because the injured soldiers belonged to the radical faction, but after Red scolded them, they soon came to his aid. A group of the conservative soldiers joined them as well.

"Sun Rangers, we'll help too."

"Thank you!"

The Sun Rangers and conservative faction soldiers worked together to carry the injured to safety. Fortunately, since there weren't all that many of them, gathering them didn't take too long. The one that stood out the most was Yellow Shine, who carried a wounded soldier over each shoulder. One of the conservative faction soldiers looked up at him in admiration.

"You Sun Rangers are a strange bunch..."

"How so?"

“To think you’d help not only us conservatives, but also these radicals...”

“Ahaha, that’s thanks to Kenichi-kun’s influence.”

“Red-san’s?”

“Whenever we’d do something that might make the children cry, Kenichi-kun would get furious.”

“Make the children cry...? You really are heroes of justice...”

“That’s what we’re always striving to be. Now, let’s go! We can’t fall behind!”

“Right!”

With the injured in tow, they began running away again. They should have been slowed down by the extra weight, but their steps were surprisingly light.

Outside of the building was bright. While they were still in the cave, there was a large light that acted as an artificial sun, so it was even brighter than it had been inside the building. Theia and the others continued running through the brightly lit cavern, but they stopped halfway to the exit.

“Maki, how does it look?”

“He should be coming out soon. The mana is still increasing.”

“The problem is how big he’ll be when he gets out...”

They’d come to a stop because they were planning on intercepting Tayuma here. If they simply escaped, Tayuma would just follow them to the surface where he could do untold damage. That’s why the surface team had to defeat him here.

“I’ve got a reaction on the sonic sensor! Your Highness, he’s coming!”

The next moment, the front half of the building collapsed with a roaring sound. With it gone, Theia and the others could see the Earth Dragon from where they were standing. And something slowly standing up from the rubble of the collapsed building.

“How could this be...?”

“What in the world?! He’s over fifty meters tall, easy!”

Theia was at a loss for words and Shizuka screamed. Both were understandable reactions. Tayuma was now big enough to cover up the Earth Dragon he was standing in front of, giving them a clear sense of scale. Like Shizuka said, he was clearly over fifty meters tall.

“According to the observational data, he’s 55 meters tall. His weight seems to be around 3,000 tons, but because of gravitational interference, I can’t get an accurate figure.”

What had once been Tayuma was now a giant, black hound. With its sharp fangs, claws, and muscular build, he looked like a hunting dog. That alone was a surprise, but his size was the biggest shock of all. The black hound far surpassed the size of any known living creature. It looked more like a monster from a movie. Alunaya, who resided within Shizuka, was quite large himself, but the hound was about twice his size.

“What a monstrous dog... At least it seems his loyalty for Maguz was real...”

According to Maki, Tayuma had transformed into a form he’d desired. In that case, Tayuma might have chosen the form of a dog as a display of his loyalty. Theia believed that while Tayuma’s soul was stained by elitism and prejudice, his loyalty to his leader was the real deal.

“However, we can’t let him prove his loyalty! Blue Knight, bombard the surface fifteen meters south of the previous coordinates!”

Theia ordered her spaceship to bombard the black hound. Just one glance at his towering figure was enough to tell her that it had strength that defied common sense. That’s why she wanted to defeat it before it could start moving.

“Please wait, Your Highness! You can only bombard the surface of this planet so many times before people start to—”

“Now isn’t the time for that, Ruth! Believe in me!”

Nevertheless, it was a huge gamble. Repeated bombardments would indeed attract the attention of the people on Earth. Theia was of course well aware of that, but she believed they needed the firepower regardless of the risks.

“Fire, Blue Knight!”

“As you wish, my princess.”

Theia pushed Ruth’s objections aside and ordered the bombardment. Ruth didn’t try stopping her. She understood that Theia had already given her actions proper thought.

The air trembled as the second bombardment arrived. The beam punched a hole through the cave roof near the first and rained down on the black hound.

“Gaaaaaaaah!”

However, it wouldn’t go down without a fight. After roaring, a disk made from black energy appeared above it. It was a shield created with the black mana meant to stand in the way of the oncoming beam. And that was when something unexpected happened. The black shield reflected the beam like a mirror reflected light.

“It reflected it?!”

“Your Highness, the beam is headed back towards Blue Knight!”

“Impossible!”

The beam travelled back along the same straight line it had come and hit Blue Knight.

“Blue Knight automatically deployed its distortion field, so there is no damage.”

“Theiamillis-san, it seems like that dog twisted space to change the direction of the beam.”

“Jeez, what an outrageous trick...”

Theia flashed a bitter smile at Clan’s explanation. While there hadn’t been any damage to her ship, this still didn’t bode well. If Blue Knight’s main weaponry wouldn’t work, it was hard to imagine normal attacks would. That meant that Theia’s power wouldn’t be enough to defeat the black hound.

“Fuhahaha, that won’t work! I’m the strongest! I’ve obtained an invincible body and I have become one of the chosen ones!”

Tayuma had now endured an attack that destroyed the Earth Dragon in a

single hit. Unable to hide the excitement over his new power that surpassed his own expectations, Tayuma continued to shout in celebration.

“I will crush you and make a new world! You powerless surface dwellers won’t be able to stop me!”

But his voice wasn’t coming from his mouth. Now in bestial dog form, his mouth and throat lost the ability to use human speech. Instead, his voice spread throughout the area via magic.

“You fool. Even with such, who would obey you when you look like that?”

Theia looked at the black hound, at Tayuma, with pity in her eyes. All throughout history, there had never been a sustained case of rule by fear. It never lasted, and Tayuma right now was nothing more than a symbol of fear. So even if he managed to take over the surface, things wouldn’t stay that way. Both Forthorthe’s and Earth’s histories predicted that.

“In obtaining such power, you’ve closed the path to rule on yourself...”

True victory was no longer an option for Tayuma. Even if he beat Theia and the others and conquered the surface, it would only be a short-term success. And Tayuma was none the wiser. Theia couldn’t help but find that pitiful. At the same time, she thought this might be for the best. People were happier remaining unaware that their dreams had been cut short.

“Maki, don’t you have any countermeasures?”

However, Theia had no intention of being dragged down with Tayuma after he had chosen to ruin his own future. She would defeat him. In order to do that, she sought Maki’s advice since it seemed like physical attacks wouldn’t work.

“I think we could either dispel the magic or break through it with spiritual energy.”

After seeing the black hound twist space with a spell, Maki thought they could either dispel the magic it was using, or attack using spiritual energy that wouldn’t be affected by it.

“Right now, I think only Kasagi-san can fight against him.”

“Huh? M-Me?!”

“More accurately, she means me. I’m going at this with all my might, Shizuka!”

Fire Dragon Emperor Alunaya far surpassed human limits when it came to both mana and spiritual energy. Right now, it seemed like the only way out of this mess was to have Alunaya go all out.

“I guess we have to... Do it, uncle!”

Shizuka steeled herself. While she would be annoyed when this was all over if Alunaya used up all of his mana, now wasn’t the time to be concerned with that. If they didn’t defeat the black hound, a far greater tragedy would befall the surface.

“I just hope that I alone will be enough...”

Alunaya activated his stored mana and enveloped Shizuka with it. Using her body as a core, he projected his own gigantic body with mana. At that stage, they switched roles—Alunaya took control of the body while Shizuka’s mind would take a backseat and give advice. And so she completed her transformation into a red dragon over twenty meters long that caused the very ground to shake when it landed.

“Looking at him like this, he sure is spectacular. This is the first time I’ve seen a land-dwelling creature that’s larger than me.”

Facing the black hound, Alunaya instinctively sighed. Alunaya was already close to the natural physical limits of land-dwelling creatures. Yet this black hound was over twice his size. It had an abnormally gigantic body forcibly created through magic. Alunaya was in awe of its unnatural existence.

“Uncle, we have to hurry.”

“You’re right. I can’t just stand here.”

Alunaya couldn’t maintain his full-on dragon form for long. He had to settle this before he ran out of mana. Alunaya took a deep breath and took one step forward towards the black hound. And just as Alunaya was about to throw himself at the monster, someone stopped him.

“Please wait, Alunaya-san.”

“Oh, Princess Clan?”

“Reinforcements—Veltlion and the others—have come.”

“Curse you, Blue Knight... You’ve left me behind again to go ride something so fun-looking...”

Passing through one of the holes in the ceiling, an airframe with very sharp angles flew into the large cave. While it might have been twenty meters or so long, it was still far too small to compete with the fifty-meter black hound. The signs and characters engraved into the airframe indicated it belonged to the People of the Earth. Indeed, it was a mobile weapon intended for air combat that the conservative faction had developed just in case.

Upon entering the cave, the surroundings suddenly got significantly brighter. Since they had been flying through the night for a while now, the sudden strong light stung Koutarou’s eyes.

“Ho! Applying the filter, ho!”

“We’ll remove it when your eyes have adjusted, ho! Don’t worry, ho!”

However, Karama and Korama who were attached to the mobile weapon’s computer lowered the brightness of the monitor, which helped Koutarou’s eyes adjust.

“So that’s Tayuma now, huh? He’s completely turned into a monster.”

“I’m sure it’s him making himself look bigger as a result of his lust for great power.”

Thanks to Clan’s detailed reports, Koutarou and Kiriha already knew what had happened inside the cave. That’s why they’d come over with the mobile weapon.

“Koutarou, it looks like Yurika has joined up with Theia and the others.”

Sanae, who was sitting in the operator’s seat, reported on Yurika’s whereabouts. Koutarou looked at the monitor near Sanae to see Yurika happily reuniting with the surface team. It was relaying footage from a camera attached to the outside of the mobile weapon.

“Good. It looks like everyone is okay,” said Harumi, flashing a smile of relief to see all her friends well.

There were a total of four humans aboard the mobile weapon. First there was Kiriha in the pilot’s seat. She was in charge of controlling the aircraft. Next was Sanae in the operator’s seat. However, she was mostly just sitting there. Karama and Korama were the ones doing all the work. Since the haniwas were directly connected to the computer, the mobile weapon didn’t actually need an operator. The remaining two on board were Koutarou and Harumi, who were sitting in spare seats. They were essentially passengers who had no part in controlling the ship. That would be left to Kiriha and her two haniwas, which was how the ship had been designed.

While one might be fooled by their cheerful personalities, the two haniwas had served the Kurano family for generations and had accumulated a huge amount of combat data. That’s why they were able to fight so effectively when given the appropriate armaments—the mobile weapon included. It was a large, heavy combat module that the haniwas had no problem operating.

This module had been given the name “Ohime” after the Goddess of Creation in the People of the Earth’s mythology. It was a sign that the conservative faction considered it their ace in the hole, their goddess of hope that would protect the dawn of tomorrow.

“But we can’t get carried away, ho! The output isn’t increasing, just as we expected, ho!”

“Our souls aren’t enough, ho! We’re a hundred years too early, ho!”

However, the mobile weapon still wasn’t fully functional. As a result, the main systems and spiritual energy generator couldn’t be used. It was currently operating on a subsystem and a standard generator, meaning it was only barely able to fly. Fighting with it was out of the question.

The reason why the main systems and spiritual energy generator wouldn’t activate was simply because there wasn’t enough spiritual energy. The spiritual energy the two haniwas provided wasn’t enough to awaken the ship. And in this state, the mobile weapon was practically useless. The only good it might serve was crashing into the enemy.

“Don’t worry. That’s why Sanae is on board.”

“Me? Why?”

With the conversation suddenly turning to her, Sanae blinked repeatedly in confusion. The haniwas, however, knew just what Kiriha meant and broke into a cheerful dance like victory was already theirs.

“Of course! As expected of Nee-san, ho! I never thought of that, ho!”

“With Sanae-chan’s maiden powers, it might awaken, ho!”

“Sanae, could you touch the magatama in front of you and transform into Kabutonga?”

“Sure... but will that do anything about the design error?”

“Please, Sanae.”

“Okay... All right, traaansfooooorm! Kabutongaaa!”

With a grand shout, Sanae’s body was wrapped in a vast amount of spiritual energy. It was so dense that a portion of it became light, causing Sanae’s body to glow. What Kiriha meant by Sanae transforming into Kabutonga wasn’t about changing her outfit or appearance, but having her enhance her physical abilities with her spiritual energy.

“It’s working! It’s coming online, ho!”

“The main systems have activated, ho!”

Sanae’s vast spiritual energy passed through the magatama and into Ohime’s systems. As it did, the lights representing each one on the panel began lighting up one after another.

“It’s working, ho! The spiritual energy generator is active!”

“Output is rising! It’s gone critical! It’s now self-sufficient, ho!”

As the spiritual energy generator began working, the airframe vibrated a little. At first it was a slow, rhythmic vibration similar to a heartbeat, but it soon quickened into something more like an alarm bell. Once the vibration reached a certain intensity, the shaking stopped altogether. The vibration control system had now kicked in and was cancelling it out.

“Output is still increasing. Thirty... forty... fifty... Switching the generator from normal power to spiritual energy, ho!”

“Ane-go!”

“Yes! Ohime, change from cruise mode to combat mode!”



“Roger, ho!”

“Leave it to us, ho!”

Ohime had two modes of operation. One was a cruise mode with limited function reserved for casual flight. The other was combat mode, which required enormous output from the spiritual energy generator.

“We’re going in, everyone! Make sure you’re strapped in!”

Kiriha switched Ohime over to combat mode and removed all restrictions. As a result, the craft’s speed rapidly increased and it glided through the air like a rollercoaster.

Having once been Tayuma, the black hound recognized the approaching craft. Tayuma knew about Ohime from information on the conservative faction he’d gotten through Maguz, which was how he knew that Kiriha was on board the moment he saw it.

“You’ve come, daughter of Kurano! You dare stand before me again?!”

The giant black hound shook his body and roared. It was a roar so loud that it rattled the entire cave. Tayuma’s voice could be heard over it, but it was being projected magically rather than through the mouth of the inhuman beast.

“As long as you would harm people, I will stand in your path as many times as it takes!”

“Harm people? You’re wrong! I am trying to lead the People of the Earth! We shall reclaim our former glory!”

“You haven’t noticed?! You’re trampling the very people that you claim to lead!”

“What?!”

The black hound looked down at his feet for the first time. Many corpses lay half-buried in the rubble of the collapsed building. They were all radical faction soldiers that had been entrusted with defending the facility.

“You aren’t leading anyone! You’re only using them as stepping stones!”

“What about it?! I am a chosen ruler! I will rule everything together with Maguz-sama! I decide who lives and who dies!”

However, the black hound—Tayuma—had no remorse about killing his own allies. After transforming into a magical beast because of his twisted wishes and gaining enormous power, he was singularly focused on achieving his desires. To Tayuma, the radical faction’s justice, his loyalty to Maguz, and his ideals of rulership were nothing more than tools to justify his actions. He would bring them up when he had to, and put them away when they got in his way. He’d become the embodiment of single-minded selfishness.

“Have you degenerated this far, Tayuma...?”

Kiriha couldn’t help being disappointed in Tayuma. Maguz was also warped, but he still felt a connection to the other radical faction members. His heart was in the wrong place, but he still had his pride as a leader. Not Tayuma. Everything he did was for himself. When confronted with a truth he didn’t like, he’d use any means necessary to brush it aside. Words had no meaning to someone like him now. There would be no changing his mind. Realizing those limitations, Kiriha decided she would defeat him instead.

“Daughter of Kurano, I decide whether you live or die too! And I say you die here!”

The black hound roared again. As it did, several black orbs appeared around its body. And when it roared a third time, the orbs flew straight at Ohime. They were energy balls created using the black mana.

“I won’t let you! This world is not your playground!”

Kiriha enacted evasive maneuvers with Ohime to avoid the incoming black orbs. Ohime moved like a rollercoaster, with the contrails behind it looking like the track.

“Come on! What’s the matter?!”

For each orb Kiriha evaded, the black hound created another with no end in sight. It was all she could do to keep evading.

“Emergency alert, ho! The spiritual energy generator is becoming unstable, ho!”

“At a time like this?!”

And things just got hairier from there. The unfinished Ohime wasn't responding well to suddenly being forced to fly at full power. As a result, its movements became much simpler. With fluctuations in the generator, Ohime was left without the power needed to make drastic turns.

“Fuahahahaha! Dieeeee!”

And more black orbs were coming at Ohime still—twice as many as before. The black hound was trying to use this chance to completely destroy the craft and its pilot. And at the rate they were going, most of the orbs would score direct hits. The black mana had the power to reflect Blue Knight's beam, so if that many of its orbs assaulted Ohime, it would very likely be annihilated without leaving a trace behind.

“Restarting the spiritual energy generator, ho!”

“Sanae-chan, please, ho!”

“I'll show yooouuuu!”

Sanae, still sitting on the operator's seat, raised her spiritual energy levels and poured a vast quantity of her energy into Ohime to wake up the generator. Once it was reactivated, Ohime began accelerating rapidly. And with the help of Sanae's spiritual energy, it was even faster than before, leaving most of the black orbs in the dust.

“Not good, ho!”

“There's one orb we just can't evade, ho!”

But there were just far too many orbs to shake off all at once. One was still charging at Ohime at full speed.

“You have no need to fear.”

However, in the end, the black orb never reached the ship. An ultra high temperature flame had incinerated it before it could hit.

“It's an ally, ho!”

“It's dragon uncle, ho!”

The haniwas displayed the source of the flames on the monitor—a crimson dragon flapping its large wings.

“Alunaya-dono!”

“Blue Knight, I shall fight with you.”

Though he was some distance away, Alunaya’s voice came through the crest on Koutarou’s right hand. The Fire Dragon Emperor had come to assist Koutarou and the others, and in their current situation, having someone as powerful as Alunaya on their side was rather reassuring.

“Curse you! You keep getting in the way again and again...”

Tayuma couldn’t have been more irritated to see Alunaya rush to Ohime’s side. He felt certain victory slipping from his grasp, and that enraged him. This wasn’t the first time that had happened today either, which only made it all the more infuriating.

“Now it’s our turn! Open the ports to the spiritual energy cannons!

“Right away, ho! Transmitting power to the cannons! Five seconds until they’re fully charged!”

“Sanae-chan, we’re counting on you again, ho!”

“Need more energy?”

“No, not that, ho! It’s possible to guide the cannons with spiritual energy, ho!”

“I don’t really get it, but I just need to hit him, right?”

“Yes, ho!”

Being a warfare module for the haniwas, Ohime was of course armed. Its main weapons were spiritual energy cannons—two of them, to be precise. They were beam weapons that directly fired massive amounts of spiritual energy from the generator. And since the fired beam was raw spiritual energy, it should be effective against the black hound.

“Alunaya-dono, we’ll attack first! Please back us up!”

“Understood.”

Alunaya could fly quite swiftly for a living creature, but was slower than Ohime. So the highly maneuverable airframe would take the lead and Alunaya would cover for them.

“We’re charging in! Fire the cannon as we pass by!”

Typically speaking, energy attacks experienced a drop-off in power commensurate with how far they had to travel to reach their target. So Kiriha decided to make use of Ohime’s mobility to bombard the black hound at point blank.

“Sanae, please!”

“Roger that! Sparkling Sanae-chan Cannon charged up to 120 percent!”

Kiriha accelerated towards the black hound. In response, the black hound created a new wave of black orbs in an attempt to keep Ohime at bay. Standard weaponry had no effect on the black hound or its orbs, so Kiriha would need to evade all of it with her piloting skills.

No matter how much power you’ve gained, I guess your mind is still human...

After transforming into the black hound, Tayuma had obtained incredible powers and heightened senses. But still, his mind controlling all of it remained human. Kiriha read him like a book and evaded the orbs by moving around bewilderingly. With Alunaya covering her to catch the orbs she couldn’t dodge in time, Ohime closed in on the black hound without so much as getting scratched.

“Now, Sanae!”

“Eeeaaaaat thiiiiisss!”

Fire spewed from the two spiritual energy cannons. The cannons, which were directly connected to Ohime’s generator, were a force to be reckoned with. While they couldn’t be repeatedly fired, their output in terms of power was comparable to Blue Knight’s secondary weaponry.

“As if I’d let you get away with that!”

The black hound created a jet black shield to protect itself like it had from Blue Knight’s bombardment. However, that was where something unexpected

happened. The two beams fired from the airframe changed trajectories like they had a will of their own and went around either side of the shield to strike the black hound directly. That was thanks to Sanae guiding them.

“Guaaaaaah!”

Suffering two direct hits from the beams, the black hound let out a loud, pained roar. There were large holes in its sides where the beams had struck, and vast amount of blood came pouring out each one. The beams were even more effective than expected.

“It’s working, ho! But this is bad, ho!”

“A new barrier has come out, ho! It’s black, but it looks like a spiritual energy field, ho!”

A black fog spread out over the black hound’s body. It was a new means of defense it had devised after being unable to stop the last attack with his shield. If the haniwas were correct, it was a kind of spiritual energy barrier, but it was pitch black unlike the yellowish field that the haniwas used. It gave off an eerie feel.

“What?!”

Blood drained from Kiriha’s face. If the black hound could protect itself against both magic and spiritual energy, there was nothing else they could do. When it came to total energy, the black hound overwhelmed them, so if two energies of the same type collided, the black hound would come out on top.

“What do you mean?! He wasn’t just strengthened by Maya’s magic?!”

“Satomi-kun, that Tayuma person has knowledge about spiritual energy devices, so I think he’s recreated them using ma— Kyaaah!”

A heavy impact shook Ohime. Kiriha hadn’t been the only one aiming for her opponent as they crossed each other’s paths. The black hound fired an orb after Ohime as it passed by.

“The spiritual energy field has collapsed! The first and second layer of armor on the starboard rear side have suffered serious damage, but it was just the primary armor, ho!”

“We barely survived, but we’re out if another one hits, ho! Be careful, ho!”

Fortunately, Ohime had survived the blow. They were lucky that Ohime had a barrier of its own and that only a single orb had hit them. But they couldn’t count on that kind of good luck again. If they were struck a second time, they would be shot down for sure.

“Sanae, please!”

“Here we go! Hyaaah!”

Kiriha turned Ohime around and fired the spiritual energy cannons at the black hound again. They were some distance off from the target now, the beams were easily dispersed when they came into contact with the new barrier.

“Karama, Korama, how does it look?!”

“Calculations are complete, ho! We were able to calculate the field’s strength from that attack, ho!”

“We’re in a pinch, ho! Even if we fire from point blank at maximum power, we can’t break through that field, ho!”

The second attack was a test to decide on how they would continue fighting, but the results were bleak. Even if they threw everything they had at the black hound, there seemed to be no hope of victory.

“Kiriha-san, what do we do?!”

“If we fight individually, we have no chance of winning. We’ll need to work together.”

“It’ll be hard...”

“I know. But we can’t let that thing up to the surface.”

Koutarou and Kiriha both understood the situation. In order to defeat the black hound, they would need to walk a very thin line... all while keeping the black hound from making it to the surface. They resolutely nodded at each other, prepared to hedge their bets on the last hand of the night.

The plan Kiriha had concocted was extremely rash. It was a gamble, and a

long shot at that. Which was why, when Koutarou explained it to Theia and the others, all he got in response was bewilderment.

“Are you an idiot?”

“Would you rather I act smart and let that thing out on the surface?”

“Well, that’s fair, but...”

“We have to try something. Please help.”

“Okay. But don’t forget.”

“Forget what?”

“That there are many who would grieve your loss if you were to die.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

The plan Kiriha had come up with put the four aboard Ohime at the greatest risk. That’s why Theia was worried for their safety.

“The surface team is okay. The rest is up to us.”

After finishing his talk with Theia, Koutarou stood up from his seat. He had an important job to do. As he got up to leave the cockpit, Kiriha called to him from behind him.

“I’m sorry for making you do something like this, Koutarou.”

Kiriha spoke in an apologetic tone. She couldn’t stand the idea that her plan put Koutarou in danger, but she had no choice if she wanted to protect everyone. She hated herself for creating a situation where she had to see Koutarou off.

“Don’t worry about it.”

Koutarou, on the other hand, seemed carefree. A person he treasured said she needed him, so he would do whatever she asked. He would probably make it out alive if he didn’t, but he would regret that for the rest of his life. Perhaps even more so than dying. Knowing that, he had no problems accepting the risks involved.

“Aren’t you scared? If you fail, you’ll—”

“That’s true for anyone when the time comes. But in this kind of situation, it’s bad luck to say anything negative.”

“Koutarou...”

“Besides, I’ve decided to believe...”

As Koutarou opened the hatch to the cockpit, he turned around for a moment and smiled at Kiriha. Seeing his expression, Kiriha could feel just how firm his determination was.

“Our future will be a bright one.”

That was something the girls of room 106 had told Koutarou. Treasuring someone meant believing in a future with them. Just keeping them safe and keeping your promises wasn’t enough. Nothing else mattered as much as hoping for a future together. They’d helped Koutarou see that, and now it was his turn to help Kiriha see it.

“Then I will believe as well. That our future and everyone else’s will be a brilliant one indeed.”

That’s why Kiriha saw Koutarou off with a smile. There was no way things would end here. Kiriha’s and everyone else’s happy days were only just beginning. That was what Kiriha now firmly believed.

After exiting the cockpit, Koutarou got outside onto Ohime. Using his armor’s gravity control, he walked along the outer shell of the airframe itself. His goal was Ohime’s nose. Since the craft was only twenty meters long, it didn’t take him long to reach it.

“That said, this still is reckless...”

With Koutarou walking atop of the airframe, Kiriha slowed Ohime down considerably, but it was still moving at several hundred kilometers per hour. While Koutarou wasn’t blown away thanks to his gravity controls and barrier, the nose of a jet was clearly a place no human was ever intended to be. The violent sound of wind whipping past the barrier was thunderously loud.

“It’s not like this is the first time, though.”

“That’s true.”

Koutarou was getting into position with Sanae-chan clinging to his back—they’d left Sanae-san in the cockpit. As she held on to Koutarou, Ohime made a sharp turn and the black hound came into sight. That black hound, Tayuma, currently had two barriers around it in addition to a wreath of black orbs waiting to fire at Ohime and Alunaya. Seeing his target, Koutarou extended both hands towards the black hound.

“Blue Knight, give me my swords.”

“As you wish, my lord.”

“Come, Signaltin! Saguratin!”

“Call sign confirmed. Coordinate axis fixed. Commencing transfer of Signaltin and Saguratin.”

A black hole appeared in front of Koutarou’s hands, one sword for each. From the right hole came the silvery Signaltin, and from the left the golden Saguratin.

“It is also possible to equip the Garb of the Lord.”

“Then give me that too.”

“As you wish, my lord.”

After taking a sword in each hand, another six holes appeared around Koutarou. They were transferring GoL in six parts, which flew out and automatically assembled with Koutarou’s armor.

“Master, this ship, Blue Knight, will pray for your fortune and glory in place of the nation of Forthorthe. Additionally, Princess Theiamillis and Guardian Knight Ruthkania both await your safe return from the bottom of their hearts.”

Blue Knight delivered that last message from Ruth before the communications ended.

“Thank you...”

Koutarou quietly uttered his thanks and readied his swords. He held Signaltin—in his right hand—forward, and Saguratin—in his left hand—slightly behind it. The tips of both blades were pointed towards the black hound.

“Theia, how are things looking on your end?”

With his preparations complete, Koutarou checked in with his friends.

“No problems here. We struggled with getting the timing right, but it looks like things will work out.”

“How about you, Alunaya-dono?”

“I only have to rampage, so my job is easy. Though Shizuka is crying about how much her weight will increase after this.”

“I’ll comfort her later.”

“Please do.”

With his allies ready as well, Koutarou finished up by calling Kiriha.

“Kiriha-san, the preparations are all in place.”

“I understand. We’ll be ready in just a moment too.”

Kiriha’s voice was firm. As expected, since this would determine the fate of the People of the Earth, she couldn’t hide the tension she was feeling.

“Don’t get too overeager, Kiriha-san. You’re not just too kind, but you’re also too serious.”

“You’re the only one who’d say that.”

“You can rely on others every once in a while too, you know.”

“I’ll do just that.”

Some of the tension left Kiriha’s voice. Satisfied with that, Koutarou turned his attention in the form of a glare on the massive black hound in front of him. The monster was over fifty meters tall, and nearly a hundred long. It was about five times bigger than Ohime. It was the difference in size between a parent and child. Ohime would never win in a clash of raw power, which was why Koutarou and the others had to pool their strength to stand a chance.

“Koutarou, my preparations are done now as well.”

“Then let’s get started.”

“Everyone, here we go! This will put an end to all of it!”

With her powerful declaration, Kiriha began accelerating Ohime. Her target was none other than the black hound, and she charged at it at full speed.

“So you’re coming, daughter of Kurano! I don’t know what you’re planning, but it’s all useless! I am stronger than anyone and everything! Not even the Goddess of Creation could stand against me!”

The black hound stamped one of its large feet as if to threaten Kiriha. There was still some hundred odd meters between the black hound and Ohime, but at Ohime’s current speed, it wouldn’t take long to close that distance.

“Maki-chan!”

“Yes!”

“Magic Shield! Modifier: Effective Time, Twice!”

“Greater Lightning Reflexes!”

As Kiriha charged in, two spells were cast on Koutarou—one from Yurika and one from Maki. The former increased his armor’s defenses and the latter his reflexes. Both were needed to protect him.

Mere moments later, Ohime reached the speed of sound and broke through the sound barrier. The roaring it created shook the entire cave, making the holes in the ceiling one size category larger.

“Then I shall go too.”

Taking that as his signal, Alunaya sprung into action as well. A blue light suddenly enveloped his crimson body. It was a spell he’d activated. The light grew stronger and stronger until it eventually swallowed him.

“Here I come!”

All of a sudden, the blue light vanished along with Alunaya.

“Wh-What?! Why is he here?!”

“Isn’t that obvious?! To defeat you!”

Alunaya had used a teleportation spell to magically slip inside the black hound’s barrier and force it into close-range combat.

“Your sudden appearance caught me by surprise, but that’s all there is to your

power, isn't it?!"

"Nnngh!"

However, even the powerful Alunaya was at a disadvantage. At only around half the hound's size, it clearly had the upper hand in a fight. Alunaya would have to make up for the difference with magic, but it wouldn't be easy.

"How foolish to think you could challenge me with such meager strength!"

With an overwhelming advantage in size and weight, the black hound had no problem knocking Alunaya back. It then distanced itself from the dragon to finish him off at range with its black orbs.

"You are the foolish one... No, that girl might just be too clever."

"What?!"

"Tayumaaaa!"

It was there that Ohime flew past Alunaya and charged the black hound.



“It’s no use! Your attacks have no effect on me!”

The black hound sneered at Ohime’s pilot—Kiriha. His magical and spiritual energy barriers were sturdy enough to block any of the attacks she could use. He had nothing to fear even if she came right for him.

“I wouldn’t be so sure! That may have been true a few seconds ago, but not now!”

“What are you saying— What?! How?!”

The impossible was happening right in front of the black hound. The barrier should have stopped Ohime in its tracks, but the airframe was pushing right through.

“What did you do?!”

“I haven’t done anything. This is your doing, Tayuma.”

“Mine?!”

“That’s right. It’s nothing special. You lowered your own barrier to push Alunaya away.”

That was the real reason as to why Alunaya had challenged Tayuma at such close range. If Alunaya made it inside the black hound’s barrier, its first move would undoubtedly be to throw him outside of it. Even the black hound would take serious damage from a dragon’s plasma breath at point-blank range. And in order to throw Alunaya out, part of the barrier needed to be lowered for a moment. This was all part of Kiriha’s plan.

And before the barrier could completely recover, Ohime would charge in through the gap. Koutarou was standing on the nose of Ohime, wielding his two swords to help chip away at the barrier and keep it open. If the barrier had been whole and at full power, the swords wouldn’t have done much of anything. But thanks to Alunaya, the barriers had an opening—a weakness. In other words, this was a strategic victory for Kiriha.

“So that’s what you did! But don’t get cocky! I haven’t lost yet!”

The black hound ordered the black orbs floating around him to attack. Ohime had slowed down as it pushed through the barrier. Hitting it now should be

easy, and one good hit alone could destroy it.

“The truest victory is not allowing your opponent to realize that they’ve lost until the bitter end.”

Little did Tayuma know he’d already fallen for Kiriha’s trap. When the black orbs were sent towards Ohime, there was a dazzling flash that blinded the black hound. It was a flash that Harumi, still aboard Ohime, had created with magic.

“Guaaah!”

Since the black hound was guiding the black orbs himself, suddenly losing its sight was a serious challenge to hitting its target. The majority of orbs flew off in random directions, with only a few remaining on a collision course with Ohime. But those, Alunaya kindly cleaned up with his flames.

“Theiamillis-san, the space distortion rate has dropped. Attacks should be able to hit now.”

“So it’s finally time for the star’s appearance.”

Theia had been waiting for this moment from the very start. While she had superior firepower, none of her attacks would work until the monster’s jet black shield was broken. And right now, the black hound’s impregnable defenses were on the verge of collapse. With a fearless smile, Theia gave an order to Ruth.

“Ruth, we’re using Blue Knight’s anti-surface missiles.”

“What about the settings, Your Highness?”

“Leave guidance to optics and gravity. The AI will be in charge of the detonation timing, and I’ll leave the other parameters to you.”

“As you wish, my princess.”

Eight space-time holes appeared around Theia, and a missile swiftly flew out of each one. The missiles themselves were bigger than Theia. They were the kind ordinarily reserved for use against bases and large weapons.

“Greater Enhance Weapon. Modifier: Multiple Targets.”

“Anti-Magic Shield! Modifier: Effective Area, Large!”

Maki and Yurika cast spells on Theia's missiles. Maki used a spell to increase their attack power, and Yurika used one to protect them. With their magical boons, the already powerful missiles grew even stronger as they sailed right towards the black hound.

"You might think..." Seeing the missiles off as their rockets ignited, Theia folded her arms. "...that we look dangerous, having powerful weapons or the ability to use magic."

The orbs rushed towards the missiles to shoot them down, but they were relatively small targets compared to the orbs and were shielded by the power of Yurika's protective spell. As a result, only two of them were destroyed in the volley. The remaining six soared through the air and struck the black hound directly in the blink of an eye.

"But in reality, the most dangerous one here is Kiriha. While she has almost no power of her own, she comes up with these extraordinary ideas, one after another."

The black hound's barrier was weakened, but was still functioning to a degree. It successfully deflected two of the six missiles and sent them flying back at Theia and the others.

"In fact, Kiriha might be able to beat all of us with just an army of a hundred men armed with sticks."

However, the deflected missiles changed course once more on their own. Being guided weaponry, all they had to do was rely on their systems. The monster's jet black shield was close to invincible against beams, laser, and bullets, but missiles were a bit trickier.

"I'm glad Kiriha-sama is on our side. I'm sure it would be a nightmare to go up against her..."

After worming their way around the black shield, the missiles approached the black hound's second layer of defenses—the spiritual energy barrier made from black fog. Fortunately, however, spiritual energy barriers tended to be quite weak against physical attacks. Getting near it, the AI ordered the missiles to detonate before actually coming into contact with the barrier.

“You could say that again. I’m sure he feels the same way right about now.”

Of the two redirected missiles, only one managed to make it back to its target successfully. As a result, five missiles exploded near the black hound. These missiles had been designed to direct all of their explosive force forward. And while they were powerful to begin with, they were even more so under the influence of magic. The explosions assaulted the black hound, each missile like a flaming javelin that pierced through the black mist and the black hound itself.

The black hound, Tayuma, couldn’t believe what had happened to him. He was supposed to have obtained power enough to give him dominion over all mankind. And indeed, he was overwhelming all of his enemies. They would be easy to destroy were he to fight them one by one. Yet Tayuma had been struck with such a devastating blow that he’d fallen to the ground. The damage was severe enough he couldn’t even create a barrier to protect himself anymore.

“It can’t be... This can’t be reality! My power is too great! I was chosen by god to be a ruler!”

Tayuma screamed out, not because of his injured body but because of his injured pride. He would rather die than not have his way now. That was why he’d sacrificed himself for power—power to fulfill his selfish desires. But now that he’d been felled, his pride was so badly damaged that he couldn’t stand it.

“This must be some kind of mistake! This can’t be happening! It’s all a mistake!”

In order to salvage his pride, Tayuma tried his best to stand. The physical pain he felt was nothing compared to the humiliation. And he’d have to beat down every last one of his enemies to redeem that. Obeying his will, the black hound staggered to its feet.

“Tayuma, you still plan on fighting?”

Kiriha, who was looking at him from her cockpit inside Ohime, knew that he was no longer in any condition to do so. Forcing himself to get up again wouldn’t change the outcome. And as a pacifist, Kiriha didn’t want to fight anymore.

“Of course I do! I’m the ruler! I will never back down! I won’t bow down to anyone! I’m a hero of the People of the Earth!”

But rationality be damned, Tayuma was hell-bent on defending his pride. Not his pride as a member of the People of the Earth, but as Shijima Tayuma.

Before, Kiriha and Daiha had refused to surrender because it might affect the outcome of the battle. They were trying to protect their people, and by not betraying their beliefs or their friends, they upheld their pride and honor as People of the Earth. But if the circumstances had been different, if there hadn’t been so much on the line, Kiriha and Daiha would have surrendered if it was the right thing to do.

But that wasn’t the case for Tayuma. He would simply rather die than accept defeat. He was like a child that would flip over a game board because he hated losing. No matter the circumstances, he would never surrender.

Indeed, in the end, Tayuma was nothing more than a petulant child. That’s why he was desperate for a way to avoid losing even now. The black hound’s eyes darted around in search of anything that might turn the tables.

“Th-That’s right! You’re here!”

What he spotted were the radical faction soldiers that had been guarding the building. Rather than joining the battle, they were watching it from a distance.

“What are you doing?! Hurry up and fight! Protect me! Kill them!”

There were still plenty of soldiers left. If they all moved on Theia and the others, the radical faction could still win.

“Aaahh, the monster turned this way!”

“He’s growling! Is he after us?!”

“We’ll be killed! Just like the second platoon!”

However, the soldiers had no intention of fighting. Quite the opposite. They fled in all directions, afraid for their lives. Not a single one remained to fight for Tayuma.

“Where are you going?! Stand and fight! Did you get scared of the enemy?!”

Tayuma didn't understand what was going on. Just a while ago, the soldiers had moved like an extension of his own body whenever he gave them orders. The respect, loyalty, and tinge of fear they showed around him made him proud. But there was none of that now. Instead, his men were scrambling to get away from him. All Tayuma could imagine was that they couldn't hear his voice, or that they had gotten scared of the conservative faction.

"You don't understand, Tayuma?"

Kiriha knew just what the soldiers were so scared of. And she found it pitiful that Tayuma didn't.

"Your soldiers... are afraid of you."

Tayuma's voice had indeed reached the soldiers. He had enough mana for that, certainly. But the soldiers had no idea that the disembodied voice they were hearing belonged to the monster in front of them. Since they didn't know it was really Tayuma transformed, they ran from the giant, roaring hound. After all, it had ruthlessly trampled their allies when it broke out from the building. The idea that it was on their side never even occurred to them. They had only been observing the battle in hopes that the black hound that had killed their allies would be defeated.

"You're lying! I am a ruler! A hero of the People of the Earth that will lead mankind together with Maguz-sama! And they fear me?!"

"If you cared even the slightest for your allies, this wouldn't have happened. Yet you cast everything and everyone aside in pursuit of the delusion you call justice. That's why no one will obey you."

When Maya had given Tayuma power, he had only thought about himself. That's why he'd gained a massive form with a frightening appearance. It was the embodiment of Tayuma's idea of rulership—violence and fear. Of course the soldiers were terrified of it.

That's why Kiriha believed that if Tayuma had held back a little and had shown some consideration to his allies, he might have truly become a leader for his men.

"Lies! All lies! Soldiers, stop running! Come back and fight!"

Tayuma repeatedly called for the soldiers, but his shouts turned into roars in the hound's throat. To the people below, it sounded like a hellhound was after them. It was all they heard, and Tayuma's real voice never reached them.

"All those who do not obey the ruler of absolute justice will be executed! You may yet be forgiven, so come back and fight!"

With the power of the black mana, Tayuma thought he'd had everything he wanted. But now, in the blink of an eye, his people were abandoning him and everything was collapsing. Tayuma had only been his ideal vision of a ruler for a few minutes. It was all too transient.

"You don't understand even after I say this much?! Then die! All of you, die!"

Tayuma spat black flames from his mouth and attacked the fleeing radical faction soldiers. Defeat had driven him mad. Despite having the power of an ideal ruler, he couldn't win against Kiriha. Moreover, his own men were betraying him now. He didn't like any of it, and so blindly attacked in his proud rage.

"Kiriha-san!"

"I know!"

Koutarou's voice came from the comms at almost the exact same time Kiriha took a sharp turn with Ohime. She was going to protect the radical faction soldiers. Though they had been her enemies just a moment ago, they were still People of the Earth.

"Karama, Korama! Remove the limiter from the spiritual energy cannons!"

"Roger, ho!"

"But they'll break right away, ho!"

"That's fine! I'm not alone!"

And that was the defining difference between Kiriha and Tayuma. Kiriha loved people. She knew the meaning of loving and being loved. That's why people followed her. Theia and the others included, as well as the Sun Rangers and of course the conservative faction. They were all moving to protect the radical faction soldiers before Kiriha had even said anything. Even the radical faction

soldiers who were unharmed made a mad dash to help. They also wanted to save their allies.

“Why?! Why don’t you obey me?! Why obey that girl?! Don’t be fooled! I’m the stronger one! I’m the true ruler! Swear loyalty to me!”

And it all rubbed Tayuma the wrong way. Everyone had forsaken him. Worse, they’d rejected him for someone else. But he couldn’t see that it was his actions even now that drove them away.

Surprisingly enough, spearheading things on the ground were the Sun Rangers. Being an official anti-invader squad, they had received official training, including training in rescue and first aid. Out of everyone present, they were the most skilled in that regard and took the lead in treating the injured.

“Daisaku, can you help me move this rubble? There are people under it.”

“Sure. Kotaro-kun, can you help Megu-chan in my place?”

“Hayato-niichan, can you carry this person on your own?”

“Leave it to me. I’m stronger than I look. I’ll be fine.”

“Okay, I’m coming, Megumi-nee-chan!”

“Thanks, Kotaro-kun. Can you clean that person’s wounds?”

“Kenichi-kun, let’s go.”

“Yeah, let’s!”

Theia was in charge of corralling those who weren’t injured and protecting the Sun Rangers while they worked. Everyone who could took up arms and fired at the approaching black hound.

“Say, Theia-chan, will guns even work against someone that big?” asked Yurika.

“Save the details for later. Or would you rather we run away without doing anything and let them die?”

“I... I understand. I’ll do my best too.”

“Vice captain, are you sure we should have armed the radical soldiers too?”

“We can ponder their motives once we get through this.”

“You’re right. I’ll trust them until then too.”

Their standpoints varied. There were those who were protecting and those who were being protected. They were conservative soldiers, radical soldiers, surface dwellers, magicians, and aliens. But they all stood together. Who they were and where they’d come from didn’t matter as much as where they were right now and what they all strived to accomplish. They were working together to save as many lives as possible.

“Why does no one listen to what I say?! Don’t you understand that I, an absolute existence, stand right before you?!”

Tayuma gritted his teeth as he looked at the fleeing people. Unable to accept their betrayal, he spat black flames towards them.

“You don’t get it at all, Tayuma. You’re a good-for-nothing whining about nothing going your way.”

Ohime swooped in the way of the flames. Koutarou, who was standing on its nose, swung Signaltin and erased the black fire. Signaltin had broken down the mana making up the flames.

“Brat, this is all your doing! Everything started going wrong when you showed up! It’s all your fault! If only you weren’t here!”

“Now it’s my fault? You’re not even going to consider reflecting on your own actions?”

“I am justice! Absolute justice! I am always right!”

“There really is no saving you...”

Koutarou sharply glared at Tayuma as he readied his two swords. He wouldn’t allow Tayuma to do any more harm. He wouldn’t let him so much as lay a finger on Kiriha, or anyone else. A fierce anger surfaced inside of him as he faced Tayuma.

“You’re the one who can’t be saved! Dieeee!”

Tayuma felt the same way about Koutarou, and the selfish anger inside of him turned into more black fire that he spewed from his mouth.

“Kiriha-san!”

“Here we go, Koutarou!”

The next moment, Ohime charged at Tayuma. Ohime flew at full speed as it bombarded the hound with its spiritual energy cannons. It was a continuous bombardment far faster than before thanks to the cannons’ limiters being removed. But that meant it was only a matter of time before they short-circuited. However, Koutarou made his next move before that could happen.

“Satomi-kun, attack whenever you like! I’ll match your timing!”

“Koutarou, the Love Love Sanae-chan Sword is charged to 500 percent with maximum love!”

“Blue Knight, allow me to lend you my remaining mana. I’ll send it through the crest.”

“Karama, Korama, reverse the spiritual energy generator circuit! Supply Koutarou with energy through Sanae.”

“Got it!”

“Leave it to us, ho!”

The two swords in Koutarou’s hands began glowing. One was a brilliant silver and the other a dazzling gold, but there was an unmistakable warmth to both lights. They were the complete inverse of the hound’s black flames.

“Die, die, dieeee! Fall before your great ruler!”

Jealousy, hate, greed, insanity, and many more dark feelings burned in Tayuma’s eyes. The black flames that he spewed were like an outward projection of his tainted soul.

“You’re alone, no matter how great a power you’ve obtained and no matter what you think you can do with it!”

Koutarou raised both swords above his head at the same time. The silver and golden lights stretched forward and extended upwards towards the surface of the earth. After ascending for several hundred meters, they spiraled together and formed a single pillar of light. The gold and silver mixed together to shine as brightly as the sun.

“There’s no way you’d ever be a match against the hundreds of us!”

Koutarou then swung the swords down. The raised pillar of light followed the swords and fell on Tayuma. It was a true blade of light formed from the power of many. The light of dawn that would tear up the darkness.

“Lies!”

Tayuma screamed. The flames he spat out were all erased in the blink of an eye. He tried creating another barrier, but the mana he gathered for it was dispelled by the glowing light.

The power of the sword of light exceeded Koutarou and the others’ individual powers. The total energy in it far exceeded anything they had gathered. It was a power that only responded to the call of their unified, collective will. Or, as Koutarou would say, it was the light of hope born from everyone’s desperate wish to survive.

“I stand at the top of all things! I will become the supreme ruler! The name Shijima Tayuma will be carved into the annals of history!”

“Don’t worry. You’ll get your wish in that regard. History will remember you... as a bad example.”

“Uaaaaaaaaah!”

The sword of light fell on Tayuma. The light itself had no attack power whatsoever, but it was ultimately effective against the black mana Tayuma was using—the very mana that had generated Tayuma’s monstrous hound form. And when the light came into contact with it, it was annihilated.

Since Tayuma’s body had been completely taken over by the black mana, when the light dispelled it, he was completely dissolved and lost his physical form altogether. However, his obsession with life and his desire for power just barely managed to keep him clinging to the world of the living.

“Hahh... Hahh... Hahh... I refuse... to die... Hahh... Hahh...”

Having lost his body and existing now only as a soul—as a ghost—Tayuma didn’t need to breathe. But his obsession with living still made him mimic the

act. As such, he was breathing raggedly like he'd just managed to escape with his life.

"I won't die... Hahh, hahh... I'll survive a-and stage my comeback... I'll eventually kill... Kurano's daughter and that brat with my own hands... Hahh, hahh..."

His strong grudge, his desire to live, and his obsession with power all sustained him as a ghost. At this rate, it seemed like he would become an evil spirit and realize his desires in the afterlife.

"..."

"Hmm? Who is that... calling for me...?"

Thinking he'd heard someone talking to him, Tayuma turned around.

"There's no one here... Oh, what's this?"

There was no one behind him, but there was something strange. It was a small, black whirlpool floating in the air. It was only a few centimeters big at first, but it gradually grew bigger. As Tayuma confusedly peered into it, it had already grown close to a meter in size.

"What is this? I can tell it's a whirlpool, but..."

Standing there perplexed, Tayuma thought he heard a voice again.

"..."

"What? Is this whirlpool talking? Or is someone inside it?"

"..."

"Collecting? What are you talking about?"

"..."

"A reaction to the alteration of the principle of causality? Replenishing expended energy? Don't tell me that. That has nothing to do with me."

"..."

"Quit messing around! I have things I have to do! I'll kill them and—
Uwaaaaah, stop! Stop it!"

The black whirlpool began spinning faster and dragged Tayuma's spirit into it. At first he resisted, but as the whirlpool increased its speed, the strength of the force increased proportionately.

"I-I still have things to do! I'll have to kill them and rule the underground and surface! Stop it! Uwaaah! Someone save meee!"

At last, Tayuma was dragged screaming into the whirlpool. The ever-growing whirlpool was now over ten meters across and Tayuma spun around in its vortex as he was slowly dragged towards the center.

"Nooooo, Maguz-samaaa! Daughter of Kurano! I don't care who, someone save me! No! I still want to live!"

Tayuma desperately struggled to break free from the whirlpool, but its force was overwhelming and his efforts were in vain. He repeatedly screamed for help, but no one came to his aid. And so Tayuma slowly spiraled towards the center of the whirlpool.

"I... I don't... want to—"

Upon reaching the center, Tayuma suddenly disappeared. He was dragged completely under—somewhere not of this world.

"..."

Once it took Tayuma, the whirlpool began shrinking. From ten meters to five, and eventually reaching only a few centimeters. And like that, the whirlpool vanished just as it had appeared. Either it shrunk to the point where it could no longer be seen, or it simply disappeared. All that was clear was that the black whirlpool had taken Tayuma.

Tayuma probably didn't even have the time to realize what had happened to him. But that might have been for the better. Considering his strong obsession with this world, he was probably happier not knowing that he had died.

Kiriha's Invasion

Saturday, July 10th

With Tayuma's disappearance, the radical faction's armed uprising came to its inevitable end. Their leader, Maguz, was captured, and their ace in the hole, the Earth Dragon, was destroyed. Having lost two pillars of their cause at once, the radical faction's morale rapidly deteriorated.

Moreover, the radical faction soldiers that had played a part in the decisive battle over the Earth Dragon had already surrendered, which had something of a domino effect. They seemed to have a change of heart and became strangely cooperative with the conservative faction. It also seemed like their hate for people on the surface had lessened in the process, as they were no longer calling for immediate war with the surface.

And that was just where it started. The pacifist sentiment spread to radical soldiers in other places as well. While the radical faction had started the armed uprising, they eventually realized that they were pointing guns at their own people. In other words, the People of the Earth finally understood what war really meant.

If Maguz and the Earth Dragon were still around, the radical faction's morale might have been sustained with charisma and power. But both had fallen into the hands of the conservative faction. With things as they were, there were very few radicals who still thought fighting was the right thing to do, and support for a ceasefire quickly increased. As a result, about one week after the armed uprising began, the battle between two factions of the People of the Earth reached its conclusion.

Though the battle had ended, Maguz wasn't willing to change his ways. He believed that a military invasion and rule by the superior were necessary, and losing to the conservative faction hadn't changed that.

But upon learning of Tayuma's fate, he toned it down a little. The fact that the radical faction soldiers had rejected such a superior power shocked him. Even if the reason for that was Tayuma's fault, Maguz thought of Tayuma as part of his system of rule. For the people to shun him shook Maguz's sense of legitimacy. As such, Maguz dialed back his aggression and indifferently waited for his punishment.

It wasn't until then that Maguz, that Raiga, finally responded to his father's request to meet. It spread whispered rumors that Raiga may yet have a human heart.

Kouma had been horribly depressed ever since learning that his son was Maguz. So much so that he'd even attempted suicide after Raiga was captured in an effort to repent for his sins. Fortunately, however, Karama and Korama had been able to stop him in time, and his attempt ended in failure. With suicide not an option, Kouma requested to retire. By leaving his position as Daiha's attendant, he intended to take responsibility for his son's actions. However, Daiha and Kiriha stopped him there. There was no one more qualified than him, and both Kiriha and Daiha wanted Kouma to continue working for the sake of the People of the Earth. Kouma accepted their will and continued his work as Daiha's right hand, but forewent his salary. He felt that was the absolute least he could do as Raiga's father.

The government on the surface honored their promise. That, in exchange for cooperation in stopping the radical faction, they would overlook the existence of the conservative faction.

When the Sun Rangers went to report on the conservative faction's victory, they were told that their vacation was over and that they were to return to base immediately. As such, they departed just as the battle between the factions drew to a close. It was quite a heroic exit to disappear without taking any of the credit.

But with the Sun Rangers out of the picture and the surface government turning a blind eye to the underground dwellers, both sides above and below ground took care to distance themselves from one another and not cause any further disturbances. In other words, they were neighbors who didn't speak. It

perhaps wasn't the ideal solution, but it would mean peace for the time being.

And so the “unofficial” relationship between the Japanese government and the People of the Earth had come to an end. But even so, the Sun Rangers would still go visit the underground from time to time. Not because they'd received a mission to do so, but rather because they had decided to cooperate with the People of the Earth on their own. They didn't like the idea of abandoning a job partway through, so they wanted to help out. And with their battle against the People of the Earth over, they had plenty of free time on their hands again. Rather than twiddling their thumbs at their base, they decided they'd rather lend a hand to the underground dwellers. Even when duty wasn't calling on them, they still thought and acted like heroes.

And perhaps that was why, whenever they would visit, many would welcome them—the children in particular. The children had heard of Sun Rangers' heroism from the adults, and respected and admired the Sun Rangers like true heroes. It embarrassed the Sun Rangers a bit, but the children's unceasing adoration only motivated them to be better heroes than ever.

The radical faction's armed uprising only confirmed for the conservative faction that fighting wasn't the answer to anything. As such, they would continue their peaceful surface invasion. If anything, with even more eagerness than before. Meanwhile, the radical faction had given up on war with the surface and had begun exploring more realistic ways to protect the pride of the People of the Earth and preserving their unique culture.

And so, finally, the People of the Earth returned to their peaceful everyday lives. Thanks to that, Daiha and Kiriha could spend more time as father and daughter.

“Say, Kiriha...”

“Yes.”

“What will you do now that the fighting is over?”

With the radical faction calmed down, the current state of affairs was no longer on the brink of emergency, and someone other than Kiriha could step in to serve as the commander of the surface invasion. Daiha would be happy for

his daughter to live her life as a normal teenage girl should.

“I will return to the surface. I have an important job to do and important friends there.”

However, Kiriha fully intended to continue her work as commander of the surface invasion. That was the most important thing to her right now. Upon hearing his daughter’s answer, Daiha burst out laughing.

“Hahaha, be honest. You just want to return to that Koutarou boy.”

“I am going back to Koutarou. My place is by his side.”

Kiriha clearly asserted herself without hesitation. She had spent over ten years working for this, and she was more invested than ever in a peaceful surface invasion. She had no reason to hide her intentions from her father, and she smiled proudly.

“Then go. I’m sure she would be satisfied with that reason too.”

Daiha nodded and looked at a photo hanging on the wall. Pictured in it were a younger Daiha and Kiriha with a woman, Daiha’s late wife and Kiriha’s late mother.

Daiha had complex feelings as Kiriha’s father, but if she was heading to the surface because of her first love, then all in all, she was still living her life as a normal teenage girl in her own way. Knowing that, he was sure even his late wife would approve of Kiriha keeping her position as commander of the surface invasion.

“Then I’ll be going.”

Kiriha took a moment to look at the photo together with Daiha. She and her father were smiling right now just like they were in the picture, so Kiriha believed that her mother was smiling down on them from the heavens the same way.

Ever since the battle with the radical faction had ended, Kiriha had been absent from 106. Considering what had happened, of course she was busy with all sorts of things. But after a week had passed, even Koutarou began feeling

lonely.

When he woke up or got home from school, Kiriha wasn't there. Whenever Shizuka or Ruth made tea, there was a leftover cup. Even calculating the score for their typical after-dinner games was different.

Things just weren't the same without Kiriha around, which left Koutarou feeling a little lost. He kept finding himself staring at the tatami mat closest to the entrance of the inner room. Couldn't Kiriha just flip it up and appear already? He couldn't help daydreaming.

"Satomi-saaan."

That was when Yurika appeared in front of Koutarou. She'd just gotten out of the bath and changed into her pajamas. She squatted down on the floor, holding her knees and looking into Koutarou's eyes.

"Are you thinking about Kiriha-san again?"

She wore a small smile and there was gentleness in her eyes—it was a rare expression for her. She was worried about Koutarou's low spirits.

"Something like that. I just felt like seeing her face."

Koutarou spoke his mind honestly with a wry smile. His relationship with Yurika had come a long way, and when it was just the two of them in the apartment, it wasn't uncommon for them to end up talking about serious things like this.

"You don't have to worry. She'll come back soon. We got our happy ending, after all."

Yurika gave Koutarou a sweet smile.

"I'm not worried about that part. I just want to see her face."

"You will soon enough. I bet Kiriha-san wants to see you and everyone else, too."

Koutarou and Yurika were currently alone. And since Koutarou was feeling down, she felt like it was her job to cheer him up. She tried setting a good example and smiled encouragingly.

“Yurika...”

“She might even be on her way here. So—”

Just as Yurika mustered her courage and tried to approach Koutarou...

“Kyaaaaaaaaah!”

The tatami underneath her shot up and sent her flying.

“Bwuh!”

Yurika continued rolling until she slammed into the wall and stopped moving. Surprised by the suddenness of it all, Koutarou could only quietly watch the situation develop.

“I did it again, huh...?”

However, when he heard that voice, he whipped back around towards the tatami mat.

“Hey, Koutarou.”

There, he spied the face of the girl he wanted to see.

“...”

“What’s the matter?”

With Koutarou remaining silent, Kiriha tilted her head in confusion. As she did, the accessories she was wearing lightly rubbed against each other and produced a sound similar to that of a tinkling bell.

“I was just thinking this is nostalgic. When you first came here, it was just like this. Remember?”

Koutarou had fallen quiet because he was surprised that Kiriha had appeared just when he was thinking about how much he wanted to see her. But because it was embarrassing to admit that, he told her the second thing on his mind instead.

“You’re right...”

“Yurika’s luck hasn’t changed, huh?”

Partly to hide his embarrassment, Koutarou walked over to the unconscious

Yurika and picked her up. He then carried her to her bed in the wardrobe.

“Back then... I needed to be forceful, so I didn’t bother checking to see if there was someone above or not.”

“And this time?”

After pulling a blanket over Yurika, Koutarou closed the sliding door to the wardrobe. She seemed to be fine. Worst case scenario, she might wake up tomorrow with a headache.

“I’m a bit nervous, so I didn’t think of checking.”

“Nervous...? Wait, why? Are you not coming in?”

Koutarou turned back to Kiriha, who, for some reason, had only emerged from the hole leading underground from the waist up.

“You don’t mind me intruding?”

“You’d ask that now? Really, what’s the matter?”

“I told you, I’m feeling nervous.”

Koutarou felt normal again after seeing Kiriha, but in contrast, seeing him had made Kiriha nervous. Her stiff expression readily betrayed how she was feeling.

“It’s rare to see you like this... Anyways, come on in.”

“Thank you, Koutarou.”

Kiriha finally entered room 106 and returned the tatami mat to its proper place in an accustomed manner before turning back to Koutarou.

“Huh?”

That was when Koutarou finally noticed that Kiriha was dressed differently than usual. What she was wearing had a similar feel to the shrine maiden-like outfit she normally wore, but this version was mostly white with red and gold threads used decoratively in abundance. It was simple, but equally elegant and luxurious. It obviously wasn’t meant for everyday wear.

When Kiriha stepped into the light, Koutarou could see that she was wearing makeup that matched her outfit. It too was simple but highlighted her beauty. Moreover, she was wearing gleaming, golden accessories all over. It wasn’t any

more than what she usually wore, but these were clearly fancier.

When he stopped to think about it, everything she was wearing looked expensive. Even Koutarou, who knew next to nothing about this kind of thing, could tell that every piece she was wearing was extraordinary. But nothing about it was gaudy. Her overall appearance was simple and clean.

“That’s an unusual outfit. What’s the occasion?”

“Heehee, this is a keepsake from my mother.”

Kiriha put her hand on her chest and smiled proudly.

“Your mother...”

Koutarou knew of Kiriha’s family circumstances. Having lost his own mother, he knew just how special this outfit must be to her.

“Yes. This is the traditional clothing that we, the People of the Earth, wear when getting married.”

“So that’s a wedding dress?”

Koutarou’s eyes opened wide. He’d understood it was special, but he hadn’t expected to hear it was a wedding dress.

“Kiriha-san, are you about to get married?”

“No, I’m not.”

“Well, that’s a relief. But... then why are you wearing that? It would be terrible if it got dirty, right?”

Kiriha had no particular reason for wearing a wedding dress, which meant there had to be a very special reason for it. It wasn’t like Kiriha to wear her mother’s keepsakes for the fun of it.

“I came here to invade.”

“Invade...? As in, this room?”

“No, I don’t need this room anymore. My reasons for doing that have been taken care of.”

“Huh, I guess you’re right.”

Kiriha had invaded room 106 as a safeguard to keep the radical faction in line. And now that the troubles with the radical faction were over, Kiriha no longer had any reason to invade. But here she was, saying she'd come to do exactly that. Koutarou didn't understand what was going on.

"So what are you going to invade?"

"About that... There's something I need to talk to you about."

Kiriha moved over to Koutarou, sat down formally, and straightened her posture. Her expression was stiffer than ever before. Seeing that, he understood that whatever this was, it was serious.

"What is this all of a sudden?"

With her sitting down, he felt weird about standing up, so he sat down formally in front of her. Waiting for him to do so, Kiriha placed her hands slightly in front of her knees on the floor and deeply lowered her head.

"Satomi Koutarou-sama, I wish to request something of you."

Her overly formal words and serious voice, her mother's keepsake and her bow... Seeing it all, Koutarou understood that this was more than just serious. It was special.

"Kiriha-san?"

But just what could she be doing all this for? Slight unease welled up in Koutarou's chest. He began worrying that she might say that she was going to return underground for good.

"Please allow me to invade your life."

But what she said defied all his expectations.

"Wh-What...?"

His unease and everything else vanished instantly from his mind. It was like he hadn't heard a word she'd said.

"If you don't permit it, then I won't appear in your presence ever again. That is the resolution I made before coming here today."

Even after saying what she needed to, Kiriha kept her hands on the tatami

mat. She raised her head just enough to look Koutarou in the eye. She's come to the apartment tonight to hear his answer, which was why she'd been so nervous. She knew all along that she might not get the answer she wanted. That's why Kiriha was paying attention to every word he said and every move he made. Everything hinged on this moment for her.

"Th-That's..."

At first Koutarou had been nothing but confused, but as he peered into her eyes, he gradually came to understand her intentions. What she meant by invasion, and why she had chosen to use that word. And once he understood all that, Koutarou couldn't help but find it funny.

"Jeez..."

Koutarou cracked a smile. While he was impressed by the strength and depth of the feelings she was directing at him, he was also amazed by her meticulousness. This wasn't a request, but a horribly clever and roundabout threat.

"Kiriha-san, you really understand me well."

Koutarou smirked as he slumped his shoulders.

What Kiriha wanted hadn't changed one bit since eleven years ago. It was to marry Koutarou and spend their lives together supporting each other. That's why she'd come in the wedding dress tonight.

But if she'd been perfectly upfront about what she wanted, Koutarou would have refused. It was still too early for that, and the problems with Theia and Yurika hadn't been resolved yet. He would've had to turn her down under the present circumstances.

That's why Kiriha hadn't said "marry me," but "let me invade your life." She was attempting to obfuscate her intentions and create a reason to always remain by Koutarou's side. It put Koutarou in a difficult position. He couldn't refuse her request because she was saying he would never see her again if he did. And he'd just learned how lonely it was not to have her around. There was no way Koutarou could deny her now.

"You've said all kinds of things to me before... but this is the cruelest."

“I have waited over ten years for what is right in front of me. I have no intentions of letting it slip past me, even if I have to use underhanded means.”

“And that’s... why you’ll invade.”

“Yes. I will invade your life. At any cost.”

If Koutarou accepted Kiriha’s request, it would mean always allowing her to be with him no matter where his life led him. It was practically the same as marrying her. Indeed, her request was either a clever threat, or it was a very transparent ploy to invade his heart for real.

“You’ve taken the political implications into consideration, right?”

“Of course. I have no intentions of forcibly staying by your side to the point that it becomes a problem for you.”

“Good grief, you’ve really thought everything out, huh?”

Kiriha had no intention of forcing their relationship. To her, it was important that Koutarou agreed to her being by his side. In a sense, she felt much how Maki did about the Satomi knights. She wanted a place to belong, and she wanted to be told it was okay to be there.

“...Okay, okay, I get it. I lose. Invade to your heart’s content.”

That was where Koutarou gave up. He couldn’t refuse her, and truth be told, he didn’t want to. Not being able to see Kiriha for an entire week had been bad enough, but he was too embarrassed to admit that to her face. He had to take a slightly manlier, nonchalant approach.

“Thank you very much. I will invade with heartfelt sincerity.”

Kiriha smiled as large tears rolled down her cheeks. The eleven years she had spent waiting since their first meeting had finally been rewarded. The person Kiriha loved wanted her around. To her, there was no greater joy. And so her tears flowed freely without an end in sight, to the point she could no longer even see Koutarou’s face.

“Oh yeah, I forgot. Here.”

Koutarou pulled something out of his pocket and put it in Kiriha’s hand.

“This is...”

Though she couldn't see it through her tears, she could tell exactly what it was by touch alone. It was a rare Kabutonga card with her name written on it. It was the memento Koutarou had given her all those years ago. After Daiha was taken hostage, Kiriha had steeled herself for death and returned the card to Koutarou. He'd cared for it in the meantime, and was now giving it back to her.

“Hngh, this... this... I... hnnngh...”

Upon receiving the card, Kiriha began crying even harder than before. She was now like a child.

“H-Hey, why are you crying so much?”

Koutarou had given Kiriha the card to stop her from crying, but it'd had the opposite effect. He'd only added fuel to the fire.

“You don't get it... hic... Onii-chan, y-you don't... get anything...”

“Huh?”

“If you give me this... right now... hic... then I'll... then I'll definitely... Uwaaah!”

At that point, words failed Kiriha. An intense, endless love overflowed from her heart. However, since those emotions turned into cries as they reached her throat she couldn't properly convey them to her beloved.

“Uwaaah, uwaaaaah!”

Instead, she jumped at Koutarou and embraced him. It was the only way she could convey her feelings right now. A complex, delicate love whirled inside her chest, but she was agitated that the only way she could express it was through the strength of her arms.

“...Even though you've gotten bigger, you're still a spoiled little girl.”

Koutarou firmly hugged Kiriha back. Up until now, she had always been in a position that required a lot of responsibility from her. That's why he wanted to let her do as she pleased now until her desires turned into something definitive.

Now that I think about it...

As Koutarou spoke, Kiriha's gaze was naturally drawn to his moving lips. As she stared at them, she remembered the promise he'd made her at the start of all this.

"Once this is all over, I'll be satisfied as long as you give me a kiss with a smile."

"Heehee, now you've said it. Let's hurry up and end this so I can shower you with kisses."

Recalling those words, Kiriha finally realized that when her tears prevented her from using words, embracing Koutarou wasn't the only way to convey her feelings to him.



As summer kicked into high gear, the daytime temperature would soar over 30 degrees. But in the mountainous city of Kisshouharukaze, once the sun set, the temperature usually dropped to something far more manageable. Usually.

“I-It’s so hot...”

Koutarou planted his face on the tea table as he mumbled to himself. His forehead was covered in sweat. The temperature in room 106 didn’t drop much even after the sun set, and the reason for that was its unusually high population density. The body heat of ten people in such a small room really added up. It was said a single person’s body heat was equivalent to a 100-watt bulb, so ten people would be like a giant 1,000-watt bulb. There was basically a heater in the room.

“Stop being so stubborn and have Maki cast a spell.”

“I’ll make it cheap.”

“When it comes to magic, there’s nothing wrong with *not* using it.”

But most everyone other than Koutarou had a way of beating the heat. The Forthorthians had personal air conditioners that they could wear. Harumi’s PAF also had a cooling function. Shizuka could head out into space if she so pleased, so the summer heat was nothing to her. Maki used magic to cool off, and Sanae had her share the spell with her.

The only ones without anything to do for themselves were Koutarou and Kiriha. Koutarou was just being stubborn, but Kiriha had been born with a high tolerance for heat. So while he looked like he was dying, Kiriha was the same as always. Neither of them were cooling themselves, but their appearances couldn’t contrast more.

“If you’re too stubborn, you’ll end up like Yurika.”

Sanae pointed to a corner of the room as she spoke. Yurika had refrained from casting magic on herself, as that would constitute a personal use of magic. As a result, she’d succumbed to the heat inside the wardrobe was currently lying on the floor with her eyes rolled back into her head.

“It’s fine. Taking the harder path in life builds character.”

Koutarou had actually refused having magic cast on him because of Yurika. He didn't want her to be the only one suffering through the heat. But since his pride was on the line, he didn't want to admit that. He would simply have to endure.

"Heh..."

Kiriha, who wasn't using any cooling either, smiled at Koutarou. It was an incredibly gentle smile. Ever since the battle with the radical faction, she'd gotten a bit more expressive like a girl her age should be. While there was seemingly no difference on the surface, she was much less reserved when in the company of her closest friends. None of the girls of room 106 pointed that out, but they all welcomed it as a good thing.

"Then, Koutarou, how about this?"

Kiriha pulled out from her pocket a piece of paper folded over four times and opened it in front of Koutarou. There was a picture of a blue sky, clear water, a white sand beach, and a shining sun. It was a pamphlet from the travel agency at the shopping street.

"You wouldn't mind if we went out to go play at the beach, right?"

The pamphlet contained information on a three day, two night travel package. Spending the day at the beach, having a luxurious dinner in the evening, and finally enjoying the hot spring in the hotel at night. That was indeed an attractive proposal. However, Koutarou also had his worries.

"It's not like we won the lottery this time. This'll cost money, won't it?"

"Don't be so cheap. You still have all of the salary I've paid you."

"But that's—"

"What are you saving it up for? Knowing you, you probably won't ever use it for anything."

Koutarou hadn't spent a single yen from the salary he'd received from Theia. He held back from spending it since it was essentially money he'd gotten from a friend.

"Okay, I get it. It's definitely better to use it so that everyone can have fun

than to save it up for no reason.”

Koutarou quickly made up his mind. He felt like Theia was absolutely right.

I only need to use it like this in the future too. I guess I was overthinking it...

Spending his salary on Theia and the others wasn't a bad way of using it. If anything that was an ideal use for it.

“All right! The beach! Yurika, Yurika, we're going to the beach!”

“Zzz... Zzz...”

“Yurika-chan is still sleeping, ho!”

“She's such a sleepyhead, ho!”

“Zzz... Zzz...”

“Jeez, she's so carefree! We'll have to go buy new swimsuits and everything!”

The first one to let out a cheer of joy was Sanae. She'd been a ghost on their last beach trip, so she was looking forward to swimming more than anyone.

“Harumi, we're going to the beach. Can you swim?”

“I can, but... I don't know if my stamina will last.”

“Don't worry. You can use PAF in the water too. That said, I haven't performed any aquatic experiments, so I hope you'll let me collect some data.”

“Yes, by all means!”

Clan and Harumi were going to run experiments while they were there. Their relationship so far had brought about great improvements for Clan's invention, and it would likely only improve further after their beach trip.

“The beach...”

Meanwhile, Maki sat there looking rather puzzled. Noticing her expression, Ruth and Theia called out to her.

“Maki-san, is this your first time going to the beach?”

“Yes... The idea has never occurred to me before this.”

“I see, you were born in a different country, weren't you?”

Maki was born in the slums of Folsaria. She'd led a grim life on the battlefield, so something like going to the beach for fun had never dawned on her.

"Then this is a great opportunity. Satomi-kun likes going to the beach, so how can you be a great vassal if you don't go with him, Aika-san?" asked Shizuka.

"You're right. I'll give it my best!"

"Very good. That's the spirit. He's an idiot, so I can rest easy if I know you're with him."

"Do your best to carry out your duty, Maki-san."

With that last little push from Shizuka, Maki's expression brightened up. She was eager to perform any duty she might have as Koutarou's vassal, and being reminded of her duties was always a quick pick-me-up for Maki.

So this really was the right answer...

Koutarou satisfyingly looked on as the girls erupted into all kinds of discussions about the beach. Kiriha, who was sitting next to him, tugged on the sleeve of his t-shirt.

"Say, Koutarou, what kind of swimsuit do you think I should wear?"

"Why are you asking me?"


"No reason. I just want you to decide. Do you not want to?"

"Th-That's not it, but..."

"You don't have to decide right away. Just tell me what kind of design you'd like when you make up your mind."

"Okay..."

And so it was decided that Koutarou and the girls would be going to the beach. They'd gone last summer as well, but their numbers and group dynamic were totally different now. It could be seen in the noisy, endlessly cheerful apartment, but no one stopped to think about it too much. It was much more fun just to live in the moment and enjoy it.



Article 19
Mutual, peaceful, and
personal invasions between
the signatories of the Corona
Convention are fully
supported.



Corona Convention

New! July 10th, 2010

Afterword

Long time no see. It's the author, Takehaya.

This has been volume 16. In this afterword, I'd like to talk about the *Invaders of the Rokujouma!*? anime a little more. But because I don't have much space this time around, I'll make it quick.

This past half a year has been very busy with anime related stuff, but as we approach the start of the broadcast, I've got more time. This is natural, of course, since there's less work for me to do the closer we get to the air date. I'm both grateful and sad for this. When this volume goes on sale, the anime won't be airing yet, but depending on when you read it, it might already be out. Anyways, like everyone else, I'm also eagerly awaiting the anime.

Now then, putting the anime aside, I'd like to touch on this volume a little bit. Here, the civil war between the People of the Earth unfolds. Having reached a definitive point where the conservative faction and the radical faction can't come to an agreement, they're left with no option but to use force to try and reckon with each other. Since the conservative faction is filled with pacifists, this development is very painful to Kiriha and those she leads. In a way, the conservative faction feels like they've lost just being forced to take up arms. But when they do, as for what conclusion they'll reach... I guess you'll have to find out for yourself. To those of you have already read this volume, I hope you enjoyed it.

Finally, I'd like to give my usual acknowledgements. I would like to thank the editorial department for helping with the publishing of this book and for their help with the anime. My thanks to everyone else who was involved as well; to Poco-san in charge of illustrations; all of the voice actors; and finally, to all you readers who bought this book.

Let us meet again in the afterword of volume 17.

June, 2014

Takehaya

Bonus Short Stories

Side: Karama & Korama

Mornings for the haniwas started early. That was because their master, Kiriha, rose before dawn. She took on the important job of making breakfast in room 106, and the haniwas would always tag along with her.

“Ho! Yurika-chan is still asleep, ho!”

“Let’s wipe the drool off her face before we wake her, ho!”

“Mmm, I-I can’t eat any more... Hee, heeheehee...”

The haniwas’ first job of the day was to rouse Yurika. They’d never once seen her get up on her own. Moreover, she was a complete mess—especially in her sleep. Part of their job was making sure she was presentable before Koutarou woke up.

“Let’s shake her, ho! Even though we know it won’t do any good, we have to try, ho!”

“We sure work hard, ho! We love working, ho! We’re model servants, ho!”

After climbing up into the wardrobe, the haniwas quickly got to work shaking Yurika. It would have been more than enough to wake any normal person, but Yurika wasn’t any normal person. She was still in a far, far off dreamland.

“Hmm, mmm, mmph... But it is a buffet... Mmm, mmph... I’ll take some more home with me... Mmph, mmm, hmm...”

“Brother, she’s not waking up at all, ho!”

“Then let’s move to plan B, ho!”

The haniwas had expected that much. This wasn’t their first rodeo. Undeterred, they swiftly moved on to the next phase: using feathers to tickle Yurika’s nose. That had been their surefire way of waking her recently.

“Ah, ahhh...”

At the first touch of a feather, Yurika’s nose started twitching right away.

“It’s working, ho!”

“Just one more push, ho!”

Anticipating that Yurika was just about to sneeze, the haniwas started tickling her nose even more. However...

“Aaahh—chu!”

“Ho! Ho, ho, ho!”

“Wawawah, ho!”

However, their opponent was formidable. Yurika did indeed sneeze, but then rolled over and went right back to sleep, trapping the haniwas beneath her.

“Save us, hooooo!”

“Ane-san, Ane-san! We were done in by an unexpected counterattack, ho!”

The haniwas desperately struggled to get out from under Yurika, who showed nary a sign of waking up. They seemed to be suffering at first glance, but the hardworking haniwas were actually quite happy. They adored Yurika for giving them such a tough challenge.

Side: Kasagi Shizuka

Shizuka’s biggest concern was how heavy she got whenever she fought at full power. The ultimate cause was the power of the dragon inside her distorting space around her, however, so it wasn’t really like she herself gained any weight when it happened. Nevertheless, any teenage girl instinctually feared the sound of the floor creaking beneath her. It was a big problem for Shizuka, even if it was the price she had to pay for saving her friends.

“Uncle Alu, can’t you prioritize doing something about this space distortion nonsense?”

“I’d love to, but correcting space requires incredibly complex magic. So if I don’t wait until I recover some mana to do it, it will take far longer for things to

return to normal."

"No way... We're all talking about going to the beach together, and at this rate, I'm going to be the only one who can't go swimming!"

Shizuka was especially concerned about her weight right now because of her upcoming vacation with the Corona House crew. She didn't want to sink straight to the bottom of the ocean when she got in the water. She didn't even want to imagine her legs sinking into the sand when she walked out onto the beach.

"Isn't it okay to weigh just a few tons?"

"It's not okay! Just imagine me walking along the seafloor, Sanae-chan!"

"Hmm... But isn't that cool?"

"Honestly, jeez..."

"Well, if it bothers you that much, why not ask those guys?"

Seeing Shizuka's shoulders droop all the way down to the floor, Sanae pointed to the corner of the room at Clan and Ruth who were having fun talking about something.

"Of course! Ruth-san, Clan-san!"

"Yes?"

"What's the matter?"

"Can't you make me weigh less with the power of science?!"

"You're referring to correcting the distortion rather than some kind of diet, correct?"

"Yes, exactly!"

"Well, it's not impossible."

"Really?!"

Shizuka excitedly leaned forward. Clan nodded in response.

"All we have to do is create an inverse distortion to cancel out the one that Alunaya-san generates."

“Then please do it! I’m begging you!”

“I don’t mind. Would a ten second duration be okay?”

“What?! T-Ten seconds?!”

Shizuka’s eyes shot wide open upon hearing that unexpected detail. Ruth nodded solemnly and began explaining.

“The amount of energy that Alunaya-sama holds and uses is massive. We can counter that with additional energy, but there isn’t a battery in the galaxy with enough capacity to make much difference for long.”

Considering the purpose, modifying a personal distortion barrier would work best, but the battery on one of those was hardly anything in the face of the Fire Dragon Emperor. In the end, the problem was that Alunaya was simply too strong.

“N-No way...”

“Looks like you’ll be walking on the seafloor after all.”

“I absolutely refuse!”

It was indeed starting to look more and more like Shizuka’s beach vacation would be a lonely one at the bottom of the ocean.

Side: Ruthkania

Several months had passed since Ruth first began practicing with a sword. Seeing her beautiful form as she swung one now, it looked like all her training had paid off. Whether it was because of her ancestry, an inherent talent for it, or her meticulous and hardworking personality, her swordsmanship had really taken shape.

“Now why can’t you move like that against a real opponent?”

“But, Master... hitting someone with a sword would hurt.”

“I guess it’s just not in your nature...”

Koutarou flashed a bitter smile. Ruth’s swordsmanship was splendid, but there was indeed something about it that didn’t suit her. She was extremely

logical, but she didn't care for violent solutions. As such, it was naturally difficult for her to raise a sword against someone.

"But if you end up getting hurt, this will have all been for nothing, Ruth-san."

"I know that in my head, but... it's still hard..."

If Ruth used 100 percent of her skill against practice dummies, she only used about 50 percent when it came to fighting real people—even in training. And it didn't matter how exquisite her swordsmanship was if she refused to use it. She wouldn't even be able to defend herself like this.

"Satomi-kun, why don't we just limit Vice Captain Ruth-san to nonlethal weapons?"

Maki, who was sitting in on their training, offered up a potential solution. Her idea was simple: if Ruth held back because she didn't like hurting people, then they should just give her a weapon that made it impossible for her to really hurt anyone.

"Huh, yeah. That's a good idea. Why don't we give it a try, Ruth-san? Try it with your light swords."

"R-Right."

With a very serious expression on her face, Ruth pulled out her beloved swords of light—the beam sabers that her ancestor Flair had once used. Instead of wielding the full beam blade, however, she set them to shock mode. She then firmly gripped the swords in both hands. Her hesitation seemed to weaken, and she took a bolder stance than before.

"I guess it's in her blood..."

Seeing Ruth hold her light swords at the ready, Koutarou was taken aback with nostalgia. She looked just like Flair, who had been an ally of Koutarou's in the past. The resemblance truly was striking. It was almost like she was the one standing in front of him now...

"Master, I'm not sure what to do when you look at me like that..."

All of a sudden Ruth's face turned red and she looked down. Her posture withered and she shyly pulled back. The gentle eyes Koutarou sometimes

looked at her with completely quashed any desire she had to fight him.

“I’m sorry, Ruth-san.”

Koutarou quickly flipped down his helmet’s faceguard. For the sake of practice, he was wearing standard, non-powered plate armor. And with the faceguard down, it was hard to tell it was even him underneath it. With his face hidden, Ruth returned to her emboldened stance.

“All right, Ruth-san. Go for it.”

“Here I come!”

With a warning shout, Ruth quickly leaped forward. Since she wore very little in the way of armor, she was extremely fast. She closed the distance between her and Koutarou in an instant and brought her sword down on him.

“Haaa!”

“Uwah!”

Koutarou hurriedly moved to shield himself. Ruth’s movements were far sharper and more focused than they had been before. And with his heavy armor and large sword, just blocking her attacks took all his concentration. They continued to spar like that for a while.

“You’ve sure gotten stronger, Ruth-san...”

“It’s all thanks to your guidance, Master.”

In the end, the weight of Koutarou’s armor exhausted him and Ruth scored a hit on his torso. He’d lost, but when he saw the big smile on Ruth’s face, he felt like a winner anyway. Inspiring that kind of feeling in others was one of Ruth’s most amazing qualities. Koutarou only wished she could see it for herself.









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Invaders of the Rokujouma!? Volume 16

by Takehaya

Translated by Warnis Edited by Morgan Dreher

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