



Takehaya
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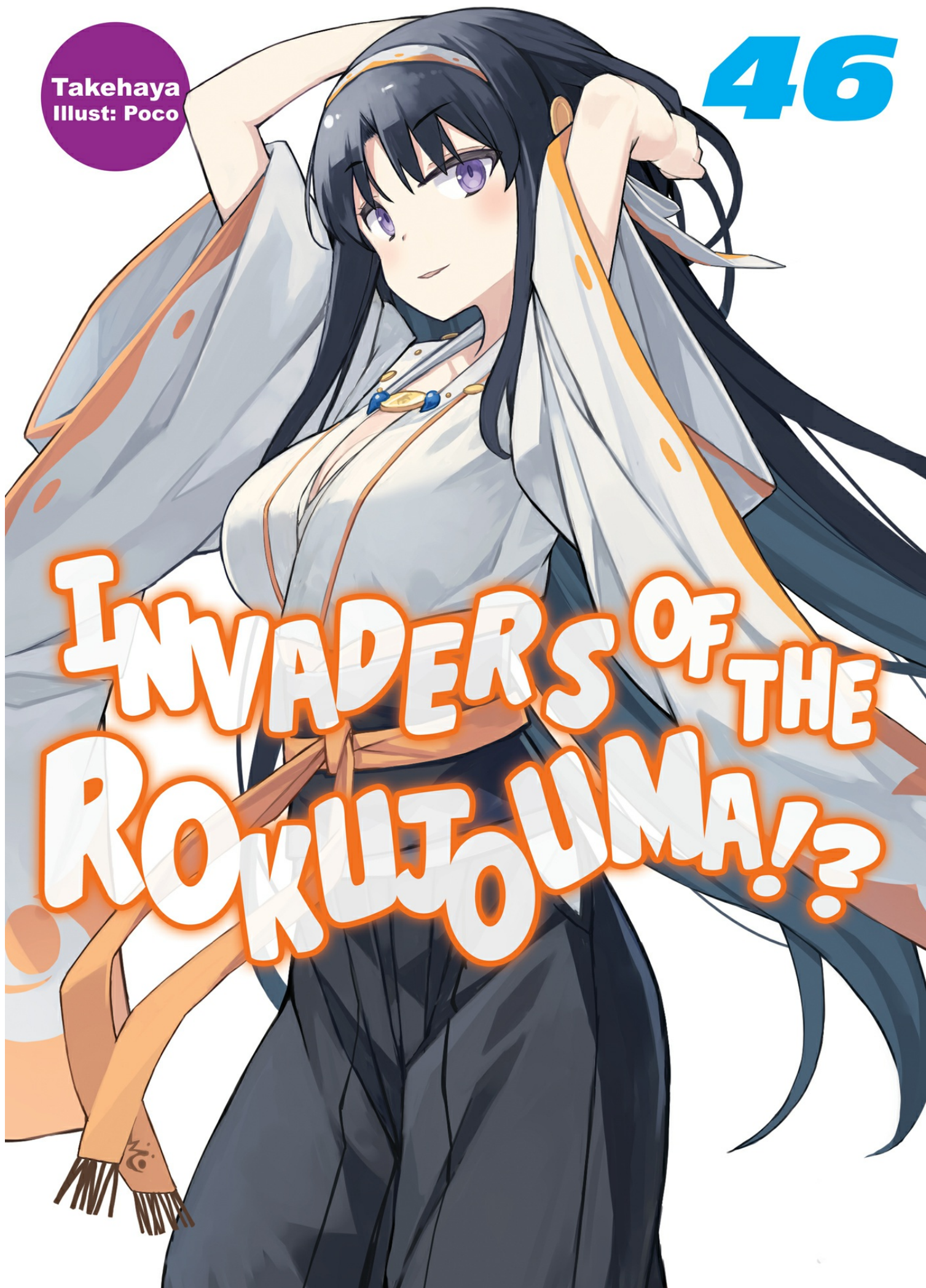
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INVADERS OF THE ROKUTOU MA!?

Takehaya
Illust: Poco

46

INVADERS OF THE ROKUTSUMA!?



INVADERS OF THE
ROKUJOUMA!? 46



THE THREE BRAINS MAKE A DETERMINED MARCH ON FOOT.

“WE WILL HAVE TO MAKE IT HOME. OUR SURVIVAL SKILLS ARE BEING PUT TO THE TEST.”



“MASTEEER!”

“EEEEEEEEK!”

**THE LANDING
CRAFT THAT THE
THREE ARE RIDING ON
WAS SHOT DOWN?!**

**WHAT IS
THE TRUTH
BEHIND THE
EMERGENCY?**

**“THAT’S
ANE-GO
FOR YOU,
HO!”**

**“NOT
FLINCHING
IN THE
SLIGHTEST,
HO!”**

**“IT WAS A
FLEETING
LIFE...”**

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FACTIONS MAP

KASAGI SHIZUKA

Koutarou's classmate and the landlord of Corona House.

Alunaya the Fire Dragon Emperor resides within her.



KURANO KIRIHA

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

UNDERGROUND DWELLERS
(OF THE PEOPLE OF THE EARTH)



SATOMI KOUTAROU

Our protagonist, and the formal tenant of room 106.

Also the Blue Knight.



MATSUDAIRA KOTORI

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



MATSUDAIRA KENJI

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

**KOUTAROU'S
CHILDHOOD FRIENDS**





AIKA MAKI

A former member of the evil magical girl group, Darkness Rainbow. After bonding with Koutarou, she's now a loyal member of the Satomi band of knights.

MAGICAL GIRLS (OF THE MAGICAL KINGDOM OF FOLSARIA)

NIJINO YURIKA

The Magical Girl of Love and Courage, Rainbow Yuriika. She's a walking disaster, but she's grown into a magical girl who really makes it count when she needs to.



RESIDENTS OF CORONA HOUSE



GHOST FORM



HIGASHIHONGAN SANAE

The ghostly girl that used to haunt Koutarou. She now has her body back and is more energetic than ever before.

GHOSTS



RUTHKANIA NYE PARDOMSHIHA

Theia's retainer and assistant. She's extremely happy to be able to serve the master she so admires.



THEIAMILLIS GRE FORTHORTHE

Princess of Forthorthe and the Blue Knight's liege. She's blossomed into a wonderful leader, but still quick to pick a fight.



CLARIOSSA DAORA FORTHORTHE

Koutarou's partner during his adventures in past Forthorthe. She's still growing, both as a princess and as a scientist.

PRINCESS ALAIA



NALFA LAREN

A transfer student who's officially come from Forthorthe, but it seems she shares a special connection with Koutarou and company...



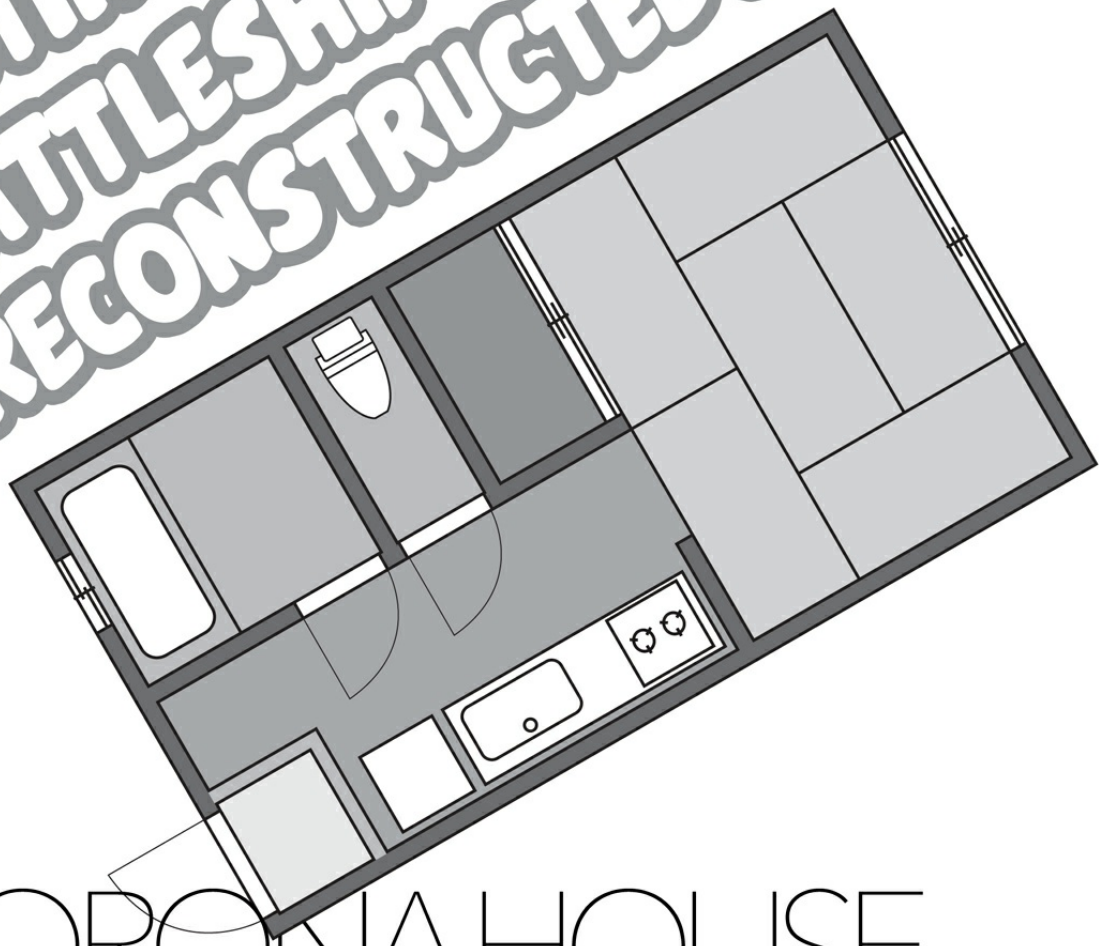
SAKURABA HARUMI

The reincarnation of Princess Alaia, whose soul traveled two thousand years through time to be with her special someone. She's currently happy to be living a normal life alongside him.

ALIENS

(OF THE HOLY FORTHORTHE GALACTIC EMPIRE)

WAITING FOR A
BATTLESHIP TO BE
RECONSTRUCTED?!



CORONA HOUSE
ROOM 106

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Traces of Conspiracy

November 29, Tuesday

Sanae was angry. As honest as she was, she couldn't hide her feelings. Her cheeks were puffed up like a cartoon character's. She pushed her face against the desk and complained. "I think that Koutarou should be more honest!"

"Why is that?" Kiriha asked with a smile. Sanae's appearance was heartwarming to her.

"I think it's about time for him to start developing the desire to take a peek at us bathing!" Sanae felt that Koutarou was being too serious. It would be more fun for her if he let his emotions go rampant.

"Koutarou is the supreme commander. In the face of a large battle, I don't think he'd be able to do that," Kiriha explained with a wry smile.

Koutarou was the Blue Knight, Forthorthe's hero. He had an overwhelming amount of influence, politically, militarily, and economically. He was also being held up as an example of morality. So prioritizing himself and acting emotionally would have a negative influence on everything. In particular, Koutarou needed to refrain from doing anything irresponsible before the big battle.

"I know that," Sanae said. "But I'm a third-year high schooler, so there are things I want to try! Like screaming, 'Eeep! Koutarou, you pervert!'"

"In other words," Kiriha summarized, "you want to feel more like a high schooler in private."

"Yeah, I guess so."

Sanae wasn't saying that Koutarou should act as he pleased toward just anyone, but she wanted him to at least be more selfish around those close to him.

"But Koutarou just isn't honest. When I tried to get in the bath with him the other day, he said, 'Evil spirits, begone!'" Sanae cried.

Koutarou had chased her out, saying that he couldn't take a bath with a girl. Sanae had simply accepted it until recently, but she'd changed her mind after hearing that Koutarou and Nana had been in the same bath. So lately, she'd been astral projecting to go through walls and trying to force her way in. Koutarou had then brought out the charms he had gotten from his grandmother to chase her out. An explosion would happen if Sanae were to touch the charm that said 'Evil spirits, begone.'

"Well, there's no other way to chase you out," Kiriha said with another smile. It appeared Sanae's frank display of feelings was troubling Koutarou. She found it heartwarming but was envious at the same time.

"Sanae-chan is angry about two things, ho!" a haniwa explained.

"That big brother is keeping her in check, and that the charm is still exploding on touch, ho!" a second chimed in.

Although there had been an explosion, Sanae hadn't really been hurt. There'd accidentally been an explosion in the spring, but it had just ruffled her hair and not much more. But the charm going off meant that Koutarou saw Sanae's astral projection as an evil spirit.

The explosion being so small meant that those thoughts had been drastically reduced, but Sanae didn't like that they were happening at all. She was also unhappy about Koutarou using a charm to evade her expression of love.

"I see. That is complicated," Kiriha said.

"How rude," Sanae complained.

"Haha... Sanae, could you reduce your spiritual energy a little?"

"All right."

Sanae was in the process of using her vast stores of spiritual energy to assist Kiriha in her work of adjusting instruments related to that very topic.

"It worked this time, Kii," Clan exclaimed. "The spiritual energy inserted was reduced, but the output of the generator increased."

"Sanae-sama, can you haphazardly increase and decrease the level of spiritual energy so that I can fine-tune the output?" Ruth asked.

Clan and Ruth were present as well, and the girls were in the process of putting together a new machine to replace Warlord III Rev, which had been damaged during the battle the other day, although most of the damage had come from how Koutarou and Maki had used it. The frame hadn't been able to handle the movements that they wanted. That was why they were talking about making a new machine instead of repairing the old one.

"Yes, sir," Sanae replied.

As instructed, Sanae repeatedly increased and lowered the amount of spiritual energy. If they adjusted the generator to withstand her level of fluctuation, there would be no problems with Koutarou using it. That made it fundamentally different from Warlord, which had been made with normal people in mind. Naturally, that made it more difficult to handle. It was expected that nobody other than Koutarou would be able to use this machine.

Koutarou was, of course, involved in their work. However, he was also training with the soldiers, so he didn't stop by Clan's laboratory until early evening.

"Still...to think you are already testing a new machine. It hasn't been that long since the last battle," he pondered.

There was already a machine built in the laboratory. It lacked armor and wasn't complete yet, but its functions were rapidly taking shape, so Koutarou was surprised to see the new machine taking shape so fast.

"Well, it is mostly using basic parts," Clan explained. "Not everything is being built from scratch."

They were using general parts and layouts for much of the machine, allowing them to rapidly create a new one. Forthorthe also had artificial intelligence to assist with the blueprints, which made a big difference. It had analyzed the battle data to point out what parts needed to be customized.

"But you're making a new one because of the serious wear on it, right?" Koutarou tilted his head. The new machine needed to be able to handle him and Maki getting serious, which the old one hadn't. Yet they were using the old parts, which Koutarou had his doubts about.

Ruth smiled at him. “That is part of it, Master.”

“What do you mean?”

“Since the parts are worn down so much, they will need to be replaced regularly,” she explained. “And even if all the parts are custom-made to handle the strain, it won’t make too much of a difference given how often the parts are replaced.”

“Oh, I see...” Koutarou came to a realization. “So it’s like replacing custom parts five times, or replacing common parts ten times.”

“Yes. It is more convenient to restrict where custom parts are used.”

“Right...it’s smarter to have repair parts that can be used by other machines too.” Koutarou nodded. Reinforcing all of the parts was ideal, but since it was a machine, wear and tear was unavoidable—which meant that parts would be replaced regularly, so it made sense to leave those that would be replaced often as they were. Custom parts were expensive, and there was no other use for them. Since they were a bottleneck when it came to replenishing, the fewer the better. One could call it strategic ingenuity.

“Hehe, by the way Clan-dono wanted to make a fully custom machine at first,” Kiriha said with a grin.

Clan had initially wanted to make the best machine possible to guarantee Koutarou’s victory, so she had looked to design a fully customized and invincible machine.

“Kii!” Clan yelled with a red face. She’d wanted to keep that from Koutarou.

“But Ruth-chan was the one to stop her, ho!” Karama said.

“Thanks to that, the machine has already taken shape, ho!” Korama added.

The invincible machine would cost too much, and it would take a lot of time to construct. Moreover, there were operational problems to contend with. So Ruth had stepped in to make adjustments to keep the machine realistic while still respecting Clan’s policy as much as possible. In other words, the machine in front of Koutarou had only been made possible with Ruth’s assistance.

“Frankly, this design puts me more at ease as well,” Kiriha noted.

“You’re being mean, Kii!”

“That’s true. There’s no point in an invincible weapon if it never reaches the battlefield,” Koutarou added.

The biggest priority with weapons was delivering the required number to the required place at the required time. If only a few cannons could be sent to the battlefield, it made more sense to mass-produce bows. The difficult part about war was managing the supply in accordance with the current situation.

“Not you too, Veltlion!”

“But sometimes, perfection is necessary. Such as PAFs custom-tailored to patients. You should be using your talents for that,” Koutarou said. Clan wanted to object some more, but his words put a stop to that. Her cheeks gradually turned red. Naturally, she wasn’t angry. Koutarou’s words had shown his deep trust for her and moved her. Clan instead cast her eyes down and started fiddling with her hair.

If you say that, Glasses is going to try to make another invincible robot...

Sanae didn’t understand any of the technical talk, but she could tell that Koutarou had gotten Clan fired up. Next time, Clan was sure to try to make another custom machine in order to protect her beloved Koutarou and deliver a perfect victory to him.

Haha, Koutarou can be so stupid... she thought to herself while looking at the other four with a smile.

Tuning the new machine was put on a break for dinner. There was other work waiting for them as well, so they were busy.

“Koutarou, let’s go eat!” Sanae said. “I’m hungry!” She pulled off the electrode on her head and jumped off the chair. With energetic steps, she ran up to him.

“All right, hang on a second,” Koutarou answered. He was setting up and porting data to the machine, but he left the rest of the work to the AI and stood up. Sanae had a point, as he was feeling hungry.

“Let’s go, everyone!” Sanae cried.

“I suppose so.” Kiriha nodded.

“Thank you for the invitation, Sanae-sama,” Ruth said and stood up from her chair.

The girls were even busier than Koutarou. Considering the work they had pending, they needed to eat dinner. During this busy period, having dinner together was one of the things they looked forward to the most.

“Kii, Pardomshiha, hold on!” Clan called out. “I wanted to talk to you about you-know-what a little.”

The two girls stopped and turned toward Clan. They both had serious expressions on their faces.

“How much is a little?” Sanae casually asked. Right now, food was the biggest thing on her mind.

“It is only a few minutes, so please go ahead with Veltlion, Sanae.”

“Then I’ll order food for you too. Are you three okay with the same menu?”

“Yes, please.” Clan nodded.

“Leave it to me! Okay, let’s go, Koutarou!” Sanae exclaimed.

“Okay, okay, you don’t have to pull me,” he said. “The food isn’t going to run away.”

“Of course it is!”

Koutarou was dragged out of the laboratory, and after seeing that, Kiriha and Ruth turned to face Clan.

“So, what did the intelligence agency say?” Kiriha asked with a stern look. Clan and Ruth had the same look.

“It is just as you expected,” Clan reported.

“Is that for certain?”

“Yes.” Clan nodded. “They just came in with decisive evidence.”

“How should we handle this?” Ruth asked. “If we make a mistake, we will lose months of time.”

The three discussed the matter for only a few minutes, like they'd promised Sanae. But the contents of that discussion would shake Koutarou and the others, as well as the core of Forthorthe.

The Holy Forthorthe Galactic Empire had several secret organizations that served the empress directly. The most well-known one was the intelligence agency. Though its name and scale were unclear, the people had known the organization existed for a long time. Meanwhile, there were also secret organizations that were completely unknown, such as the court magicians. The old Darkness Rainbow leaders had been appointed as such, and they were in charge of dealing with incidents regarding magic and spiritual energy, but they had little direct contact with Elfaria. It had been a bitter pill to swallow since Forthorthe as a country had no countermeasures for magic and spiritual energy, but it was working out well for the moment. If anything, they were performing admirably. As a result, the organization was gradually being expanded with the help of personnel on loan from Folsaria. But that also meant that they were busy.

"Crim-chan, stop standing around and help out," Orange said.

"But I'm bored," Crimson complained.

The girls were busy at work today as well. Their job was to decontaminate the battlefield. Waste had been used in a limited capacity in the previous battle. That waste was material that had been drenched in negative spiritual energy, and just touching it would infect living creatures and turn them into zombies. Since leaving it would be dangerous, they needed to thoroughly decontaminate the area. Moreover, decontamination required either necromancy or spiritual energy, so the court magicians had their hands full, and right now they were hard at work, with Purple, who specialized in necromancy, as their leader.

"We've been doing nothing but cleaning lately," Crimson continued.

"But it's never going to end if we don't do it."

Right now, Crimson and Orange were in the main tower of the contaminated military base where they had been assigned. But Crimson was unhappy. She was active and rough around the edges, so plain work like this didn't suit her. As

a result, the normally free-spirited Orange had to soothe her. Orange wanted to finish the job as soon as possible and escape from this place that had nothing cute.

“Why don’t we just blow it all up?” Crimson asked. “It should be fine if we burn it down.” She was reaching her limit and considering destroying it all with her magic.

“I’m sorry, Crimson.” Purple, who was passing by, apologized with a wry smile.

“If you’re going to apologize, we should just blow this place up,” Crimson suggested again.

“I would love to, but it could just scatter the waste and would burn up the evidence as well.” Purple shrugged. “This is one of the difficult parts of court service.”

The waste in question was weak to heat, and Crimson’s magic could burn it up. The problem was that if not everything was equally heated, waste could be scattered, expanding the contaminated area. Moreover, destroying the evidence would hurt as well. Working for the empress or not, the law needed to be followed, and they needed to gather evidence of the wrongdoings of enemy crimes. That was something that had been unnecessary for Darkness Rainbow in the past, but was another struggle now that they were court magicians.

“This is something we’ve got to do even if you don’t want to, Crim-chan,” Orange agreed.

“Jeeez.”

“Or would you rather take over my computer work?” Purple asked.

“I want that even less!”

“Ah, I would rather do that, Purple!” Orange raised her hand.

“You can’t change the desktop image to something cuter, you know?” Purple said. “That’s evidence as well.”

“Whaaaaat?!” Orange cried out. “Then I’ll pass.”

“I see.” Purple nodded. “Then take care of this place.”

In the end, Crimson reluctantly got back to work. The court magicians worked for the empress, but the girls had their own goal. By making a name for themselves, they wanted to create a path for Folsarians returning home. By expanding their scale, Forthorthe would have more of an exchange with Folsaria. The coming and going of people and information would increase. That was why messing up here would only create discontent in Forthorthe, which would put their goal in danger. And that wasn't something Crimson wanted.

"Everyone, listen!" Green's voice came from their government-issued bracelets. It was a message for all former leaders of Darkness Rainbow transmitted through an emergency channel.

"What is it, Green?!" Crimson threw away the tools for decontamination and hurriedly answered. She'd already surmised that it was a serious situation because of the use of the emergency channel.

"We've gotten a message from our 'common friend'! Come back right away!"

"Got it!" Crimson briefly replied and took off running. Green was working as an operator at the top of the main tower. All Crimson needed to do was run up the stairs. "Good job, Elexis, Maya!" she shouted as she ran.

"Do you think it's them too, Crim-chan?" Orange asked as she chased after her. The same people had come to her mind upon hearing Green say "friend."

"Who else could it be?!"

"Yeah! It has to be!" Orange agreed.

They were people the girls definitely couldn't ignore. Driven by hope, they disappeared from Purple's field of view in moments.

"Good grief." Purple sighed. "They must have been bored. You two called at a good time." Having been left behind, she smiled and moved the tools for decontamination they had dropped toward the wall so that they wouldn't get in the way. Once she finished that, she quickly walked after them.

Facing Elexis for the first time in a while, the court magicians found that he had gotten more fit. He also had a bit of a tan, making him look less like a scion. But the glow in his eyes and smile on his lips were the same.

“I never expected that we would be able to meet again,” he began.

“If you were alive, you should have come to see us!” Crimson shouted.

“Do forgive him, Crimson,” Maya pleaded. “After all, he is wanted for trying to overthrow the empire.” Maya seemed to be the same as always. She had clear, white skin and a beautiful body. Her beauty was captivating even to women. However, her expression when smiling at Crimson was kinder than before.

“Where were you until now, and what were you doing?” Yellow asked as she wiped away her tears. She was normally reserved, but this time she spoke bluntly. She was truly happy that they’d been able to reunite.

“We were working as couriers while drifting around the outskirts of space,” Elexis explained.

“It was such a hassle,” Maya added. “We couldn’t even create a company by regular means. And then that Blue Knight started meddling with the transport industry.”

After the battle against Vandarion, Elexis and Maya had been hiding on the outskirts. Forthorthe’s hold over the remote regions was weak. The anti-government forces used those circumstances, which made sense, since Maya and Elexis were pretty much anti-government as well. And since they needed to work in order to survive, they’d set their eyes on the transportation business now that the country was getting back on its feet. At first, they’d operated a normal transport business with fake papers, but after attempting to acquire the Blue Knight business certification mark, their papers had been checked over, and they had escaped. After that, they’d switched to the illegal transport business.

“Acquiring the know-how to run a business before turning to an illegal business was a big help, though.” Elexis laughed.

“I don’t think that’s something to laugh about,” Blue replied firmly. She was always calm and didn’t say much, so her speaking up said a lot about how she truly felt.

“I’ll relay your complaints to Koutarou-kun later,” Elexis told her. “But for now, I’m back, Blue.”



She stared at Elexis but said nothing. To him, she didn't look unhappy. That said, he wasn't sure what to do, so he looked over at Maya, who smiled at them.

"I can finally offer my thanks, Maya," somebody called out.

"Green...it has been a while since we met face-to-face," Maya answered.

"Thank you for saving me that time. And Elexis too..." Green said and bowed.

Maya nodded. "I'm glad you're safe."

"Happy to see you well," Elexis added.

"I'm doing fine thanks to you," said Green. She had once been captured by Vandarion and used for her predictions. Elexis, Maya, and Darkness Rainbow had saved her, but when she'd come to, they had already been missing, so she'd never had a chance to thank them.

"I'm glad to see you two doing well!" Orange walked up to the pair and lightly tapped Elexis's chest. "You look more fit than before."

His chest had certainly become bulkier since the last time she'd seen him.

"Well, I've been working in the transportation business for a while. I couldn't do nothing but desk work like before," he explained.

"I heard rumors that you were more like space pirates, though?" Orange observed.

"That might not be entirely wrong," Maya answered.

"Whatever our intentions, our clients and enemies had a lot of misunderstandings like that," Elexis added.

"Okay, okay, so you were sneakily doing your own thing without telling us," Orange remarked.

Elexis's tan and physique were a result of him working as a courier. It was a simple job of receiving and delivering packages, but there were all kinds of clients and destinations. He also had experience with forcibly collecting packages and breaking through sieges, so in a way, he wasn't too different from a space pirate.

“And what business do space pirates have here?” Purple asked.

“That’s harsh, Purple. Could you please be more friendly?” Elexis pleaded.

“I’m not sure if I can call someone who hasn’t shown himself for almost a year ‘a friend,’” Purple replied, narrowing her eyes.

“Hahahaha, you have a point there.”

“There’s something we wanted to ask you,” Maya interjected. They hadn’t contacted the court magicians in order to renew old friendships. There was something they had to talk about.

“We’re working for the empress now. There’s a chance we won’t be able to help you,” Purple warned her.

“Just listen to what we have to say,” Maya responded. “You can decide if you want to help or not after that. I understand the position you’re in right now.”

“Okay.” Purple nodded. “I’ll hear what you have to say, Maya. Also...I’m happy to see you again after so long.”

“Me too,” Maya answered. “I wish the reason for our reunion wasn’t this, though.”

From there, Maya and Elexis began explaining why they had come to meet the court magicians. Maxfern had been resurrected using a different process from normal reviving spells. By overwriting a living soul with the necessary information, he had overtaken the host’s body and soul. Their client wanted to recover the possessed victim, Ralgwin. In order to do that, they needed powerful magic. They would need to reverse the process and remove the information that made up Maxfern, and restore Ralgwin’s soul.

But Elexis and Maya couldn’t use such spells. Maya had once been able to use powerful magic, but by now most of her body had been replaced with machines and small spells were her limit. That was why they’d contacted the court magicians. They had nobody else they could rely on.

“And that’s how it is,” Elexis concluded. “This is Fasta-san. She is our current client.”

“It is a pleasure to meet you,” Fasta greeted the girls. “I may be unemployed

now, but in the past I was Ralgwin-sama's subordinate." Fasta bowed to the court magicians. Her polite greetings were in part because she was the one asking for help, but mostly because of her earnest personality.

"You just got back and you're already bringing trouble with you, Elexis." Crimson gave him a cold stare. The issue weighed more heavily on her than the reunion.

All Elexis could do was offer a bitter smile and shrug. "It is certainly a problem," he agreed.

"You sure admitted that easily."

"I have no choice but to admit it. Trying to rescue Ralgwin will mean going against that Grand Wizard, Grevanas."

"Grevanas?" Crimson's expression changed. She'd been unhappy but suddenly looked hopeful.

"Of course." Elexis shrugged once more. "We won't get anywhere without doing something about him."

Resurrecting Ralgwin meant defeating Maxfern first. And Grevanas wasn't going to allow that to happen, which was why Grevanas needed to be dealt with, either through force or schemes. And Elexis didn't think it would be easy.

"I-I guess it can't be helped." Crimson relented. "We go way back...so spill the details!"

"Hold on just a minute!" Orange objected. "You can't go and decide that on your own, Crim-chan! You just want to fight against Grevanas, don't you?!"

Crimson had been easily convinced, but Orange managed to stop her just in time. She loved cute things and seemed carefree, but she could be reliable when necessary.

Crimson denied it. "N-No. That's not true! I was moved by Fasta-san's determination, and we're good friends with Elexis and Maya."

"We're civil servants now!" Orange insisted. "We can't run around on our own anymore, and could we even do this in the first place?!"

"Ugh..." Crimson grasped for words. Orange did have a point. They weren't as

free as they'd been during the Darkness Rainbow era. They might have been a secret organization, but they were also civil servants, so they needed to get confirmation from their boss. Moreover, it was questionable whether they could even use such grand magic to save Ralgwin. Now that they were in Forthorthe, they were lacking catalysts and auxiliary equipment.

"Personally, I would love to help, but..." Yellow felt the same way Crimson claimed she did. However, she was actually serious. She was thoughtful and she cared about her allies, so she was moved by the dangers Elexis and Maya were putting themselves through and wanted to help them. But at the same time she was worried. Orange made a good point. She turned to Purple, who was serving as a kind of leader for the court magicians. "What do you think?"

"Hmm..." Purple looked up and started fiddling with her hair as she fell deep into thought. As someone who used necromancy, she had a good idea of how Maxfern had been resurrected and how to nullify it. She'd also tried to bring back her dead lover in the past. "I think it would be possible. The bottleneck would probably be a lack of materials. Regardless of whether we gather them here or smuggle them in from Folsaria, it will take a lot of time."

The problem was that they were in Forthorthe. Their magic activities were still in their infancy, and there were no established routes for materials necessary for magic. The major materials were manageable, but others had been put on the back burner due to seeing very little use. In this case they would need those materials. Overwriting the soul to resurrect someone was a special method and required special items that would take a lot of time to gather.

"That is also part of why we came here, Purple," Maya clarified.

As the former Dark Navy she was an expert on mind manipulation magic. She didn't specialize in necromancy, but there was a lot of overlap between their fields, which was why she and Elexis had come to see them. If they began preparations now, they should be able to make it in time for when it was necessary.

"That's a good decision, Maya," Purple noted.

"But it will be hard to handle it, considering our position..." Blue, who had been quietly watching over them, spoke up. She was as serious as Maki, so she

was concerned about their current position. Since they were civil servants, they couldn't act of their own accord. Moreover, Elexis was wanted for treason. Cooperation would be difficult.

"Regarding that...I have a request for you, Crimson," Elexis said.

"Me?! Why?!" The conversation suddenly turning to her flustered Crimson. She had no interest in complicated topics, so she'd been sure that she would be left out.

"I want you to bring it up with Navy—uhm, Aika Maki-san."

"Whaaat?!" Crimson was astonished. All of a sudden, Maki's name had been thrown in.

Crimson was too surprised to speak, so Green answered in her place. "You took their relationship into account from the start, didn't you?" She adjusted her glasses and glared at Elexis.

"I wouldn't dare." Elexis shrugged with a smile. "This is just how it played out."

But when she saw his face, Green was convinced that was exactly what he'd done.

"What do you mean, Green?" Crimson, who still didn't understand, asked with a puzzled look.

"It's obvious. If you tell Navy, it will naturally reach the Blue Knight's ears. And he will believe the information since Navy will guarantee it. So what do you think he will do?"

"The Blue Knight will kind of cooperate?" Crimson guessed. "Like he will turn a blind eye to it?"

"The proper channels won't work," Green said. "It needs to only reach the Blue Knight."

"And that's why they came now?"

"Yes," Green nodded. "This man has planned it all out! I can't believe it!"

Things would get complicated if the government or military brass found out.

So Elexis would make use of Koutarou's personality and Maki's friendship with Crimson to sway their group. That was why he'd shown his face now.

"You heard them, El," Maya remarked.

"I wouldn't dare," Elexis said. "I am always mindful of beautiful flowers. I just wanted to see your faces again after such a long time."

"You are nothing but lies!" Green shouted.

She didn't like his scheming. She herself had wanted to see them again, yet the man in question had only come as part of his calculations. Green's dissatisfaction was a show of her having attained the feelings a normal girl would have.

"Haha. Green, please forgive El," Maya said.

"Maya?" Green replied.

"I've only just learned this recently, but...he can be really shy around the people he's close to. Isn't it funny, when he's normally so confident around others?"

Maya glanced over at Elexis. At some point he'd turned away so that the court magicians couldn't see his face. He probably had an uncomfortable expression. Green could tell just from looking at his back.

It was also a sign that Maya was right. He really had come to see them because he was worried. But he was too embarrassed to meet them without a reason. It was a struggle for someone who hadn't had real allies before. And Green shared that emotion.

Green was using her best friend, Crimson, to hide her true feelings. "Can we really, Green?!" she excitedly asked.

"Even if I tried to stop you, you would just sneak away to do it anyway, right?" Green said.

"Yeah!" Crimson nodded.

"Good grief..."

Truthfully, Green had no reason to object. But she was embarrassed like Elexis

was, so she was grateful to Crimson for getting so fired up.

“You heard them...” Purple concluded. “We will cooperate with you, Fasta-san.” She had no objections either. Having tried to resurrect her lover, Purple could understand how Fasta felt.

“Thank you very much, everyone.” Fasta lowered her head.

There were tears in the corners of her eyes, and Purple waited for her to raise her head again before talking. “Let’s go over the problematic points.” Her calm expression stiffened. Her expression looked similar to her Dark Purple days. “We will leave it to Crimson to lay the groundwork with the Blue Knight, is that okay?”

Crimson nodded. “Okay, I’ll talk with Maki.”

Just by talking with Maki for the first time in a while, she would get the chance to fight the Grand Wizard, Grevanas. It was a win-win situation.

“We’ll also be able to get most of the necessary materials over time,” Purple noted. With her expertise in necromancy, she had an idea of what materials they’d need for the ritual. Most of them were possible to acquire; it would just take some time. And considering the situation, it was possible that Folsaria might support them as well. Even so, Purple wore a stern expression. “There is just one material that time won’t help us with.”

“Maxfern’s lingering thoughts, right?” Maya offered, explaining the reason for her stern expression.

Purple nodded. “Yes. Right now, Maxfern’s soul is using Ralgwin’s soul as a platform, with Maxfern’s lingering thoughts, fragments of his soul, being used to overwrite it. In order to remove that, we need parts of his soul to reference.”

Maxfern’s soul was made up of Ralgwin’s soul fused with fragments of Maxfern’s soul, making it near impossible to single out Ralgwin’s soul. But if they had fragments of Maxfern’s soul, they could compare it with the current Maxfern to determine what needed to be removed.

“But this will remove overlapping parts, so we will need fragments of Ralgwin’s original soul as well...” Purple noted.

“That won’t be a problem,” Fasta declared. “I know where Ralgwin-sama lived.”

Upon removing Maxfern’s part of the soul, parts that overlapped with Ralgwin’s soul would also be removed. So they needed fragments of Ralgwin’s soul to recreate those removed parts. Fortunately, those wouldn’t be difficult to obtain. Ralgwin had lived in the current age, so there were plenty of lingering thoughts around. Moreover, the perception of loyal subjects like Fasta would help with the process.

“It would seem the problem will be how to obtain Maxfern’s lingering thoughts.” Elexis folded his arms. That was a considerable problem.

“I wonder if there are even any lingering thoughts of Maxfern remaining from before his resurrection...” Maya muttered.

Maxfern was a figure from two thousand years ago, so there were next to no lingering thoughts of his remaining. The majority had dissolved with the passage of time. Those that remained had likely been collected by Grevanas. There were surely some that Grevanas hadn’t retrieved, but that would mean they were either unusable or too difficult to obtain. Naturally, they would be extremely difficult to acquire.

“If Grevanas is the kind of person the legends say, he would have prepared backups just in case,” Purple mused.

“Hmm, that’s possible.” Elexis snapped his fingers. “There was no guarantee the resurrection would succeed, so he should have several backups.”

Grevanas was known as a personal adviser to Maxfern. It was said that he was calm and careful. In which case, unless he had absolute confidence in his resurrection magic, he would have backups. And it wouldn’t be wrong to assume that some were still around.

“Besides, even after resurrecting him, they will be starting a war, right?” Maya reasoned. “It’s possible that Maxfern will need to be resurrected again.”

With Maxfern throwing himself into war, there was a risk he would die in battle. There were also accidents and diseases. There would be several scenarios in which Maxfern might need to be resurrected again, so it was highly

likely that there were backups in place. Elexis also felt like Maya was right.

“Which means...we would need to sneak into their headquarters,” he said, leaning back into his chair.

If Grevanas really did have spare lingering thoughts prepared, they would certainly be hidden at their main base of operations. They were extremely important, and he couldn't afford to lose them, so it would be challenging for the group to get their hands on them.

Maya sighed. “And we will need to do it before he fights the Blue Knight boy and the others and dies.”

Not only were the remaining lingering thoughts likely gathered at the enemy base, there was also the risk of Maxfern dying in combat and his body and soul being reduced to ashes, making it impossible to resurrect him. Moreover, he might take irreparable damage in battle against Koutarou's group. There were plenty of scenarios that could prevent Ralgwin's resurrection.

“Which means we'll need to hurry,” Purple said. “Crimson, if you would.”

“Fine, fine. Jeez.” Crimson made her way to the exit.

There was no telling when Koutarou and the others would clash with Maxfern and Grevanas, so they needed to talk with them as soon as possible, and face-to-face at that. There was no telling who might be listening over a call.

“I'm definitely going to fight Grevanas, you hear?!” Crimson said.

“I know,” Purple replied. “We'll make a plan with that in mind.”

“Good.” Crimson nodded. “Then I'm going.”

“Crimson, wait!” Green chased after her. She wanted to help her, and she didn't like Crimson talking with Maki alone.

Before long, the two were out of the room. After seeing them off, Elexis continued speaking. “Now then, as for how we should proceed... I would like you to prepare for the ritual in parallel with your job. We will be gathering information. In our current situation, we should be able to get information we couldn't get elsewhere.”

“That's true; it's not like you can use your official transportation business,”

Purple agreed.

Elexis and Maya were currently illegal couriers, or perhaps one could call them space pirates. With Elfaria casting a wide net over the transportation business, Maxfern and Grevanas couldn't openly transport weapon materials, which meant they needed to rely on illegal means to move their cargo, which should make it easier for Elexis and Maya to gather information.

"As long as you do it seriously instead of playing around," Orange said, being serious for once. "You have to get a lead before the final battle between Maxfern and the Blue Knight." She loved all things cute and hated trouble like battles, but she was surprisingly motivated for once. Not only were her allies getting fired up, but she also sympathized with Fasta.

"I know." Elexis nodded. "There won't be any playing around this time." The same might be true of him. The gleam in his eyes was similar to when he'd been fighting Koutarou and the others, glowing with a strong conviction to win.

"I will be keeping my eye on him, so don't worry, Orange," Maya said.

"Please do, Maya," Orange replied.

"You got it."

Maya could also tell how serious Elexis was, so she wasn't as worried as she sounded. But the battle was starting again. She would be keeping her eye on him so that he didn't go off and die on his own.

"Thank you so much, everyone." Fasta bowed. "You're going through all this effort just for our sakes..."

She thanked them all for risking their lives for her and Ralgwin. Risking one's life for others was far from easy, even more so when going up against someone like Maxfern.

"Don't worry about it," Purple said. "Even if you weren't here, we would be destined to fight Maxfern. If we ignored Grevanas, Folsaria's reputation would plummet, which means those looking to return to their ancestral home from Folsaria would have no place to call home."

As Forthorthe was the true homeland of Folsarians, there were plenty of

people who wished to return. Moreover, if Grevanas were to severely harm Forthorthe with magic, the public image of a country of magicians would be terrible. Their return would never be allowed. As such, they needed to get rid of Grevanas as soon as possible. In other words, the court magicians and Maya would need to fight Maxfern and Grevanas anyway.

“In that sense, we would have to thank you for cooperating with us on this, Elexis,” Blue muttered.

With that, everyone turned to look at Elexis. Blue was right. Elexis alone had nothing to gain from this. The battle between Forthorthe and Maxfern had nothing to do with him.

“Hahaha, please stop it,” he laughed. “I once stood up to create the ideal society so I can’t leave Maxfern be. Besides...” He suddenly stopped.

“Besides, what?” Maya asked with a smile.

“It’s...nothing.” In the end, Elexis said no more about it.

“Hehehe, how shy you are,” Maya laughed. “Good grief...I wish you would take after the Blue Knight’s honesty...”

In reality, everyone already knew why Elexis was cooperating with them. But since they knew he was embarrassed, neither Maya nor the court magicians said anything more.

Many people were rising up to defeat Maxfern and Grevanas, but they weren’t the type to wait for the enemy to attack. Maxfern would rather strike first to dampen the enemy’s spirit. He desired to stand at the very top. And he wanted to be the one to decide when the battle started as well.

“This plan will work. Move to execute it immediately. Aside from his battle prowess, the Blue Knight is just a human teenager. It is these three who make their plans, back him up technologically, and make arrangements on the practical level.”

Information on a certain plan was displayed on a hologram in the command room. The Gray Knight glanced at it and nodded in agreement. Satisfied with his words, Maxfern grinned.

“If you’re saying that, there’s no doubt about it.” Maxfern smiled with Ralgwin’s face, but it was twisted with insanity.

“They are the Blue Knight’s Achilles’ heel,” Grevanas said. “And they have no replacements. If we can take down even one of them, the Blue Knight will no longer be able to walk the path of a hero.”

The hologram was showing a plan to attack Koutarou and the others. Grevanas had planned it at Maxfern’s behest.

“Wahahaha, and we will bury all three of them!” Maxfern laughed. “We will rip off his wings!”

In the center of the hologram were the faces of Kiriha, Clan, and Ruth. Maxfern had set his sights on those three. His first move was to crush the brains behind the Blue Knight. Grevanas had had his spies gather information in order to execute this plan. And as luck would have it, the three of them would be traveling together. The attack plan Grevanas had created would be put into action at that moment.

“Still...” the Gray Knight muttered. “Having a conference on economic development on Alaia, the sixth planet...”

Maxfern and Grevanas were plotting to attack the three when they were moving together. The girls in question would be traveling to the planet Alaia to take part in the galactic conference. The planet was under the control of the Mastir family, and as the eldest child of the Pardomshiha family, which had strong ties to the Mastir family, Ruth would be in charge. On top of that, the second princess, Clan, as well as Kiriha, would be taking part as a technical advisor and consultant, respectively. The composition made sense, with nothing out of the ordinary. Yet something was bothering the Gray Knight.

“What is it, Gray One?” Maxfern asked.

“I was just thinking that the timing is too convenient.”

What bothered the Gray Knight was the timing of the conference. It was set at the same time that Maxfern and Grevanas were raising an army. And their three targets were all heading for the conference. It felt almost calculated.

But Maxfern rejected the notion. “Aren’t you overthinking it? The conference

was planned beforehand. It's just a coincidence that the timing overlapped. Besides, you and Grevanas tend to overestimate those girls."

Maxfern wasn't as worried as the Gray Knight was. The conference wasn't something that had suddenly been decided. It was something that had been held several times to recover from last year's civil war and was where decisions on policies were made. Naturally, it wasn't the first time the three girls in question would participate either. Moreover, Maxfern felt like the Gray Knight and Grevanas were being too cautious. They'd been given a hard time, so it was understandable, but Maxfern was of the opinion that attack plans needed to be bold.

"I understand how you feel," Grevanas said. "But don't worry, Gray Knight-dono. We have information to back this up. We have information from those we have on the inside that the security at the conference is being enhanced. They seem to believe that the conference itself, filled with important people, will be targeted."

Grevanas would normally feel the same way as the Gray Knight, but this time he had closely scrutinized the information and felt that there wouldn't be a problem, just like Maxfern. The spies in Forthorthe had sent information on the meetings. According to that information, the enemy was concerned about an attack during the conference, which made sense, as leaders and influential people from knight families from a lot of planets would be gathering in one place. So it was fair to assume the conference itself would be the target. It would clearly have an effect on all of Forthorthe.

Compared to that, the three that Maxfern and Grevanas were after had little strategic meaning. They were nothing more than staff around the Blue Knight. But as Maxfern understood the Blue Knight well, he understood that crippling him had great strategic value. By killing them, he would stop the Blue Knight. A lot of people's wills were focused on the Blue Knight in Forthorthe. So if the Blue Knight was stopped, it would be like Forthorthe's heart stopping. There were very few people who understood that—Maxfern was an exception—which was why most people would neglect the three girls and protect the conference.

"I hope you're right," the Gray Knight said. He had no basis for his concern.

Perhaps he really was overestimating the girls. He lost interest after Grevanas confirmed the validity of the information.

“But you do have a point,” Maxfern said. “Depending on the circumstances, we may change our aim to the conference. That way we could avoid the trap you are worried about.”

“You’re the same as always, Maxfern,” the Gray Knight replied.

Maxfern had an intense grudge against the Blue Knight, and he would do anything to ruin the royal families or the Blue Knight himself. Damaging the country would harm the royal families. To the Blue Knight, it would mean damaging what Alaia had built up. Maxfern wouldn’t be picky as long as he could trample over Alaia, the Blue Knight, and the royal families.

“Hmph, I’ll take that as a compliment.” Maxfern grinned. His only interest was in destroying everything and making people grovel before him. His evil smile would make anyone watching shudder.

But the Gray Knight was unfazed. He had no interest in Maxfern’s expression.

“So when are you planning to attack, Grevanas?” Maxfern asked.

“Please look at the hologram.” Grevanas pointed to the information on the projection.

With the topic changing to specific attack plans, the hologram displayed a highly detailed model of Planet Alaia from orbit. A long curve was drawn onto it. It was the route that the three girls would be taking.

“In the past, this is the route that people from the Forthorthe government have taken when traveling to Alaia,” Grevanas explained. “There’s no guarantee it will be the same this time, but from the moment they enter the atmosphere until they finish braking, they should follow the same curve. This is when we will strike.”

With a beep, the picture on the hologram changed. Grevanas displayed a craft that had slowed down and entered level flight.

“This is the moment that they’ve expended their energy,” Maxfern commented.

“It is just as you say, Maxfern-sama.” Grevanas nodded. “Safely entering the atmosphere means expending a great deal of energy to decelerate and protect the craft. The moment before entering level flight will be when they use the most energy.”

In orbit, spaceships flew at a constant speed. Simply put, if a spaceship flew at that position at that speed, the gravitational pull of the planet was balanced by the centrifugal force on the spacecraft. By slowing down, the centrifugal force would weaken, causing the spaceship to descend to the planet. But since the spaceship was flying at dozens of kilometers per second, even after slowing down, it would touch the atmosphere at several kilometers per second. The extreme heat created from the friction had to be dealt with somehow to prevent the ship from falling apart. Forthorthe designed their spaceships to be cost-effective and the hulls were solidly built while also relying on distortion fields to block the heat. Therefore, spaceships needed to expend energy to slow down and also maintain the distortion field. So the moment the ship entered level flight was when they had used up the most energy, which was when the ship was at its most defenseless.

“Aiming for the enemy when they’re at their weakest is basic strategy,” Maxfern noted. “So won’t they be expecting that too?”

“Yes indeed, many military and government ships are designed not to be defenseless at this time,” Grevanas said. “But even so, attacking then is important.”

“What do you mean?” Maxfern asked.

“When entering the atmosphere, they will be traveling in a straight line, making it easy to take aim,” Grevanas explained.

Because of its speed, until a spaceship slowed down enough, it had to fly in a straight line. Once the ship changed to standard flight, it could take evasive measures again. So the best time to attack was when the ship had slowed down enough, not just from an energy perspective, but also from an accuracy perspective.

“So what better time to attack, especially since they will have used some energy.” Maxfern nodded. “That makes it the perfect time to attack.”

“Using missiles in that moment should be enough to destroy them,” Grevanas surmised.

“Then we’ll need ground troops on Alaia.” Maxfern folded his arms.

In order to ensure that the ship was destroyed, they would need quite a lot of missiles. And with enhanced security, it would be difficult to attack with a fleet. This meant that they would need weapons on the ground, and more than a few at that, which was surprisingly tricky.

“If we can sneak ground forces in, the chances of success will skyrocket,” Grevanas agreed.

“I would hope so. This is an important battle that will determine the outcome of the war.”

There was a lot that needed to be done, but if they could complete those tasks, they would achieve a big victory that would take the wind out of the Blue Knight’s and Imperial Army’s sails. Knowing that, Maxfern and Grevanas made careful preparations.

A big fight is finally about to start...

The Gray Knight watched them prepare. Once a large battle began, it would be easier to bring out the powers of the Goddess of Dawn. So it was an important opportunity for the Gray Knight too. Careful preparations, not letting any chances slip by, and boldly confronting anything. With that in mind, the Gray Knight began making his own plans.

State of Emergency

December 5, Monday

The official name of the conference was the Forthorthe Economic Development Conference. It had been created shortly after the civil war in order to correct the economy that was starting to collapse through cooperation that exceeded what the government could accomplish. The coming conference was the sixth one; the effectiveness of previous policies would be examined, and new policies would be discussed. Kiriha and the others had participated in the first conference as well as the ones that had happened since they returned to Forthorthe. So it wasn't their first.

"I can't help but be worried." Clan was on the deck for departures, but she didn't look very happy. She was feeling gloomy when she thought about what was awaiting them. She tended to be more negative than Theia, but it was rare to see her like that when it concerned her job.

"But by taking this risk, we increase Satomi Koutarou's chances of victory," Kiriha said.

"I wasn't saying that I'm afraid of taking risks," Clan retorted.

"I understand, Clan-sama," Ruth said. "I feel the same way."

Kiriha and Ruth also felt tense. But it wasn't the conference the three of them were worried about. There was something else on their minds.

"Hey, hold up!" a voice called out from behind.

It was Koutarou. The moment they saw him, the girls' expressions returned to normal.

"What is it, Satomi Koutarou?" Kiriha asked while turning around.

There, she could see Koutarou entering the departure deck carrying a large package in his hands.

“Bring this with you!” Koutarou said. “Landlord-san made lunch!” As he walked over to them, he held up the package, which had Shizuka’s homemade food in it.

“Haha, thank you.” Clan smiled. “The flight *will* take several hours.”

The trip from Forthorthe to Alaia would take some time. While warp would cut out the majority of the distance traveled, in order to avoid warping on a planet, they would be traveling the ordinary way before and after the jump. With all that in mind, the journey was expected to take six hours.

“Shizuka, I want some too!” Sanae demanded.

“I request some as well,” Theia added.

“I figured you would say that, so I made a lot,” Shizuka said. “Let’s eat it later.”

“All right!” Sanae cheered.

Behind Koutarou were Sanae, Theia, and Shizuka. The four of them had come to see them off. Incidentally, Harumi, Maki, and Yurika were with the Imperial Army. They were absent due to being called away for magic-related training.

With the lunch talks over, Theia spoke to the three headed for the conference. “I’m sorry about this. Having to leave this to you... I wish I could go with you.”

“It can’t be helped,” Clan replied. “You have a different conference to attend.” She smiled at the apologetic Theia as she accepted the lunch from Koutarou.

Theia had been expected to take part in the conference as well, but there were several military and political conferences that needed members of their side. So Clan and the others would be attending alone.

“The only ones that could really play around in this situation are Mackenzie and Mackinley, who were forcibly brought here,” Koutarou said.

“There you have it.” Clan nodded.

“I appreciate you saying that,” said Theia.

They were all busy. The magicians were all with the military, and even Shizuka and Sanae, who normally seemed free, were guarding Elfaria and Theia whenever they went out on official duties. So at times there just weren't enough of them. But that went for everyone, so nobody really complained.

"Clan-sama, Kiriha-sama, it is almost time for departure," Ruth said.

Clan and the others were bound for Alaia on a battleship, and they had just contacted Ruth. A small craft was being sent out to pick them up, heading for the Imperial Palace's departure deck.

"So it's finally time," Clan said as her expression changed ever so slightly.

Koutarou could sense the tension in her expression. "Is there something you're worried about?"

"Ah?! U-Um..." Clan faltered. She was surprised and thought she'd failed.

Her reaction confused Koutarou, but Kiriha answered in her place. "There's actually somebody tormenting Clan-dono waiting for her," she explained.

"Kii!" Clan exclaimed. Was it okay to say that? Clan was shocked more by Kiriha's words than Koutarou's.

"Hahaha, so you can't really keep your cool when under pressure," Koutarou laughed. "But when you meet them, just tell them off."

Fortunately, Koutarou took Kiriha at her word and figured that there was someone Clan didn't like at the conference.

"I know!" Clan shouted.

"It appears they have arrived," Ruth reported.

"That's larger than I thought," Koutarou said.

"It is a military vehicle, after all," Theia replied. "Even small crafts are like this."

"To think seeing something like that flying around would become a daily occurrence," Shizuka commented.

"I agree, Landlord-san. What a crazy future this is," Koutarou agreed.

The spaceship coming to pick them up arrived, and attention turned away

from Clan.

Sensing that, she sighed in relief. “Thank you, Kii.”

“I’m glad he didn’t notice,” Kiriha answered.

“I was so surprised when you said that, Kiriha-sama,” Ruth added.

“It’s best not to lie,” said Kiriha. She hadn’t told any lies; she simply hadn’t corrected Koutarou’s misunderstanding.

“That might be true,” said Ruth.

“We should give them a good thrashing,” Clan told them.

“Yes, that’s the spirit,” said Kiriha.

The three who were departing looked at each other and nodded. It was finally time to leave.

With their space distortion technology, Forthorthe spaceships didn’t need rockets, but the two technologies could be used in tandem when there was a need to hurry. Using rockets when unaffected by gravity meant that the ship flew off in a flash, leaving behind a plume of smoke.

“They’re so far away already, I can barely see them anymore,” said Koutarou.

“I can still see them,” said Theia.

“You have amazing eyesight, Theia-chan,” Shizuka told her.

“You can see them too, can’t you?”

“Ahaha, in my case it’s more that uncle can see them,” Shizuka said.

Koutarou, Shizuka, and Theia were chatting with smiles, but Sanae alone wore a complicated expression.

“Hmm...” Sanae murmured.

“What is it, Sanae?” Koutarou asked.

“It’s nothing special, but...weren’t those three a little tense?”

“Isn’t that normal? It’s an important conference, and if there’s someone you don’t like there, you’re going to get a little tense. Don’t you get the same just

before a test?”

“Ah, that’s true,” Sanae said. “I guess that’s just what it’s like.”

Sanae had noticed that the three girls were strangely tense. But Koutarou did make a good point. Any normal girl would get tense taking part in a galactic conference, so she soon forgot about it and looked at the sky like Koutarou and the others.

But in the end, that interpretation was wrong. Kiriha and the others were nervous for a different reason. It wouldn’t be until a few hours later that they realized that.

It took roughly three hours to get from Forthorthe to a location where a ship could warp. That distance was necessary to make up for any margin of error. Warp worked by bending space through the control of gravity to travel vast distances. Because of that, the presence of large objects like planets would have an influence on the warp. At close distances it was possible to ignore the margin of error, but not for longer trips. So for normal travel, ships needed to get far enough away from planets. The same applied to the destination. Since the ship would arrive in a location that wasn’t heavily influenced by gravity, it would take another three hours to reach Alaia.

“Maxfern-sama, a landing craft has been launched from the Imperial Army’s battleship,” Grevanas reported. A hologram was displaying a battleship, with a small spaceship being launched out of it.

“As per our intel,” Maxfern said. “Their route is the same as the one they used to get to the conference the time before last.”

Moreover, the location that landing craft set out from and their directions were displayed on the hologram. Based on that, Maxfern could conclude that the same route as another time was being used.

“As expected, it seems the battleship is on guard in orbit,” Grevanas noted.

“Their security is tight,” Maxfern agreed. “But that makes them easier to predict.”

Their target, the three girls, were on the small spaceship that could enter the

atmosphere, heading for the conference. The battleship remained on alert in orbit. The Imperial Army was already stationed on Alaia, and with another battleship joining, their defensive positions were very powerful. A normal attack would face a fierce counterattack.

“On this route, our forces on point 13 and 14 are able to intercept,” Maxfern reported.

“Give them the order to move,” Maxfern instructed.

“At once,” Grevanas acknowledged.

Trying to send in pursuers after the landing craft would be difficult. With the defensive system and fleet in orbit in position, any pursuit would be intercepted long enough for the landing craft to escape. But thanks to the information Maxfern and Grevanas had gotten ahead of time, they could set forces to intercept on the ground. Strict security or not, it would be hard to stop a small unit that had infiltrated ahead of time. Moreover, the attackers could focus their fire on a single point while the defenders had to spread out their attention. The information gave the attackers an overwhelming advantage. That was why Maxfern was convinced of his victory, and a smile appeared on his face.

“Blue Knight, your women have jumped into my trap on their own. Hehehe...” he laughed.

Maxfern’s greatest enemy was the Blue Knight, from both a strategic point of view and an emotional one. On board the landing craft were three of the pillars that supported the Blue Knight’s strength. They were in charge of strategy, technology, and logistics, and losing just one of them would greatly weaken the Blue Knight. Now there was a chance to take all of them out at once. With a chance to get revenge, Maxfern’s excitement was at its peak.

“The ground forces have begun moving,” Grevanas said.

“The wait is frustrating...” Maxfern replied.

If everything played out as the information they had gathered suggested, the landing craft would enter the atmosphere in thirty minutes. Maxfern had to spend the time until then filled with impatience.

Upon entering the atmosphere, the landing craft started glowing. It was a result of the ship's distortion field coming into contact with the air. The air in front of the distortion field was rapidly compressed and turned into heated plasma, burning the hull. Meanwhile, the strong distortion field was expending a lot of energy to ward off the heat. As a result, the landing craft was glowing.

"The landing craft has started decelerating," Grevanas reported.

The landing craft on the hologram that Maxfern was staring at was glowing brightly. It had already entered the atmosphere. The footage was being recorded from afar, but it was clear on the hologram thanks to the AI processing the image.

"I see," said Maxfern.

"Is something the matter?" Grevanas asked.

"So this is why shooting stars shine... I never could have imagined it two thousand years ago."

Being from two thousand years prior, Maxfern hadn't known why shooting stars shone. By observing meteorites, he could understand that they had all been heated up immensely, but he hadn't known why.

"So it is," Grevanas said. "And that gap in knowledge was like our gap in strength with the Blue Knight."

"But things are different now!" Maxfern said with a fire burning in his eyes. "I can now reach the Blue Knight, and right now I am about to tear off his wings!"

Maxfern now understood why shooting stars shone, which meant that he now had the same power as his nemesis, the Blue Knight. There was no longer any gap in their strength. And by destroying the landing craft, he would surpass him.

"That moment is fast approaching," Grevanas announced. "The landing craft has descended to below twenty-five kilometers. If the simulations are correct, the distortion field should be released soon."

The landing craft decelerated via the friction with the air in the atmosphere. By the time the landing craft was about twenty kilometers from sea level, it

would have slowed down to around the speed of sound, and there would no longer be any need for the distortion field to protect the hull. It would then continue going in a straight line and slow down a little more. That was the moment that Maxfern and Grevanas had been waiting for.

“Well then...begin the attack! Fire every missile you’ve got!” Grevanas gave the command to attack.

The missiles wouldn’t impact in an instant. Even if they were fired from directly below, they still had to travel twenty kilometers. Firing them now was essential to reach the ship just before it changed to normal flight.

“The ground forces have launched missiles,” Grevanas reported.

With a warning sound, eighteen small lights appeared on the hologram. They moved slowly at first, but rapidly accelerated. The lights were all supersonic missiles. Flying at more than five times the speed of sound, they would destroy their target in the blink of an eye. The target had used up most of its energy making it through the field, so there was no way it would be able to block all of them.

“Drop dead, women!” Maxfern cursed. “Blame the day you became the Blue Knight’s pawns!”

Filled with excitement and hate, Maxfern watched as the supersonic missiles curved through the air toward their target. A few seconds after being fired, they struck the landing craft. He was too far away to hear the sound, but the explosion was big. The camera looking up at the sky was showing a massive explosion. The flames and flash hid the landing craft from sight.

“It’s a direct hit!” Grevanas said.

“Are we sure?!” Maxfern confirmed.

“Yes! The landing craft has scattered into parts that are falling to the ground!” Grevanas answered.

The radar showed the craft breaking into debris. There was no sign of anyone escaping, so it was likely that the crew had been shot down with it.

“Wahahahahahaha, now what will you do, Blue Knight? Your wings have been

torn off!” Maxfern laughed.

At this moment he was assured of his own victory. Without the brains behind him, the Blue Knight could only struggle. That made Maxfern incredibly happy.

He celebrated. “Wahahahahahaha, we did it, Grevanas! With this, the battle will move forward well!”

“I am sending ground forces to confirm its destruction!” Grevanas informed him.

Unlike Maxfern, he calmly issued orders to the ground forces. He was happy about their victory, of course, but his innate calmness showed its face. The destruction seemed to be assured, but he wanted to be certain, so until the soldiers reached the estimated point of impact and reported on the situation, he wouldn’t openly show any joy.

A few minutes later, the ground forces arrived where the craft had crashed. There, they found the ship in pieces. The impact had scarred the ground around it. The soldiers stepped over the circle of debris driven into the ground and headed for the largest piece in the middle. Black smoke was still rising from it. The armor had been destroyed, but it was no doubt the main body of the shot-down ship.

“Grevanas-sama, we have visual confirmation of target A,” a soldier reported.

“What condition is it in?”

“The rocket boosters have been seriously damaged, but while the armor has also been damaged, the craft has maintained its form.”

“Confirm what’s inside right away!” Grevanas ordered.

“Understood! Sending heavy infantry inside!” the soldier responded.

Grevanas had a bad feeling. The lack of overall damage bothered him. Staring at the hologram with worry, he watched as soldiers in huge armored suits opened the hatch. Their armor had been designed for fighting on different planets, and it could take the heat and smoke without issue, so it was perfect for the job.

“Aren’t you overthinking it, Grevanas?” Maxfern asked. “At the very least,

they hit the ground at high speed. There is no way the people inside could survive.”

“I think so too, but...” Grevanas hesitated.

The landing craft had been hit directly with missiles, and it had slammed into woodlands while spinning out of control. Even though it had decelerated, it had hit the ground at several hundred kilometers per second. The impact alone would have killed anyone on board. So Maxfern’s words were probably true. But Grevanas couldn’t fully believe it. His experiences with victory slipping through his fingers made him more cautious. Unease filled his withered face.

“Reporting in!” That was when one of the soldiers that had entered the craft stepped back out. Their movement made it clear that they were panicked. “The destruction inside is minimal! No bodies were found! Either there was nobody on board or they have already escaped!”

“What?!” Maxfern was aghast.

“Did the destroyed rocket motors shield them?! No matter! Hurry and chase after them!” Grevanas barked.

Both of them had raised their voices. The landing craft had a lot of large structures, including its rocket motors, which worked as a shield against the missiles, protecting the cockpit. So it was possible that the controls had worked well enough to land, though very unlikely. Unless the three on board were extremely lucky, that wasn’t something that could be so easily accepted. Yet the truth was that nobody was dead inside the ship. Grevanas was puzzled by that, but he quickly gave the soldiers orders to pursue the trio.

Meanwhile, Koutarou was busy with work he was bad at. By coincidence, he had become the majority shareholder of DKI, so he had the authority to choose the representative director—which, through another series of coincidences, had ended up being him. He had temporarily taken up the position after Elexis was cut out, but he was still the representative director. Therefore, he needed to present his management policy to his employees and shareholders on occasion. He was currently writing up a draft for that.

“So, what are you going to do about this company, Kou?” Kenji asked when

Koutarou put down his pen.

Koutarou was using an electronic pen, used to write on electronic paper. “I want to keep it from having any strange influence on the world,” he answered. “I bought it to win the battle, but I don’t want to cause trouble for other companies. It’s not like I want to put DKI in the red, but I want to keep it from making too much profit.”

Whether he declared it during his speech or not, Koutarou’s current policy was to maintain the status quo. Businesses would continue running as they had. Clients varied between individuals and companies, but Koutarou wanted to be responsible. Any sudden change in policy would only cause confusion. Naturally, any illegal business was put to a stop, but there were some exceptions. Products that would benefit the world, like the PAF, were unlikely to turn a profit, so he would actively pursue those. Ultimately, the PAF’s value had become too great and ended up making a profit anyway, but the policy behind it was sound.

“In the future, it would probably be best to let go of DKI,” Koutarou commented. “I don’t want my presence to warp society. Besides, I have basically no time to get involved in the management side anyway.”

“Ahaha, true, you *are* the supreme commander, Kou-niisan,” Kotori laughed. She couldn’t get used to Koutarou being the supreme commander of an army. And with him being the manager of an enterprise too, all she could do was laugh.

“Um, Koutarou-sama,” Nalfa said, “if you say you are stepping down from being the representative director, won’t DKI start to go under?” This was no laughing matter to her. She knew a little more about economics than he did.

“Huh? Why?” Koutarou asked.

“I remember my brother saying that when you became the manager of DKI, the share prices skyrocketed,” she explained. “Apparently, it happened to all of the related companies. So if you were to retire, the opposite would occur...”

Nalfa had a brother named Danesford, who was a famous reporter. And he had said that Koutarou’s involvement had a huge impact on economics. Right now that was working positively, but if Koutarou acted in the opposite way, it

would turn out for the worse. Nalfa was worried about that.

“So that would make the stocks shrivel up and drop like a rock, huh? Ahahahaha!” Kenji clapped his hands and burst out laughing. Koutarou buying up DKI’s stocks and becoming the manager had caused the stocks of DKI and affiliated companies to shoot up. So the opposite would happen if he sold them.

That would have a negative influence on the world, which was exactly what Koutarou didn’t want. “It’s not something to laugh about, Mackenzie!” he shouted.

Kenji shrugged. “Well, either you make a huge profit and sell or leave the management to someone else.”

If DKI and its affiliated companies made huge profits, they might be able to absorb the damage after Koutarou sold his stocks. Alternatively, he could hire a CEO and leave the management to them. If that CEO maintained Koutarou’s policies, it would limit any influence the company had.

Maybe having Elexis do it would be best, but...legally, he’s in a terrible spot... Koutarou mused.

With Elexis having grown, Koutarou could theoretically leave things to him. But the man was a traitor in the eyes of the law, so that wouldn’t work. As he was thinking about what to do, he suddenly realized that he had a second candidate for the job.

“Mackenzie, why don’t you be CEO?” he suggested.

“Whaaat?!” Kenji exclaimed. Having the topic suddenly turned on him stopped Kenji from laughing, and he stood up from the sofa he was sitting on.

“Well, you’re a smooth talker,” Koutarou explained. “You’re also surprisingly serious deep down. If I say a friend is helping me while I’m busy, people probably won’t oppose it.”

“Don’t be ridiculous! Don’t get me involved in this!” Kenji objected. Seeing Koutarou, he felt like one’s position and fame should match their stature. And from his point of view, Kenji figured he should—at best—be a department chief in a small company. Being the CEO of a galactic corporation was nothing but a shackle.

“I think it’s a good idea,” Koutarou said. “What do you think, Kin-chan?”

“I agree,” Kotori replied. “It would force nii-san to live a serious life.”

Contrary to her brother, Kotori was all for it. If Kenji took over as CEO in place of the Blue Knight, the romantic scandals surrounding him would surely disappear. In Forthorthe, Koutarou was seen as an example of morality, and not even Kenji would be able to do something to make him look bad. The relationship between Kotori and Kenji had been improving lately, but if her brother took on such an important position, she could finally breathe.

“Kotori! How could you!” Kenji shouted. Naturally, he was upset about his sister’s statement. But for better or worse, their argument didn’t have time to continue.

At that moment, someone swung the door wide open and rushed into the room. “Your Excellency! It’s an emergency!” an Imperial Army soldier cried.

Seeing the soldier’s speed and expression, Koutarou realized it was important and threw aside the pen and paper to rush over.

“What is it?! What happened?!” he asked.

“The spaceship that Princess Clariosa and her friends were on has been shot down!” the soldier reported. Koutarou had expected something serious, but this went beyond that. Shocked, he took off running, moving quickly past the soldier. Naturally, his destination was the palace’s command room. All of the information should be gathered there.

The Forthorthe Imperial Palace had a command room to give orders to the Imperial Army. That was because the emperor was in charge of the army. Although Elfaria was an exception thanks to Koutarou’s presence, this had been the case for generations. As such, most information was collected there when something like this happened. When Koutarou entered, the room was buzzing.

“That’s why Kiriha-sama said not to move from the Imperial Palace!”

“Now’s not the time for that! We have to confirm their safety first!”

“Calm down, everyone! Those three won’t go down so easily!”

The landing craft that Clan, Kiriha, and Ruth were on had been shot down.

That news had sent panic throughout the command room. Those three were exceedingly important to Forthorthe. Clan was a princess as well as skilled in science, technology, and intelligence. Kiriha boasted a high level of competence as a military strategist and politician, formulating strategies and policies and even handling negotiations. As for Ruth, she coordinated both military and economic affairs. Together they could handle huge matters, and they could be considered Elfaria's and the Blue Knight's confidantes. With those three suddenly disappearing, it was no surprise that confusion had spread.

"His Excellency the Blue Knight has entered!" the AI announced.

At that announcement, the command room fell silent. Koutarou was the supreme commander. As such, they needed to avoid getting in his way.

Before Koutarou sat down in his seat, he asked, "So, what's the situation?!"

"At present, we only have a report that landing craft Shooting Star K17 was shot down during the final stage of deceleration. This has been confirmed on cameras both from orbit and on the ground," an officer reported.

The first report had come from a patrol unit on duty. The pilot had informed them that the landing was going according to schedule and confirmed the ship's appearance both visually and on radar, entering the information into the computer. After that, the patrol ship had returned to its mission and surveyed its surroundings. Shortly afterward, the ship had detected supersonic missiles fired from the surface and reported that as well. Moments later, Shooting Star K17 had been shot down by different missiles.

The second report contained observations from both the surface and space. In Forthorthe it was common for any ship entering the atmosphere to be recorded. Having an outside viewpoint was helpful from a safety perspective as well as for verification in case of accidents. That was especially true when important people were on board, and landing craft were observed by multiple cameras and sensors. The craft had started its descent at the specified point. Just as it was about to finish deceleration, Shooting Star K17 had been shot down by supersonic missiles. Upon being hit, its trajectory had changed and it had fallen toward the ground in a curve that was wrong for a spaceship.

"Why was there an attack from the surface?! Was the information leaked?!"

Koutarou asked.

The problem with the incident was that the attack had come from the ground. The point of descent was changed every day, but there weren't many points around the conference that were suitable for descent, so they could end up being reused. Yet it was unrealistic to have equipment for interception at every point. It would be next to impossible for the Imperial Army to miss such a large number of weapons being moved. So it made more sense to assume that the information had been leaked.

"It is impossible to say at the moment, but it is very likely," an officer answered.

"Did you send ground forces?"

"A rapid reaction force has already been deployed. They will arrive in seven minutes."

"I refuse to believe it!" Koutarou slammed his desk. "They can't be dead!"

The incident had happened because they had been naive.

I underestimated Maxfern. Of course someone capable of anything would target those three!

In a large-scale battle, it wasn't people like Koutarou or Theia who were the most dangerous. It was people like Kiriha, Ruth, and Clan: those who could oversee the entire battlefield and make adjustments to people or material were the biggest threats. For example, Theia was strong. In specific battles, she would win time and time again. That would have some effect on the battlefield.

But what if there were no supplies? Not even an invincible Theia could fight without bullets. Repeated victories were thanks to Ruth, who could supply troops without either excess or shortage; Kiriha, who managed the damage to troops on the battlefield by moving them around in a balanced manner; and Clan, who repaired and manufactured weapons and gathered information. Having gone through several wars, Maxfern and Grevanas were well aware of that, which was why the three girls had been targeted. The enemy's grudge against Koutarou was probably part of it, but it made strategic sense as well. It had been careless to send the three out to a conference when a war was about

to start.

“Your Excellency, please allow me to speak.”

While Koutarou was filled with regret, the woman who was seated in the chair next to Clan’s currently empty one spoke up.

“Who are you?”

“I am from the intelligence department. I was given a message from Princess Clariosa to pass to you if this situation were to occur.”

“From Clan?! Tell me!”

“I will convey it precisely as instructed,” the woman said. ““If something were to happen, tell Veltlion to tap his seat’s headrest with his right hand three times.””

“Tap the headrest?” Koutarou looked perplexed. Clan’s message was strange. He didn’t think there was any meaning in the requested action. Even so, he decided to stand up and tap the headrest three times.

“What is the point of—”

“Designated command confirmed,” the AI responded. It appeared the act was a hidden command. “Your Excellency Blue Knight, replaying a message from Princess Clariosa.”

Clan appeared on a large monitor. Behind her were Ruth and Kiriha. It appeared to have been recorded in the command room.

“Pardomshiha, is it already recording?” Clan asked.

“Yes, it has already begun,” Ruth confirmed. “So Master is already watching.”

“Wha... Ahem...” Clan cleared her throat and began talking. “Veltlion, if you are watching this, then I imagine you’re in an uproar.”

“Don’t try to act cool now,” Koutarou retorted.

“Quiet, you!” Clan shouted.

“What?! How did she know that I was replying?!”

“Anyway...I have something important to tell you,” Clan continued. “Why this

has happened, and what to do next.”

From there, she started talking about how their landing craft would be shot down.

It had started one week ago. Clan’s intelligence agency had come up with some information: the Forthorthe Liberation Army was looking into her, Kiriha’s, and Ruth’s movements with the intention of assassinating them.

“That’s quite concerning...but let us just handle it as usual,” Clan remarked.

Spies had been discovered trying to infiltrate the Imperial Palace several times before. The only difference was that this time the target was Clan and the others, so she was going to have the intelligence agency handle it like they usually did. But someone stopped her.

“Hold on, Clan-dono,” said Kiriha.

“What is it, Kii?”

Kiriha had happened to be around when Clan received the report. After stopping her, Kiriha stared at the monitor by Clan’s seat.

“It would be a shame to let such an opportunity go,” Kiriha announced.

“Opportunity?”

“Considering the future, we can use this to get information on Maxfern.”

Kiriha was concerned about the lack of information they had on the enemy. She didn’t know where their headquarters were, what the scale of their forces were, what regions were working with them, and so on. Since Ralgwin had been so skilled, they hadn’t been able to grasp the scale of the situation beforehand. So if a battle were to begin, it would be disastrous. Kiriha wanted to use the opportunity to gather more information.

“What exactly are you thinking?” Ruth, who was also sitting in, asked. She was prepared to do anything to allow Koutarou to win, so she was interested in Kiriha’s suggestion.

“I want information on them, so I want to create a situation where they will risk frequently exchanging information. That said, I don’t want an all-out war to

begin,” Kiriha explained.

“So you want orders to be sent, like in the middle of a battlefield, but you don’t want it to be during a large-scale battle? Is that even possible?” Clan asked.

“Not definitely, but it is possible. If we supply information to their spies, we can present them with an opportunity to assassinate us.”

“*Assassinate us?!* ” Ruth’s face turned pale. The suggestion was unexpected. She knew that Kiriha was a genius, but even she was shocked by what Kiriha had to say.

“Of course, we can’t actually let ourselves be assassinated,” Kiriha continued. “That would wrap up their plan, and I don’t want to die either. We need to allow ourselves to be attacked but survive.”

“I see!” Clan exclaimed. “In that case, they will deploy their army to assassinate us and will keep in frequent contact with their commanders!” She understood what Kiriha was saying. If they used this method, they could probably get a grasp on the enemy’s leadership.

“And this isn’t as likely, but if Maxfern and Grevanas are close enough to use comms in real time, we might be able to follow them and find their headquarters,” Kiriha added.

On missions, command could only have around a ten-second delay at most. In other words, if they weren’t within a distance that took light ten seconds to travel, they wouldn’t be able to give proper commands, which would mean that Maxfern and Grevanas were close. Moreover, they would need to have frequent contact. That would make it possible to locate and follow the enemy to their headquarters, but only if everything went according to plan. If Maxfern put his trust in their soldiers on the field, he could fall back farther, in which case they would have to analyze the communication waves and hopefully pursue an enemy ship in the hopes of gathering information on the Forthorthe Liberation Army. Even then, Kiriha felt that the risk was worth it.

“Oh...my... That is an unexpected plan.” Ruth’s mouth was agape. She couldn’t even imagine how Kiriha could think up such a plan. But she could understand that this was why the enemy was snooping around for information

in order to assassinate her.

“And you want us to be the bait,” Clan concluded. “But it would all be for nothing if we actually die. That is a very difficult task, Kii.”

Clan understood Kiriha’s intent, but it was a tricky matter. Preparations could mean nothing depending on where the assassination would happen. So it would be necessary to guide the enemy to a position where they could actually make those preparations. Their enemy was a military organization that ignored all rules. It was obvious that they would hit with overwhelming firepower. That had to be prevented somehow. But if the attacks were perfectly blocked, the plan wouldn’t work. They needed to take enough damage for the enemy to think that they were just one step short of accomplishing their goal. Without that, there wouldn’t be a large volume of messages being exchanged.

“I got it, Kiriha-sama,” said Ruth. “You are intending to leak information on the next Forthorthe Economic Development Conference, correct?”

“That’s right.” Kiriha nodded.

“Ah, all three of us are participating in that conference!” Clan exclaimed. “That would narrow their aim!”

The enemy was gathering information to assassinate all three of them, which meant they could leak information regarding when they would all be together. That way, the enemy would set their sights on that particular moment. Furthermore, since they would be traveling by spaceship, it was easy to tell when the enemy would attack. It was possible the enemy might see through it and assume that things were *too* convenient, but it was better than leaking other information that might make the enemy’s moves less predictable.

“Could you change Theia-dono’s schedule, Ruth?” Kiriha asked. Theia was scheduled to attend the conference with them, but Kiriha didn’t see any reason to get her involved.

“I understand. I will make arrangements for that,” Ruth answered.

“Can Theiamillis-san not join in?” Clan asked.

“It’s not like this is without risk, and Theia-dono is too important,” Kiriha explained. “After all, she would have to seem to be defeated by the enemy.”

“They might suspect something,” said Clan.

Kiriha intended to survive, but there were no guarantees. They were going to be reckless in order to gain information. So having Theia, who wasn't being targeted, accompany them would only put her life at risk for no reason. Besides, they needed to act like the enemy had outmaneuvered them, which would look unnatural if a combat expert like Theia was with them. If they wanted to preserve the idea of the noncombatants trying to escape with their lives with the Forthorthe Liberation Army giving chase, Theia couldn't come with them. And with Theia gone, they could get the enemy to lower their guard. Kiriha figured Grevanas would assume that if it was a trap, they would force Theia to come along to increase the value of the decoy.

“What a grand plan,” Ruth said. “I can only hope that it works out well.”

Clan nodded. “I agree with you there.”

They both agreed with Kiriha's suggestion. By taking on such a risk on their own, they would allow the Imperial Army and Koutarou to buy a great deal of time, so they didn't hesitate to put their plan into action. Even so, it wasn't like they weren't anxious.

“I can understand them wanting to take down Kii, so it might work out perfectly...” Clan commented.

“How disconcerting. These are just the idle ramblings of a little girl,” Kiriha replied.

“To be honest, I am glad you're on our side, Kiriha-sama,” Ruth added.

With that, the three chose to face an assassination attempt head-on. It was highly dangerous, but it could end the war sooner. That way, there would be fewer civilian casualties, and most importantly to them, Koutarou would spend less time on the battlefield. To the girls, that was worth the world.

Having chosen to take this risk, their biggest problem was when the enemy would attack.

“Strategically, there are only a few opportunities to strike,” Kiriha informed them. “It is highly unlikely that they'd strike in space. It's unrealistic that they would know where we'll warp out to intercept us.”

Kiriha surmised that an assassination in space would be difficult. In order to get to Planet Alaia, they would need to warp once so the enemy couldn't know exactly where their ship would arrive. That was too reliant on luck to be a plan.

"Besides," Ruth offered, "it wouldn't be very wise to attack while we are still on a space battleship."

The three would travel to the orbit of Planet Alaia on a battleship before moving to a landing craft to descend to the surface. Naturally, a battleship was very sturdy, so it was easier to attack a landing craft. If the enemy wanted to take out the entire ship, they would need some heavy anti-ship weaponry. But if they could sneak in such a thing, they could have just attacked the Imperial Palace in the first place.

"Then it would happen after we leave the battleship, but they would likely avoid the conference or the area around it due to its strict security," Kiriha noted. "In other words, it would happen at some point during the atmospheric entry. From a technological viewpoint, when would a landing craft be at its most vulnerable, Clan-dono?"

Kiriha surmised that the attack would happen between their descent and arrival at the conference venue. To determine exactly when, Kiriha asked for Clan's counsel.

"That would be the moment before the craft finishes decelerating," Clan answered. "The craft will be using its distortion field during reentry to ward off the heat, so when it finishes decelerating, it will have used up most of its energy. Moreover, the flight will be in a direct line, making it easy for guided weapons to lock on to the craft."

Clan's answer was clear. The landing craft was at its most defenseless moments before it finished decelerating. The girls had no way of knowing, but Grevanas had reached the same conclusion.

"What are the chances that they use something other than guided weapons?" Ruth asked.

Guided weapons, like missiles or unmanned crafts, weren't the only weapons available. There were lasers, rail guns, and more. So Ruth wanted to know why she was focusing on guided weapons.

“Lasers or rail guns would make it too easy to tell where the attack came from,” Clan explained. “After the first shot, they would be wiped out by an orbital bombardment.”

Lasers and rail guns stood out a lot moments before firing. They needed a lot of energy to fire, and that would be detected. Moreover, the attack would fly straight, so its origin could be calculated by following its trajectory. From there, a battleship could rain down lasers and there was nothing the enemy could do. Unless the first strike was guaranteed to take out the landing craft, lasers or rail guns would be hard to use. Similar circumstances made bullets and cannons unfeasible. The sound and straight trajectory made their origins easy to discover.

“So they would use weapons guided through optical observation,” Ruth mused.

“Certainly they would,” Clan nodded. “Well, strictly speaking, lasers would be further obstructed by the heated atmosphere around the craft.”

Firing lots of guided weapons would be the best option for taking down the landing craft. Missiles wouldn’t miss a decelerating target flying in a straight line. Moreover, even if the enemy was detected, they could fire all the missiles at the same time before getting hit by orbital bombardments, so it would be impossible to prevent the assassination attempt.

“In other words, Clan-dono will need to block those missiles,” Kiriha said, “while also making it look like they’ve done serious damage.”

A normal landing craft wouldn’t survive a focused missile attack, so Clan needed to make adjustments to their plan that would allow them to survive. But it couldn’t be too perfect. Some tricks needed to be put in place to make the attack look effective. If not, the enemy might suspect that it was a trap.

“You make it sound so easy, Kii.” Clan gave Kiriha a disgruntled look.

“We are counting on you, Clan-sama,” said Ruth.

“Good grief, you two...”

Though exasperated, Clan’s brain was changing gears to figure out how to block the attacks while making it look like they had worked. She had a one-

week deadline. All of her knowledge and experience was being put to the test.

Clan came up with a clear answer to the difficult task. For that purpose she added three functions to the landing craft. The first was a sturdy distortion field.

“Activate the additional distortion field! And I don’t care if we’re almost out of energy—deploy the original distortion field!”

“As you wish, my princess!” the AI said.

Clan initially countered the eighteen incoming missiles with decoys and jamming technology, but it was only enough to avoid two of them. For the remaining sixteen, she used the enhanced defense of another distortion field. The new field was powerful enough to be installed on a battleship. It also had a dedicated power source, so it could function even after the original distortion field had used up most of its energy.

“Alert message: eight missiles have directly impacted the distortion field,” the AI reported. “The damage to the landing craft is minimal, but the distortion field has collapsed. Thirty-eight seconds remain until it can be reactivated.”

“Good work!” Clan exclaimed. Eight missiles had been blocked but there were still eight more. With the distortion field out of energy, it couldn’t block any more. “Now, Karama, Korama!” she instructed.

“Leave it to us, Clan-chan, ho!” said Karama.

“Amplifier activated! Deploying the emergency Spiritual Energy Field, ho!” Korama cried.

“We’re counting on you! It’s all up to your guts now!” Clan said.

The second defense was additional armor plates installed on top of the landing craft. It was reactive armor that would blow up on its own when a missile exploded, reducing the impact by having the two explosions cancel each other out. Combined with Karama and Korama’s Spiritual Energy Field, it became a sort of composite armor. The reactive armor was double layered, with the Spiritual Energy Field separating the two layers. The haniwas’ power wasn’t enough to block the missiles, but with an amplification device, they could provide adequate protection.

The combination blocked another six missiles. Even so, two more remained. Clan had one final countermeasure, but it wasn't necessarily for defense.

"Immediate evacuation recommended," the AI proposed.

"I know that!" she shouted.

"Clan-sama!" Ruth cried.

"Now, Pardomshiha!" Clan instructed. "Ignite it!"

"As you wish, my princess!" said Ruth. She slammed her right fist down onto the operator panel in front of her.

That was when something unexpected happened. There was a large boom and explosion, but not from a missile. It had happened within the landing craft. Ruth had activated the self-destruct.

"All we can do now is pray!" Clan told them.

The self-destruct had originally been meant to destroy the evidence. The new functions had been installed near the rocket motor, with the exception of the reactive armor. But since those had already exploded, only the devices near the rocket motor remained, so if the motor was destroyed, there would be no evidence that they had prepared for the assassination ahead of time, leaving only the cockpit unscathed by chance.

There was another explosion.

"Did it work?!" Clan asked. She'd used the self-destruct to block the last of the missiles by triggering it when they were approaching. The motor exploded, scattering debris that hit the missiles, causing them to detonate.

Clan screamed as Ruth yelled, "Masteeeeer!"

Kiriha resigned herself. "It was a fleeting life..."

"That's Ane-go for you, ho!" said Karama.

"Not flinching in the slightest, ho!" Korama replied.

Clan had managed to block all of the missiles, but they didn't make it out of the situation unscathed. The landing craft was seriously damaged, with parts falling off. Fortunately, the cockpit was still in one piece and airtight, protecting

the three girls. However, the cockpit was falling in a tailspin. Only God knew if they would be able to land safely.

When Clan came to, she was dangling from the ceiling, so to speak. In the crash, the cockpit had ended up upside down, and the ceiling was now the floor. Clan was firmly fastened into the pilot's seat, her hair and arms dangling down.

"Ugh... Karama? Korama?" she asked in a daze.

"Ho! Clan-chan opened her eyes, ho!" Karama said.

"Are you okay, ho? Does your head hurt, ho?" Korama asked.

"It seems I'm not hurt...but that was horrible..."

Clan accepted a helping hand from the haniwas to get out of her seat. Like she'd said, she didn't seem to be injured, but she did look exhausted. The distortion field had limited the speed of their spinout, but it hadn't eliminated it. Just getting spun around like that was enough to tire her out.

"Are you okay, Onee-chan?" Kiriha asked gently. It was a tone reserved for when the two of them were alone. Naturally, her eyes were just as kind.

"I see you're full of energy. I guess you always were..." Clan replied.

"I can even ride on a roller coaster," Kiriha said.

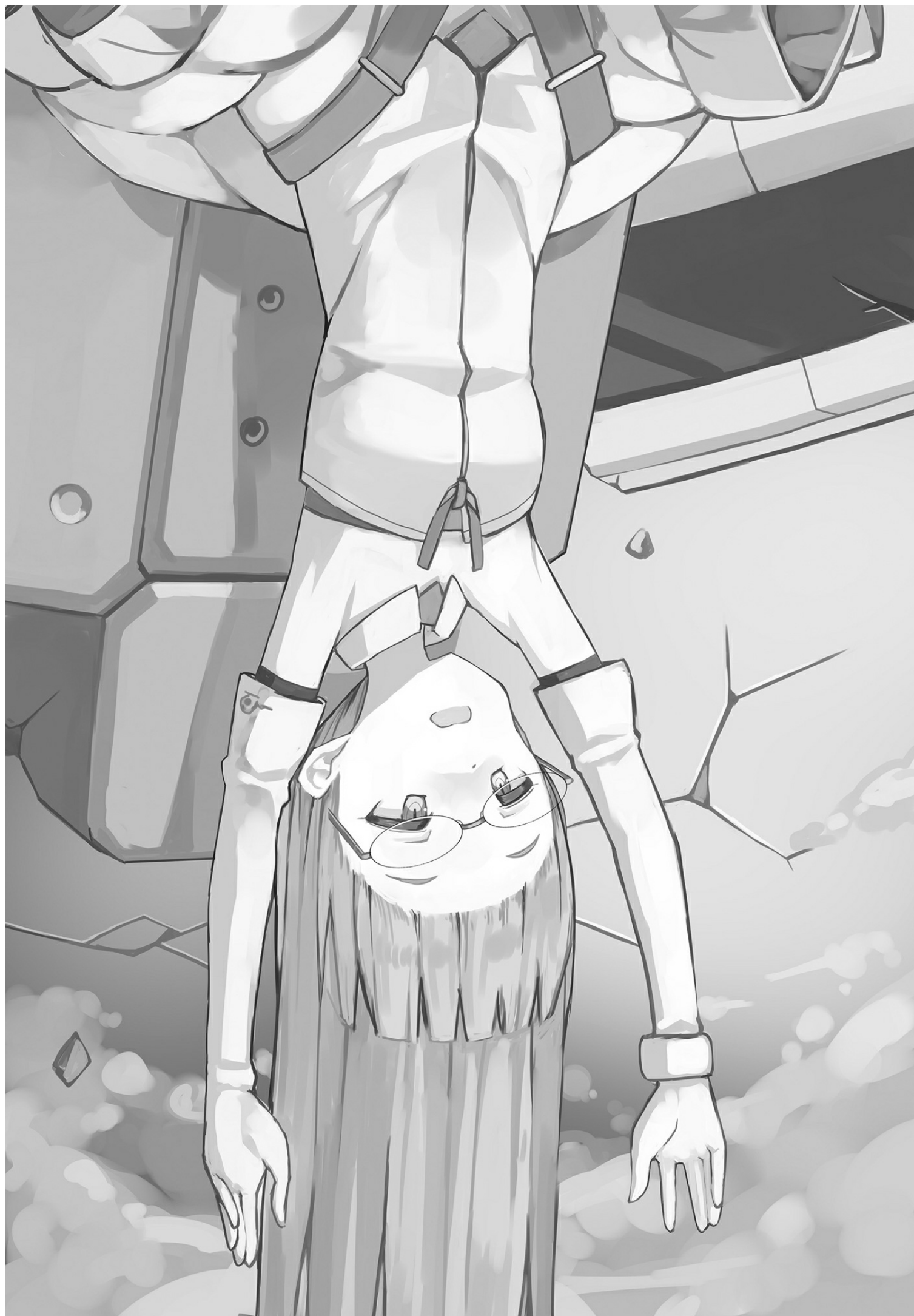
"I suppose so...hehe," Clan giggled as she fixed her clothes. Kiriha naturally helped out.

Ruth watched them with a serious expression. "Sorry for interrupting, but we need to leave right away. The enemy is coming."

She was already preparing to set out. Upon waking up, she had packed a rucksack with an emergency kit, portable rations, and other necessities. Since she knew the enemy was coming, she'd left Kiriha and Clan to the haniwas and gotten to work.

"Here, Clan-sama," Ruth said. "It has your personal belongings and tools."

"Thank you for everything, Pardomshiha," Clan replied.



“This is for you Ane-go, ho!” Karama said.

“We kept it light, ho!” Korama added.

“Thank you,” Kiriha answered. “I am aware that I’m not getting enough exercise.”

Shortly after their crash landing, the three crawled out of the ship. Since everything was upside down, it was harder to move, but the spaceship had exits up, down, left, and right, so it wasn’t too hard to get out.

“Looking at it like this, I am impressed that we are in one piece...” Ruth said upon seeing the damage that the craft had taken. The armor was falling apart. Looking around where the rocket motor had landed, it was a miracle that the cockpit survived.

“That’s thanks to Clan-dono’s efforts,” Kiriha said.

“That’s amazing, ho!” said Karama.

“Well done, ho!” said Korama.

“If anything, it’s thanks to the safety measures,” Clan replied. “Unfortunately, we didn’t land thanks to me.”

Just like the PAF and Koutarou’s armor, distortion fields tended to have levitating powers. Spaceships that used distortion fields for defense and navigation naturally used them as safeguards as well, so as long as the power supply and distortion field generator were safe, a crash landing was survivable—if both were kept intact.

“It’s the same thing, Clan-sama,” Ruth insisted. “You were the one to protect the safety devices.”

“But you can hardly call it an achievement,” Clan answered with a sigh. “We won’t be able to get the vehicle out of this.” She was being praised, but her expression was gloomy. There had been an unexpected problem. The original plan had been to use a vehicle to leave, but the hatch was warped from the crash, and it was impossible to get the vehicle out.

“It’s hard to predict everything,” said Kiriha. “Sometimes there’s nothing we

can do.”

“That reminds me,” Clan replied, “you actually won against someone who could predict the future. Hehe, so if *you’re* saying that, there really was nothing we could’ve done. Let’s just try to stay positive about our situation.”

“That’s the spirit,” Kiriha agreed.

“Pardomshiha, what direction do we go?” Clan asked.

“This way please!”

“Ho!”

“Ho, ho!”

With that, the three girls and two haniwas left the ship and crash site behind. It was a given that Maxfern and Grevanas would send in soldiers to check the wreck, so they had to rush to a safe location as quickly as possible and wait to be rescued.

Escape

December 5, Monday

With Forthorthe's technology, it was easy to find footprints in the forest using image processing. So the first thing Kiriha and the others did was use distortion fields and the PAF to levitate for a while.

"We should land and walk," Kiriha suggested. "It would be bad if the enemy detected the space distortion."

"That's true. They'll have deployed on the ground by now." Clan nodded. "Pardomshiha, what is the status of communications in this area?"

"It's encrypted, so I can't read it, but it's clearly picked up in the past few minutes," Ruth answered.

"They must be in pursuit," Kiriha concluded.

There still weren't any forces from the Forthorthe Imperial Army around, so all the messages flying about must be from the enemy. Since the planet was under Imperial control, the Forthorthe Liberation Army was in the middle of enemy territory. Normally, they would want to avoid obvious communication, yet the frequency of messages was increasing because the enemy was in pursuit despite the risks.

"It seems like they are moving as we hoped, for starters," Ruth said and looked over at Kiriha, who nodded.

"That's good. The problems start here, though."

"We have to escape our pursuers, but we can't lose them completely," Clan said. "How troublesome."

The circumstances weren't too different from when they'd been in the landing craft. Their very presence meant that the enemy, in their pursuit, would seek the opinions of their superior officers, which meant the volume of messages would increase. If things went well, that could help them find clues

leading to the enemy stronghold.

“Our survival skills are being put to the test,” Ruth said.

“We should have kept some troops in hiding,” said Clan.

“But we couldn’t afford to let the enemy see them,” Kiriha replied. She had considered putting allies in position ahead of time but had worried that Maxfern and Grevanas would suspect something. Those two were destined enemies of Koutarou, so it would be a mistake to underestimate them.

“I think so too,” Ruth agreed. “Besides...if we’d said that we wanted soldiers in hiding in case we were shot down, Master would have absolutely objected to it.”

Ruth had an additional reason they couldn’t have positioned soldiers ahead of time: Koutarou. He would surely have heard about it, and it wasn’t hard to imagine him objecting to the idea of them being shot down in the first place.

“Is that your opinion as the vice captain of the Knight Order or your intuition as a woman?” Kiriha asked.

“Both,” Ruth boldly replied with a calm look. In the past, that was something she wouldn’t have been able to do. But Ruth now knew that she was of use to Koutarou, both officially and personally.

“So we would have needed to give up on soldiers either way,” Clan replied.

“And we will have to make it home,” Kiriha added. “If we return with any serious injuries, Koutarou will never forgive us.”

The same was true for Clan and Kiriha, which was why they had accepted the risk of getting shot down on purpose. They could accept that risk to allow their beloved to win. They could never sit back and simply be protected.

“Of course.” Ruth nodded. “We have to prove this isn’t just recklessness, but all part of a proper plan.” Her eyes shone brightly, and the same was true for the other two. It was a rough situation. But they would all return home safely.

The haniwas were the first to detect the enemy approaching thanks to their bond and instincts. Scientifically, the data the pair acquired was analyzed and compared by the AI that had spent many long years learning and now detected

the enemy's presence.

"This unnatural gathering of spiritual energy is the enemy, ho!" Karama announced.

"But there are no large gaps in spiritual energy, so they don't have any large weapons, ho!" Korama added.

"They must want to hide too. If the Imperial Army's satellites or reconnaissance drones find them, they would just be a target for orbital bombardment," Kiriha mused.

The enemy was still quite a distance away, so the haniwas' analysis used a lot of assumptions. But the situation was clear: the Forthorthe Liberation Army had sent out a group in pursuit. A relatively small squad was following the three. But their pursuit couldn't afford to include anything too flashy since the Imperial Army was watching from above. If detected, they would be obliterated, so they needed to stay low just like Kiriha and the others. For the same reason, they had no large-scale weaponry. Both the pursued and the pursuers were using the trees for cover as they carefully moved.

"How about having the Imperial Army detect us from above?" Clan suggested.

If their allies were above them, it seemed sensible to request reinforcements, but Ruth apologetically shook her head.

"I can not recommend it. It would seem the enemy already has stealth craft in the sky."

"So we would be attacked before any allies arrived..." Clan nodded. Just as the Imperial Army had eyes in the sky, so too did the Liberation Army. They couldn't use satellites or reconnaissance drones, but they did have small tactical drones and unmanned craft deployed, which meant that when the trio's allies discovered them, the enemy would too. Their allies could send unmanned craft to protect them, but the enemy could send missiles and kamikaze drones in turn. Since they would arrive around the same time, the outcome was clear.

"A signal, huh?" Kiriha pondered. "That's not necessarily a bad idea." Having listened to the two, it seemed like she had come to a conclusion.

Clan looked at her. "What do you mean, Kii?"

“There’s something I want to try. I need your help.”

“I understand,” Ruth answered.

Clan nodded, somewhat perplexed. “I don’t mind, but...”

With a serious expression, Kiriha explained her plan to them.

Two types of units had been placed on Alaia to assassinate Kiriha, Clan, and Ruth. The first was the missile unit meant to shoot down their ship. That unit had a vehicle equipped with six supersonic missiles, with eight units deployed around the expected point of descent. Three of them had taken part in the attack for a total of eighteen missiles fired. The other type was a normal ground unit, albeit lightly equipped. Its role was to chase down any survivors if the missiles failed to assassinate them, so it needed to be stealthy within enemy territory. For that reason, those units had no vehicles or large weapons; instead, they had only weapons they could carry and relatively small unmanned crafts. The composition was closer to that of a reconnaissance unit than a standard infantry force. Their numbers were also that of a squad: a total of ten. Eight such units had been deployed around the area.

“I thought this would be a simple mission against amateurs, yet we’re struggling to find them.” The squad’s vice captain folded his arms and groaned.

This was one of the eight squads pursuing Kiriha and the others. They were stationed two kilometers away from where the landing craft had crashed and had been sent to investigate. After confirming that the targets were alive, they’d reported to their superior officer and immediately received new orders to follow the survivors.

“Since they haven’t left any footprints, they must know what we can do,” the squad captain said.

“Oh! I think Princess Clan was in charge of the intelligence agency!” the vice captain recalled.

“This is going to be a long day...”

The captain resigned himself to a long fight. There were no footprints around the crash. So much so that one could suspect the survivors had hidden inside of

the craft. But the newly created life-detector, which was actually a spiritual energy sensor that soldiers didn't know about, had confirmed that there was no life aboard, so there was no doubt they'd escaped. Moreover, the survivors had done so in around ten minutes. That wasn't something a civilian who'd been caught in an accident could pull off. It was clear that their targets had experience in battle. If the squad let their guard down, the survivors would escape.

"Where did they run off to?" the vice captain asked.

"Where would *you* run to?" the captain replied.

"I would run to my allies...but it's a long way to walk. The ocean is to the south and isn't very suitable for hiding. So perhaps the hilly north where I could find a good place to hide?" the vice captain suggested.

The captain nodded. "I think so too."

The ocean was a few kilometers south. Since the survivors wouldn't want to be cornered, they probably wouldn't run there. It made more sense to assume they had escaped to the north, since the forest extended into the hills, making it easy to hide, and there were also other places where they could take refuge, like caves or ravines.

"So, to the north?" the vice captain asked.

"But they are skilled. Wouldn't they be able to predict that we would think that?" the captain replied.

"Then they may still be hiding around here. We don't have much time," the vice captain said.

Assuming their targets knew what they were doing, they could be waiting around the crash site. That could hurt them in the short term, but it would hurt the Liberation Army in the long run, since it was the Liberation Army that was in enemy territory.

"All right, we are going to search this area," the captain decided.

"What about the north?" the vice captain asked.

"Epasta's squad was deployed to the northeast. We'll have them block off the

north.”

“I see. Then they will be trapped.”

They would search the surrounding area and leave their allies to block off the north. So unless their targets headed northeast with pinpoint accuracy, they would have no way to escape. Since this was enemy territory, the squad could only search the immediate surroundings of the crash site, so the strategy made sense.

“Okay, everyone move into the forest! The Imperial Army will be all over this place soon!” the captain ordered.

The vice captain relayed the order. “You heard him! Move out!”

Many of their personnel were former Vandalion faction members, so they had a degree of training and morale. Following orders, they entered the forest in an orderly formation. Their decision was the right one, as Kiriha and the others still hadn’t gone far.

“Have some men wear infrared goggles to check our surroundings. We don’t have much time to conduct a thorough search,” the captain noted.

“Understood. We’ll also have some unmanned craft search with acoustic sensors,” the vice captain replied.

“Good,” the captain said with a nod.

They were the hunters but also the hunted, so they would use all means available to search for the survivors. If they failed, it was they who would suffer for it.

Their actions were correct overall, aside from a single miscalculation—the three survivors weren’t the type to run and hide.

Shortly after their search began, something abnormal happened: a small explosion in the air above them.

“What?! What was that?!” the captain asked.

As confusion spread among the soldiers, the wreckage of a machine the size of a large dog rolled across their feet. It was one of the unmanned craft they had sent out.

“The unmanned craft was shot down!” the vice captain shouted.

“Dammit! They discovered our location! Set up a smoke screen and start jamming!” the captain ordered.

“At once!”

With the unmanned craft they had sent out as a precaution destroyed, it made sense for the soldiers to assume that the enemy had done so to launch a surprise attack. In other words, the enemy was coming, and the squad didn’t know where the enemy was yet. It was an extremely dangerous situation.

Fortunately, they were able to deploy a smoke screen and jam signals before the attack to avoid being wiped out. But there was no time to relax. The squad captain gave out further orders.

“Use the remaining unmanned craft to find the enemy!”

“Understood! Wait, what?!” the vice captain exclaimed.

“What is it?! Give your reports clearly!”

“All unmanned craft are...apparently fully functional...” the vice captain stated.

“Impossible! Then what is this destroyed craft?!”

“Warning: incoming bombardment detected from the enemy flying above. Immediate evasion recommended,” the AI reported.

“Is this what they were planning from the start?!” the captain cried.

Immediately afterward, incoming missiles hit the wreckage of the unmanned craft, causing a large explosion. The soldiers were unfortunate for several reasons. The first was that their equipment belonged to the old Vandarion faction, which meant it had previously belonged to the Imperial Army, who used the same equipment, and had mistaken the unmanned craft Clan had delivered to them for their own. Since it was the same type with its signal disguised, they would never have expected that the enemy had given it to them.

Their next bit of misfortune was that the craft had self-destructed, but they had interpreted that as the craft having been attacked and shot down. Who

could have predicted that the unmanned craft had sneaked up and destroyed itself?

The third reason for their misfortune was their high degree of skill. There was no way that their unmanned craft would have been shot down for no reason. Since it had to be a sign of an incoming attack, their training had taken over and driven them to set up their defenses. A smoke screen had been deployed and jamming had begun. That was the moment the Forthorthe Imperial Army had learned their exact location. A reconnaissance plane above them had detected the jamming, and when a pilot had gone to visually confirm it, they'd seen the smoke screen. It made sense to assume that the enemy was in the middle of a battle with Kiriha's group, so the pilot had launched a support attack, firing optically guided missiles, which had struck at the center of the smoke screen.

"They aren't entirely unlucky," Kiriha noted. "From their point of view, we could be inside of the smoke screen, so the pilot would have used nonlethal weapons. So the enemy shouldn't be dead."

"And we will use this opening to hack their drones," Ruth said.

Clan's jaw dropped. "Kii, there really is something wrong with you. I wouldn't blame the enemy for calling you a devil..." With the self-destruction of a single unmanned craft, Kiriha had taken out an Imperial Army squad. Ruth had lost her craft but gotten four more from the enemy. Since Clan was well-versed in its design, she had already finished hacking them. As a result, their available unmanned craft had quadrupled. It was a complete victory over the enemy, and they had captured their weapons. Moreover, the enemy had been given no leads. It was a complete strategic victory for Kiriha's side. Clan couldn't help but pity the captain, whose biggest misfortune was having Kiriha as his enemy.

"How rude," Kiriha said. "I am nothing but an angel."

"You have a habit of telling jokes with a straight face," Clan pointed out.

"Oh my."

Thanks to the efforts of an angel, the three were able to get rid of their first pursuers. But they couldn't let their guard down. There were still a lot of enemies around, so they needed to hurry up and join their allies where they

had agreed ahead of time.

“If they try, they would emit radio or gravitational waves, and then missiles or bombs would be lobbed their way,” Theia said.

“Then what are they going to do?” Sanae asked.

“They run to a landline and use a phone.”

“So they’re looking for an old-timey phone.”

The problem was that Forthorthe’s technology was too advanced. Since they had technology to send things instantly, they couldn’t attack until they also had sufficient defenses. They would need antiair lasers and rail guns, and a powerful distortion field. The first would intercept any missiles or bombs, and the distortion field would protect them in case the ordnance still exploded. Alternatively, they’d need an old-fashioned phone that didn’t rely on wireless communication, so Kiriha and the others were heading for a base that had prepared those items ahead of time.

“What are we going to do, Koutarou?” Sanae asked.

“You, Landlord-san, and I are going to follow them.”

“What about me and Sanae-nee?” Theia asked.

“Get ahead of them to our hideout. It needs to be protected, and it’ll be faster if we search from both sides.”

The message from Clan had had an overall explanation of the plan as well as the location of their hideout. The group was acting in accordance with her instructions. They needed to safeguard the three girls.

“Then what are we waiting for?!” said Theia.

“Yeah, see you later, everyone,” Sanae-nee added as they ran off. They were heading for the landing craft they’d used to get there, which they now planned to use to get ahead of the missing girls.

“All right, we should go too,” Koutarou agreed.

“I hope they’re not hurt,” Shizuka anxiously said.

“If they are, I’ll punish them.”

“Aha, you know you couldn’t do that,” Shizuka laughed.

“Well, we can at least confiscate their pudding.”

“Ugh, that would be rough!” Sanae cried.

The trio hurried off after their friends. They sounded casual, but they were anything but calm on the inside. Their expressions were somber.

They were using Spirit Vision as their method of pursuit. Maxfern and Grevanas also had Spiritual Energy Technology, but their technological level wasn’t advanced enough that normal units could get their hands on it. In that regard, Koutarou’s side had the upper hand.

“Blue Knight, I’m sure you already know, but you should avoid using Signaltin’s power to talk,” Alunaya warned him. “It’s the same reason as the phones—Grevanas and I would notice. If you’re going to use it, you have to be very close.”

Koutarou smiled wryly. “How vexing…”

The method of communication differed, but it was ultimately the same. They would need to straightforwardly search using Spirit Vision, and that made him impatient.

“The one who grows impatient first is the one who loses in cases like these,” said Alunaya. *“Leaders need to have self-control.”*

“I’ll keep that in mind.” Koutarou pumped himself up and focused on his Spirit Vision. Fortunately, there were still spiritual traces of the missing girls. “This is bad. The trail ends here.”

A hundred meters from the crash site, those traces, which wavered like an aurora, disappeared completely.

“I think this is a Spiritual Energy Field,” Sanae concluded with a glance. Since she played with the haniwas often, she’d seen them hide their presence with a Spiritual Energy Field quite a few times.

“The haniwas, huh? I can’t tell where to go from here,” Koutarou replied. With the traces of energy gone, Koutarou had no way of following the trail, but Sanae smiled.

“Hehehe, I can still see it!”

“Good work!”

Koutarou reached out to Sanae, who placed his hand on her head so that he could pat it. Then she grinned. “Okay, I’m satisfied!”

After some head patting, a satisfied Sanae led the way. But Koutarou soon reached out to her again.

“Hold on.”

“Huh?”

Sanae stopped and looked up at him. He’d grabbed her shoulder, his expression confused.

“What is it? Kiriha and the others are that way.” Sanae pointed into the forest.

When she did, Koutarou hurriedly pulled her hand down. “Hang on! Don’t point,” he told her.

“Why not?”

“You’ll give away their location.” He pulled Sanae close and whispered, “So don’t point right at them.”

They couldn’t know if the enemy was watching. Their opponents would have arrived at the crash site before Koutarou’s group, and there was a chance they were lurking nearby to observe them in hopes of figuring out where Kiriha’s group was. The squad that was supposed to do that had already been taken out by Kiriha, but Koutarou was still on guard.

“Oh, I guess so.” Sanae nodded as he made his point, quickly apologizing. “I’m sorry, I’ll be more careful.”

“As long as you understand,” Koutarou answered. “I’m not angry with you.” Seeing how apologetic she looked, he was relieved and let her go.

“Okay. I’ll lead the way by zigzagging,” Sanae announced.

Koutarou nodded. “We’re counting on you.”

Even without pointing, if Sanae walked in a straight line, any enemy watching could figure out where the missing girls were. Assuming they were under

surveillance, Koutarou's group would need to make their way forward with detours.

Knowing Kiriha-san, she would already have escaped while zigzagging, but it's probably safer for us to do the same...



As Koutarou pondered the situation, he felt eyes on him.

“Hmmm.” Shizuka cast him a sidelong glance while she was thinking about something herself.

“What?” Koutarou asked.

“You can be surprisingly”—*forceful when stopping a girl in a hurry*, she was about to say before changing her mind mid-sentence—“considerate about small things.”

It wasn't entirely untrue, as this was something she had noted before.

“Well, I do have some experience as a commander,” Koutarou explained.

“I see. You were the same two thousand years ago.” Shizuka nodded. She was happy that Koutarou was so reliable. As for what she had been about to say, once everyone was back home safe, she intended to explore it further.

Before long, Sanae-san and Alunaya discovered the enemy. Although they used different methods, they found them at almost the same time.

“There are enemies in the front to the right,” Sanae-san warned them. “The terrain is blocking the view, but they are about two hundred and fifty meters away, Satomi-san.”

Having astral projected, Sanae-san was on lookout in the air, leaving Sanae-chan in charge of her body.

“*There are ten,*” Alunaya informed them. “*Many are holding lumps of metal. There are also four large lumps, probably machines, that are floating. They are a modern squad of warriors.*”

He was relying on instinct. He could sense spatial distortions, mana, sound, and smell to draw conclusions.

“Have they not noticed us?” Shizuka whispered with a worried look. She wasn't very comfortable playing this kind of hide-and-seek for a long period of time.

“It's okay,” Sanae-san said. “They're nervous, but there's no aura turning

toward us.”

“Right, good...” Shizuka responded with relief.

Seeing that, Koutarou called out to her. “They might be detecting us, but they could be seeing it as unnecessary information and ignoring it.”

“What do you mean?”

“Our presence is being made to look like puppies or kittens,” Koutarou explained.

Since they were close, it was possible that the enemy had already noticed them but ignored them since they saw them as critters. Based on experience, Koutarou’s side was using all kinds of methods to suppress their spiritual energy and body temperatures. Completely concealing their presence was a bad idea due to how unnatural it was and how much energy was expended. Yurika might have been able to erase everything, but Koutarou wasn’t a magical expert, so their current approach was more suitable. Of course, if the enemy looked at them directly, they would see through the disguise, so they couldn’t let their guard down.

Shizuka nodded. “Oh, that makes more sense than hiding everything from sight and hearing range.”

“So what shall we do, Blue Knight?” Alunaya asked. “Just defeating them would be simple, but...”

The expected forces were ten infantrymen and four unmanned craft supporting them. If Shizuka got serious, her side would be victorious in a matter of seconds.

“Based on their path, it doesn’t seem like we are being watched,” Koutarou answered. “So let’s leave them alone and let them pass by.”

Thanks to Alunaya and Sanae-san pointing it out, Koutarou could somewhat sense the enemy’s presence. They were currently on a path that would intersect with the one Koutarou’s group was on.

Fortunately, it didn’t seem like they were being watched after checking out the crash site, so Koutarou decided to wait in hiding and pass behind the

enemy.

“Why? Shouldn’t we just take them out?” Sanae-chan asked. As someone who preferred to keep things simple, she felt it was better to defeat the enemy where they were. That way, there would be fewer enemies and Kiriha and the others would be safer.

“Then they’ll assume the girls are here and send in everyone,” Koutarou replied.

“Oh, that would be bad.” Sanae-chan nodded. If a Liberation Army squad was taken out, their superiors would assume one of two things had happened: either their targets had defeated them, in which case they would gather their forces in the area, or reinforcements had defeated the targets, which would mean those reinforcements were also looking for the girls in the area and would deploy their soldiers accordingly. So when thinking of Kiriha and the others, it was best to let the enemy be. With fewer clues to follow, the troops had to spread out to cover a wide area.

“Wait a minute, Satomi-kun,” Shizuka said. “Why don’t you think they have any clues to lead them to Kiriha-san and the others?”

Shizuka could sense the soldiers passing by ahead of them, since she was sharing Alunaya’s sensations. But that wasn’t enough for her to understand Koutarou’s decision.

“If they had proper information, they wouldn’t go that way,” said Koutarou. “And they would be rushing too.”

The direction the soldiers were moving in was one hundred and twenty degrees off from the direction Koutarou was headed. Even considering the zigzagging pattern they were moving in, it was far from where the missing trio was. Moreover, several hours had passed since the crash, so if the enemy was chasing after the girls, they would be rushing.

“Since they don’t know where Kiriha-san and the others are, they are looking for reinforcements like us?” Shizuka clarified.

“They should be. They would want to connect with reinforcements and follow or beat them to their destination.”

“In other words, attacking them is just what they want,” Sanae-san concluded.

“That’s so scary! War is scary!” Sanae-chan commented.

The enemy was pursuing Kiriha’s group while searching for reinforcements. Without seeing through that kind of mindset, Kiriha and the others could be in great danger. For that reason, they had to exhibit the utmost caution.

No wonder Kiriha-san and the others are being targeted...

Normally, it was Kiriha, Ruth, and Clan who were concerned about that kind of mindset. They would prepare the way so that the others didn’t have to think about it. But right now, those three weren’t here, so every decision took precious time. Koutarou felt how useful those three were now more than ever. He didn’t even want to think about what it would be like to manage without them until he settled things with Maxfern. So for both personal and public reasons, he had to get the three girls back.

Four hours had passed since the Liberation Army had shot down the target landing craft. They had been searching the area since then but still hadn’t found their targets. The trio in question had vanished like smoke.

“Don’t tell me they were never on board to begin with,” Maxfern muttered.

“That is impossible. The spiritual energy sensor detected the residual thoughts of the crew,” Grevanas said.

“So they’ve skillfully been buying time... The more time passes, the more advantageous the situation becomes for them.”

He slammed the armrest of his chair in frustration. They hadn’t been able to escape, as a new fleet from the Imperial Army had arrived. They’d also confirmed that a ground force had descended to the crash site, so their targets hadn’t gotten to safety yet. That meant they were still active on the surface. The reinforcements were probably a rapid reaction force, and once a little more time passed, normal soldiers would be deployed in numbers that far surpassed the current ones. That would be the end of the Liberation Army’s hunt for the girls. The tables would turn and it would be they who were being hunted.

“We probably have less than two hours,” Grevanas concluded.

The rapid reaction force had arrived after four hours, which must have been a rather reckless journey. If they traveled using the ordinary method, it would take six hours, so there were less than two hours left before more soldiers arrived. They needed to kill their targets before then.

“We have to be bold here, Grevanas,” said Maxfern.

“I agree. But we will need to do something beforehand.”

Healthy girls could walk around sixteen kilometers in four hours, but given the wooded terrain, they’d probably made half of that distance. Even if they put real effort in, they would have gotten ten kilometers at most. It was a wide area, so a bold move—such as using the waste—required narrowing down that area a bit more.

“Do you have a plan?” Maxfern asked.

“I am thinking of summoning magical beasts to chase them down.”

His idea was to use wave tactics by summoning a vast number of weak magical beasts to search for the three. There was no need for the creatures to actually kill them. All they needed to do was find a trace so that a human squad could be sent in to finish the job.

“I will use fairies,” Grevanas said. “They are smart, fast, and cost little mana.”

Fairies were small humanoid creatures ten centimeters tall with wings growing out of their backs. They were the perfect fit for what Grevanas wanted. Moreover, they could also use simple magic, making them highly useful pursuers.

Maxfern shook his head. “That won’t work, Grevanas.” He didn’t think the fairies could chase the three down.

“Why is that? They can hardly be called diligent, but they are ideal for this situation...”

Fairies had a clear weakness, which was that they couldn’t take a hit. An even bigger weakness was that they were very talkative. They would always be chatting with each other. So Grevanas would ordinarily never summon them.

But he couldn't think of a magical beast better suited to the situation.

"Fairies would be fine against a normal enemy," Maxfern explained. "The problem is that our targets have fought plenty of these kinds of battles."

Maxfern didn't think the idea was wrong. Fairies were suitable for searching a large area, even if they could be noisy. But Kiriha and the others had used similar methods.

"They have fought using all kinds of techniques and technologies," he continued. "They should easily be able to surmise what we are trying to do and will have countermeasures for science, magic, and spiritual energy—countermeasures that we won't even notice."

Sure, Maxfern's side had caught up in techniques. They also had access to spiritual energy and the latest science. But what about using those things in battle? Two thousand years had passed since the Blue Knight had assumed the mantle of hero. In the current age, he would no doubt have tried all kinds of combinations. Meanwhile, Maxfern and Grevanas had little in the way of that sort of knowledge, so Maxfern didn't think it would be wise to challenge them to their own game.

"But if we don't do something—"

"Naturally," Maxfern interrupted him. "That is why we will use a method that they have never used, Grevanas!"

"And what would that be?" His wrinkled face twisted. Despite his intelligence, he couldn't read Maxfern's intentions.

"You will summon magical beasts that systematically hunt. Magical beasts that hunt in a pack and don't rely on mana, but vision, hearing, smell, and a high degree of intelligence, and can communicate as well. They'll be harder to use than magical creatures or corpses, but in this situation they will be the most reliable."

Maxfern was telling Grevanas to use the power of wild beasts to hunt their targets. Even if their targets used all means to protect themselves, they couldn't completely block out all five senses. Especially not against beasts with stronger senses than theirs. The beasts' power would be even greater when they worked

together. Wild beasts didn't have much in the way of intelligence, making it difficult for them to communicate with Grevanas. They would also be slower than fairies that could fly too. But the merit of not fighting on the same stage as the Blue Knight and his allies was big.

"I see!" Grevanas exclaimed. "As expected of Maxfern-sama!" With that, he finally understood Maxfern's intent.

Maxfern-sama is right. By putting a pack at multiple points, we'll flush those girls out!

"How about it? Can you do it?" Maxfern asked.

"Please give me a moment..."

Grevanas thought hard about the plan. After considering how many creatures he could summon, how much land a pack could cover, and all other kinds of factors, he reached a conclusion.

"Maxfern-sama, I believe it is possible."

"Then put it into action right now," Maxfern ordered.

"After this, however, I will not be able to use magic for a while," Grevanas added. Beasts required more mana than fairies. Even if he used all of the gems he'd stored mana in, it would just barely be enough to summon all of the necessary beasts. After using up all of his mana, Grevanas would be nothing but an old man.

"That's fine! This will all have been for nothing if we don't find them anyway! Do it!"

"At once!" Grevanas nodded and immediately departed the control room, while thinking, *Maxfern-sama is as reliable now as he was two thousand years ago... He is the one most suited to rule the world!*

With those emotions in his heart, he left to carry out his big job. He was more determined than ever to use his powers to bring Maxfern to the top.

A Bold Move

December 5, Monday

Five hours had passed since Kiriha, Clan, and Ruth were shot down. In that time, they had traversed eleven kilometers, which was around the distance that Grevanas had estimated. In another two hours they would reach the hideout.

“Things appear to be going well,” Kiriha noted.

“The frequency of the Liberation Army’s communications has increased, and there are also a number of spatial distortions detected,” Ruth reported.

There had been several near misses with enemy squads. Fortunately, they’d been able to get past them by putting their heads together.

“Haha, it appears the only problem is my lack of stamina...” Clan said. “What’s with the long face, Kii?”

The situation was good, but Kiriha didn’t look happy. “I was thinking that things are going too well.”

She had expected the situation to be more dangerous. But for some reason, it hadn’t been so bad. Normally, safety was something to celebrate, but not in their current situation. Since the objective was to get the enemy to communicate as much as possible, she didn’t want them to give up because they had failed to catch her.

“You think the enemy is giving up on the pursuit?” Ruth asked.

“If that is all, that is fine, but I am worried they might lose patience and take action,” Kiriha said. She was worried that the enemy might do something more dangerous than giving up. She imagined Maxfern and Grevanas would lose their patience and use the waste to infect the forest wildlife. If all the animals were infected, there would be no point in hiding. She also didn’t want to imagine what would happen afterward. But she only knew of Maxfern through hearsay, so she couldn’t say for certain.

“I see. This *is* Maxfern,” Clan said. “Considering his abnormal obsession, it doesn’t sound impossible.”

Clan herself had actually met Maxfern, so she knew him best out of the three. From Clan’s point of view, he was an insane man obsessed with complete victory, and he would do anything for it. Even after being defeated, he had tried to spread a disease through the world.

“Sorry to interrupt, but there are spatial distortions all across this area!” Ruth suddenly cried. “Something relatively small is appearing in several places!”

There were dozens of spatial distortions within ten kilometers of the crash site. The size of the distortions suggested that several meter-large things were coming out of them.

“There’s mana all over the area, ho! At the very least, it is covered in magic, ho!” Karama yelled.

The haniwas had something like a horn on their foreheads. Those horns were actually crystals that vibrated in response to mana. Karama had felt that vibration.

“Oh no, ho! Whatever came out is following the path that we took, ho!” Korama said. “They found a way to track us, ho!”

Korama and Karama compared the information they’d gleaned from their horns to get a rather accurate location of the mana. Based on that, it was safe to say that the enemy had found the path Kiriha and the others had taken.

“Is that for certain?” Clan asked.

“The probability is over ninety-five percent, ho!” Korama answered.

“Karama, how many enemies are there, and how fast are they?” Kiriha asked.

“With their speed, they will reach us in twenty minutes, ho! There are probably fewer than three of them, but they are grouping up as they move, ho! Ane-go, we should make a break for it, ho?!”

Compared to their group’s pace, their pursuers were moving more than twice as fast. The girls would be caught in no time at all. More and more pursuers were joining the hunt as well. It was impossible to guess how many there would

be once they caught up. Because of that, Karama recommended that they run. Even if they were less than a meter in size, the enemy would be dangerous if they attacked in a group.

“Korama, bring out the map!” Kiriha said. “We need to find a place to escape to!”

“Got it, ho!”

Kiriha had determined that they wouldn’t be able to reach their hideout in time. So she stared at the map that Korama projected to find a place where they could take cover or fend off the enemy.

“Okay, we’re going to run!” Kiriha announced.

“Understood!” said Ruth.

“This has gotten troublesome...” Clan complained.

Kiriha only looked at the map for a few seconds, but in that time she gathered her thoughts and took the lead, breaking into a run. They had almost no time to spare. There was no guarantee that they would survive if they escaped to the place she had found on the map, but they earnestly ran all the same. Since they had a future they wanted to achieve, they couldn’t give up on a chance to survive.

Kiriha had chosen a narrow valley to escape into—specifically, a narrow ravine. The area was rather hilly with interlocking ridges without much difference in elevation, but there were some ravines scattered around. Kiriha and the others escaped into one of them.

“I see... From here, the enemy can only come from one direction,” Clan said in satisfaction as she looked around.

In a ravine, the enemy couldn’t attack from all sides; they could only chase from behind. The girls could get stuck in a pincer attack if the enemy got ahead of them, but that was still better than being surrounded. Moreover, they just needed to be on guard so that it didn’t happen. In fact, they had already sent an unmanned craft ahead and found no signs of any enemy present.

“Not to mention, they’ll struggle with such limited formations,” Ruth added.

The ravine was steep and narrow. At most, a few people could walk side by side. In a battle, two or three was the limit. Since their group was few in number already, only the enemy would be fighting at a handicap. It was a well-thought-out escape plan.

“It would be ideal if there was more cover above...but we can’t be picky about that,” Kiriha noted. She was concerned about the open space above them. They could be attacked by unmanned craft from above, though there was no chance of being shot at by aircraft flying even higher than an unmanned craft. All told, it was the ideal choice when their options were so limited.

“Karama, Korama, watch above us just in case,” Kiriha instructed them.

“Leave it to us, ho!” said Karama.

“We can do it in our free time, ho!” Korama agreed.

“I’m not sure what to think about that phrasing,” Clan muttered.

“That’s harsh, Clan-chan, ho!” Karama cried.

With Kiriha at the front, the girls passed through the ravine. Even if they were to fight or escape, they would need to go a little deeper first.

“But Kiriha-sama, why was the Liberation Army suddenly able to track us?” Ruth asked. “Just a little while ago, it seemed they’d completely lost sight of us...” This question was on her mind. If they didn’t know how the enemy was pursuing them, they would struggle to evade them.

“Based on the data and their movements, it is likely a pack of beasts,” Kiriha explained. “They are using sharp senses to follow us. Seeing as they are moving downwind from us, they are not machines, and they are intelligent.”

Based on the mana reaction at the start, it was likely magical beasts. Based on their formations, Kiriha surmised that they were beasts that hunted in groups. In particular, a pack had picked up their scent and moved downwind. That was a sign of intelligence. Machines didn’t have to concern themselves with such thoughts, and they wouldn’t know to go downwind either.

“So...basically, wolves or hyenas?” Ruth asked.

“Indeed.” Kiriha nodded. “They should be magical beasts that look something like that. It was a good idea on the enemy’s part.”

She believed that Maxfern and Grevanas had switched to a more basic method of chasing them down. They must have felt that it would have a better chance of success than relying on science or magic, which the girls had countermeasures for. The beasts also had far more experience when it came to hunting, and considering their instincts, they could probably produce better results than modern technology. In fact, that was being proved true already.

“We don’t have any experience surviving in the wild either,” Clan noted. “I can only vaguely guess at how we are being chased.” She could tell that the beasts were picking up faint smells and small sounds and wouldn’t overlook anything. But she didn’t know what kind of smell, which sounds, or what other clues they were using to follow them. It might have come naturally to beasts, but the three girls had no experience with those matters.

“In other words, we won’t be able to escape by running normally,” Kiriha replied. “We’re here, so this is where we will intercept them.”

Their pursuers were fast and could track them easily. So even if the girls tried to run, they would need to stop at least once. If not, they would clearly be overrun.

To the Liberation Army, the past few hours had been a lesson in patience. Not only could they not find their targets for assassination, but they were also in the middle of enemy territory. If they did anything that drew attention, they would be wiped out. In fact, the squad that had gone to check the landing craft at the crash site had been discovered and taken out. They couldn’t let their guard down. They’d had to endure frustration and fear for five hours, so naturally the soldiers were exhausted.

That was when they received a report that beasts had been deployed and were pursuing their targets. That report stirred the soldiers to life. They were still in as dangerous a situation as ever, but their odds had improved. Nearby squads linked up to join the beasts in their pursuit.

“Still, I’ve never seen beasts like that,” a soldier noted. “What planet did they

come from?”

“Who knows?” the captain answered. “I have no idea, but they seem well trained and can cooperate with us to some degree, so it shouldn’t be a problem.”

“Sure, but aren’t you curious?”

The closest force to their targets were five beasts and one squad. There had only been two beasts when the squad had grouped up with the creatures, but another three had joined them shortly afterward. They were the squad that Kiriha’s group was trying to fight, as they had gotten too close.

“They’re going straight ahead without hesitation,” the soldier said. “It’s honestly a big help.”

“I hope they’ll lead us right to them...” the captain muttered.

The soldiers were in a troop transport, following behind the beasts. It was only moving at forty kilometers per hour because of the poor terrain, but the animals slowed down enough for them to keep up. It was far better than searching without many clues. The fact that they were heading for their goal made it feel like the soldiers were moving at a much higher speed than they really were.

“Oh!” the captain exclaimed.

“The beasts have stopped. Something must have happened. Slow down.”

“Understood,” the soldier replied.

Following the captain’s order, the driver slowed down. The truck’s headlights lit up the beasts. They looked like hyenas, but their fur was dark green. The light made their eyes glow yellow. These creatures didn’t exist on Forthorthe because they were magical beasts that Grevanas had summoned from Folsaria.

“Right, so that’s what they are,” the captain murmured.

Five meters away was the entrance to a ravine a few meters wide. A small river ran through its center, and one of the beasts was drinking from it. Their targets had entered the ravine, so the beasts were waiting for the soldiers. Realizing that, the captain gave out orders.

“Use the unmanned craft to report to our superiors.”

“At once!” the soldier replied.

Having gotten close to their targets, they now needed to make difficult decisions, so the squad captain would contact Maxfern and Grevanas and wait for orders. Since they couldn't use gravitational waves due to being in enemy territory, they used an unmanned craft equipped with laser communications to make their report. It would contact their allies in orbit, and since it used a laser to make direct contact, there was no fear of it being intercepted. Just in case, however, the unmanned craft only made contact when there were no enemies above them. It might have taken some time, but it was necessary.

“Captain, we've gotten an answer,” the soldier reported. “Continue the pursuit.”

“All right, everyone, get off! We're going into the ravine!” the captain ordered.

“Understood!” the soldiers answered.

As expected, the orders from above told them to follow their targets into the ravine. They would need to leave the vehicle, which was why the captain had requested orders.

“Can you lead the way?” he asked.

The beasts growled and entered the ravine ahead of the soldiers.

It was dark outside, as the sun had already set, but the beasts had night vision and their other senses were sharp. They could find their targets much faster than the soldiers.

The ravine was narrow, so the beasts proceeded in lines of two, with the soldiers behind doing the same. The cliffs on either side were steep, so little light from the stars above leaked in. Even with light, it was hard to see. The soldiers next to the captain seemed uneasy.

“Captain, are they going to attack?” one asked.

“If our targets came here under the assumption that they wouldn't be able to escape, they definitely will.”

The squad captain believed their targets would launch an ambush from the ravine. That was why he had his soldiers in a formation with plenty of room to move around.

“There may only be three of them, but they’re still the Blue Knight’s allies,” another soldier said. “Meanwhile, we are a squad of ten. Maybe we should have waited for our allies to join us.”

“Waiting is dangerous,” the captain answered. “I can’t imagine what would happen if we gave them more time. As you said, they *are* the Blue Knight’s allies.”

He could understand his subordinates’ concerns. He shared them. But giving their targets time would be a bad call. Since those three were the brains behind the Blue Knight, they might be able to come up with some sort of plan if they had enough time. The soldiers would have a higher chance of success with force. And combined with the support of the five beasts, the captain figured that if they were going for it, they had to do so now. There were a lot of unknowns, but it was the best option right now.

“That makes—”

That was when the beasts in the front growled. The remaining three moved their ears and became more alert to their surroundings. Seeing that, the captain raised his voice.

“Deploy the distortion fields! They’re attacking!”

The assault came at around the same moment he spoke.

“You’re wide open, ho!”

“The early bird gets the worm, ho!”

Strange voices rang out as fire and electricity rained down from above. They struck the beasts and soldiers directly. The fires burned the soldiers, yet they took almost no damage thanks to the distortion field. However, when the electricity struck the three beasts in the rear, one of them took enough damage for the summoning magic to be dispelled, and it turned to ash and disappeared. The other two were still there, but shock left them staggered.

The two beasts in the front growled at something overhead. There were enemies in the darkness. Using that as their lead, the soldiers, equipped with Liberation Army standard beam rifles, fired into the sky.

“They got angry, ho!”

“Spare us, ho!”

Before the soldiers could pull their triggers, the hidden enemies retreated. The soldiers only caught a brief glimpse of them thanks to the lights attached to the rifles, but all they could tell before the strangers disappeared was that they were small and dark brown.

“Woof! Woof, woof!”

“Grrrrrrr!”

The two remaining beasts ran after the enemy—a natural reaction for such creatures. They wouldn’t let something that hurt their pack get away. But it was a big mistake from a military perspective.

“Wait! Get back!” the captain shouted, but though they had listened to his orders before, they ignored him. They were too agitated to hear him and leaped into the darkness.

Dammit! What should I do?! If we don’t follow them, we’ll lose the beasts! But the enemy will definitely be waiting to intercept us!

He was forced to make a difficult decision, which had been the enemy’s plan from the start. They wanted to separate the soldiers from the beasts and deprive them of a way to track them. Yet, despite knowing that, an ambush awaited the soldiers if they gave chase.

“Damn, there’s no time to wait!” the captain exclaimed. “We’re following the enemy! Follow me!”

He made his decision and ran after the beasts. The soldiers followed his lead.

The beasts can find the enemy in the darkness! the captain thought. If we wait, we won’t be able to move around in the ravine!

The beasts weren’t just necessary for tracking the enemy from afar, but also for their current situation. If they didn’t follow the beasts, the soldiers would be

forced to be more cautious, making them practically unable to move in the ravine, which was just what the enemy wanted.

“They’re smart!” the captain warned his team. “Don’t give them time to think!”

The soldiers desperately ran. All they could see was what little their lights illuminated. They swept them back and forth, staying vigilant of their surroundings as they moved as quickly as possible. They had to find the enemy before the two beasts that had run ahead were killed.

“There they are!” The captain shone his light and found the enemy. Like the intel had said, it was three girls. They each had a weapon and were in the process of battling the two beasts.

Suddenly, one of the creatures let out a scream and fell to the ground. The other was still fighting, but it was staggering and covered in wounds. They were in a miserable state, but the soldiers had made it in time. Although the beasts had been gravely wounded, that was fine since the soldiers had discovered the enemy in time. They just needed to let their firepower do the talking.

Seeing his chance for victory, the captain raised his voice again. “Attack! Once they’re down, it’s over!”

He felt both excitement and relief as he aimed his rifle, setting his sights on one of the girls and firing. It was a black-haired girl with a naginata, which looked like a large spear to him. However, the beam was blocked by a distortion field. It appeared to be military-grade and blocked the attack.

“I guess they’re not completely defenseless!” the captain noted. “But we just need to press our advantage!”

Even if the enemy was using military-grade distortion fields, they wouldn’t be able to endure repeated attacks. If the full squad worked together, they would win. However, their three targets weren’t without a plan.

“Hey, are you trying to run away?!” the captain cried.

Realizing their disadvantage, the girls had turned around and were attempting to escape deeper into the ravine. As they did, they would fire back at the soldiers, but it was no easy task to shoot backward while running. They were

throwing out sporadic attacks that didn't stop the soldiers.

"It's too late to run! We've already found you!"

Their actions were pointless. If they were going to run, they should move faster. Their advantage had lain in ambushing from the dark, but since that advantage was gone, the three had no chance of escaping.

"Don't stop shooting!" he warned the others.

The order was to kill, and the soldiers fired with everything they had. After enough shots, the distortion field protecting the girls finally broke.

"It's over!" the captain shouted.



The soldiers mercilessly shot at the girls. It wasn't like their hearts didn't hurt over shooting young women, but they believed the war would come to a quick end if those three were killed.

However, what happened next went beyond anything they could have expected. The beams had looked like they were piercing the girls' bodies. However...

"What?!" the captain exclaimed.

The beams had instead shot through metal lumps: three familiar unmanned craft. They were relatively small types that both the Imperial Army and Liberation Army used, typically for infantry support. The beams shot through the unmanned craft and destroyed them, and the girls were nowhere to be seen. It was like they'd never been there at all.

"What is going on?!" The captain was astonished, but their misfortune had only just begun.

An explosion happened a short distance behind them. It wasn't all that big, but it caused the cliff to collapse and block the way.

"Dammit! They got us!" a soldier cried.

They now realized that they had fallen for a trap and let the girls escape. The girls must have fled a long time ago.

After making sure that the ravine had been blocked off, the haniwas returned to Kiriha as planned. They were slightly behind the collapsed cliff face, having entered a byroad and hidden in a small, open space. They'd been there the entire time, watching the fight.

"Ane-go, mission complete, ho!" Karama said.

"Did you see what we did, ho!" Korama said.

Kiriha nodded. "Indeed. Well done."

"All right, ho!" Karama cheered.

"We were praised, ho!" Korama added.

Kiriha looked satisfied but also relieved. The haniwas might be rather stealthy, but the first attack had been risky. Fortunately, the haniwas had returned safely, so she smiled at them.

“Well done, Kiriha-sama,” said Ruth.

“They fell for it, hook, line, and sinker,” Clan agreed.

“It’s an opening in the mind that any human would have,” Kiriha explained. “They’ve been following us without ever seeing us, so when they caught a glimpse, they were distracted and failed to confirm the facts. If their commander had been calm and confirmed everything, we wouldn’t have been able to escape.”

It had all been part of Kiriha’s trap. The three unmanned craft had been covered with holograms of the girls and used as decoys. If the enemy had used sensors to examine them, they would have found that they were holograms and the trap would have failed. But the enemy had been negligent. Like Kiriha had said, they’d gotten ahead of themselves and hadn’t confirmed the facts. They’d followed the unmanned craft, unaware that they were being led on a different path than the one the girls had taken, and then their way back had been blocked. Two beasts had collapsed, and the others were seriously injured. Even if the soldiers got past the rubble and rejoined them, it would be impossible to chase the girls at the same speed they had before. Moreover, moving the rubble would take a lot of time. So it would make sense to assume that the squad would no longer be able to pursue their targets.

“But a commander calm enough to do that wouldn’t have brought the five beasts into the ravine in the first place,” Clan concluded, taken aback not by the enemy commander but Kiriha’s ability to fully predict the enemy’s actions.

“It would seem Her Highness has seen through me,” Kiriha said with a shrug.

“Right. After seeing them bring in all five beasts, you became convinced that the enemy commander was in a rush, Kiriha-sama.” Ruth nodded. “He must have reasoned that there was no need for pursuit anymore and brought them along for more firepower.”

She had previously been perplexed. To her, it had seemed like Kiriha’s plan had several holes in it. But if the commander was in a rush, her plan made

sense. As expected, he had failed to see through Kiriha's plan and aggressively attacked. Normally, he would have left a beast or two outside of the ravine. But in his hurry he had failed to do so and ended up losing a valuable means of pursuit.

"Besides, if their commander was like that, we would have been cornered sooner," Kiriha said.

Another factor had been the enemy's ability to pursue. If the commander had been more careful and capable, they would have followed the girls more skilfully. Since they hadn't, Kiriha could easily guess their skill level. She had only been convinced once they'd entered the ravine but had more or less surmised it ahead of time.

"I wouldn't rate them that poorly, though," she continued. "They're just true to their work."

"And you are the one who targeted that behavior. Good grief..." Clan sighed.

Kiriha's abilities were already beyond traps and ruses. She was reading the minds of her opponents. Clan almost felt sorry for the Liberation Army, who had to go up against her.

"Well, thanks to Kiriha-sama, we were able to escape," said Ruth.

The closest squad had been stalled. There were others behind them, but they had bought themselves enough time to escape, so they were safe for now.

"They are going to come after you for this, Kii," Clan warned her.

"I think that goes for you too."

"We wouldn't have been able to do anything if you hadn't hacked those unmanned craft, Clan-sama," Ruth agreed.

"What about you, Pardomshiha? What was with those realistically moving holograms?" Clan said.

Their escape had been a display of their powers. Kiriha had come up with the plan, Clan had controlled the unmanned craft, and Ruth's holograms had been essential. It was because of those capabilities that Maxfern refused to let them go. He would hound them until they regrouped with Koutarou and the others.

“Alert message,” the AI announced alongside an alarm. “Large numbers of space distortions detected around the area.”

It was reporting that the enemy was appearing in a wide area around them.

“Kii, they’re making a drastic move!” Clan shouted.

The large number of spatial distortions meant that the enemy was sending forces through transfer gates without any proper preparations. It took an hour to fully set up a transfer gate, so the enemy was using them while being aware of the losses they would take.

“If only...” Kiriha said. “This is probably in preparation for their real attack.”

“This is an emergency, ho!” Karama said. “We’re detecting a large magical reaction, ho!”

“Detecting a large mass! It’s either a mobile weapon or an extra large magical beast, ho!” Korama added.

As Kiriha had expected, their real goal came last. Based on its size, it was either a mobile weapon covered in powerful magic or a massive magical beast.

“They wanted to hide this thing’s spatial distortion reaction,” Kiriha noted.

“So they used a large number of spatial distortions so that it would be impossible to tell where it appeared?!” Ruth exclaimed.

“And the real deal is one of them... Not bad, Grevanas...”

In order to hide the transfer gate for their ultimate weapon, they had used spatial distortions as decoys. Not even Clan could figure out which one was the right one. It was a trick to keep it from being destroyed from orbit upon appearing.

“Their next step will almost definitely be a bombardment using the transported weapons,” Kiriha explained. “At this rate, we will die.”

With the Liberation Army having deployed so many weapons, the Imperial Army was sure to do the same, in which case, it would be difficult for Maxfern to target the girls. So rather than taking the time to pursue them, he would bombard them into pieces. The bombardment didn’t need to be accurate. Since it was clear that they were in the area, bombing everywhere around them

would kill them. As a sign of that, none of the spatial distortions had been very close to them. They were spread out to surround the girls from afar. In other words, Maxfern had concluded that it was pointless to send more soldiers after them.

“What?!” Ruth’s face turned pale. “But they have allies here!”

More forces might not be coming for them, but soldiers that had pursued them were still nearby, including the ones trapped in the ravine. Maxfern was going to burn it all to the ground, allies included. To him, they were disposable. The only interest he had was in victory or defeat.

Kiriha’s assumption was right on the mark. The last thing Maxfern and Grevanas sent in was a large mobile weapon. It was made to contend against the Blue Knight, with plenty of spiritual energy technology and magic on it. It was also equipped with a strategic weapon of mass destruction.

“Fire, Grevanas,” Maxfern ordered.

“We still have soldiers deployed in that area, Maxfern-sama,” Grevanas replied.

His words weren’t out of compassion. If they killed their own men, even a few of them, the soldiers would start suspecting them. It was a dangerous situation that could shake the foundation of the Forthorthe Liberation Army.

“Did you not hear me?” Maxfern asked. “Fire, now! If we give them time, we might miss them! All of the losses will be for nothing!”

They had taken a lot of risks and losses to get to the current point. They’d lost spies gathering information and soldiers when hiding them in enemy territory. Since putting the assassination plan into motion, they’d lost quite a lot of men. If they didn’t bomb their targets now, it would be meaningless. Maxfern saw their losses as a bigger problem than the suspicions the soldiers might feel. The gains from the assassination were his biggest priority.

“Understood!” Grevanas nodded. “Firing at once!”

He input the order into his computer. When using strategic weapons, the authorization process was more complex than for normal weapons. It took

around twelve seconds before the mobile weapon could attack.

“Launch code sent!” Grevanas said. “Rengan Strategic Missile is launching!”

They watched a holographic screen showing the mobile weapon in question. The back part deployed, revealing the missile. It was the same size as the ones used for attacks on the ground and had a booster like mobile weapons used to move around. Even if it was scorched a little by point defense lasers, it would accomplish its objective. With its powerful booster, it would reach terrifying speeds as it shot through the sky. Without some serious preparations, it would be impossible to stop the missile. What was even more terrifying was the warhead it had.

The Rengan Strategic Missile could be equipped with normal warheads as well as a wide-area incineration one. The special property of that warhead was that it detonated twice. The first dispersed combustible gas throughout a wide area, while the second burned it. The effective range was over a kilometer, and the second detonation would immolate anything within range. It wasn't very effective against warships and the like, covered by powerful distortion fields as they were, but against humans or vehicles with little protection, the fire was lethal. There was also a shock wave that spread on detonation, which would rip people and light vehicles apart. And even if someone survived the shock wave, the fire and heat would finish them off. If by some miracle a person survived the shock wave and fire, they would die of asphyxiation due to the oxygen in the area burning up.

In other words, the wide-area incineration warhead was intended to wipe out infantry or mechanized units. Maxfern used it so that he could guarantee they'd kill Kiriha, Ruth, and Clan, with no care for his nearby allies. It was an insane decision that even Grevanas instinctively objected to.

Maxfern let out an insane laugh. “Go! Burn it all down!”

His smile was filled with hate, envy, joy, and all kinds of evil emotions. Having waited since the landing craft was shot down, the malice within him was immense. With the warhead being fired, all of that malice was finally released alongside his excitement hitting its climax.

“If you can save them, try it, savior!” Maxfern screamed in elation. “You can't

protect anything! You won't even be able to see their corpses!"

The missile flew as they looked on. It was only traceable with the naked eye for a few seconds as it accelerated beyond view and flew toward the area where the three girls were expected to be.

"Three, two, one...impact," Grevanas said.

There was a moment of silence. The first detonation spread combustible gas. Once it had spread far enough, the second detonation would light the gas on fire.

The sound of the second explosion cut off in the middle. The audio picked up by an onsite microphone clipped. There was a flash bright enough to burn the eyes, followed by what looked like the flames of hell burning the world.

"I did it! I did it! The women are dead!" Maxfern laughed. His face was lit up red by the fires. Seeing those flames, he knew he had won. The three girls were dead. The Blue Knight's wings had been ripped off, and he would be greatly weakened. He would fall into despair. Having achieved revenge and a strategic victory, Maxfern's joy was at its peak.

"I am sending a nearby unit to the area," Grevanas calmly announced. Unlike Maxfern, he had some doubts about the attack.

"You are foolishly earnest, Grevanas! Nobody could survive those flames! And if they're dead, there won't be any corpses! It's pointless to send troops!"

"I hope you are right..."

While listening to Maxfern's joyful voice, Grevanas made sure the soldiers had the proper equipment and sent them to the site. Since the girls had given them a hard time, he wanted to make absolutely sure of their victory before celebrating.

How the Intelligent Fight

December 5, Monday

When the missile equipped with the wide-area incineration warhead exploded, Koutarou and the others were just outside its effective range, which was simply because they had moved in a zigzag pattern rather than directly toward Kiriha's group. If they had moved a little closer, they would have been in danger.

"This is horrible..." Koutarou said. "Maxfern blew up even his own allies."

Upon reaching the effective area of the missile, they were faced with a land devastated by fire. The trees and shrubs were carbonized and had lost their shape. The only things left were scorched stones. There were no survivors in the burned wasteland.

"Yeah. There are a lot of confused spirits," Sanae said. "Neither the animals, plants, nor humans know that they've died." She was quietly angry. She normally openly displayed her emotions, but not this time. The sight she was seeing was terrible.

"They really will do anything..." Koutarou murmured. He and the others had expected this sight. Even a few hundred meters away from the effective area, they had felt the blast wave and heat, so they had known what sort of destruction they would witness, and they'd been prepared for it. Still, when faced with reality, the shock was palpable.

"Even I would not cause such senseless destruction," Alunaya said in disgust. Not even the fire dragon emperor would bring such chaotic destruction with his flames. He used fire for life and to live. The destruction before them was clearly not for such a purpose.

"I wonder if the others are okay..." Shizuka murmured with worry. If the girls had been within the range of such destruction, it was hard to imagine they were safe.

“I hope they’re all right,” Koutarou agreed with a somber expression. Though he believed they were alive, he couldn’t shake the fear of what he’d do if they weren’t. But those three had created countless miracles, so Koutarou told himself that surely they had done so this time as well.

“Wahahaha, they’re dead!” Maxfern’s voice suddenly echoed through their surroundings. “I fired the missile right where I knew they were!”

Koutarou looked up at where the voice was coming from and found a large mobile weapon floating in the air. Maxfern had been convinced that Koutarou would show up and had moved the mobile weapon into position.

“Maxfern! Are you insane?!” Koutarou shouted.

“Who can say? After two thousand years, how much sanity could remain?”

“How many of your own allies have you sacrificed to kill just three people?!”

“You do the same, don’t you?!” Maxfern shouted back at him. “Or are you under some delusion that soldiers won’t be harmed?!”

“The soldiers aren’t fighting under the assumption that they will be killed by their allies! You’re just tightening the noose around your own neck, Maxfern!”

“Don’t worry. They will hear that it was you who killed them!” Maxfern laughed. Even if the Imperial Army had proof, the Liberation Army would only say it was fake. They would never imagine that Ralgwin would do such a thing. His reputation shielded Maxfern from suspicion, hiding the truth from the troops.

“You are rotten...” Koutarou was aghast at Maxfern’s words. He had fought others who could be considered evil. But even when cornered, they had followed the unwritten rules of the battlefield. None had ever ignored the loss of soldiers from the outset. But Maxfern was different. He easily committed taboos. Koutarou didn’t understand what drove him, but it was shocking behavior.

“This is war, Blue Knight! I will pay any price to kill your women!” Maxfern taunted him. Killing Kiriha, Ruth, and Clan was a huge strategic victory for him. It would also allow him to pay Koutarou back for some of the grudges of the past, so losing some soldiers meant nothing. He would do anything—use

anything—to win. His frame of mind hadn't changed in over two thousand years.

“Unfortunately, you have failed in that, Violbarum Maxfern.” That was when a cool voice rang out, stopping Maxfern short. It was a voice he never could have expected.

“Kiriha-san?!” Koutarou exclaimed.

“We finally meet, Satomi Koutarou.”

The voice belonged to Kiriha. At some point, she had joined them, wearing her usual calm smile. Naturally, Clan and Ruth were behind her. All three of them looked fine.

“How?! How could you have survived that?!” Maxfern screamed, astonished by their appearance. He couldn't believe it. There was no way they could have survived the wide-area incineration warhead as far as he knew. That wasn't overconfidence or blind belief either—anyone would understand that upon seeing the devastating explosion.

“It was simple,” Clan replied. “We collapsed a cave on purpose and buried ourselves.”

They had run into a cave by the ravine and blown up the entrance. The threats from the warhead were the shock wave, heat, and lack of oxygen. However, distortion fields and Spiritual Energy Fields had some resistance to those, so by using bedrock to block out most of the danger, they had survived. Of course, depending on the direction of the entrance and how deep the cave went, they could still have been cooked alive, but fortunately, the cave they had run into was deep enough for them to survive.

“But even if you survived the explosion, how did you get out?” Shizuka asked, perplexed. Hiding in a cave could protect them from the explosion, but it would trap them. It should have been incredibly difficult to get out without proper tools.

“Good point.” Ruth nodded. “It was a gamble.” The girls had actually been buried inside.

“We didn't know if we could escape before running out of oxygen,” Clan

explained.

Not everything had been ideal, and they hadn't been able to plan everything, but their top priority at the time had been to escape the explosion.

"Then how are you here?!" Maxfern shouted. "That should be impossible!" He couldn't accept the situation. And especially not that Kiriha was alive. She looked a lot like his niece, Lidith, who had once betrayed him. Her getting out of the situation unharmed was incredibly frustrating.

"In conclusion, you went too far, Violbarum Maxfern," Kiriha told him, hiding her mouth behind her fan.

The gesture that seemed to be making fun of him only angered Maxfern further. Then Theia and Sanae-nee, who spoke through the comms on Koutarou's armor, poured even more salt into the wound.

"How foolish. This is what happens when you let your emotions get the better of you and use that kind of bomb," Theia said.

"Thanks to you burning everything down, it was easy to find them," Sanae-nee added.

It was they who had saved the girls. The effects of the warhead had been disastrous, burning down everything within a kilometer, but that had removed all life from the area, including plant life. As a result, Sanae-nee had been able to easily locate them. After all, there were no other living auras nearby, which had made it simple. Theia had rushed to the spot with soldiers and dug them out.

"Impossible!" Maxfern exclaimed.

"If you had been a little more careful, you would have won," Theia continued. "You were too hasty, Maxfern."

If Maxfern had used a less powerful bomb, or a biological or chemical weapon, the outcome would have been different. Some life would have survived, and it would have been difficult to find the three girls in the cave. But due to his insistence on using excessive firepower, he had lost his chance. In that crucial moment, the gap in their experience fighting with spiritual energy and magic had decided the outcome.

“Even so, it won’t matter if you all die here!” Maxfern screamed. “Die! I’ll kill you all!”

The large mobile weapon had a second Rengan Strategic Missile stored behind it with the same warhead as the first one. If he fired it, he would be able to kill the three girls for sure, not to mention the Blue Knight and Princess Theiamillis were present too. It was the perfect time to make up for his failure.

“You seem cunning at first glance, but when you get emotional you lose sight of things,” Kiriha answered just as the three people next to Koutarou disappeared. A moment later, there was an explosion in the back part of the mobile weapon.

“Grevanas, what happened?!” Maxfern cried.

“It seems like an unmanned craft self-destructed! The missile launcher has been damaged!”

“What?!”

One of the unmanned craft that Clan was controlling had self-destructed. She had stolen four from the Liberation Army, three of which had been lost when used as decoys. Clan had used the remaining one to attack the mobile weapon. When firing a weapon, the distortion field in the area was released, so a relatively small unmanned craft could slip in. Thanks to Clan’s skilled disguise of signals, the craft’s approach had gone unnoticed, so Maxfern had had no way of stopping it. That said, because it was so small, the force behind its self-destruction wasn’t all that large. The missile launcher had been damaged, but it hadn’t caused any real damage to the mobile weapon itself.

“It looks like it worked out,” Clan remarked. “Now there’s no need to worry about that bomb.” Her voice came from Koutarou’s armor. She wasn’t actually there. In fact, the three girls were just holograms serving as a distraction, which was how they had suddenly disappeared.

“Good job!” Koutarou exclaimed. “Nothing less than I’d expect from you!” He smiled, showing no sign of surprise. Since he could sense spiritual energy, he’d known they were holograms from the start and had had a hunch about what their plan was.

“Curse it! Damn women! Not just once, but twice!” Maxfern shouted.

“What should we do, Maxfern-sama?!” Grevanas asked.

“That’s obvious! Send in our squads! Don’t let them leave alive!”

“At once!”

Maxfern might have been outsmarted, but he still had soldiers and mobile weapons deployed in the area, so he would use them to take down Koutarou’s group with a frontal attack.

Before firing the missile, the Liberation Army had deployed a large number of forces. The majority of the transferred forces were unmanned craft, but there were also some human squads. That was an outrageous act that the Imperial Army would never do. It was extremely dangerous to use transfer gates before they were stable. So while unmanned crafts could be sent at times under the assumption that some would be lost, humans would never be sent over. Being able to do that without batting an eyelid was one of Maxfern’s terrifying sides. After firing the missile, those forces set out for the affected area with the large mobile weapon in the lead, and they were facing Koutarou’s group.

“But we won’t lose either,” Clan replied. “After Theiamillis-san discovered us, we deployed our forces too.”

The Forthorthe Imperial Army wasn’t without a plan of their own. Once Kiriha, Clan, and Ruth had been successfully rescued, they’d deployed their soldiers. Before then, no one could communicate with the girls because the enemy would have reached them first. But that restriction on comms had disappeared once Theia and Sanae-nee had them safely away. All of the unmanned craft in the area were being called in, and standard forces were marching over.

“I only wish we had your new machine ready for you,” Clan said.

“That would be too much,” Koutarou replied.

As battles had started looking more like wars, he would often fight in the Warlord-series mobile weapon because there were large enemies on the battlefield, though there was another reason for it too. Koutarou’s Spirit Vision wouldn’t allow him to avoid stray bullets or attacks from unmanned craft. However, when the enemies were few, he could handle himself. Still, the

danger shot up when a battle became more disordered, and even more so after Koutarou was discovered to be the Blue Knight. With that in mind, after Kiriha and Harumi's "very polite request," Koutarou had ended up using the Warlord series. After the last battle, Warlord had been seriously damaged, so a new machine was being built, but it wouldn't make it in time. Koutarou would therefore be relying on his sword and armor for the first time in a while.

"Please make do with me for today," Alunaya said.

"I don't have to make do with you. You're always a huge help," Koutarou replied.

In Warlord's place, Alunaya had returned to his original form, and Koutarou was on top of his head. At twenty meters long, the dragon was far larger than Warlord, and his firepower was equally powerful. If anything, it was Shizuka who had to make do.

"Uncle, you can't overdo it, okay?!" Shizuka said.

"I know, I know," Alunaya responded consolingly.

"I'm not so sure..." Shizuka said with suspicion.

Only Alunaya's soul had come to the modern world, so transforming into his original form took a great deal of mana. When he returned to Shizuka's form, the less mana he had, the weaker his control over gravity became. That would appear as an increase in weight for Shizuka, which was a problem a girl in her teens didn't want to have.

"I'm here this time too, so don't worry, Shizuka," Sanae informed her.

"I'm counting on you, Sanae-chan!" Shizuka pleaded.

Sanae-chan was also next to Koutarou. She was in her astral-projected form and would support the others. Meanwhile, Sanae-san was taking refuge with the body.

"It has been a while, Fire Dragon Emperor!" Maxfern's voice came from the large mobile weapon facing Alunaya. "So, you're the Blue Knight's slave now?!"

Both sides were acquainted. Two thousand years ago, Alunaya had been enslaved by Grevanas, which was why Maxfern sneered at him.

“Indeed, I am having fun,” Alunaya replied. “It would seem you are using something rather unshapely.”

Alunaya wasn't perturbed. He simply bared his fangs and calmly retorted. He did have a point, as Maxfern's large mobile weapon was quite misshapen. The general shape was round, with propulsion and weapons sticking out of it. It had been made with only victory in mind. When two mobile weapons were the same size, a sphere was the strongest shape, even when accounting for the protection of a distortion field. And since a large generator could be placed in the center of the ball, both offense and defense were strengthened.

Moreover, since there was no real front, aside from the back part, which had been destroyed by an explosion, it could attack in any direction. There were no blind spots, with it constantly being on the offensive and very sturdy. Its structure made a lot of sense in melee and for fighting Koutarou, but it was no doubt unshapely.

“As long as I win!” Maxfern said. “There's nothing as foolish as losing because you're concerned with looks! Brace yourself, Fire Dragon Emperor and Blue Knight! This is where I will settle the score with you!”

At Maxfern's words, the Forthorthe Liberation Army advanced. Small unmanned craft at the front formed a wall, and behind them human soldiers and large mobile weapons were being deployed. It was a dangerous strategy of having the Imperial Army fight the unmanned craft while the Liberation Army attacked from behind the wall.

“We're going too, Blue Knight!” Alunaya cried.

“Yes!” said Koutarou. “Ruth-san, I'm counting on you.”

“I am sending the forces forward, Master!” Ruth answered. Her words didn't quite feel right to Koutarou.

There should only be unmanned craft coming, right...?

The Forthorthe Imperial Army should only have had a few soldiers in the area, since they were the ones who had descended with Koutarou and the others a few hours earlier. So that should have been their main troop, but what advanced was a force quite unlike it.

“What is this?!” Koutarou exclaimed.

“Oh, what an interesting thought,” Alunaya commented. *“A steel legion?”*

Koutarou was surprised, and Alunaya laughed. What advanced from behind was a band of unmanned craft, but its composition was abnormal. There were various unmanned craft with humanoid craft at the center. In the front were unmanned craft with heavy armor and firepower meant to support the front line, and the humanoid ones accompanied them with handheld firearms, covering their blind spots. The troop carriers were also taking part in the attack under automatic control. Farther in the back were medium-sized unmanned craft for shelling, aiming at the approaching enemy. In the sky were reconnaissance drones, kamikaze drones, and medium unmanned craft flying around instead of fighters or helicopters. It was like a trade fair of machines, and “steel legion” was a good name for it.

Who wouldn’t be surprised by that? Clan sighed while looking at the forces advancing.

Nobody else would try to make a military force like this. If anything, it was too difficult from a technical point of view. After all, crafts of various designs would have to work in concert with each other. Adjustments would also need to be made in the middle of battle as allied and enemy numbers fluctuated. Maintenance was also a source of confusion, since all sorts of technology would be mixed. That was why only one or two types of unmanned craft were normally used. Yet Ruth had used them despite all that because they were lacking in numbers.

Clan had objected to the suggestion at first. “Sure, this will make up for our lower numbers, but what about controlling them?” she’d asked. “If all they can do is go forward, they’ll be destroyed!”

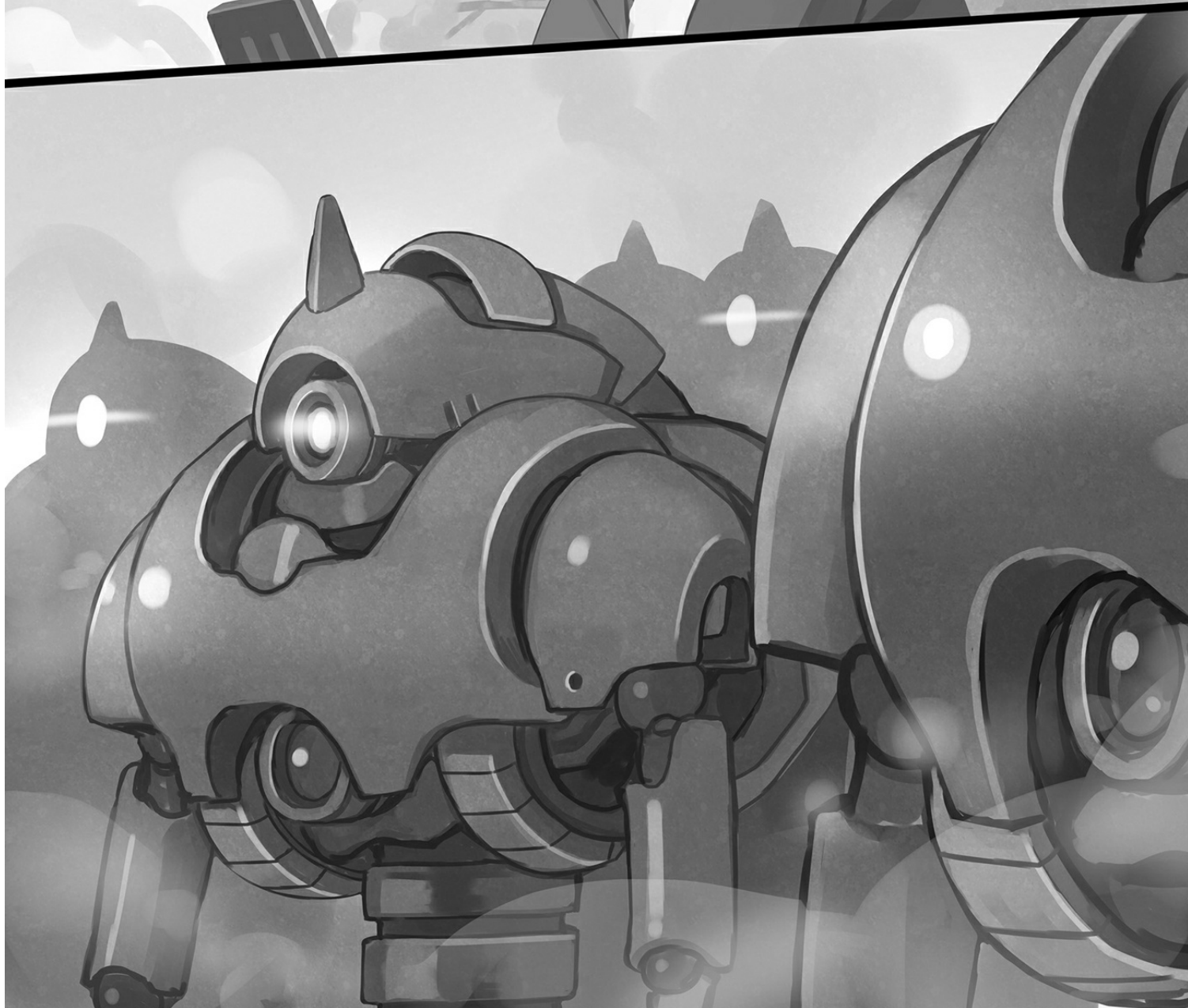
If the unmanned craft couldn’t coordinate, their AI would make them fight on their own. They might cooperate at some points, but they would essentially just charge and attack. That would make them easy targets. Since they needed to do more than just buy time, Clan didn’t think letting the simple AI control them was realistic.

However, Ruth’s response was reassuring. “I will handle it somehow! I have

done research into this before, though I haven't done any testing!"

The steel legion had been born from the current conditions plus Ruth's special talent. The only things that could immediately make its way over from the Imperial Army's side were unmanned craft. But one or two types wouldn't be enough. Since they were normally deployed as support for normal forces, there weren't enough to make up a main force. So Ruth had scraped together all unmanned craft from nearby bases and spaceships without caring about the standard theories behind such warfare. Naturally, that meant all kinds of machines were mixed together, and coordination should have been impossible, with them only being able to recklessly charge.

But Ruth had made the impossible possible.



“If the enemy turns their zombies into soldiers, we can use unmanned craft as our army!” she announced.

The inspiration had come from the battle the other day when Grevanas had used undead soldiers. It had been made possible by embedding the model of a soldier into the living dead. Using that idea as a reference, Ruth had the diverse unmanned craft act like an army. Having done some research into the subject, she’d been able to apply it to the special circumstances they were in.

That’s normally not something that you can pull off just because you thought of it, Pardomshiha. Clan sighed. *You can be quite a monster...*

Making various kinds of unmanned craft act like trained soldiers was easy to say, but putting it into practice was head-splittingly complex. Being able to do that showed unbelievable talent. Even so, Ruth was only human. The controls were incomplete, and she was losing time making up for that, so she couldn’t fulfill her normal role—which was why Clan took over as the operator.

“We will support the front line with the unmanned craft!” she told Koutarou. “You just focus on that large mobile weapon!”

“Got it, I’ll leave that side to you!” Koutarou replied.

“Then let us go!” Alunaya cried.

“Go get them, Uncle!” Sanae cheered.

The ground trembled as Alunaya ran. His big body had a lot of blind spots, and enemies would normally aim for those. But there was no need to worry about that now. Alunaya was surrounded by the steel legion, so there were no concerns about the enemy circling around and attacking him. They had once fought a mechanical dragon that was ten meters tall, but this sphere was easily double that. Moreover, because of its shape, it was probably closer to twenty times more in weight.

“It’s unexpectedly fast! That must be because it’s spewing fire from all directions!” Alunaya noted as his claws missed their mark.

Before getting hit, the mobile weapon in question used its emergency boosters to rapidly change direction. It moved far faster than one might expect

from its size.

“But of course!” Grevanas replied. “This Acturus has been made with all the knowledge gained from previous battles! Your data has naturally been integrated as well!”

Grevanas was in charge of controlling the mobile weapon. It had been created per his proposal, and he was more knowledgeable about it than anyone else. He’d named it “Acturus,” an ancient Forthorthian word that meant “ball,” “circle,” or “perfect.” The name was not just a reflection of its appearance, but also a sign of his confidence in the machine.

“It’s not technologically inferior either! The situation is different from two thousand years ago!” Grevanas added.

Acturus followed his instructions and bombarded Alunaya while moving rapidly. It was firing masses of spiritual energy. Alunaya was protected by mana and sturdy scales, but a direct hit would still chip away at his spiritual energy. Grevanas now had technology on par with Koutarou’s, and he understood its weak points. It wasn’t a reckless show of strength. Through countless battles, they had developed equal power. Acturus’s name was not simple vanity.

“Hyper Sanae-chan Barrier!”

A spiritual energy bullet was repelled moments before scoring a direct hit on Alunaya thanks to Sanae’s powerful psychic powers.

“Thank you, Sanae!” said Alunaya.

“Just charge right in there, Uncle! I will block the spiritual energy!”

“Of course!”

They fought back as a unified front. Alunaya was already very strong against magic and physical attacks, but his defense against spiritual energy was limited. If Sanae were to block it, however, his defense was perfect.

“Koutarou, a couple of them are coming your way!” Theia announced.

Her job was to take out the enemies in the sky. Ruth was stopping the ground forces with her steel legion, but flying units couldn’t be halted. They could take out Sanae, which would make Alunaya’s defense collapse, so Theia’s job was

serious. Even so, given the number of enemies, some of them inevitably got through.

“Got it!” Koutarou nodded “That must be them!”

Taking out those enemies was his job. In a sense, he was the cornerstone of their defense. If he fell, Sanae and Alunaya would follow in a domino effect.

“I’m not all that good with ranged weapons...but I don’t really have the luxury of complaining!” he said.

Koutarou jumped off Alunaya’s head and repeatedly fired the beam cannon equipped on his shoulder. It was a piece of the additional equipment, Garb of Lord, which was a useful weapon that would automatically eliminate enemies that came too close. But when used on enemies farther off, it had to be aimed manually. Koutarou was better with swordplay than shooting, so he struggled a little, but fortunately, he was able to gun down the incoming unmanned craft.

“Curse you, Blue Knight,” Grevanas spat out. “Attacks by unmanned craft while other people are around! No matter. I will have them support the ground forces to avoid pointless waste.”

“Don’t think about the consequences, Grevanas!” Maxfern said. “The Imperial Army’s standard forces will be coming soon. Focus only on the enemy before you!”

“Maxfern-sama... I... Very well!”

He had almost been distracted by their enemies’ skillful cooperation, but Maxfern’s rebuke quickly calmed him down.

It is just as Maxfern-sama says. I should only focus on killing the Blue Knight and his party...

As an advisor, Grevanas had to think of a lot of things, so he had a habit of overthinking at times. Fortunately, Maxfern’s clear sense of purpose pulled him back to their true goal.

“Increase the generator output to 120 percent!” Grevanas ordered.

“Pardon me, Grevanas-sama, but doing so will make it burn down in a few m—” a soldier began.

“A few minutes is more than enough! The Imperial Army reinforcements will show up before then!” Having calmed down, Grevanas pushed Acturus to its limits. But he wasn’t without a plan. Since there was little time left, the machine only needed to last for a short while. It was a strategic recklessness.

The battle grew more intense, the clash of the forces on the ground becoming more confusing.

“Commander, it seems like the entire enemy force is made out of unmanned units,” a soldier observed.

“That was to be expected, since we were transferred here...but it’s hard to believe,” the commander answered. “How are they controlling them?”

“A soldier has also gone missing from Ulworth’s squad,” the soldier reported.

“Is that certain? They didn’t die in battle or go missing during the fight?”

“It has been confirmed that they were missing before battle.”

“What the hell are our superiors thinking with such a reckless transfer?!” the commander shouted.

The cause of their confusion was the Liberation Army’s low morale. The top brass’s recklessness in the battle had lowered the soldiers’ morale. Several people had disappeared, and confusion and anxiety rippled through the ranks.

“Seeing this, those rumors might not be untrue either...” the commander muttered.

“You mean Mulact’s eight mobile infantry. I have a bad feeling about it...” the soldier whispered back.

In fact, contact with some of the ground units had been lost. It was a unit that was supposed to be deployed northwest of the landing craft.

“They must have gone to the center of the explosion,” the commander mused.

“Surely they couldn’t have gone there... No, but...” The soldier hesitated.

They had been transferred to the ground as reinforcements, but they couldn’t

contact the unit in question. A rumor had quickly spread that they had been caught up in the wide-area incineration warhead. The troops hadn't believed it at first, but now that people had gone missing in the process, the rumors were starting to sound true. The idea that their leaders would let all of them die to kill the Blue Knight was a mental blow. Soldiers were prepared to die in battle, but they didn't want themselves or their allies to die for no reason.

"Commander, bad news!" another soldier said. "Large mobile weapons have appeared among the enemy!"

"What?!"

Their confusion was further exacerbated by the appearance of large mobile weapons being deployed by the Imperial Army.

"Our attacks are having no effect! Their defense is too strong! It's entirely one-sided!" the soldier continued.

The mobile weapons were twenty meters tall, with wide bodies, and they moved slowly. However, their defensive power was overwhelming, and neither beams nor bullets had any effect on them. They advanced, ignoring the Liberation Army's attacks, and took out soldiers and unmanned craft.

"That's a humanoid weapon I've never seen before. Could it be a new weapon developed by Princess Clariosa?!" the commander exclaimed.

Princess Clariosa was well-known among the people as a highly skilled scientist. She had invented all kinds of things, including the PAF. It made sense to assume that she had made a massive robot. Looking up at the constructs, the commander felt despair.

It was Sanae-nee who had seen through the soldiers' panic, but it was Clan who took action. So the Liberation Army surely believed that it was all Clan's doing. But their mistake lurked elsewhere.

"Oh, it's working!" Sanae-nee said. "They're all scared, and it looks like they're thinking it's your newest idea. Great work, Glasses!"

"I'm not sure if I should be happy or not..." Clan sighed. For some reason, her shoulders drooped. The massive humanoid weapons that she'd sent in were

achieving great results. The Liberation Army was running, and the unmanned craft had cut down their numbers. There was no reason for her to be disappointed.

“I think you can be happy.” Kiriha smiled.

“Kii...I wanted to send in the real ones.”

Surprisingly, most of the large humanoid weapons were actually holograms. Hiding behind the holograms were five unmanned craft meant for bombardment pretending to be a massive robot. That was why the enemy attacks weren't working. They were simply passing right through, but the soldiers didn't have the composure to notice.

“They look real to the enemy,” Kiriha assured her. “Nobody could imagine they're fakes when a steel legion is approaching them. Moreover, the enemy is confused and their morale is low. They all believe it's real and fear it.”

Since the Liberation Army was in a panic, nobody was paying attention to the details. If they checked the sensors, they would see through the trick, but nobody did. Not to mention that it was in the middle of the night, which hindered their vision. As a result, everyone believed there were massive robots in front of them. Like Kiriha said, they appeared real to the Liberation Army's soldiers, who were giving up on fighting and running away.

“Go, Sun Fighto!” Sanae-nee excitedly shouted the name of the weapon. The model for the massive unmanned craft had been taken from a humanoid weapon on Earth called Sun Fighto. It was the robot that was made when the five Sun Rangers combined their machines. Clan had helped in its construction, so she had a holographic model of its exterior.

“You really are a genius, Glasses!” Sanae-nee exclaimed.

The enemy was in an uproar. Clan's flash of genius had brought about fantastic results. However, her expression was dark. She didn't desire those results or the high praise.

I can't believe I'm getting results from scams and scheming again... she complained internally.

Clan knew that once she discovered the enemy's weakness, she had to exploit

it. The results of the fight would greatly affect their future. If they won, there would be far fewer casualties. But if possible, she wanted to be praised for being more like a princess.

Clan's fake giant robot scheme was successful, and the Liberation Army's formations were falling apart. If they'd had more unmanned craft than soldiers, they likely would have maintained cohesion—the Liberation Army forcibly transferring soldiers had worked against them.

"Looks like everything's falling apart, Maxfern!" Koutarou taunted his opponent.

"Say whatever you like! It will all be worth it if you die here!"

Maxfern had gone after Kiriha and the others at first, but now his target had shifted to Koutarou. It was questionable whether that had been his original goal or if he was simply coming apart.

That said, we're in a troublesome situation, Koutarou thought. *We've already rescued Kiriha-san and the others. We could retreat, but if we disappear, he'll obviously go after the conference...*

Koutarou's side would be very troubled politically if the conference was attacked. Important people from all over the galaxy would be gathered there, and the venue was on Alaia, which was Mastir territory, so losing VIPs there would bring the empress's authority into question. Moreover, they would have allowed it to happen, knowing the enemy was there. If any civilians died, Koutarou's group would be held responsible, so they couldn't carelessly retreat. They needed to defeat the Forthorthe Liberation Army here.

"Sorry for burdening you like this, Koutarou," Kiriha said. She had known the risks but felt they were worth taking. That was why her voice coming through the comms sounded so apologetic.

"You can say that again! But I'll save the lecture for later!" Koutarou answered. He swung Signaltin and cut a missile in half, then looked at Acturus, which was their biggest problem. "Be honest with me, Kiriha-san. That's bad, isn't it?"

Koutarou had a bad feeling. It wasn't a matter of fighting strength. They could

win if they fought hard enough, not to mention that reinforcements were on the way. Even so, he felt uneasy. He had no real basis for it, but he was up against Maxfern. He couldn't imagine that the battle would end without a bang.

"Exceedingly so," Kiriha agreed. However, in her case, she had more in-depth predictions.

"I thought so." Koutarou sighed.

"I was just thinking about bringing it up," Kiriha continued. She hadn't contacted him to apologize, but to talk about this very topic. "There is a time limit on this battle. Once that time is up, the Liberation Army will automatically lose. So Maxfern will do something just before that point."

Alaia was under Forthorthe control. Naturally, the Imperial Army had a big presence on the planet. Since a major battle had begun, a large Imperial Army force would inevitably come. Once they did, the Liberation Army would be trapped. At that point, regardless of who was winning, they would lose. Kiriha imagined that Maxfern would do something drastic before accepting defeat.

"It's only a prediction, so I can't make any guarantees, but I imagine he would indiscriminately bombard the entire area or self-destruct," Kiriha explained.

Soldiers who could retreat probably would. But those who couldn't or were too slow would be left behind, and an attack would be launched at the conference venue or nearby cities. Alternatively, the mobile weapon would self-destruct to take Koutarou down with it.

"Most attacks can probably be stopped. The Imperial Army has plenty of defenses," Kiriha went on.

Most attacks wouldn't be a problem. Since Kiriha figured the enemy might target the conference venue, she had put antiair defenses into position. A self-destruct shouldn't be a serious threat either. Since there were few large unmanned craft, an explosion wouldn't have an influence on other locations.

"But there is something we can't block."

"The missile on that thing's back, huh?" Koutarou concluded.

"Yes. If that explodes, we can't stop it," Kiriha stated.

The missile on Acturus's back was the real worry. Its launcher was broken, but it could still be detonated. Since Acturus was so large, it would be easy to pursue but difficult to retrieve, so it could be used to take Koutarou down with it.

"That would be horrible. He'd burn even his own allies to death!" Koutarou exclaimed.

"You will need to hold them back. If Maxfern self-destructs, he will indeed take his allies down too," Kiriha agreed.

If the idea was to take down Koutarou with Acturus, the warhead would be detonated mid-battle, meaning that the Liberation Army would be right there. Maxfern would rather do that than have the soldiers retreat and allow Koutarou to catch Acturus. Kiriha predicted that this was how Maxfern would think.

"I'll stop it from happening no matter what!" Koutarou had no intention of letting Maxfern detonate the warhead. He could understand Maxfern self-destructing in hopes of taking him down, but he couldn't accept Maxfern sacrificing his own allies to do it. Koutarou was determined to stop the destruction to save both himself and any meaningless casualties.

"If it was launched, we could shoot it down, but since it's stuck, you would need to get behind the mobile weapon and take out the warhead directly," Kiriha explained. "If Maxfern catches on to what you're doing, he will probably detonate it right then and there, so it's not realistic to dispose of the warhead either."

"Then what should I do, Kiriha-san?!"

"We want to avoid any situation where the enemy would feel suspicious or uneasy, so you need to destroy the control system in a single shot."

It was very likely that Maxfern would trigger the warhead when he ran out of time or sensed that he was at a disadvantage. Likewise, if Koutarou tried to escape or mess with the warhead. Acturus's computer had to be destroyed in a single shot so that it couldn't give relay orders. Kiriha concluded this was the method with the highest chance of success.

“You make it sound so easy,” Koutarou grumbled.

“I’m sorry, Koutarou. I didn’t expect Maxfern to go so far.”

“What a pain...” Koutarou sighed.

He couldn’t even imagine how difficult this would be. Since Maxfern’s craft was spherical, the computer should be at the center. In front of it would be the generator, which was the next most important piece of hardware. In other words, Kiriha was demanding that he shoot through that. But Acturus was large and sturdy. Stopping it was one thing, but penetrating it required some serious firepower.

“There’s no need to lament, Blue Knight,” Alunaya stated. “This is our job. There is nothing you and I can’t do.”

Koutarou exhaled. “Then let’s live up to those expectations.”

“That’s the spirit!”

“Boo, don’t forget about me!” Sanae-chan complained.

“Sorry about that,” Alunaya apologized.

It would be up to Koutarou, Alunaya, and Sanae-chan. The three of them had the highest firepower when combined. If anyone was going to shoot the computer through the generator, it would be them.

Kiriha’s prediction was correct. The moment Acturus’s missile launcher had been damaged, Maxfern had decided to self-destruct depending on the situation. But with the Imperial Army reinforcements arriving in the form of unmanned craft, there was no guarantee that they could kill Koutarou and the others there, so he was thinking of using it as a last resort.

“Ralgwin-sama...”

A subordinate contacted Maxfern, who was on the bridge of a battleship. The soldiers still believed that he was Ralgwin and called him by that name.

“Imperial Army transport ships are approaching the battlefield,” the soldier reported.

“How much time do we have?”

“At their current rate, they should have ground forces deployed in two, three minutes,” the soldier answered.

“Very well. How are the Blue Knight and the others doing, Grevanas?” Maxfern ended the call with his subordinate and turned to Grevanas, who was right next to him. He was operating the computer, sending instructions to Acturus. In other words, Grevanas was the one fighting their enemy.

“Considering that they have been fighting relatively passively, they might be waiting for reinforcements,” Grevanas guessed.

The Imperial Army had already achieved their objective by rescuing Kiriha, Clan, and Ruth. The Liberation Army’s assassination had ended in failure, so it made sense to assume that the Imperial Army didn’t want to sacrifice anything else.

“So, we are the ones who must act... Now, what to do?” Maxfern pondered.

He gathered his thoughts in a short amount of time. Acturus was performing as expected. It was an even match for the Blue Knight’s side. It was more than possible to take someone down with it, be it the Blue Knight himself, the Fire Dragon Emperor, or even the psychic girl. The Fire Dragon Emperor was strong in both offense and defense, though the psychic girl didn’t have a body, so it was unclear if she could even be defeated. That meant that the Blue Knight, who was covering for the others’ weaknesses, was the prime target.

“Grevanas, focus your attacks on the Blue Knight,” Maxfern ordered.

“Without consideration for anything else?”

“That’s right. I’ll leave the time of detonation to you. Use it to kill the Blue Knight!”

“As you wish!” Grevanas nodded, bared his teeth, and smiled. Even the Blue Knight’s defenses would weaken under Acturus’s attacks. If the wide-area incineration warhead was detonated at the right moment, it could kill him. It was a worthwhile gamble.

Acturus coming at Koutarou was something he welcomed, since he wanted to keep casualties to a minimum. It also meant that Maxfern and Grevanas hadn't realized that he and the others were planning to stop the detonation. But it was also dangerous. With Sanae protecting Alunaya, and Koutarou protecting her, he became the target.

"Another attack is coming! The spiritual energy is increasing!" Sanae-chan warned him.

Acturus was a machine, and unmanned at that. But that didn't mean that it wasn't emitting any spiritual energy. It had a spiritual energy generator, was protected by a Spiritual Energy Field, and attacked with a spiritual energy cannon. Some of its controls also used that same technology. So the spiritual energy would change the instant it attacked or defended. Sanae read those fluctuations and relayed them.

"We sure are busy!" Koutarou exclaimed.

He created a magical shield to block the mass of energy. But that wasn't the end of it. Smoke grenades shot out from his armor and covered their surroundings in smoke just before lasers came flying and struck him. Fortunately, the smoke reduced the power of the lasers and the Garb of Lord's distortion field was able to block them.

"They're aiming for our weak point," said Alunaya. "Blue Knight, they know that they can take me down in a domino effect if they take you out."

He swung his right arm to intercept a missile that was closing in on Koutarou, causing it to go off early. The missile exploded, but being made for anti-mobile weapons, it wasn't going to leave a scratch on the dragon. The spiritual energy cannon was necessary for that, which was why Koutarou was being targeted. In order to take down Alunaya, both Koutarou and Sanae had to go down first.

"Thank you, Alunaya-dono!"

"But what are we going to do? There is no end to this!" Alunaya responded.

They were having trouble attacking. Acturus moved fast and was hard to hit, not to mention that it had superb defense. There were no openings, as it used various weapons based on what the situation required. It was also

advantageous for it that there was nobody on board, and it attacked at times that would normally be illogical. It was a powerful enemy with all the combat knowledge of both sides installed.

“If we could only stop it for a moment...” Shizuka said, watching from inside Alunaya, as Acturus’s nonstop, fluid moves caught her eye.

Living beings would temporarily stop when deciding on or reaching their destination, but Acturus never did thanks to sophisticated and dedicated AI. Koutarou and the others had no way of knowing about that, so the only thing that was certain was that they couldn’t land a big attack until Acturus halted.

“Hmm... For a moment...” Sanae stared at Acturus while releasing her aura from her palms to block the machine gun bullets. There was something on her mind. “I might be able to stop it for a moment. But I can’t say for sure...”

“That’s fine! Do it, Sanae!” Koutarou replied. “We don’t have much time!”

An attack is coming! Be careful! Sanae thought.

Oh, only now do I notice that just before moving, there is a slight sound from its thrusters. I will be able to pursue it now! thought Alunaya. He started flying acrobatically. Thanks to Sanae, he could hear the slight operation sounds of Acturus’s thrusters. Since he could hear them just before they fired, he changed direction in tandem with them. That way, he wouldn’t fall behind and could stay on Acturus’s tail.

Thanks, Sanae! Now we can fight back! Koutarou thought. Acturus was still focusing its fire on him, but he could track the attacks just like Alunaya. It might be hard for a longer period of time, but he could handle it for a short duration.

“Ehehehe,” Sanae giggled again.

“What are you going to do next, Sanae?!” Koutarou asked.

“We need to get a little closer first,” she replied.

“So you can do something if we get closer?!”

“Probably!”

“Okay!” By the time Koutarou answered, he had already jumped to the right of the direction they were heading in. In response, Acturus changed the

direction it was traveling.

“That’s being reckless, Satomi-kun! You’ll get yourself killed!” Shizuka screamed.

Koutarou’s armor had flight functions as well, but he was far slower than Alunaya. The lack of thrust had already slowed him down considerably. There was no way he’d be able to escape Acturus now. It was like he had jumped into his own doom.

So that’s your plan, Blue Knight! Alunaya grinned and chased after Acturus.

The mobile weapon was headed straight for Koutarou. Since he had jumped off to the side, Acturus was flying diagonally in relation to Alunaya, showing him its flank. For that brief period, the enemy was flying slower relative to Alunaya. Using its determination to attack Koutarou, Alunaya had lured it into moving a specific way.

“Go get him, Uncle!” Sanae cheered.

“Of course!” Alunaya nodded and closed in on Acturus until he was close enough to hit it with his claws or wings.

That was the moment that Sanae-chan had been waiting for. “Listen to my soooong!!!” she loudly declared before singing the theme song of the magical girl anime that she loved. “I will beat away your boredom. When you look down, I will brighten your day. I will save you with the magic of smiles...”

The song itself didn’t really matter. The real point was that she was putting her heart into it. Her song didn’t come out as sound waves—instead, it echoed through her surroundings as aura.

At that moment, Acturus’s posture fell apart. Its boosters and thrusters malfunctioned, stalling it.

“Good job, Sanae! So that was your plan!” Koutarou cheered. The timing was perfect. It had happened right before his eyes.

“Yesterday’s tears will melt away in the morning sun. The wind will bring you happiness...” Sanae continued singing rather than answering him, but she wore a proud expression.

Maxfern and Grevanas, on the other hand, weren't laughing.

"What is going on?!" Maxfern screamed. "Grevanas, what is happening?!"

"I do not know. There is a spiritual energy transmission malfunction! The system is rebooting?!"

Despite it not looking like anything was being done to it, Acturus was suddenly malfunctioning and its system was being rebooted. Since they couldn't hear Sanae's song, they were confused.

"What are you doing! Get it moving!" Maxfern ordered.

"We have another eight seconds until it finishes rebooting! At this rate—"

Sanae had been aiming for the moment Acturus launched an attack on Koutarou. The mobile weapon used all kinds of spiritual energy technology, including for communications. When the transmission's spiritual energy had decreased, she'd hit it with a powerful aura. It had torn the transmission to pieces, causing an error in the system, which had made it reboot. It was a spiritual energy version of electronic warfare—the kind of daring move only Sanae could pull off.



“Now, Blue Knight!” Alunaya cried.

Koutarou yelled out a battle cry as Signaltin struck Acturus. The beautiful silvery blade, which had the power to break up mana, pierced the magical barrier on Acturus and ripped up its armor.

“Let’s do this, Uncle!” Shizuka exclaimed.

“Come out, flames of purgatory! Roar, burst flames! Dwell in my arm as an apocalyptic wedge that will burn the heavens and earth!” Alunaya was the supreme ruler of flames. He didn’t need an incantation to control normal fire, but that wasn’t the case when creating special flames. By incanting, he could add additional properties to the fire, and he created a powerful flame that dwelled in his right arm.

Normally, it was impossible to attack while chanting. But Alunaya and Shizuka were one in body and soul. While Alunaya chanted, Shizuka attacked. It was an impossible move made possible by their special circumstances.

Shizuka thrust Alunaya’s right fist forward in the basic seiken of karate. And because of that, it was a movement Shizuka had practiced endlessly. Alunaya’s body created a powerful blow, and the kinetic energy was slammed into Acturus’s body, right where Koutarou had ripped up the armor. The fist easily slipped through the opening.

“Hear my oath! Ultimate Flame Wedge!” In that instant, the mana dwelling in Alunaya’s right arm was released. The power within his fist destroyed Acturus’s interior. At the same time, the fire burned it all. Naturally, these were no normal flames. For a moment, the fire was tens of thousands of degrees, and a blinding flash was unleashed.

The strike pierced not just the generator and computer, but all of Acturus. It was a beautiful strike that loudly declared the presence of Fire Dragon Emperor Alunaya. The hole in the frame was a perfect circle, and Koutarou worried about the flames that passed through.

“Good thing there’s a mountain over there...although it has a new cave now.” Koutarou sighed.

“I’ve still got it, don’t I, Blue Knight?” Alunaya said proudly.

“Could you please hold back a little, Alunaya-dono? That was gut-wrenching.”

“Impossible. I didn’t know how strong it was, so I went all out.”

“I suppose so...” Koutarou relented. He was covered in a cold sweat, but Alunaya was in high spirits.

Meanwhile, Shizuka was in the dumps. “I’m definitely not stepping on a scale for the next few days,” she cried.

“Hmm, your feet are sinking into the ground, so you definitely weigh a few tons,” Sanae replied.

“Don’t say that, Sanae-chan! I don’t want to hear it!” Shizuka shook her head. She understood the situation and wouldn’t complain. But that didn’t mean that it wasn’t painful for her.

“Sheesh, it’s finally over,” Koutarou said with a wry smile. The battle had ended a moment ago. Once Acturus was destroyed, the Forthorthe Liberation Army had begun its retreat, although some had missed their opportunity and surrendered. There had been casualties, but at least the Liberation Army soldiers hadn’t been killed by Maxfern.

“Satomi Koutarou,” Kiriha began.

“Kiriha-san,” Koutarou answered.

“It looks like everything has safely ended.”

“Do you know what I want to tell you?” Koutarou asked.

“A proposal?” she jested.

“You idiot! Don’t you move from where you are! I’m coming over there right now to scold you!” Koutarou shouted. “I have a ton of things I want to say to you!”

“I gladly accept.”

“I said it’s not a proposal!” he retorted.

Most importantly, Kiriha, Clan, and Ruth were all safe. They had managed to escape Maxfern’s assassination attempt. When Koutarou had first heard that their craft had been shot down, it had felt like his heart had stopped. Relief

washed over him as everything ended safely, but his rage was intense.

When Kiriha and the others consulted Harumi, the latter immediately shook her head. “You can’t. That is too dangerous for you. I can’t help you. If anything, I would prefer you didn’t do this...”

Kiriha’s group was going to leak information to the enemy and be shot down on purpose. They wanted Harumi, Maki, and Yurika to gather information during that time. But naturally, Harumi couldn’t accept it.

“I know how you feel...but I can’t agree either.” Maki had the same opinion. She understood why the others wanted to hurry and gather information. Fighting an enemy without enough knowledge was dangerous. As a former member of Darkness Rainbow, Maki was well aware of that. But the risk to Kiriha, Clan, and Ruth was too big. If things went poorly, they would die.

“But...why do you have to do something so dangerous?” Yurika was troubled. She wasn’t very knowledgeable in this area, so she didn’t know what to do. She wanted to hear a more detailed explanation.

“There are two primary reasons,” Clan answered. “If we fight the Forthorthe Liberation Army upfront, the war might last months or even years. That is why we want information on the location of their stronghold even if we have to get reckless, so that we can have a decisive battle right away.”

At the moment, they still didn’t have information on the main base of Maxfern’s band of knights or the location of the Forthorthe Liberation Army’s main force. Conversely, Maxfern did have some information on the Imperial Army. It was similar to fighting a guerrilla organization, so the conflict would follow the same sort of flow, which meant they would have to slowly fight an enemy they didn’t fully know. In order to avoid that, the trio was prepared to take on a massive risk to get a lead on their enemy.

“Moreover, we have only just started recovering from last year’s civil war. If a long war was to begin now, the people would be forced to make sacrifices, and it would take decades to recover. We have to avoid that at all costs,” Clan continued.

The civil war that Vandarion had started last year was still a burden to

Forthorthe. If another war began just as they were starting to recover from the fallout, Forthorthe could take some fatal damage. The economy was shrinking, and the people would be stuck in poverty. Moreover, a lot of people would die in the war, soldiers and civilians alike. Maxfern wasn't the sort of man to care about that.

"There's also another serious problem," Ruth added. "But this one is more personal." She explained the second reason, which ultimately moved Harumi and Maki. "We don't want Master to fight in a war for years," she concluded.

"That's..." Maki's eyes opened wide.

"That might...certainly be a problem...to consider..." Harumi muttered, equally shocked.

They both understood that Koutarou wasn't suited to fighting a war for years. He was too kindhearted for that. But since the people he was close to were all important, he often ended up in battles for political reasons. He couldn't be heartless against an enemy unless they were particularly horrible. Because of that, many people wanted him to win, and he wanted to live up to their expectations. But secretly, his heart was being worn down with each battle. So the girls wanted him to be able to live without that stress and agreed that he was better off not fighting. That was the reason they would take the risk instead. If they could shorten the war, that was more than enough reason for them to accept the risk.

"Satomi Koutarou is already shouldering so much," Kiriha noted.

"He is doing what the royal families are meant to do," Clan added.

"If we can return Master to an ordinary life even a second faster, that is enough for us to stake our lives on," Ruth said.

"Now is our only chance. Once they get used to handling magic and spiritual energy, we will never have one like this again. Think it through thoroughly before making your choice," Kiriha pressed them.

Much of the girls' happiness lay in Koutarou's ordinary daily life, so they had no reason not to go through with their plan. Kiriha, Clan, and Ruth were determined.

Seeing that glow in their eyes, Yurika made her decision. “I understand. I’ll help.” She casually accepted. She didn’t understand the difficult stuff, but she could see the girls’ love and courage glowing. She had to protect that as the guardian of love and courage.

“Yes, I will help too,” Maki agreed. “We have no choice but to fight for that reason.”

Yurika didn’t say much, but Maki could feel her sincerity. She was also a magical girl of love and courage now. The way that they put it into practice differed, but they strove for the same goal.

“What about you, Sakuraba-senpai?” Yurika asked Harumi in a casual tone. The gleam in her eyes was strong and kind. She was neither coercing her nor pulling back.

Harumi had been thinking about all sorts of problems, but she’d come to her conclusion already. “Satomi-kun is a hero because of the burden we placed on him...and ending the war quickly will help the people of Forthorthe too. I understand. I will help.”

Not even Harumi knew if these were her emotions or somebody else’s, but it didn’t matter. Her wish was the same as that certain someone’s.

As Kiriha’s group descended in the landing craft, Harumi’s group was in orbit. Their cover story was that they were there as part of an exercise, but they were actually on Nefilforan’s Hidden Leaves to gather information on mana, with the Nefilforan Unit gathering other intel.

“How are the others?!” Harumi asked.

“They’re fine. They have been safely shot down as expected,” Nefilforan reported.

Harumi was in the process of getting an update on the situation. Fortunately, the first phase of the plan had gone as expected, as the landing craft pretended to be shot down.

“Thank God,” Yurika said in relief.

“I wouldn’t call being shot down safe, though,” Maki disagreed.

The first stage was the biggest point of concern for them. Once it was safely over, they felt deep relief.

“Well then, please take it away,” Nefilforan said.

“Yes, we will get right to it,” Harumi answered.

Once their call with Nefilforan was over, they got to work. Preparations had already been completed. Harumi’s group borrowed the Hidden Leaves’s hangar for a large-scale ritual spell for mana detection. The three worked together to cast it so that they could detect when Grevanas used magic. There wasn’t much of a chance of Grevanas using a spell when the landing craft was being attacked due to the distance and lack of accuracy, so their job began now.

“Please begin, Yurika,” Maki said. “I will match you.”

“Okay.” Yurika nodded. “I’m beginning the chant for the ritual version of Detect Magic!”

Maki and Yurika stood on top of a magical circle and began chanting together. The two users of modern magic language would be in charge of the spell. Harumi used the ancient language, so she wasn’t involved in casting that spell. Instead she was in charge of gathering and amplifying mana. Using magic in space was slightly different from using it on the surface. Harumi would be assisting in that part.

“I think this should be fine,” Yurika said.

“Sakuraba-san, can you increase the mana a little?” Maki requested.

“Okay...how about this?” Harumi replied.

“Thank you. I can confirm that the ritual worked and it’s operating normally.”

Mana was usually generated by life and objects. So aside from a few exceptions, there was next to no mana in space. Because of that, magicians couldn’t use the mana around them, causing the cost of spells to increase. But that also meant that mana in space went much further. Without any obstacles, it didn’t decrease like normal. That was why the effective range of magic detection was far wider there than on the surface. By using a ritualized version

of the spell, they could ensure it had an even longer reach and could cover the area around Alaia.

“And now we wait.” Harumi nodded, then checked a crystal that had been charged with mana ahead of time. Using the mana within the large crystal, they could maintain the ritual for a full day. If Grevanas used magic during that time, they should be able to determine his location.

“Do you think he’ll use magic?” Yurika asked.

“Only God knows. But it will be big if we detect something. We would be able to pinpoint his location, after all,” Maki answered.

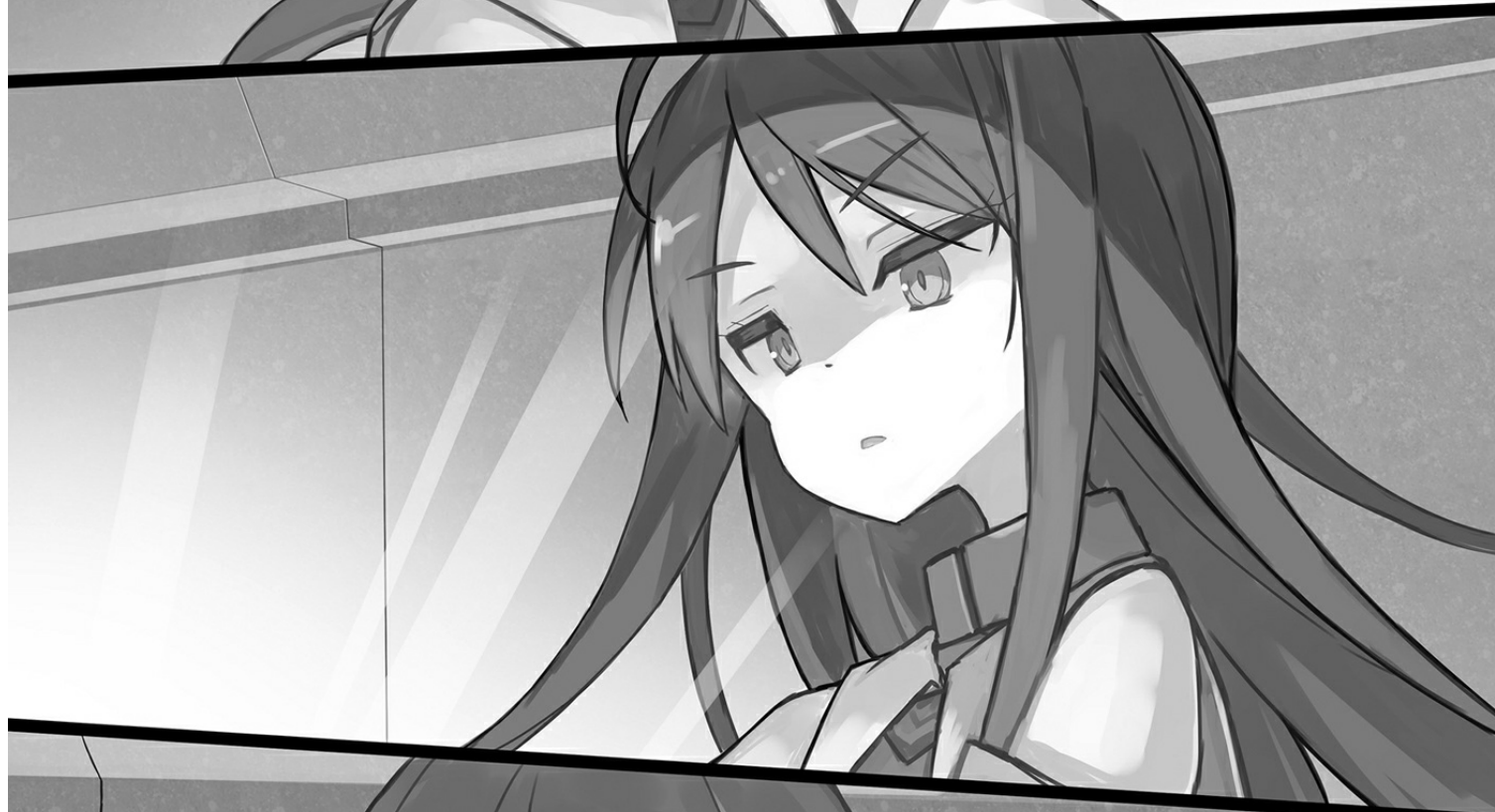
The Nefilforan Unit and intelligence department under Clan were tracking enemy communications. Since they were looking for random enemies, chances were high that they would find something. But it was just as likely that it wouldn’t lead anywhere. When looking for magic, chances were high that Grevanas wouldn’t use a spell, leading to them finding nothing. But like Maki said, if he did, they would know his location, which meant finding Maxfern’s location as well. It was a low chance but too valuable to overlook.

“Do you think Kiriha-san and the others are okay?” Yurika asked, worried.

“I hope so,” Maki answered.

“They’re fine. In this case, no news is good news,” Harumi stated.

For several hours, nothing happened. It wasn’t until five hours after the landing craft was shot down that a bell-like tone rang out in the hangar. That was the sign that the ritual magic had detected something. When Maki heard that, she hurriedly stood in the center of the magic circle.



“Sakuraba-san! This is it!” Maki cried.

“Yes, I’m starting the measuring instrument!” Harumi replied.

A glowing red point appeared near the magic circle at around the height of the girls’ waists. It was a mana reaction. If the mana circle was the center of Alaia, the red dot was the location where mana had been used. Feeding that information into the measuring instrument and comparing it to a map of space would allow them to determine an accurate location.

“Nefilforan-san!” Harumi called.

“What is the matter?”

“We detected something! I am sending the data over to you!”

From that point, the Nefilforan Unit, or intelligence department, would take over. A stealth ship would be sent to the revealed location to pursue Grevanas. That way, they might be able to find Maxfern’s base. Even if they didn’t find it, they would still learn a lot.

Once everyone had safely returned to the royal palace, Koutarou received an explanation from Kiriha. The shock left his mouth wide open.

“So you were shot down on purpose to get information from the enemy?!”

Koutarou knew that the girls had been acting as decoys based on Clan’s message but had believed they’d unexpectedly been shot down in the process. That was why he had gotten angry with them for doing something so dangerous. But according to Kiriha’s explanation, being shot down was part of the plan. Not even he had expected that.

“More accurately, we wanted to get the enemy to communicate more,” Kiriha said. “Even smaller forces will contact their commanders when something unexpected happens. They will get a response too. So by maintaining a state where we stay just out of reach, the volume of communication would increase, which would be monitored.”

The original goal had been to increase the volume of communications to narrow down the location of the enemy fleet and stronghold. Of course, that

might not have been possible from increasing the number of messages alone, but fortunately the information they gained from their last battle had come in handy. They knew that Grevanas was gathering special materials for magic and spiritual energy technology, so they could narrow down their active region somewhat by reaching out to the logistics industry. Therefore, the region they surveyed wasn't all that large, relatively speaking.

"No matter how good their camouflage, they weren't able to hide everything. Even more so when motivated by a chance for revenge. Thanks to that, it went much better than expected," Kiriha explained.

"Veltlion, the intelligence department is currently pursuing Maxfern's battleship," Clan announced.

"You found him?!" Koutarou exclaimed. "Right! They were close enough for communication and transfer gates!"

Kiriha had merely aimed to locate the ship of someone who was high in rank, but Maxfern was more eager than expected, so they'd managed to find his battleship. A stealth ship was currently following it.

"By the way, it was thanks to Harumi-sama and the others," Ruth added.

"They were involved too? So that's why that exercise was suddenly decided on," Koutarou said.

"I'm sorry, Satomi-kun," Harumi apologized. "The fewer people who knew, the better." She didn't like hiding things, but if people were told, their actions would change, which might have allowed the enemy to catch on. She'd had to stay quiet about it.

"But it was worth the risk, Satomi-kun. Now we should be able to shorten this battle," Maki added with a determined look. She didn't doubt her decision in the slightest.

"I guess so..." Koutarou had no choice but to agree. With the information Kiriha and the others had risked their lives to get, the strain on the citizens would be limited. In hindsight, it was the right course of action, so he couldn't blame them for their choices.

"Anyway, don't ever do something like that in secret again, okay?" Koutarou

had been truly shocked when he was told that the girls had been shot down. He'd believed that they were still alive but had been anxious until he could see for himself. He never wanted to experience the same thing again.

"That won't be a problem," Kiriha said with a smile. "They aren't foolish enough to fall for the same trick twice."

Maxfern was no idiot, so the girls had only had a single chance. Once Maxfern's and Grevanas's knowledge of magic, spiritual energy technology, and science deepened, they wouldn't fall for Kiriha's ploy again. The trap they had sprung was the first and only time it would work, which was why Kiriha didn't plan to do it again.

"Hmm..."

Even though he'd heard what Kiriha had to say, Koutarou was still worried. He believed in the girls—they could be fully trusted—but they had a tendency to jump into danger. That was what bothered him.

Seeing that, Ruth smiled. "It's okay. You don't have to worry, Master. If Satomi Koutarou-sama rather than the Blue Knight wishes it, we will obey."

Ruth vouched for her words. Even if he wasn't the Blue Knight or the captain of their band of knights, as long as Satomi Koutarou wanted it, the girls would live up to his wishes. Ruth might have been the one to say it, but all of the girls agreed.

"That's..." Koutarou faltered. In other words, the girls were telling him to tell them to always stay at his side. When he realized that, he recalled what Kiriha had said. "*A proposal?*" and indeed, it was something like that. Koutarou reflexively looked over at her, and she gave him a graceful smile that she hid behind a fan.

"Then maybe I will do it once more..." Frighteningly enough, Kiriha threatened that she would do it again if he didn't show with his attitude that he agreed.

"Don't you dare! Don't ever do something dangerous without me knowing again!" Koutarou exclaimed. While he knew it was practically a threat, he didn't want the girls to do something dangerous in secret again. He never wanted to repeat that experience.

“Ahahaha, well if you insist, I suppose we have no choice.” Theia let out a refined laugh and answered as a representative of the girls. “We are all fine women. We have the capacity to respect your wishes.”

She and the others looked happy. Much of that joy lay in Koutarou leading an ordinary life. They were all sick of what was happening as well.

At the same time, Maxfern and Grevanas realized that they had been caught in a trap. They’d felt that something was off when fighting, but that suspicion didn’t turn into conviction until after they retreated and grouped up with the Gray Knight. When they linked up, the Gray Knight noticed a stealth ship following them.

“It looks like they pulled one over you, Maxfern,” the Gray Knight said. “They dragged the fight out on purpose to find you.”

“To think we would lead them all the way here...” Grevanas said.

“Dammit! You’re saying I fell for the Blue Knight’s plan?!” Maxfern slammed his fist into his desk.

They had already repelled the intelligence department’s stealth ship. Or rather, once they’d learned they had been detected, they’d retreated. Since the ship wasn’t built for fighting, it was a reasonable decision. Moreover, it had already accomplished most of its mission. The enemy hadn’t gotten all the way to their stronghold, but once they started investigating the area, they would find it eventually. It was only a matter of time.

“How utterly vexing. It would seem that the time of operating in the shadows has come to an end,” Maxfern said.

“That would be for the best,” Grevanas answered. “That was our original intention anyway.”

They’d been planning to go on a major offensive after the assassination plan anyway. Once they launched their offensive, their bases and various strongholds would naturally be exposed. The time left before that happened would differ, but it would happen eventually.

“In large-scale battles there will be mass deaths, so Forthorthe will be

weakened whether they win or lose. And it will turn the public sentiment away from Elfaria,” Grevanas continued.

Attackers had the advantage in choosing where they attacked, while defenders didn’t have that luxury. With such a vast territory, the Imperial Army would be spread thin. On top of that, if they failed to defend and people died, the public sentiment would turn away from them. The defenders always faced such risks. Maxfern and Grevanas might have ended up on the back foot due to the trap, but they could still win.

“There is just one case that will cause problems,” the Gray Knight calmly pointed out.

There was indeed a very tricky problem hidden in plain sight when it came to Maxfern and Grevanas going on the offensive. The Gray Knight thought it would be risky to put the plan into action before taking measures against it.

“That’s right.” Maxfern was aware of the issue. “It is the problem of the Blue Knight attacking before we can go on the offensive. It will all hinge on whether we can avoid that.”

The Forthorthe Liberation Army would need time to gather their forces before they could go on the offensive. But it was no easy task to get a large organization to move as one. If they didn’t, they would be individually destroyed, so some time was necessary. It would be a problem if the Blue Knight led an attack on their headquarters with a small unit before then. It would be easy for the Imperial Army to allocate enough forces to launch a surprise attack on their base.

“Then I will go,” the Gray Knight said. “It’s about time I see the Blue Knight anyway.” The Gray Knight also wanted a large-scale battle. Since that might not happen if the Blue Knight and the others weren’t stalled, he would lend Maxfern a hand without hesitation.

“How reliable, Gray One,” Maxfern said with a smile. The knight had given him the answer he had hoped for.

The Gray Knight had nothing to say in response. He had no expectations of Maxfern, aside from him becoming a trigger for a large battle.

“Haha, no matter. Now then, war is coming, Blue Knight! And Empress Elfaria! Enjoy the sight of the lands being burned again!”

Despite the lack of response, Maxfern showed no sign of anger. His expectations for the future were more important. With the Gray Knight’s powers, he could stop the Blue Knight, which would allow him and Grevanas to attack as planned, and the problem of being discovered wouldn’t matter for much longer. Before long, the Imperial Palace would become Maxfern’s new base. He was convinced of that.

Afterword

It has been a while. It's the author, Takehaya, here. The all-episodes-in-one Blu-ray for the *Invaders of the Rokujouma!?* anime is currently on sale! But that's enough direct marketing, as this time volume 46 of *Invaders of the Rokujouma!?* has been safely published. The story is finally moving toward the end. From here on, Koutarou and the others' battle will turn into a large war, and I would like to touch on that.

Those who keep up with the news will know that there are several wars happening in the world at the moment. Moreover, they have been continuing for a long time. War takes a lot of time. There are some exceptions, but in most cases wars last for several months to several years. But that doesn't work very well in a story. You can't have Koutarou-kun spend months to years in a back-and-forth with Maxfern's forces. So I wondered how I could fit a war into the time frame of the story, and my answer was this volume.

Kiriha, Clan, and Ruth risk their own lives in hopes of shortening the war. By using an assassination plan against Maxfern, they attempt to discover the location of his stronghold. Such places have a lot of supplies, facilities, and personnel gathered within them, so discovering one early on would cut a war short. There are cases in history where quick attacks have captured a capital and ended a war in a matter of days. Moving headquarters takes a lot of time, so Maxfern and Grevanas are in a dangerous period. In other words, thanks to the girls' hard work, I won't have to write about a long war. I can't change the novel into a war chronicle now, after all! Of course I can't say that it's a perfect method, but I hope it will fill some of the gaps between real and fictional wars.

Speaking of real wars, there is a problem: the unmanned weapons that Ruth controls, which are like drones in reality. When this series was first released in 2009, drones weren't common. Technology was very basic as well. They required constant remote control like radio-controlled machines did. The exception was expensive military drones used by advanced countries, which met the requirements for modern drones, like automatic flight. Ruth's

unmanned craft are based on that idea, made more advanced with Forthorthe's technology. Thus her unmanned craft, which can fly in any direction using space distortion technology complete with semiautonomous AI that can support infantry, were born.

However, though two years have passed in the series, twenty years have passed in reality. Drone technology has advanced and is closing in on the capabilities of Ruth-san's unmanned crafts. AI is starting to be introduced to drones that can be guided by GPS without the need of a remote control. Technology for drones of the same type to coordinate is starting to be introduced as well. This is bad. In the series, it's the year 2011, but to readers it might not feel all that novel. That was why Ruth needed to get a new special move: the ability to use various kinds of unmanned craft and command them like an army.

Military drones began as unmanned reconnaissance drones. Afterward, they were given the ability to attack or blow up. Technology for autonomous control has been progressing since the appearance of reconnaissance drones. If we use that as a basis to imagine the progress of unmanned craft, after attack craft appeared, antiair drones that would automatically intercept unmanned craft with lasers would naturally appear. If they didn't, the attack and self-destructing unmanned crafts would dominate the battlefield, so that invention would be inevitable. If not, then light, highly mobile weapons would be the only things that could be used, with heavier weapons being unable to appear on the battlefield.

Once antiair unmanned craft appear, slower unmanned craft with heavy weapons, which didn't exist before, would start appearing. Then, to counter those unmanned craft like attack helicopters or fighters, alternatively simple drones equipped with powerful distortion fields would appear. This development would continue back and forth until all kinds of unmanned craft existed, which is why I believe that all sorts of unmanned craft will exist in Forthorthe.

But only one or two types would be used, which would differ on a unit-by-unit basis. Infantry might use antiair and reconnaissance craft. The reason for the limited variety is a matter of logistics, as repair parts and ammunition would be

required for each type. Because of that, the Forthorthe Imperial Army has no concept of simultaneously deploying a wide variety of unmanned craft on the same battlefield. They might have at one point in time but the idea would have been culled in the name of efficiency.

As such, Ruth being able to do so is an exception. Since Maxfern does anything necessary, there are always special conditions applied to battles with him, which is why after considering all possibilities, Ruth discarded efficiency for the advancement of technology. She realized that against Maxfern, she couldn't afford to use operational difficulties as an excuse. Her mindset paid off, as she was able to send in a steel legion when it mattered the most. So as an author, that is a relief, but in another decade or so, the real world will likely be using a wide variety of drones in tandem. But by then, *Invaders of the Rokujouma!*? should be completed, so I don't mind. Incidentally, the Warlord and Motor Knights control technology end up being crushed by this new technology.

All this talk about Ruth's enhancements have filled up the available space, so I will end things here for today. I would like to give my heartfelt thanks to: HJ Bunko's editorial department and everyone in affiliated companies; Poco-san, who goes along with my somewhat bothersome requests and draws illustrations for this volume; and all the readers who continue to support this series, which has become like a hobby to me.

Let us meet again in the afterword for volume 47.

June, 2024

Takehaya

Bonus Story

When Sanae had talked about what she wanted to do while she was still a high schooler the other day, Nalfa had been able to follow. She didn't quite agree with wanting to get into the bath of the boy she liked, but she did agree with wanting to make memories in her teens.

"Baths aside, I understand how you feel," Nalfa said. "It would be exciting if something happened."

"Hmm, such as?" Kotori tilted her head and asked.

But when she thought about it, Nalfa had no real ideas. "Um...like having a blanket put over me when I'm sleeping...maybe?" she answered after thinking about it. Since she'd been in a rush, she only had a rather vague image. But it was still something that would make her happy.

"When you're sleeping..." Kotori muttered. "The other way around would be easier. Kou-niisan sleeps a lot." Kotori had personally encountered Koutarou sleeping quite often, so she found it hard to imagine the orderly Nalfa falling asleep in front of him. "Don't you want to do something yourself, Nal-chan?" she asked.

"N-No way! Doing something to Koutarou-sama is way too high of a hurdle," Nalfa replied, vigorously shaking her head. She was typically the kind of person to stare at what was important to her. It was difficult for her to appeal to them and make them turn her way.

"I see. Then it's a matter of how to capitalize on the few opportunities there are," Kotori concluded.

"Capitalize on...opportunities?"

"Ah, so you haven't prepared anything either?" Kotori furrowed her brow. But she wasn't actually angry. It was just a joke between friends, and she soon smiled again.

"Chances and preparations... I don't get it." Nalfa was confused.

“Well, you tend to be more passive, right, Nal-chan?”

“Um...yes, I think so.”

“Which means you can’t determine the number of times something happens. You’ll have to wait for a coincidence,” Kotori explained.

“I suppose so.” Nalfa nodded.

“Then you should toss some fuel around to fiercely burn when something happens,” Kotori suggested.

“Toss some fuel around?!” Nalfa finally understood what Kotori was saying. Kotori wanted her to intentionally make an incident bigger when it happened. “But what am I supposed to use as fuel?” Nalfa was panicked. She was happy just looking and didn’t ask for anything more, so she couldn’t imagine it properly because of her passive personality.

“What about wearing clothes that are actually see-through when you look really closely?” Kotori suggested.

“W-Wouldn’t that just make me a pervert?!” Nalfa shouted.

“Then what about wearing really cute underwear?”

“With the idea of showing them off?!”

Since Nalfa was more passive, she had few opportunities to come into contact with Koutarou. So Kotori’s idea was to use fuel like thin clothes or cute underwear to make the most of those few opportunities. But that was too much for Nalfa to easily accept.

“But you can’t touch Kou-niisan on your own, can you?” Kotori asked.

“Well...no...” Nalfa muttered.

“Then you need to be decisive. Either you add some fuel or go for it yourself, or you’ll be stuck like this forever.”

It wouldn’t have been a problem if Nalfa could talk to or touch Koutarou on her own like Kotori could. But since she couldn’t, Kotori felt that Nalfa needed to go the extra mile. As Nalfa’s best friend, she hoped for the best for her.

“Um, let’s say we leave that for later. Shouldn’t we start with something

simpler first?” Nalfa knew where Kotori was coming from, since just waiting for a chance was too passive. She also understood that Kotori was worrying for her sake. She wanted to improve, but she couldn’t take such an extreme first step.

“Then let’s start by making sure to participate in seasonal events,” Kotori offered.

There were summer festivals, Halloween, Christmas, and New Year’s—plenty of events where wearing something eye-catching wouldn’t be out of place. So a first step would be taking part in those and making her appealing to him by wearing cute clothes. It would be somewhat meek, but it was much better than being reserved and doing nothing.

“That might work...” Nalfa nodded in relief. Rather than wearing flashy casual clothes, it would be fancy cosplay. It weighed far less on her to wear such apparel at seasonal events rather than at all times.

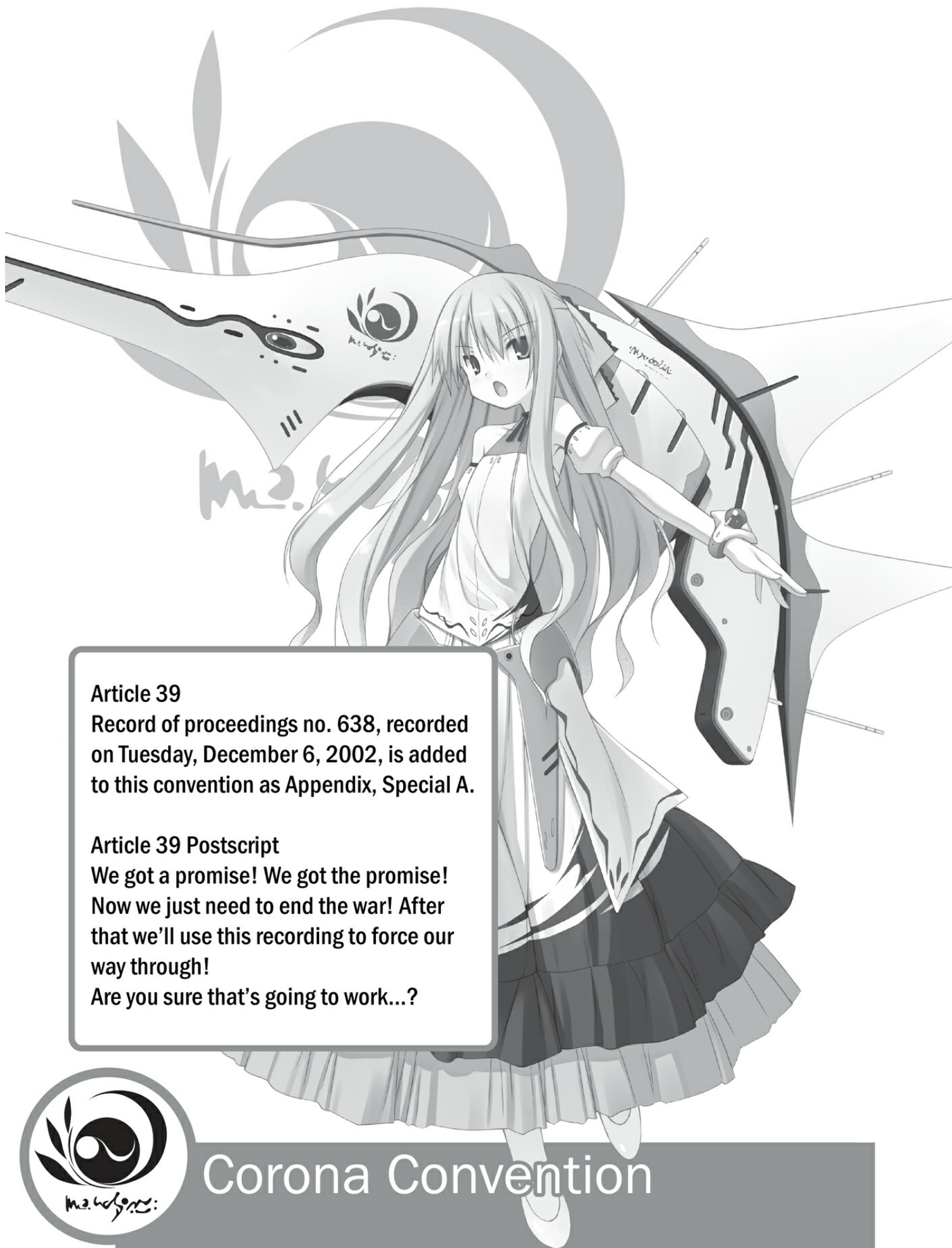
“All right, then let’s go consult with Yurika-san!” Kotori said. “There’s no better person to ask when it comes to cosplay!”

The only concerning part was that Kotori was rather motivated. She was normally so mild-mannered and calm, but when it came to Koutarou, she became strangely direct.

“We’re starting already?!” Nalfa exclaimed.

“There’s nothing to be gained from being slow! Now come on, let’s go, Nal-chan!” Kotori cheered.

Her bright smile was dazzling, but Nalfa couldn’t help but feel uneasy upon seeing it.



Article 39

Record of proceedings no. 638, recorded on Tuesday, December 6, 2002, is added to this convention as Appendix, Special A.

Article 39 Postscript

We got a promise! We got the promise!
Now we just need to end the war! After
that we'll use this recording to force our
way through!
Are you sure that's going to work...?



Corona Convention

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Invaders of the Rokujouma!? Volume 46

by Takehaya

Translated by Warnis Edited by Tess Nanavati

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