

39

Takehaya
Illust: Poco



The illustration features a young woman with long, flowing pink hair and blue-rimmed glasses. She is wearing a white lab coat over a dark blue shirt with a gold-colored collar. A blue identification tag is pinned to her left chest, and a black wrist device with an orange button is on her right wrist. She has a confident, slightly mischievous expression. To her left and right are two spherical robotic companions. The one on the left is labeled '01' and has a blue blade-like protrusion. The one on the right is labeled '02' and has a more complex camera-like lens. The background is plain white.

INVADERS OF THE ROKUROU![?]

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The illustration features a young woman with long, flowing pink hair and blue-rimmed glasses. She is wearing a white lab coat over a dark blue shirt with a gold-colored collar. A blue identification tag is pinned to her left chest. She holds a black device with an orange button in her right hand. Two spherical robotic companions, one labeled '01' and the other '02', are positioned on either side of her. The background is plain white.

INWADERS OF THE ROKUROU![?]



**“SOMEONE
SAVE
MEEE...”**

**NALFA FACES HER
GREATEST CRISIS YET!**


INVADERS OF THE ROKUJOUMA!? 39



“HYAAAAAH!”

**“COME,
SANAЕ!”**

“THE GRAY KNIGHT” VS. SANAЕ ONEE-CHAN
WHAT DOES THEIR FIGHT REPRESENT...?



**JUST AS THE MOBILE
WAS CLOSING BACK UP,
SOMEONE SQUEEZED
THROUGH BEFORE THE
COCKPIT SHUT TIGHT.**

**“MIND
GIVING ME
A RIDE?”**

**“KIRIHA-SAN?!
WHAT ARE YOU
DOING HERE?!”**

**“I WANTED
TO TRY OUT
THE FABLED
PRINCESS
CARRY.”**

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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-cum-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 SANAЕ

The ghostly girl that used to haunt Koutarou. She now has her body back, however, 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 she's 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



SAKURABA HARUMI

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

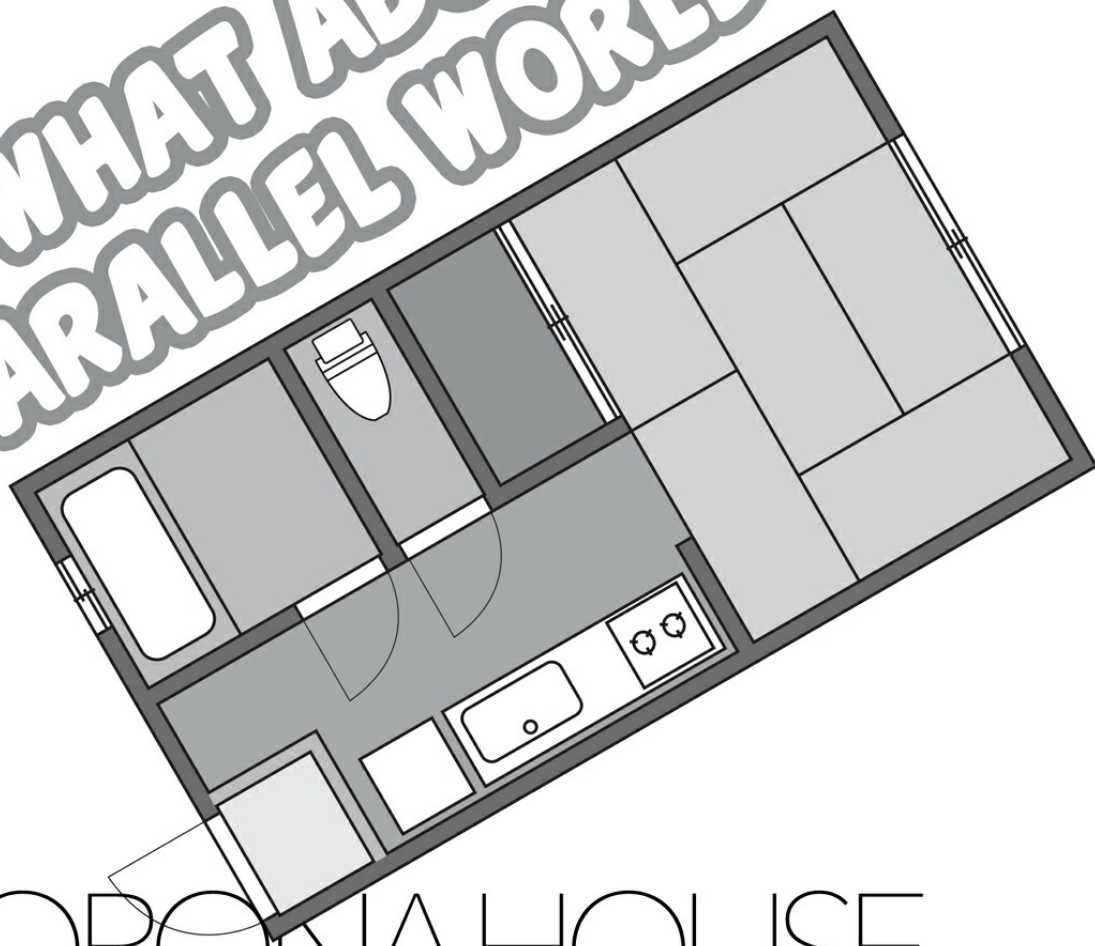


NALFA LAREN

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

ALIENS (OF THE HOLY FORTHORTHE GALACTIC EMPIRE)

**BUT WHAT ABOUT THE
PARALLEL WORLD?!**



CORONA HOUSE
ROOM 106

Nalfa's Ordeal

Wednesday, August 31st

With hobbies like fishing, maintaining one's tools was essential. Sea angling gear was constantly exposed to saltwater, so there was a perpetual risk of it rusting. To prevent this, Koutarou made time to clean his kit after using it. He took good care of his baseball equipment too, so the sight of him doing such maintenance wasn't all that unusual in room 106.

Nevertheless, the people of Forthorthe were curious about the pastimes of Earth—and their interest was especially keen in anything involving Koutarou, the Blue Knight. Thus Nalfa was almost always recording, no matter how mundane the scene... Today, however, was an exception. Rather than her camera, she had a handwritten note in her grasp, and she wore a serious expression as she passed it to Koutarou.

"Koutarou-sama, is this how you spell the princesses' names?!"

"Let's see, Theiamillis Gre and Clariossa Daora... Yeah, that's right. But you know, this is a speech. Nobody's even going to know if you misspell them."

Koutarou glanced at Nalfa's note and smiled before turning back to his tools. He was in the middle of reassembling a reel he'd taken apart to clean. Experience guided his hands in smooth, steady motions. The work was familiar to him.

"You make it sound like it's no big deal, but this is my first time ever giving a speech."

"But you're always talking on camera, right?"

"That's different. The spotlight's not on me then."

Nalfa's head was spinning. In a few days, the second semester at Harukaze High would begin with a second wave of Forthorthian transfer students, and she'd been chosen as a representative to give a speech at their welcoming

ceremony. The decision was like a bolt out of the blue to her. She'd never imagined that she would be asked to take center stage like this.

"I think there are already lots of people watching you, though."

"Only because I'm close to you."

"You need more confidence in yourself, Nalfa-san. You're a good, wonderful girl, and I'm sure everyone appreciates that."

"Please don't tease me. I need your help."

"Y'know, you're kinda acting like Yurika today..."

Koutarou paused his handiwork and looked back at Nalfa. She was gripping the note in her hands as tears welled in her eyes. Indeed, she looked just like Yurika when she was cornered.

"You could at least stand by my side!"

"What good would that do...?"

"It would help me!"

Nalfa was uncomfortable taking a leading role like this. She preferred to be behind the scenes filming. Even when she made a cameo, Koutarou and Japanese culture were always the focus of the show. She was nothing more than a supporting character. Never once had she been the main character, until now. For her speech, she'd be sharing her own thoughts and experiences. It was a first for her—and a major hurdle.

"Don't think too hard about it," Koutarou encouraged her. "Just say what's on your mind."

"Ugh... How do you do it, Koutarou-sama?"

"Well, my speeches are normally political, so Clan and Kiriha-san write them for me. Can't really afford to get that stuff wrong, y'know?"

"But they still express your feelings, right?"

"Yeah. Clan and Kiriha-san just write down what I want to say so it's clear. Should we ask them to help you out too?"

"I don't think so. They're busy enough as it is... I wouldn't want to waste their

precious time with this.”

“That’s exactly what I’m talking about.”

“Huh? What is?”

“You’re a good girl. You want to give this your all.”

“Well... if I don’t, it’d cause trouble for a lot of people.”

“If that’s your mindset, I’m sure you’ll be fine.”

In perfectly frank terms, Koutarou wasn’t worried at all. Nalfa may have looked rattled, but she was keeping her chin up. Yurika would still be clinging to Koutarou and begging for his help, but Nalfa wanted to give it her best shot. Even if she failed, Koutarou didn’t think she’d do a bad job.

“That’s big talk,” said Nalfa. “You’ll make it up to me if things go awry, won’t you?”

“Sure, sure.”

“You’re not seriously listening to me, are you?”

“You can tell?”

“Jeez!”

Nalfa put her hands on her hips and frowned. She was pouting almost like Shizuka or Harumi.

It feels like just yesterday she seemed so scatterbrained, but she’s doing well for herself now...

In the first few months after meeting Koutarou, Nalfa had made a rather hopeless and hapless impression. She’d apparently had a sheltered upbringing, and she was so reserved that she could barely do anything for herself. Moreover, she was a walking disaster, prone to tripping over nothing and falling in ditches. Every time Koutarou took his eyes off her, she managed to find trouble. But things had changed since then. In the last couple of months, she’d grown dramatically. She was more dependable now and tried to take care of herself.

Seeing her like this... Wouldn’t things have turned out the same in Forthorthe

too?

Koutarou pondered Nalfa's development as he stared into her face. Since she'd been able to pull herself together on Earth, after all, wouldn't she have been able to do the same back home? It was interesting to think about, but he didn't think it mattered all that much one way or the other.

It was probably just disorienting to be thrust into a whole new world. I mean, she literally came from another planet...

Perhaps Nalfa had always been a little flighty and shy, and perhaps being in an unfamiliar situation had exacerbated those qualities. It wasn't like they'd completely disappeared, even now. Koutarou thus had to wonder if it was less that Nalfa had grown over the past few months and more that she'd simply returned to her normal self.

"What's the matter, Koutarou-sama?" she asked, her head cocked to the side. She wasn't sure why he was looking at her so intently.

"Ah, it's just that you..."

He couldn't tell her he'd been thinking about how unreliable and passive she was just a few short months ago, so he stopped to think of a better reply. Saying that was enough to set a girl off—Koutarou had learned better over the past few years.

"I what?" Nalfa pressed.

"E-Er, I was wondering about your hair."

Koutarou glanced at Nalfa's locks, which had happened to catch his eye. Her hair was almost translucent, but looking at it closely, it shone with the colors of the rainbow. He'd always wondered about it before, and this seemed like the perfect time to bring it up and change the subject.

"You mean the color? It's natural," Nalfa said with a smile as she touched her long hair. As a girl, she made a point of taking care of it. She was pleased Koutarou had noticed.

"I guess it's okay, then," he said.

"What is?" she asked.

“During ceremonies and stuff, the teachers can be real sticklers about dyed hair that goes against the dress code.”

“Ah, they can be like that in Forthorthe too. They really don’t like it when you style it up during formal events.”

“But your hair color is natural and you wear it down, so I don’t think we have anything to worry about.”

“You have a good point, though... That had completely slipped my mind.”

Nalfa smiled again as she played with her hair. She’d been so preoccupied with her speech that she hadn’t given a thought to her outfit or hairstyle for the ceremony. Seeing her twirl her tresses, Koutarou’s eyes naturally wandered to them again.

“It really is an unusual color,” he remarked.

“Do you think so?” she replied. “It seems perfectly normal to me.”

“I was sure there had to be some kind of technology behind it.”

“Oh, we have that too. People love to change their hair color as they please. Kind of like this...”

Nalfa picked up her phone. It was an Earth-made smartphone, but she’d moved pictures of her friends and family onto it. She brought up a few to show Koutarou, yet just before she could turn the phone around for him...

“Let me see... Oh.”

Nalfa went wide-eyed. Rather than waiting for Nalfa to show him, Koutarou had leaned in to see for himself. He put his face right next to hers, just like he would with any of the other nine girls.

Y-You’re close! Too close! That’s way too close!

Nalfa was beside herself. She’d led a sheltered life and hardly knew how to act around men aside from her brother. Moreover, Koutarou was the Blue Knight. As a Forthorthian girl, how could she *not* be shaken being so close to him?

“E-Eeek!”

She reflexively backed away, losing her balance in the process. Since she was sitting down, she could have just stuck a hand out to catch herself—if she hadn't been holding her phone, that is. She floundered, then began to fall.

“Nalfa-san!”

Seeing her topple over, Koutarou instinctively grabbed her shoulder and pulled her close. He was worried that she might hit her head. Even if they were on tatami mats, that wasn't something he wanted to see. With a soft thump, she collided with him instead. It looked like he'd embraced her.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

“I-I'm so sorry...” she muttered.

Nalfa had tried to get away from Koutarou, but now they were even closer than before. He was just relieved that she was safe, but Nalfa hardly knew what to do. Her expression and tone turned stiff. It wasn't that she disliked Koutarou. If anything, the problem was the opposite.

I take it all back. Nalfa-san is still a klutz...

Recently, Koutarou had intentionally gotten bolder around the girls. Living with them for so long had changed him, and it was starting to have an effect on them in turn. Koutarou was none the wiser, however. Even now, he was completely oblivious as to what was going on inside Nalfa's head.

Nalfa's ordeal continued after that. She'd previously seen Koutarou as both a legendary hero and a normal boy (a combination of her feelings as a Forthorthian and Kotori's friend). But now there was something else in the mix. She saw Koutarou as a man, and the very thought shook her to her core.

Wh-What should I do? He's a legendary hero... Moreover, the princesses and the other girls love him.

Nalfa had been conscious of vague feelings for Koutarou taking root in her heart, but given his relationship with the other nine girls, she believed it was best not to nurture them. Yet against her will, those feelings were now growing with a fervor. If she allowed it, they would burst into full bloom. That possibility, that prospect, was the source of her current anguish. She had no idea what to

do.

“All right, done! On to the next one.”

Koutarou, meanwhile, remained blissfully unaware of all this and continued cleaning his fishing kit. (Granted, it would have meant a different set of problems if he *had* noticed.) Once his reel was back together, he moved on to repairing his lures. He filled any cracks with putty, fixed up their coatings, and changed out dull hooks. It was detailed work, but he was enjoying himself.

Ah, gosh! I can't stand the sight of that beaming smile right now!

Just minutes ago, Nalfa hadn't minded being alone with Koutarou. But now she struggled to stay composed, even though nothing had really happened. In fact, Koutarou was acting like everything was perfectly normal. Nalfa felt it was unfair that she was the only one who felt awkward. Her fixation on Koutarou, however, pushed all thoughts of her speech out of her mind, and she likely wouldn't go back to worrying about it for some time. The awkwardness continued until Theia and Ruth returned to the apartment.

“We're back,” Theia called from the front door.

“Hello, everyone,” Ruth greeted the room.

“Hey, welcome home,” Koutarou called back to them.

“Hello, Princess Theiamillis, Ruth-sama...” Nalfa followed suit.

Although Nalfa wasn't sure if it was for better or worse, having more people in room 106 was an immediate relief. Koutarou naturally turned his attention to the new arrivals. Nalfa felt like she'd been saved.

“Koutarou.”

“What?”

“Hup!”

With light steps, Theia walked over to Koutarou, sat down next to him, and rested her head in his lap. Koutarou wouldn't normally complain, but now wasn't a good time.

“Hey, that's dangerous. I'm using putty and adhesives here. What if I drop

some on your face or in your hair?”

He was in the middle of fixing up his tackle, which involved working with solvents that could damage Theia’s skin, stain her clothes, or ruin her hair if he accidentally splashed any on her. It truly was risky to be in his lap right now.

“I don’t mind. Carry on as you were.”

Theia, however, didn’t seem to care. Her smile was softer than usual. There was a gentleness in her partially closed eyes. Feeling like he’d be sucked in if he kept staring, Koutarou hurriedly looked away.

“With the ceremony so close, shouldn’t you be careful?” he asked.

“I’m sure the citizens would love to hear the story of a princess getting glue in her hair as she watched the Blue Knight keep up his fishing lures.”

“You’re a girl, you know, so—”

“Living together means tolerating that kind of thing. Besides, you’ll love me no matter how dirty I get.”

Theia had been in a great mood ever since Koutarou’s exchange with Elfaria the other day. He’d said something extraordinary that pleased her immensely.

“Ohohohoho! So you have a request of your beautiful mother-in-law, do you, Layous-sama?”

“I still haven’t married Theia yet!”

His words could be taken to mean that he would, in fact, marry Theia one day. Koutarou, of course, wanted to deny it. Not that he actually could, however. Theia had broached the subject of marriage long ago, so for Koutarou to insist—to say he had no intention of getting married whatsoever—would be as good as a lie. This left the earnest boy in a position where he could say nothing at all.

As she set snacks down on the tea table, Ruth giggled a little. She’d realized that Koutarou’s “yet” didn’t apply to Theia alone. If it did, his decision would’ve been made for him already. But there were eight other girls he wanted to make happy too, which was the reason for his silence.

“C-Come on, I want to keep your face pretty just the way it is...” he muttered, averting his eyes. That was as much as he could admit. He’d matured in the last

two years, but he still didn't have the courage to say something like that to a girl's face.

"Well, in that case, I suppose I have to comply," Theia acquiesced.

She understood his reluctance. She knew that they were asking a lot from him. She was also more interested in having fun, so she didn't want to corner him. She thus got up from his lap and settled in next to him instead.

"So, what haven't you repaired yet?" she asked.

"Why?" he asked in turn.

"I'll help. You won't complain about that, will you?"

"All right, then take that gold and red one."

"Hmm, so I just need to fill the crack and paint it red?"

"You got it."

"Leave it to me. I'm pretty dexterous, you know."

"As long as we finish up before you get frustrated."

"You know me so well... Heh, I suppose the Mastir family has a stable future ahead of it."

"..."

As Ruth contently continued to watch over Koutarou and Theia, yet another laugh escaped her lovely lips. Theia and Koutarou were so deeply connected that they were now inseparable—that was why Theia saw stability in the Mastir family's future. Ruth felt a similar bond with Koutarou, so she believed the Pardomshiha family would share that fortune.

With new transfer students from Forthorthe on the way, Theia and Ruth were busy. So much so that they'd barely had any time to spend in room 106 lately. Even today, they were only here in the middle of the day on business—they had important paperwork regarding upcoming events. And so, when Koutarou was done with his fishing gear and Nalfa was done with her speech, they switched gears.

“I answered everything in Japanese. Is that okay?” Koutarou asked.

“Yes, that’s fine,” Theia replied. “Now at the bottom, there’s a question about sharing this information with the Forthorthian government. Do you see that?”

“Oh, you mean this?”

“If you consent, your answers will automatically be translated and sent over to the immigration department.”

“Ah, so you’ve got this all figured out.”

Once the ceremony was over, Koutarou and the girls would be returning to Forthorthe to pursue Ralgwin. Theia had brought documents to facilitate that. The last time they went, there had been no diplomatic relations between Earth and Forthorthe. The former hadn’t even known the latter existed. But now there were procedures in place that needed to be followed. This wasn’t just international travel, after all; it was intergalactic. All sorts of red tape had cropped up to keep things as safe as possible. Eventually the system would be consolidated and streamlined, but for now, in its infancy, there was a ton of paperwork to fill out and sign.

“Did you do stuff like this when you first arrived, Nalfa-san?” Koutarou asked.

“...”

“Nalfa-san?”

“O-O-Oh, me?!”

“Yeah, I was asking if you had to do paperwork like this when you came to Earth.”

“Yes, although it was all on the computer.”

Nalfa still looked flustered. Kiriha observed her with great interest, half because she’d sensed what Nalfa was feeling and half for a different reason altogether.

I suspected as much, but Nalfa has some sort of connection to us, doesn’t she?

Kiriha was still in possession of a certain sealed letter from her past self. Then there was the mysterious power Nalfa had displayed when attacked. Seeing the

Forthorthian transfer student grow closer to Koutarou, Kiriha had begun to think something was afoot.

But I don't sense any deception on her part... Perhaps this is the work of an outside influence. No... it's still too early to say. I'll need to observe more.

After deciding on a course of action, Kiriha put the matter away in the back of her mind. After all, something just as interesting was unfolding in front of her now.

"Go, Harumi! Now's your chance!" Sanae-chan shouted.

"B-But I'm not ready!" Harumi cried.

"You don't need to be! Just go get 'im!" Sanae-nee cheered.

"Sakuraba-senpai, you don't have to listen to Sanae-chan when she's being unreasonable," Sanae-san cut in.

"But if I give up now, I feel like I'll always be stuck like this."

Behind Koutarou sat Harumi and the three Sanaes. Sanae-chan and Sanae-nee were spurring Harumi on, while Sanae-san was trying to pump the brakes. The emotional push and pull was taking a toll on Harumi. Her fingers were twitching, her eyes were wide open, and her breathing was ragged—a clear case of the nerves. It was unusual to see her so on edge.

"Uh, Kiriha-san, what's going on behind me?" Koutarou asked. He could tell the girls were up to something and that Harumi was caught in the middle of it, so he looked to the insightful Kiriha to figure out what was going on.

"Simply put, Harumi is trying a new way of expressing herself," she explained. "Please be patient."

"A new way of expressing herself? I don't follow, but if you say so..."

Based on Kiriha's answer, it sounded like—whatever was happening—it was important to Harumi, but it wasn't anything too serious. Koutarou thus quietly returned to his paperwork.

"My Harumi is a pretty late bloomer, but you've got it bad too," remarked Sanae-nee.

“Of course!” threw in Sanae-san. “They’re still the same person.”

“All right, the target’s stopped moving! Now’s the time to attack, Harumi!” rallied Sanae-chan.

“This is my chance, so... here goes!”

Having finally steeled herself, Harumi thrust her hands out toward Koutarou. She kneaded her fingers and began massaging his shoulders.

“Well done, Private Harumi!” cheered Sanae-nee.

“Say, Onee-chan, can I get a promotion already?” asked an excited Sanae-chan.

“Give it up, Private.”

“Aye, aye.”

“Since when did we have ranks again...?” Sanae-san muttered.

The three Sanaes were now casually chatting, but Harumi was in a different world. She was anxiously waiting to see how Koutarou would react. She fretted over whether she was being too hard or too gentle, too fast or too slow, and so on. She even worried about whether he’d want a shoulder massage from her in the first place. Harumi was so considerate of others that she had a great deal to be anxious about, which was why she’d hesitated to do this in the first place.



“Hey, Sakuraba-senpai.”

“Y-Yes!” Harumi let out a shrill cry when Koutarou said her name.

Ahh, what is Satomi-kun going to say? That it hurts? That it's too weak? That he doesn't need this? Maybe he'll even say that he doesn't want me to...

It wasn't that Harumi lacked confidence in herself; rather, it was simply hard for her to be forward with the man she loved. Even though she was now healthy and starting to get more proactive, that part of her hadn't changed.

“Let me rub your shoulders later too,” he said. “I give a pretty mean massage.”

Harumi was such a late bloomer that even an ignoramus like Koutarou knew how much courage it must have taken for her to reach out to him. He also understood what it meant to her. And while he couldn't respond to those feelings directly right now, he could at least repay the favor just like he would for Sanae or Theia.

“Oh, u-um, okay...”

Koutarou's offer surprised Harumi, but she didn't refuse. He was offering a token of his gratitude, after all. Since she'd braced herself for the worst, it was a pleasant surprise.

“Ooh, now your fingers are really moving, Sakuraba-senpai.”

“Satomi-kun, you know exactly what you're doing and you're just being mean, aren't you?”

“Yup.”

“Everyone's been complaining about that lately.”

“Really?”

“Yes. We all think you shouldn't be so shy.”

“W-Well, you know, I'm a guy and everything...”

“I won't forget this.”

“Have mercy, Sakuraba-senpai.”

Slowly but surely, Harumi was calming down. The three Sanaes looked at each other without saying a word. They knew these things needed to happen naturally, but they were all working hard to help her get closer to Koutarou. Seeing him play with Theia and Nalfa had made Harumi decide to try her best too. And for the time being, it was mission success.

Everyone eagerly dove into their paperwork at first, but as time wore on, their enthusiasm waned considerably. Filling out forms was a monotonous task, after all. The first to throw in the towel was Yurika.

“I can’t do it... I’m not going to Forthorthe...” she whined, tossing her pen and papers aside as she collapsed on the tea table. She’d completely run out of steam.

“Keep at it,” Koutarou encouraged her. “Can you really call yourself a magical girl if you’re the only one who drops out to stay home?”

“But I have so much more paperwork than everyone else!”

That much was true. Yurika wasn’t just being whiny. She had twice the forms to fill out—one set for Folsaria and one for Japan.

“Aika-san has just as much,” Koutarou reminded her.

“I’m not as fast as Maki-chan, though.”

“Well, if you don’t get to it, you really are gonna get left behind.”

“I don’t want that either...”

Maki also had two sets of forms, but she was a quick study. She’d already finished her paperwork and moved on to helping out the other girls who were having trouble. Even at a time like this, she was an exemplary role model.

“If you became a Forthorthian citizen, you wouldn’t have to go through all this,” Theia suggested. She had plenty of time on her hands since she was on Earth as a Forthorthian diplomat, meaning she had no red tape to deal with. She could travel between the two planets as she pleased.

“That’s not the kind of thing to decide on a whim,” Koutarou objected with a shake of his head.

Theia had a point, but changing one’s nationality was a serious decision. It

shouldn't be made merely to avoid bothersome paperwork. Theia understood that herself, so she nodded in return.

"He's right," she admitted. "So you'll just have to bear with it and fill out the paperwork."

"No, I want to change nationalities!" Yurika insisted.

"Idiot," Koutarou scolded, smacking her on the head.

"Auuugh..."

That discouraged Yurika from any further resistance. With tears in her eyes, she reluctantly took up her pen again. Shizuka watched this all unfold with a smile, but something suddenly occurred to her.

"Say, that reminds me, Satomi-kun. Couldn't you just ignore all of Forthorthe's laws because of what Princess Alaia did?"

Indeed, Alaia had written it into the Forthorthian constitution that the Blue Knight would forever be immune to the letter of the law. Essentially, he was above it. There was no real need for him to fill out any Forthorthian paperwork.

"I could," Koutarou replied. "But that would cause a lot of trouble for a lot of people, so I save using my exemption for emergencies."

"Yeah, I guess that makes sense."

"Besides, I'd still have to fill out the Japanese paperwork."

"My, you're so mature, Satomi-san."

"I'm no match for you, Landlord-san."

"And smooth too. Hahaha."

Following that, everyone finished up their paperwork without issue. It was a necessary step in pursuing the remnants of Vandarion's faction. Fortunately, with a little bit of time on their side, they were able to follow all the proper procedures. In an out-and-out emergency, they would've had to act first and gain the necessary approvals after the fact.

Ralgwin and his forces escaping was a problem, but it would take time for him to establish himself in Forthorthe. He'd been isolated on Earth for long enough

that he had no idea what kind of situation would await him back home. Reconnecting with his former allies wouldn't be easy. He also needed to find and prepare another base, not to mention facilities for producing magical and spiritual technology.

Nevertheless, Koutarou and the girls still needed to be on their guard for the possibility of a terrorist attack. It was difficult to imagine Ralgwin making a move before he'd settled in, but they would only have themselves to blame if they allowed themselves to fall prey to a small ambush. Knowing Ralgwin, however, he was planning a large-scale attack instead.

In the time it would take Ralgwin to prepare that, Koutarou and company would make their way to Forthorthe in a way that didn't draw too much attention. If they rushed straight there from Earth, they would essentially be announcing that there was an emergency. Given the current situation, they believed it would be best to suppress the urge to hurry and instead follow all the proper protocols. That said, there was also another reason they were taking things slowly.

It was believed that Ralgwin's forces had departed with him on his battleship, but Kiriha had her doubts. Had *all* of them really left for Forthorthe? His main force may have gone with him, but a detachment may have remained on Earth to strike when the time was right. In light of that possibility, Koutarou and the girls were waiting for the Forthorthian reinforcements coming with the new wave of transfer students, as well as additional help from Folsaria and the People of the Earth. If the Corona House crew left before they arrived, they'd be leaving the planet largely undefended.

Koutarou and the girls thus wouldn't depart for Forthorthe until everything was ready and all preparations were complete. Their very last job would be overseeing the welcome ceremony for the second round of Forthorthian transfer students.

In the Shadows

Saturday, August 27th

Unfortunately, Kiriha's worries were well founded. Ralgwin had indeed left a unit behind. But rather than a detachment, it was an elite soldier—the formidable Gray Knight himself.

“Now then, the problem starts here...”

For the Gray Knight, returning to Earth from orbit wasn't difficult. He could just blend in with meteors or space debris entering the atmosphere, and once they burned up, conceal himself the rest of the way with the power of chaos. As long as he didn't land near Koutarou and company, no one would be any the wiser. He thus made a strategic touchdown in the mountains some distance from Kisshouharukaze City.

“His sword shines with the light of nine colors, so why is it still in Signaltin's form? As long as that remains a mystery, I'm not going to get anywhere,” the Gray Knight mused with a click of his tongue.

He'd remained on Earth to investigate Koutarou's sword—something not even the sharp-witted Kiriha could have predicted. Each light Signaltin shone with gave it greater power, and with that power, the sword's form changed. With all nine lights, it should have looked like an entirely different sword. Yet Koutarou's Signaltin was still Signaltin. The Gray Knight was determined to find out why.

“Guess I'll observe for the time being... I need to avoid clashing with the sword of kingship while it's in this incomplete state.”

If he didn't draw out the true sword of kingship, he wouldn't be able to accomplish his goals. A battle now would spell a deadlock. He didn't want to consider it, but it was also possible that he'd ended up in a world where the true sword of kingship didn't exist at all. The technology for traveling between parallel realities was only in its infancy. He'd potentially ended up in a world

that was only similar to his intended destination.

“Jeez, what a pain...” the Gray Knight muttered as he made for Kisshouharukaze City. His gray armor and cape blended into the dark of night, and he seemingly disappeared into the shadows of the trees.

Ever since the civil war, Ceilēshu had been serving as Elfaria’s assistant and secretary. She’d initially been the regent in the empress’s absence, but Elfaria had taken a liking to her delicate work and chosen to keep her close at hand after the fact. This was in accordance with Ceilēshu’s wishes as well. Rather than wanting to become empress herself as she had during the war, she’d since realized that she much preferred working *for* the empress. And to that end, she was going to see Elfaria today with a message from Earth.

“Oh, you’re earlier than usual today, Ceilēshu-san,” remarked Elfaria, greeting the princess with a smile.

The two women were in the corner of a greenhouse of the imperial palace. Meeting here had become a daily routine for them. Ceilēshu would bring classified reports to share and other sensitive matters to discuss over a cup of tea.

“I see you were waiting, Your Majesty.”

“I woke up early, so I finished with my work early and thought I would take care of these.” With that, Elfaria tucked her pruning shears into her gardening bag and turned to Ceilēshu. As someone who enjoyed drinking tea, the empress was growing several varieties in the greenhouse. She was particularly fond of an ancient variety called Rubustori.

“That’s so like you, Your Majesty. Heehee,” Ceilēshu giggled.

“What?”

“In truth, I’m here because I just received an urgent transmission from Layous-sama,” she reported.

“My!” The moment Elfaria heard this, her face blossomed into a smile and she ran over to Ceilēshu. She looked less like an empress and more like a young girl. It was perfectly clear what Koutarou meant to her. “What did he say?!”

“Please take a look at this.”

Ceilēshu tapped her bracelet to bring up the message for Elfaria in hologram form. Elfaria impatiently touched it with her own bracelet to translate and read it with intense focus. Watching her, Ceilēshu expected her to look like she was reading a letter from her lover... but Elfaria suppressed her feelings. Ceilēshu had served as regent empress herself, so she now understood that Elfaria wasn't always as free as one might think.

Elfaria's high spirits quickly faded, her smile replaced with a frown. Koutarou's message wasn't personal in nature, but rather a boring administrative request for aid. After sending him a reply, she unhappily leaned on the table and stirred her tea with a spoon without a trace of her normal dignity and elegance.

“Please cheer up, Your Majesty,” Ceilēshu urged her.

“I'm starting to understand Clan-san's pain. Layous-sama is *too* perfect of a hero.” Right now, Elfaria looked like a girl in a long distance relationship who was sulking because she hadn't heard from her boyfriend. “Would it kill him to butter up his mother-in-law...?”

Elfaria would have been happy with a single line in Koutarou's message meant specifically for her, even if it was just about the Rubustori tea she was growing in the greenhouse. Yet there was nary a word. Koutarou was a workaholic, or rather a heroholic, and it broke Elfaria's heart. Of course, given the gravity of the situation, Koutarou couldn't be blamed for his forthright seriousness.

“Would Empress Alaia truly have loved him if he were that kind of man?” Ceilēshu pressed her. Though she'd mentioned Alaia, she had a different imperial royal in mind—she simply kept that part to herself.

“I hate it when you are logical like that,” Elfaria replied.

“My, haha, you're acting like a child.”

Ceilēshu had brought it up herself, but she couldn't help reflecting on how true it was. Elfaria and Theia were a two-person family, and because of Elfaria's duties as empress, Theia had undoubtedly had a lonely childhood. Elfaria's likely hadn't been much different—until she met her knight in shining blue armor, that is. There was no question that he'd become a pillar of support for her. As a

fellow royal, Ceilēshu was painfully aware of Elfaria's feelings for him.

"To Your Majesty, Layous-sama must be..."

"Ceilēshu-san?"

"I-It's nothing... I was just thinking that perhaps you should express your frustration to Layous-sama directly."

"What do you mean?"

"Based on this message, Layous-sama will be returning to Forthorthe before long."

"What?"

Elfaria quickly reread the message. In it, Koutarou mentioned his battle against Ralgwin and subsequent voyage to keep him at bay for as long as possible. She'd been too upset to realize it on her first readthrough, but now that she put everything together, that did indeed mean he was currently on his way to Forthorthe.

She's become such a wonderful empress whilst retaining her feelings from her youth... I really am no match for Her Majesty, ahaha...

Elfaria was ordinarily a sage woman, but when it came to Koutarou, she would sometimes lose sight of herself in the heat of her emotions. Ceilēshu felt like it was part of her charm.

"Ahem... I apologize for behaving in such an unbecoming fashion."

"There's no need to apologize, Your Majesty. It's only natural for the royal families of Forthorthe to be fixated on him."

"Let us get to work straight away, Ceilēshu-san. I want to be perfectly prepared for Layous-sama's arrival."

"Certainly."

Elfaria wanted to give Koutarou a piece of her mind, and she couldn't do that with Ralgwin on the loose. That meant she needed to do something. The empress and Blue Knight would only be able to talk in peace when the safety of the people was assured.

Upon receiving word from Koutarou, Elfaria immediately moved to suppress Ralgwin. The first thing she did was expose a holdout of Vandarion's faction in hiding outside of the Forthorthian star system. Thanks to Nefilforan's campaign before she left for Earth, Vandarion's faction had been all but snuffed out already. There were small cells still active in distant systems, but that was to be expected given the vast galactic reach of the Forthorthian Empire. Elfaria's first countermeasure was thus to prevent Ralgwin from finding and uniting with them.

Her second countermeasure—monitoring the distribution of specific rare materials—was done in tandem. It was similar to what Kiriha had done in Japan to locate Ralgwin's base. In addition to military technology, she watched the buying and selling of niche goods needed for the production of magical and spiritual technology. This, however, was largely a preemptive measure. Ralgwin wouldn't be in the trade for some time yet, as he'd yet to reach Forthorthe and set up his operation. Elfaria was simply casting an anticipatory net.

Her real objective was her third countermeasure, which was a special variation of the previous two. Forthorthe naturally had areas rich in mana, and the most appealing to Ralgwin would be the mana-rich lands nearest to the holdout bases of Vandarion's factions. Even without an existing base nearby, as long as the land was sufficiently mana-rich, Ralgwin would want to build there to make use of it. In light of this, Elfaria's third countermeasure was scouting such places and moving to secure them before Ralgwin could. In charge of this mission were her newly appointed court magicians.

"Crimson, I get that you're happy, but you can't just go around destroying everything," scolded Green.

"I know that. I'd hate to get fired before I fight the grand wizard," replied Crimson.

"Getting fired is the least of our worries..."

Elfaria's court magicians—the former leaders of Darkness Rainbow, sans Dark Navy, whose seat was currently empty—served her directly. Crimson, Green, Blue, Yellow, Orange, and Purple were originally sentenced to imprisonment for

their involvement in the civil war, but Elfaria had struck a deal with them—their service in exchange for their freedom. As they'd switched sides toward the end of the war, Elfaria didn't think they were truly evil. Moreover, they already had a good understanding of the culture and the situation in Forthorthe, so they were an immediate asset. If Elfaria had instead recruited magicians from Folsaria, it would have taken quite some time to get them up to speed. The arrangement was beneficial for both parties.

"For better or worse, nobody's going to complain even if we were to destroy the location," said Purple. "It's an old mine."

"For real?!" gasped Crimson.

"Yes. It was built to extract gold tinged with mana, but as gold mines go, it's not very large. It was shut down years ago. In addition, the planet it's on isn't conducive to habitation, so there are no civilian facilities in the vicinity. Vandarion's faction has been confirmed to be in the area, however, so we need to secure it."

Their objective this time was a mana-ridden gold mine. Of course, its original owner had been none the wiser about the mana in the mine. They'd simply extracted and sold the precious metal there as regular gold, ultimately folding their operation due to lack of profits. It was completely abandoned now. No one would really care if Crimson raised hell there.

"If it's abandoned, there aren't going to be any enemies there... I got my hopes up for nothing," she complained, her shoulders slumping when she heard Purple's report.

"I wouldn't be so sure," cut in Yellow with a smile.

"What do you mean?" Crimson asked, looking up at her.

"It seems like Vandarion's faction is doing whatever they can to stage a comeback... even sending people to look into abandoned mines."

"I guess they don't have any magic weapons, do they? Are they just interested in mining the gold? Don't they know the place shut down 'cause it couldn't turn a buck?"

The remnants of Vandarion's faction in Forthorthe weren't aware of the

existence of magic, and they would remain oblivious to it until they reconnected with Ralgwin. So even if they reopened the mine now, they'd only be harvesting mundane gold like the previous owner. Crimson couldn't wrap her head around why anyone would want to restart a failed business venture.

"It wasn't profitable before, sure. But that could change if they take a page out of our old book," Yellow explained.

"Ah, so that's what you meant," Crimson remarked.

The previous owner of the mine had been an ordinary citizen who used ordinary methods and business practices. If Vandarion's faction took a different approach—ignoring safety regulations, using forced labor, evading taxes, and so on—they might be able to turn a tidy profit.

"And here we are now trying to put a stop to exactly that. What a strange twist of fate..." Blue muttered as she played with her hair.

Though the girls were now court magicians, it wasn't long ago that they'd been the leaders of an evil organization. They knew every dirty trick in the book, but now they were on the other side of the fence. It was indeed quite a turn of events.

"That's the way the cookie crumbles," Orange said matter-of-factly. "We found out we just weren't cut out for that kind of life."

They'd had a change of heart after their defeat at the hands of Koutarou and company. They'd come to realize that they would never win by exploiting their own allies. Since then, they'd been spending more time together and learning how to cooperate. It opened up a sort of understanding between the girls and an awareness of their common interests. That gradually colored their interactions and their views of each other until they'd grown to be as close as they were now. Deep down, they understood that they were all just looking for friends they could trust.

"But fighting's a big pain, so I'll leave that to you, Crim-chan," said Orange.

"You're always like this," sighed Crimson.

"I hate getting dirty."

“Jeez... Anyway, Purple, does this mean there’ll be enemies to fight after all?”

“There’s a fifty-fifty chance based on the intel I have. I guess it just comes down to luck.”

“Then I bet they’ll be there. I’m pretty confident in my luck.”

“Wouldn’t it be lucky if they’re *not* there...? You really do love fighting, don’t you?”

“Right, wrong, whatever... Honestly, I don’t really care so long as I get to fight.”

The six girls set out in matching outfits of bright colors. Even after departing, they still stuck together—something they never did before. They’d developed a strong sense of camaraderie and a desire to accomplish their goals as a team.

The mine investigation turned into a combat mission, just as Crimson had anticipated, when they encountered a reconnaissance team sent by Vandarion’s faction. Nevertheless, after they returned to the spaceship they used for missions, Crimson despondently collapsed onto the table in their meeting room.

“In the end, there weren’t any enemies...” she sighed, looking bored.

“Yes, there were. What are you talking about? There were quite a few of them too,” Green replied, taking a seat next to her as if to console her. Her words, however, had no soothing effect whatsoever.

“Those guys totally didn’t count,” Crimson insisted. “They were just small fry.”

Crimson was unhappy because the enemies they’d fought were weak. Although Vandarion’s faction was armed with military-grade weapons such as assault rifles, they were no match for Elfaria’s six court magicians. In other words, the difference between them was such that Crimson hardly considered it a fight at all.

“They were just a small force hiding in a remote region. There wasn’t much chance they’d have elite soldiers or heavy artillery,” said Yellow from across the table.

She, for one, was glad the enemies had been weak. The girls had only just been established as court magicians and there wasn't a prayer of them getting backup in the near future. Everyone aside from Crimson was hoping to avoid any intense clashes.

"Aren't there any enemies out there?! You know, good ones! I'm not asking for the grand wizard to show up, but couldn't they at least send some giant robots or something?!"

If such enemies really did start appearing, the court magicians would be in grave danger. But Crimson didn't care. She'd learned to love her friends, but she loved combat above all else.

"Crim-chan, the people who'll bring out that kind of stuff have only just gotten here, you know? We won't see them for a while," Orange said from where she sat across the table, kicking her legs. And she was right.

Ralgwin and his forces aside, Nefilforan had put in a great deal of work to quash any significant resistance lingering in Forthorthe. And since Ralgwin had likely only just arrived in Forthorthe, it would be some time yet before he and his men made their move. They needed to settle in and prepare first.

"What are they taking their sweet time for?!" Crimson demanded. "Being able to act on your whims and do as you please is half the fun of being evil!"

"Don't worry, Crimson. If you show off your strength, I'm sure strong enemies are bound to come up with countermeasures specifically for you," Green assured her.

"Really? Did you see that in one of your future forecasts?"

"I did. It's not entirely clear to me yet, but it seems likely."

"Then I guess I'll try a little extra hard..."

It was hard to say that Crimson truly thought of herself as a court magician. Nevertheless, her dedication to her comrades and her obsession with fighting drove her to stay the course. Watching her raise a fuss, Yellow grew pensive.

Maya and Elexis sure left some big shoes to fill... Will we ever really be able to do it?

Yellow worried that Crimson's agitation was the result of losing people precious to her for the first time. The same could be said for the other girls and even Yellow herself. She'd often catch herself wondering what Maya and Elexis would have done if they were still around. It wasn't like she was nervous about her new environment or the missions the girls were now taking on. She was simply concerned about their future.

Investigation and Research

Wednesday, August 31st

Today, Kotori happened to be on her own for a change as she headed to a hardware store near the station. She'd been spending most of her time with Nalfa recently, but the two of them had split up in order to get ready for the upcoming welcome ceremony. They wanted to film the event, which would require some prep work, but Nalfa had shut herself in her apartment to finish writing the speech. The setup thus fell on Kotori.

"Gosh, the panic on Nal-chan's face when they picked her to do the speech sure was something..."

Even when they were apart, she was still thinking of Nalfa, who always put a smile on her face. Nalfa was kind, modest, and considerate. Kotori almost found it hard to believe that she was an alien, especially now that they'd grown to be close friends.

"I bet she didn't think she'd get the star role of the ceremony."

Everything they did together was fun, whether it was vacationing at the beach or finding out Nalfa had been chosen to give a speech. Kotori could still remember how Nalfa's eyes had darted back and forth in bewilderment upon hearing the news. Nalfa had opened up Kotori's world entirely. Before meeting her, Kotori had been a painfully shy girl with few friends. But she was different now. Helping Nalfa adjust to life here on Earth had helped Kotori come out of her shell too.

"Although she's always been a star if you ask me, ahaha..."

Nalfa was flustered by the thought that everyone would be watching her on the ceremony stage, but Kotori was always watching Nalfa. As a precious friend who'd changed her life for the better, she'd always been a leading lady in Kotori's eyes. Kotori couldn't help being a little amused that Nalfa was only just now imagining herself in the spotlight.

“But it figures. Nal-chan’s only ever looking at Kou-niisan. Maybe that’s normal for a Forthorthian, but I think Nal-chan...”

Kotori believed that Nalfa had trouble seeing her own importance because she was perpetually spellbound by Koutarou, always watching him. Whether she was holding a camera or not, her focus was always on him. To her, Koutarou was the main character and she was just a camerawoman. To take it a step further, she felt like a princess waiting for her knight—

“...Huh?” Kotori abruptly stopped in place. *Is somebody watching me?*

She sensed someone staring at her and looked around, but the only people she saw were passersby minding their own business. She couldn’t pin down the source of the feeling. No one seemed to be looking at her.

“Hmm... Maybe I’m just being too self-conscious. I *was* just thinking about how Nal-chan only has eyes for Kou-niisan, after all,” she muttered with a smile as she continued walking.

Indeed, perhaps her romantic daydreaming was getting the better of her. When she turned her attention back to the road, however...

“Is that... Kou-niisan? What’s he doing here?”

Just up ahead, she saw a familiar figure along the crowded street by the station. It looked like Koutarou. He was walking away, not having noticed her. There was nothing inherently strange about that, but something felt... off to Kotori.

What is with this mysterious chill...?

Kotori had spent years with Koutarou, so she knew him better than most. He always seemed warm, albeit with a loneliness that had diminished over the years thanks to Kenji’s support. But right now, Koutarou seemed horribly cold and alone to Kotori. The feeling was so striking that she hesitated to call out to him, and in her moment of doubt, he disappeared into the crowd.

Was that really Kou-niisan? Could it have been someone else...?

Kotori stopped once again, lost in thought. She was certain she’d *seen* Koutarou, but it hadn’t *felt* at all like him. All she could think was that she’d

been mistaken.

Maybe I'll ask Kou-niisan about it later. Yeah, that's what I'll do!

One way or the other, she'd be seeing Koutarou later. She could ask him about it then. For now, she had an important job to do, so she put the matter out of her mind and continued on to the hardware store.

The man Kotori had spotted was, in fact, not Koutarou. It was the Gray Knight—a Koutarou from a different world. The gaze she'd sensed was also his. Indeed, the Gray Knight had been observing her.

"Hmm... I don't detect any mana from Kotori. Or any significant spiritual energy. Seems she's a dud too."

The Gray Knight was watching her from afar. With his vision and other senses heightened via mana and spiritual energy, there was no need to get close.

"Considering the situation, it wouldn't be strange if there were other contractors. It's also possible that they're different from the ones in my world, but I can't seem to find anyone who fits the bill..."

In order to get to the bottom of the curious circumstances surrounding Signaltin, the Gray Knight was in the process of investigating the people close to Koutarou. Kotori was his tenth target. He believed that there must be a reason Koutarou's sword retained its current form, so he was looking into anyone who had a relationship with him. The investigation, however, had yet to turn up anything.

"I'll have to expand my search parameters. Maybe I'll look into anyone involved in the play next. Or maybe his classmates, starting with Kashiwagi... Ah!" The Gray Knight swiftly moved into the shadows when Kotori stopped walking and began looking around. "There's no way she saw me, but she *has* had a good intuition since she was a kid..."

Kotori continued to scan the area for a while before she set off again. Once she did, the Gray Knight resumed his observation.

"Still nothing— Wait! That was a flash of mana!"

As Kotori walked away, he sensed her emitting mana—but only for an instant. It was so brief that he couldn't even be sure it had come from her.

"I'll have to confirm it..."

With his tenth target, the Gray Knight had finally found a potential lead. Even if it was uncertain, he couldn't very well ignore it and move on. He thus decided to approach her. He couldn't make direct contact, but he could examine her from a closer vantage point. As she proceeded down the main road, the Gray Knight followed.

I'll start by throwing some mana and spiritual energy at her...

He channeled waves of mana and spiritual energy toward her back. A magician or psychic would show some reaction to that, but Kotori didn't even seem to notice. She simply kept on walking.

No response. And no sort of magic barrier activating on its own...

Even if it was just a harmless wave, magical or spiritual barriers would automatically activate if hit with unknown energy. Yet Kotori had shown no signs of having either.

Maybe I'm just overthinking this... Am I getting impatient?

The Gray Knight concluded that Kotori was just a normal girl after all. His results at a closer distance were more accurate, and he still sensed nothing from her. That had to mean she had no supernatural power.

I can't afford to waste time. There's no need to get hung up on Kotori. I can always come back if I hit an impasse...

It was possible that Kotori was being protected by incredibly sophisticated means, but the odds of that were very low. Rather than staying here to find out, the Gray Knight thought it better to turn his attention elsewhere. It would be more efficient to keep the possibility in the back of his mind and circle back again later if needed.

All right, let's move on...

His interest in Kotori waning, the Gray Knight picked up his pace and walked past her. She was moving much slower than he was. In the past, he'd matched

his gait to hers, but those days were long gone. He quickly put a great distance between them. She appeared to catch a glimpse of his profile just before he vanished into the crowd en route to his next target.

Although people tended to think Clan's only hobby was research, she also liked music—particularly played from the vacuum tube amplifier and speakers she'd built herself. Because of that, she rarely used her smartphone to enjoy music. Today, however, Clan was intently listening to something on her phone. As she had headphones on, it was impossible to tell exactly what, but based on how happy she looked, it certainly seemed like it had to be her favorite song.

“...”

Yet strangely enough, she tapped at her phone screen every few seconds. If she were listening to a song, it had to be an awfully short one. She was lucky there was no one else in the Hazy Moon's laboratory to see her... for what she was listening to wasn't actually a song at all. It was a recorded voice.

“According to my resident genius scientist here, a robot's ultimate weakness is the human controlling it.”

It was an audio file from their battle a few days prior. That alone meant it was worth review, but this particular clip didn't warrant listening to over and over again.

“According to my genius scientist here...”

Nevertheless, Clan had her reasons—albeit not very scientific ones.

“My genius scientist...”

Every time she heard those words, she blushed and grinned with glee. It was enough to tickle the girlish side of her heart she kept hidden deep within.

“My... My... My...”

Koutarou had referred to her—his genius scientist—in the possessive. She never heard him talk that way, even in the heat of battle. He hadn't exactly had time to consider his phrasing, but Clan was thrilled. She'd wasted no time cutting the audio and putting it on her phone. She listened to it repeatedly

every time she had a break, and as she was doing that now...

“What are you doing?” Koutarou asked, suddenly appearing in front of her.

“Ahhh!” Clan was so surprised that she almost dropped her phone. It floated up into the air, but she managed to grab it again and hurriedly paused the track.

“C-Can you not scare me like that?!”

She thought her heart might leap out of her chest. Under no circumstances could she let Koutarou hear it. She was sure he’d snub her. It would be like hell for her.



“Sorry, you just looked so happy. What were you listening to?”

“Th-That’s a secret!”

“You could just tell me. I’m pretty interested in music from Forthorthe, y’know.”

Koutarou knew about Clan’s hobby. He’d helped her build her vacuum tube amplifier, after all. That’s why he figured she was listening to music now.

“N-No, absolutely not!” Clan adamantly refused, frantically shaking her head back and forth, causing her long hair to do the same.

“Come on,” Koutarou begged, puzzled by her resistance. He didn’t see the harm in sharing her music.

“I have a secret or two of my own!” she insisted, looking up at Koutarou with crimson cheeks and tears in her eyes.

Seeing this, Koutarou figured she had her reasons and decided not to press the issue. “Guess it wasn’t music, huh?”

“No...”

Once Koutarou sympathetically relented, Clan let out a sigh of relief. Her face was still red, however. It would take some time yet for her to recover.

“Okay, forget it then,” he said.

“I wish you would,” she replied.

“I mean, I *am* curious what made you so happy.”

“What...?”

If Koutarou was interested in what made Clan happy, she felt that was as good as saying he was interested in her. There was no way of knowing if his words really meant what she thought—what she hoped—they did, but just wondering would keep her face bright red for a little while longer.

Koutarou hadn’t come to Clan’s laboratory to hang out. He actually had something important to discuss with her, and once she’d collected herself, he got down to business.

“Say, Clan, I’d like to talk with you,” he began.

“Isn’t that what we’ve been doing?”

“I do not mean pleasantries with my dear Princess Clariosa. Rather, it’s a matter that concerns your specialty.”

“You’re going to accuse me of being a sly schemer again, aren’t you?” Clan asked, a grudge smoldering in her eyes. She was certain he was about to tease her.

“I’d love to rib you for that—”

“See? I knew it!” Clan theatrically turned her head away.

While she was merely lying in the bed she’d made for herself, she hated being consulted for intrigue and such as a result of her former misdeeds. Especially when Koutarou was the one who brought it up.

“—but I’m actually here for something serious.”

“What is it?”

There was no playfulness in Koutarou’s voice, but his tone wasn’t grave. He didn’t sound like he was here for her help with some plot or scheme. Sensing this, she slowly turned back to face him.

“Do you remember when you made Sakuraba-senpai’s power-assisted barrier device?” he asked. “We talked about selling it to Forthorthe.”

“Ah, we did talk about that, didn’t we?”

Clan’s expression relaxed and mellowed. She thought back on developing and producing the device fondly. Koutarou had earnestly praised her skill for the accomplishment, making it a special memory to her indeed.

“If we can really do that,” he said, “why don’t we?”

“You mean sell it? To Forthorthe?” Clan asked, her eyes wide.

In the past, Harumi had suffered from a weak constitution and needed the PAF, or Power Assistance Field, to keep up with Koutarou and the others. It was functionally similar to Koutarou’s armor, but in the form of a compact personal barrier. With the PAF, Harumi had gained the physical prowess of a well-trained

athlete. The instant he saw it, Koutarou was sure that it could be adjusted for civilian use to help a lot of people—and he'd come to see Clan today about making that a reality.

"DKI will handle the production and selling," he explained. "You know, since it's my company now."

"You're interested in humanitarian work?"

"It's kinda like the only thing I *can* do for the Forthorthians."

"Well, anything you try is bound to be a smashing success given your popularity..."

If DKI were to operate normally with the Blue Knight at its helm, his name alone could sell any product they offered, regardless of quality. It would be bad for fair trade, so Koutarou had declared that DKI would no longer be a for-profit company. Little did he know that this had caused DKI's stock to skyrocket.

"We're not trying to make money off it. I just want to get the technology out there."

"To make it easier for other companies to copy."

The sale price of new and innovative products normally accounted for their R&D costs. But when said products were made from technology that was already publicly available, that cut down dramatically on the upfront expenses to make them. This in turn drove down sale prices and ultimately made products more accessible in terms of affordability.

"That's why I came to talk with you, Clan. You own the rights to the PAF, don't you?"

"Yes, strictly speaking."

Since Clan had created the PAF, the technology was hers. Forthorthie had laws like that too.

There's no way that I'd refuse a serious request from you... Jeez, couldn't you believe in me a little more?

If anything, Clan was a little disappointed that Koutarou even had to ask her in the first place—like he didn't trust her. Nevertheless, he was doing the right

thing, so she kept her complaints to herself.

“Very well... The technology is close to perfection thanks to Harumi.”

Harumi’s PAF was essentially a prototype, and Clan had already made several adjustments and improvements to it thanks to the data she’d collected during her time with it. All that remained was tempering the device’s performance for civilian use, which would make the barrier last longer and perform better for assistance purposes.

“My grandmother was very passionate about charity work, so I’ll be following in her footsteps.”

“Oh yeah, you mentioned that before.”

Koutarou was referring to their journey home from the past, when Clan had mentioned her grandmother and grappled with her impending death. That discussion was still clear in his mind. It was one of the reasons he’d had a change of heart about Clan.

“I’m sure she was just like you are now,” he said.

“Yes. It might sound strange coming from me... but she wasn’t very much like the rest of the Schweiger family.”

Clan, too, remembered her struggle well. Their unexpected slip through time had tested her greatly. She’d been forced to contemplate the value of a life. Who should be saved and who shouldn’t. As she turned the dilemma over in her head anew, she could feel Koutarou’s gaze soften as he beheld her.

“It kills me to admit this when you’re acting entirely out of goodwill, but I can’t say my motives are completely pure,” he confessed.

“What do you mean?” she asked.

“It’s more believable if I’m returning to Forthorthe to put the PAF on the market rather than just to study, you know?”

“Ah, of course. The citizens will be less suspicious of the Blue Knight’s homecoming this way.”

Koutarou had left Forthorthe to avoid exerting undue influence over Forthorthe’s society and economy. The citizens understood that, yet they loved

him all the more for it. So what if he were to return suddenly? He'd made no promise of marriage to any of the princesses. Would he really return as a mere transfer student after everything that had happened? The citizens were bound to worry something else was afoot.

And that was exactly what Koutarou was aiming to prevent. That was why he'd come up with the plan to sell the PAF. In other words, it was the cover story for his return to Forthorthe, and that made him feel guilty. He thought his ulterior motive diminished the value of the humanitarian gesture.

"Regardless," said Clan, "you're still doing something magnanimous out of the goodness of your heart. You shouldn't let it bother you."

"You think so?"

"Yes. You're just being a stickler."

Clan didn't see eye to eye with Koutarou on the matter. If he weren't returning to Forthorthe at all, the PAF device would remain off the market for some time yet. That meant his visit—whatever the reason—would bring good to the people, and that could hardly be considered a bad thing. The thought put a smile on her face.

"Hahaha, my princess sure is open-minded."

Koutarou hadn't at all considered her point of view, but she had a compelling argument. It helped ease his guilt. Clan had merely spoken her mind, but it was a huge relief to him. Thanks to her, a smile returned to his face too.

"I used to be a villain myself, so I know a thing or two about good deeds—Wait, *your*...?"

"Hmm? What?"

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

For some reason, Clan blushed and shook her head. Koutarou had no idea what she was thinking, but he couldn't help noticing she looked cuter than usual.

On their way back from the welcome ceremony rehearsal, Kotori posed a

rather straightforward question to Nalfa. It was so straightforward, in fact, that Nalfa didn't understand it at first.

"Nal-chan, do you love Kou-niisan?"

"...What?"

"I asked if you love Kou-niisan."

It wasn't until Kotori repeated herself that Nalfa finally grasped the meaning of those words. Her eyes shot open wide.

"Wh-Wh-Whaaat?!"

"It's not *that* surprising. So, do you?" Kotori asked, leaning in to press for an answer. She was extremely interested in talk of romance—especially where it concerned her best friend.

"I-I-I wouldn't dream of it! He's way out of my league! I couldn't disrespect Koutarou-sama, the princesses, and the others like that!" Nalfa insisted, frantically shaking her head so violently that her rainbow-colored hair swayed behind her.

"I'm not talking about manners or any of that. I'm asking about how you feel. I want to know what Kou-niisan means to you. Do you love him? Do you hate him?"

"That's... Um..."

"You hate him?"

"No, I would never." For just that brief moment, Nalfa was completely composed as she flat-out denied what Kotori had said.

That told Kotori everything she needed to know. She thus narrowed her eyes and whispered, "So you love him, then?"

"Y-Yes..." Nalfa nodded and shrank back, casting her eyes downward.

That was the truth, but she was embarrassed to reveal the depths of her heart even to Kotori. Moreover, they were talking about the legendary hero of Forthorthe—Nalfa's feelings could easily be taken for a sort of superficial admiration. She felt like a child, and it made her uncomfortable.

“I knew it,” said Kotori.

“You figured me out?” asked Nalfa.

“There was nothing to figure out per se... It’s just that you only ever have eyes for Kou-niichan.”

“R-Really?”

“Yeah, really. Even when you’re not filming him, you’re always watching him. Like Kou-niisan’s the only person in the world.”

“Well...”

“Well what?”

“Well...”



“Ahahaha,” Kotori laughed happily, causing Nalfa to shrink back even more. Kotori felt like she was watching her past self. “All right, I’m going to lend you a hand.”

“You are? With what?”

“I’m going to help you get closer to Kou-niisan.”

Kotori had once been a painfully shy girl who always hid in Koutarou’s and Kenji’s shadows, but meeting Nalfa had slowly brought her out of her shell. Where Koutarou and Kenji had been the only ones who’d known her before, now Nalfa and her classmates were all getting to know her too. Kotori was grateful for that and wanted to repay the favor. Learning of Nalfa’s crush seemed like the perfect opportunity to make good on that.

“W-Wait a second, Kotori! You can’t do anything outrageous! This is the legendary Blue Knight we’re talking about! Empress Alaia had feelings for him, and there’s even talk about him marrying the princesses!”

The biggest obstacle in Nalfa’s eyes was the simple fact that Koutarou was the hero of Forthorthe. Even if he stepped down from his position, that would always be true. He was the very embodiment of Empress Alaia’s ideals—the man who’d left her long ago to return to the modern era in order to keep a promise sworn in his homeland. Yet even in the present day, he was a model of chivalry who’d quelled another civil war. He was a hero both in name and practice, and Nalfa would never see herself as being worthy of him.

“Don’t worry. It’s just Kou-niisan. It doesn’t matter if he’s a hero or not.”

“You can only say that because you knew Koutarou-sama before he was a hero. By the time I met him, he was already far beyond my reach...”

To Kotori, Koutarou was a slightly out-of-touch childhood friend who’d accomplished great things out of nowhere. But to Nalfa, he was a national hero she’d only recently come to know personally. She wished he’d been her childhood friend too.

“But you know, Nal-chan, Theiamillis-san managed to overcome that exact same problem. Granted, their positions were reversed back then.”

“Even Her Highness...? Oh.”

It took Nalfa a second to realize what Kotori was saying. When Princess Theia and Koutarou first met, he was just a normal Earthling. The difference between them was night and day. Even so, Theia had chosen Koutarou. It was only after that that they’d come to realize Koutarou was the Blue Knight. Theia had not pursued him because of his status.

“That might be true, but...”

“Are you going to give up?”

“...”

“Are you just going to watch Kou-niisan from afar until you graduate and then go back to Forthorthe? Is that really all you want?”

“I... I... Er... Um...”

“What *do* you want?”

“N-Not that! I don’t want to just watch him from afar!”

“That’s right! So we’ve gotta do our best!”

Kotori had anticipated Nalfa’s answer. Not even she thought Nalfa would be able to stay in such an indecisive state forever. Surely Nalfa wasn’t happy this way. Nalfa had connected Kotori to the outside world, and she wanted to do the same for her—she was simply going to be connecting her to Koutarou instead. Kotori felt like it was meant to be.

“But what am I even supposed to do?” Nalfa asked sheepishly.

“Don’t you worry! Just leave that to me!” Kotori assured her. “I’ve pretty much been like Kou-niisan’s little sister for years!”

“Are you sure? Don’t you also...”

“Yeah, I love Kou-niisan too, but I can’t say it’s romantic,” Kotori confessed with a shrug.

Koutarou was indeed special to her. While she tried not to let it show, Kotori had a hard time with boys. She was extremely comfortable with Koutarou, but as for whether or not she had romantic feelings for him... That was a completely

different story.

“Anyway, I think getting closer to Kou-niisan is a good first step. It’s not like it’s going to happen overnight.”

“If it takes long enough, maybe your own feelings will be clearer by then.”

“Yeah, although it might lead to an all-out war between the two of us.”

“Yeesh, what a terrifying thought.”

“Okay, maybe that won’t happen. Ahaha.”

“Good.”

Kotori and Nalfa couldn’t imagine themselves fighting over Koutarou. It was easier imagining the three of them getting along. Because of that, Nalfa felt that perhaps Kotori wasn’t wrong to pursue a platonic relationship with him.

The Gray Knight’s investigation was proceeding, but the scant results left much to be desired. He’d yet to find any clues as to why Signaltin wasn’t displaying its true powers. At this rate, he was going to run out of leads before he learned anything.

“Kashiwagi Shiori was another dud... That makes twenty people now,” he muttered as he put another check mark on the paper in his hand—a list of Koutarou’s relationships he’d constructed from memory. “It has to be *someone* on here...”

Signaltin’s power was affected by human emotion. That was why the Gray Knight believed the sword was weakened because of someone close to Koutarou. But even though he’d investigated target after target, he had failed to discover anyone of interest. There were nearly thirty names on his list, and he was swiftly approaching the end of it.

“It’d be a pain if it turned out to be someone in Forthorthe... Maybe I should have gone with Ralgwin.”

The Gray Knight still had about ten targets left to go, but he’d prioritized the most likely suspects. Elfaria or Ceilēshu back in Forthorthe were his best remaining bets, leaving him to think it had been a mistake to stay on Earth after

all.

“No point in complaining. I’ll just go to Forthorthe after I finish checking out the possibilities here.”

If the Gray Knight was headed to Forthorthe anyway, the empress and the first princess could wait until he was done on Earth. It would be pointless to leave now if he simply had to return afterward, so he instead decided to stay to see the rest of his list through. As he was flipping through the pages...

“Wha—”

He caught a glimpse of a high school girl out of the corner of his eye. Her hair glimmered with the colors of the rainbow in the sun as she passed through the school gate together with Kotori. The sight of her left him speechless.

“Nal-chan, what do you want to do with Kou-niisan?”

“I want to keep watching him.”

“But that’s no different from what you do now.”

“I mean I want to watch him even more closely... And if possible...”

“You want him to look back at you?”

“...Y-Yes...”

The two girls were talking away, but it wasn’t the content of their conversation that had shocked the Gray Knight.

“I-It can’t be... What is *she* doing here?!”

He was surprised simply to know that the girl with the rainbow hair existed here. He knew who she was—and he knew that Koutarou did too. Nevertheless, the Gray Knight hadn’t done any legwork for an investigation on her. He’d excluded her from the list at the very outset. After all, there was no way she should be here. It would upset the very foundation of the world.

“And why can’t I sense any power from her whatsoever?! Is it just somebody who looks like her?!”

The Gray Knight’s demeanor was a mixture of astonishment, panic, and confusion. Never in a million years would he have believed that she was here, of

all places.

“Should I make contact? N-No, knowing who this is, I can’t do anything rash...”

The Gray Knight’s brain was now working in overdrive. He was too startled to think calmly. The appearance of this girl had rattled him that severely.

“Then I’ll ask Kou-niisan to come shopping with us next time. It’ll be a piece of cake if we tell him we need him to carry our bags for us.”

“I wouldn’t dare...”

“Oh, come on, just trust me! Okay?”

“Okay... I trust you.”

As he stood there aghast, the two girls slowly walked by. Neither noticed him. They simply went about their day, none the wiser as to his presence.

The Welcome Ceremony

Monday, September 5th

While she'd managed to finish her speech for the ceremony, Nalfa was extremely nervous on the day of. The pressure of taking center stage was overwhelming.

"Ahahaha, Nalfa-san," laughed Koutarou, "you're stiff as a board."

"Do you have to sound like you're so unconcerned?!" Nalfa objected.

"Aww, c'mon. I'm worried sick for my underclassman getting up on that stage."

"I know a liar when I see one!"

Koutarou had come to check on her and found her pacing. She was so distracted that she kept tripping every so often too. It reminded him of how clumsy she'd been when she first came to Earth.

Yeah, I guess it's just in her nature.

Koutarou was unexpectedly tickled. He felt like he'd ended up with a handful of a little sister, not so different from Yurika or Sanae. In fact, Nalfa was acting just like Yurika or Sanae did when beset with trouble. He couldn't help wanting to look after her.

"You're always in such high spirits during the Blue Knight cooking program," he said to encourage her.

"I don't have to do that on my own, and people only watch that for you... You have to help me!"

"Sorry. I'm in charge of security. It's my job to protect you and the new transfer students."

"Can't you please just protect me?!"

“I wouldn’t make for very good security if I were glued to you on stage, now would I?”

“Right now I hate how dedicated to the job you are!”

All Nalfa needed to do was walk out in front of the crowd and read her speech, but it was her first time doing anything like this. She was on tenterhooks. She ordinarily projected a gentle aura, and that was nowhere to be seen right now.

“Break a leg, Nal-chan!”

“Don’t you abandon me too, Kotori!”

“But you really are on your own, Nal-chan. There’s nothing I could do for you if I wanted to.”

Kotori was filming Nalfa with a very amused expression. She wasn’t recording just for fun. They’d later send footage of both Nalfa’s speech and Koutarou’s patrol back to Forthorthe. In other words, it was business as usual.

“Kotori, you traitor!”

“Me? What about Kou-niisan?”

“Koutarou-sama is just serious by nature!”

“Why is he the only one off the hook?”

“That’s... Just because!”

With that, Nalfa turned her attention to Kotori. Satisfied, Koutarou nodded and used his bracelet to contact the others. He hadn’t just been making up excuses—he really did have to take care of security.

In total, the second wave of transfer students consisted of over fifteen hundred students, about two hundred of whom would be attending Kisshouharukaze High School. Kisshouharukaze was receiving so many because it had been designated a model city for the job. There were several similar special zones in Japan, each of which would also be taking on a large share of the second wave of students. Schools where the first wave had adapted well were receiving proportionately more. In that sense, Harukaze High was

performing admirably.

“Theia, how are things over there?” Koutarou asked.

“It’s about time for the new students to enter the gymnasium, so I’ve dispatched some unmanned scouts to keep guard... But I guess you could say it’s just a nice, clear day so far,” she responded through his bracelet.

“We haven’t seen any suspicious radio or gravity waves either. Nor any comms interference. I don’t believe there’s any danger at the present moment,” Ruth added.

Harukaze High’s success was in large part due to Nalfa, but it also had a great deal to do with Theia and Ruth. They’d essentially paved the way. Everyone on campus had learned of their origins around the time Nalfa arrived, but because the kids and faculty already knew them, they were mostly comfortable around Forthorthians. Incidentally, Theia and Ruth were in charge of the early warning system today. Their job was to detect enemy attacks as soon as possible with various drones and sensors.

“Nefilforan-san, what’s the situation like over there?” Koutarou asked next.

“The airborne troops are in position on standby. If there are any problems, they’ll sortie immediately,” the princess reported.

“Moreover, the commander looks a little disappointed that’s all you had to ask her,” Nana threw in.

“Wha—”

Nefilforan and Nana had their most elite forces over Kisshouharukaze City. They were specially trained in dropping into enemy territory and boarding spaceships. Today, their mission was to deploy immediately in the event of any enemy activity and buy time for everyone else to arrive. The moment Theia and Ruth detected someone, they would move out. They played a critical role as the first line of defense.

“And how’s the gymnasium team?” Koutarou asked next.

“Uh, we’re fine!” Sanae-chan replied.

“You need to give a more detailed report!” Sanae-san scolded her.

“I’ll handle it,” Sanae-nee offered. “We’re keeping watch with the haniwas, but haven’t sensed anyone.”

“Hey, look at you, Onee-chan! That was a great report!”

“...Was it?”

“It was, ho!”

“We’ll send the data to Ane-go, ho!”

“So yeah, like I said, we’re fine!”

When the Sanaes and the haniwas were done giving their side of the report, Maki chimed in. “Satomi-kun,” she began quietly, “Yurika has been checking regularly and there’s no sign of magic being used within a quarter of a kilometer.”

“I’m still worried about the grand wizard though...” Yurika muttered.

“Hey, there’s no sneaking past Uncle’s nose,” Shizuka assured her.

“Really?”

“He’s telling me he can smell seafood-flavored instant curry on you.”

“Okay, okay! I believe you, so don’t say anything more!”

Assigned to the venue detail were the three Sanaes, Yurika, Maki, and Shizuka. They were the perfect combination of power and flexibility. And in the event of a more physical attack, the Sun Rangers and men in black were standing by outside. There were also normal guards provided by the school present. The ceremony was clearly protected with multiple layers of security. Short of a large-scale attack, the students would undoubtedly be protected.

“Kiriha-san, how’s it going on your end?”

“It’s last minute but we’ve confirmed the identities of all of the additional guests. It’s safe to assume that there aren’t any spies among them.”

“What about you, Clan?”

“There are no gravitational waves in orbit and no high energy signals... It appears that Ralgwin and his forces really did return to Forthorthe.”

Farther above Nefilforan's troops, Kiriha and Clan circled the Earth in the Hazy Moon. Kiriha was commanding the ship while Clan was providing backup for everyone. They used their spare time to gather information and manage intelligence, like confirming the guest list. Their exact jobs would shift with the ever-changing situation on the surface below.

"I certainly hope so," said Koutarou. "It's best if nothing happens. Especially today."

"I'm afraid the Earthlings might be our biggest worry today," Harumi said with a sorrowful look.

Plenty of Earth's native population was still in an uproar about the arrival of aliens, and tensions were high. Some people even accused Forthorthe of being involved in past UFO sightings, even though Japan and Forthorthe had jointly debunked that. A great number of protestors had tried to flood the country in time with the second wave of transfer students. They were generally barred entry for that purpose, but there were plenty of protestors in Japan too. There was even speculation that foreign countries were fueling the unrest due to lingering dissatisfaction that Forthorthe had chosen to cooperate with Japan exclusively. The danger, as Harumi worried, was already present.

"We—all of us in Kisshouharukaze, really—are lucky that Theia and Ruth-san were the first Forthorthians we met," said Koutarou.

Thanks to Theia and Ruth, he already knew that Forthorthians were flesh and blood humans just like Earthlings. The whole city knew it by now. Rather than fear, they'd be greeted with a warm welcome here.

"Yeah, that's true. I think so too," Harumi agreed.

She was of a similar mind. People feared the unknown, but Theia and Ruth were now longtime friends. The response just wasn't the same. Their presence had inoculated the citizens of Kisshouharukaze City to the fear many were feeling.

"I don't feel the same," said Theia. "I have the shivers right now."

"What do you mean?" Koutarou asked.

"Think back to when I met you. Who knows how this would be unfolding if I

had killed even one person on this planet? Just the thought of it is terrifying,” she confessed with a shudder.

Indeed, Theia had once looked down on Earthlings as mere backwater neanderthals. She hadn’t cared one iota about their safety—and she now realized how dangerous that was. If she had caused an incident back then, the current relationship between Japan and Forthorthe would be dramatically different.

“We have Ruth-san to thank for that. Both of us,” said Koutarou. “The unthinkable might have happened without her.”

“I was only fulfilling my duty as Her Highness’s retainer.”

“There’s no need to be modest. If not for you, I would have hurt someone. I truly am grateful, Ruth.”

“Same. I would have hit Theia for real.”

Ruth’s interference had stopped the fight between Koutarou and Theia and subsequently prevented a variety of problems. She was indirectly the reason there was peace on Earth at the moment. Koutarou and Theia both felt obliged to thank her for that.

“You hit me for real now, though,” Theia objected.

“That’s totally different. You know that,” Koutarou argued.

“Indeed. It’s no-holds-barred between us now.”

“Ahaha, I am proud to have served as cupid for Your Highness and Master.”

As far as Ruth was concerned, she wasn’t entirely sure that she could really stop Theia if it came to that. She was, however, confident that she could mediate between her liege and Koutarou. He’d proven to be a great ally and friend. While it wasn’t exclusively for Theia’s sake, Ruth was pleased that the two were on such great terms.

“W-We’re getting off topic. Let’s get back to work,” Koutarou insisted.

“Hey, you’re just avoiding the... Okay, let’s return to work,” Theia conceded.

“Yes, I believe that’s for the best,” Ruth concluded.

Regardless of Koutarou's intentions, Theia and Ruth weren't planning on letting all the progress they'd made go to waste. Not now that Koutarou was so precious to them. They wanted to follow the same path he did in life, and they would risk everything to protect him moving forward.

The welcome ceremony had proceeded smoothly so far, yet Koutarou and the girls remained on guard. Their greatest concern at the moment, however, wasn't a potential attack—it was Nalfa. She'd almost fallen twice already, first when she climbed up to the stage and then again for seemingly no reason at all. To no one's surprise, she was incredibly nervous. Koutarou wanted to rush to her side both times but stopped himself. Nalfa had only tripped without tumbling over, so she didn't actually need any help either time. Nevertheless, watching out for her had become second nature to Koutarou. Harumi watched this all with a smile from where she stood next to him, although he was none the wiser.

"To our newest students, welcome to Kisshouharukaze High School! I am Nalfa Laren, a transfer student from Forthorthe just like you. I've been here since April of this year," Nalfa began.

It was all she could do to read the speech she'd prepared beforehand. Her nerves were getting the better of her. Her expression and voice were stiff. Koutarou watched worriedly, hoping she'd be able to make it all the way through.

With Satomi-kun focused on her, I need to do my best...

Still smiling, Harumi cast several spells to heighten her senses and her awareness of her surroundings. Since Koutarou was so fixated on Nalfa, she decided it would be best to leave her to him and pick up the slack elsewhere. Unfortunately, Nalfa could easily be the main target of a terrorist attack, so Harumi knew there was no harm in Koutarou keeping a close eye on her.

"As I'm sure you've all noticed already, this world is full of surprise and wonder. Its history is entirely different from Forthorthe's, so the way people live and the way society works here are different. I believe just getting a taste of that will make your time here worthwhile. I know it has for me. Even now, my days here are still full of surprise and wonder."

Nalfa stumbled over a few words here and there but managed to plow her way through her speech. Koutarou continued to look on, tense and excited for her.

“Stay calm... The next part is a little long, so take a deep breath first. Yeah, that’s it!”

He’d helped Nalfa write the speech and rehearse it. He knew it almost as well as she did. He was keenly, anxiously aware of everywhere she might stumble.

I’m sure Satomi-kun watched over me the same way... Harumi thought to herself as she observed them. In the past, she’d also been painfully shy and flighty. She couldn’t help seeing a little bit of herself in Nalfa, and seeing the way Koutarou doted on her warmed her heart.

“Now, with that said, I believe it would be best for you all to experience life here for yourselves. Please enjoy your time on Earth and in Japan. And again, on behalf of the current student body, welcome to Kisshouharukaze High School! Let’s have a wonderful school year together!”

Nalfa didn’t take long to get through her speech. She’d kept it short to avoid standing out too much. It was only a fraction of the length of the principal’s speech, so it was well received by both the current students and the transfer students.

“Thank goodness it’s finally over...” Koutarou sighed.

“Satomi-kun, you’re practically acting like you’re Nalfa-san’s father,” Harumi remarked.

“Yeah, well, I feel like I’m fretting over my daughter.”

“Haha, I’m a little envious.”

As Harumi laughed, Nalfa returned from the stage followed by a round of applause. Now that it was all over, she was profoundly relieved to see Koutarou and Harumi.

“Pheeew... I did it,” she said, exhaling all the air in her lungs and scrunching her shoulders. It made her look even more petite than usual—a sign of just how anxious she’d been.

“Nice job,” Koutarou congratulated her as he handed her a bottle of water. Nalfa wasn’t the only one pleased that her speech had gone off without a hitch. He, too, looked relieved.

“Thank you very much, Koutarou-sama!”

“You did great out there.”

“Thank you... I was really nervous.” As she said thanks a second time, Nalfa finally managed a smile. She couldn’t have been happier to be done with the whole ordeal.

“I told you that you’d be fine, didn’t I?” Koutarou reminded her.

“You did,” she said. “My faith in that got me through.”

“That’s all you have to do for now, Nalfa-san, so take a break for a while.”

“Yes, I think I’ll do just that,” Nalfa agreed, her expression relaxing.

Meanwhile, Koutarou’s own expression grew stern. He was still on the job, after all. Ralgwin could be lurking anywhere and Earth-based radicals could attack at any time. Just because Nalfa’s speech was over didn’t mean they were in the clear yet.

“That’s enough for the fake Satomi-kun, I think,” said Harumi.

Seeing that Koutarou was ready to get back to work, Harumi waved a finger. When she did, the illusory Koutarou who’d been walking around the gymnasium disappeared. Harumi had summoned it as a distraction while the real Koutarou was completely focused on Nalfa. It was largely a decoy, but if it served to put the enemy on guard, that was fine too. Buying time was all Harumi had hoped to accomplish with the illusion.

“Sorry about that, Sakuraba-senpai,” Koutarou apologized. He finally realized that he’d neglected security while Nalfa was on the stage and that Harumi had been covering for him.

“Don’t be sorry,” she said. “I love that part of you too.”

Harumi would have been a little dismayed if Koutarou had wholly ignored his friend’s big day to carry out his guard duty. She wanted him to remain the kind, honest boy he was—that was her and Alaia’s wish. If he fell short anywhere

because of it, she would make up for it herself. She'd meant what she said to him.

"Could you not say that with such a straight face...?" he begged bashfully.

"C-Certainly. P-Please forget I said it..." Harumi replied, equally bashful.

Though she and Alaia shared a soul, their minds and lives were discrete. Nevertheless, Alaia's words would unconsciously escape Harumi's lips from time to time. They were so frank on occasion that she found herself staring at her feet out of embarrassment. Like right now, for example.

Koutarou hadn't been the only one watching Nalfa's speech. Another knight had done the same—the Gray Knight. His reasons were entirely different, however. There was no kindness or warmth in his eyes. Rather than cheering on Nalfa, he beheld her like a mystery that needed to be deciphered.

"To think Nalfalaren would become a high school student welcoming alien transfer students... What's going on in this world?" he muttered. "But things are starting to make sense now. Either the Blue Knight wished this for her or there are some other extenuating circumstances... I can't say for sure, but if she's a mere powerless human here, that would explain why Signaltin isn't embodying its true powers."

The Gray Knight had been observing Koutarou and the people around him. As expected, he'd sensed nothing from Nalfa personally. He could tell the other nine girls had gained great strength via a contract with the sword, but even between the lot of them, that still didn't add up to the power that the true sword of kingship possessed. The Gray Knight had a hard time believing that power had been lost. Since Nalfa demonstrated none of it whatsoever, that meant it was either hibernating somehow or displaced in some way.

"Would she remain powerless even in an emergency?" he wondered aloud. "It's about time to find out."

The Blue Knight, Signaltin, and the other girls were one thing. Nalfa alone was helpless. So after careful surveillance, the Gray Knight finally decided to make his move. He needed to confirm where the sword's true power lay and the conditions for drawing it out. As long as its power remained sealed, he couldn't

accomplish his goals. He would have been even more cautious under normal circumstances, but with the group about to depart for Forthorthe, he needed to strike even if there was some risk involved.

Following the welcome ceremony, Nalfa departed Harukaze High for Corona House. The ceremony was all she had scheduled for the day, so without anything else to do, she left afterward while Koutarou and company stayed behind to tend to other matters. Kotori and Kenji were seeing her home.

“Man... everything’s totally different from last year,” Kenji said with a small smile.

A short year ago, Kisshouharukaze High School had been an ordinary local school. Today, it was a critical institution of intergalactic diplomacy. As a result, things were indeed quite different around campus. Whereas the principal and vice principal had been mere custodians of the student body before, they now spent their time running all over the place. Just the other day, they’d had a meeting with Forthorthian VIPs on a spaceship in orbit.

“Even seeing spaceships is becoming a normal occurrence,” Kotori agreed.

Harukaze High had also changed dramatically in appearance. New facilities and dormitories had been added in anticipation of more transfer students. The school was now almost twice the size it had been. As Kotori had alluded, there was even a small spaceport where smaller crafts could land. And those were only the changes visible to students. Like Kenji said, things were totally different from a year prior.

“I never thought that I’d have to give a speech in front of people like that,” sighed Nalfa.

The biggest change for Nalfa was a personal one. She’d always been a viewer. Since coming to Earth, she’d been shooting things that she thought other people would want to see. Yet finally, today, she’d taken her own place on the stage. It might not have meant anything to someone else in her shoes, but it was world-shaking to Nalfa.

“If you’re going to say that, then I never thought that I’d make friends with an alien,” said Kotori.

“Me either,” replied Nalfa.

The two girls shared a look and a giggle. In truth, their relationship was the most profound change of all. Kotori’s best friend was from a different planet and vice versa. It was a friendship of both personal and cosmic significance.

“Meanwhile, I got a lead role in our next show because Forthorthe turned out to be real,” threw in Kenji.

“Oh, yeah. That did happen, didn’t it?” said Kotori.

For the past two years, Theia had written plays about Forthorthe for the school festival. Kenji’s firsthand experience with both had allowed him to land the starring role in the next iteration.

“It’s just a shame that Sakuraba-senpai isn’t the princess...” he mumbled.

“Nii-san, why’d you have to go and ruin it?!” Kotori shouted.

“S-Sorry. Just slipped right out...”

“Ahaha, you siblings sure get along,” Nalfa remarked.

The Matsudaira siblings’ relationship had changed over the past year too. Enrolling at Harukaze High had destroyed Kotori’s image of her brother. Indeed, she’d learned of his womanizing ways and she disapproved strongly. In a way, her own horizons had broadened—in no small part thanks to her eye-opening friendship with Nalfa.

“I was so proud of my brother until last year too. To think you were really like this...” Kotori lamented.

“You don’t have to put it like that!” Kenji objected.

“If you don’t like it, maybe you should stop switching girlfriends every day!”

“I have my reasons!”

Nalfa giggled as she watched the siblings bicker. She had a brother of her own, so she could relate. In fact, she’d had quite a quarrel with her brother, Danesford, before leaving for Earth.

“Don’t go, Nalfa! It’s far too soon!”

“If anything, it’s almost too late for me to study abroad.”

“That’s not what I’m talking about! You’ll never make it on your own! It’s too dangerous!”

“You’ve always been overprotective!”

“You just don’t get it! In the worst case scenario, you could die!”

Danesford had been vehemently opposed to her coming to Earth. He’d always been protective of his little sister, and he couldn’t imagine her thriving on a strange new planet all alone.

In the end, my brother was right. I’ve caused a lot of trouble for Koutarou-sama. Still, I’m glad I came...

Reflecting on it now, Nalfa understood her brother’s concern. She wasn’t mature enough to get by on her own. That said, she didn’t regret her decision to come to Earth. So many wonderful things had happened here, beginning with meeting Kotori.

Besides, if I were more self-sufficient, Koutarou-sama surely would have regarded me like all the other transfer students. I never would’ve gotten to see him as a normal boy. I probably shouldn’t think this, but I’m glad things turned out the way they did...

It was true that Koutarou had taken a special shine to looking after the klutzy, unreliable Nalfa. He wouldn’t have felt the need to keep close tabs on her if she’d been more dependable, so Nalfa was now glad she was an airhead—but only a little. She was still keenly aware she’d been a burden on him.

“Besides, why are you only criticizing me?!” Kenji demanded of his sister.
“Kou’s not much different!”

“Kou-niisan doesn’t chase after any girl he lays eyes on! He’s doing his best to settle down!”

“No matter how you look at it, he’s just dating all of them!”

“It only looks that way to you and your filthy brain! Kou-niisan is a gentleman who’s never crossed the line!”

No matter what planet they hailed from, it seemed siblings were much the same anywhere in the universe. That was how Nalfa felt watching Kenji and

Kotori. Her thoughts turned to her own brother, and she found herself wondering what he was doing right now. Being separated had taught her how great it truly was to have someone close by. The next moment, however...

Huh...? What is this tingling feeling?

Nalfa stopped when she sensed a presence. She looked around to find the source, and her eyes fell on the riverbed that followed the road home. The hair on the back of her neck instantly stood on end. There was something there. Something frightening.

“Hey, what’s the matter, Nalfa-san?” Kenji asked.

“Yeah, Nal-chan, your face is pale,” Kotori remarked.

The siblings had noticed Nalfa stop in her tracks and thus turned around to see what was wrong. Her apparent state of shock alarmed them.

“I just got this weird feeling,” she said. “There’s something... There! What is that?!”

Nalfa finally saw it. It was on the riverside promenade up ahead in the direction they were headed. Nobody had been there before, but now someone wearing a gray hood had appeared as if oozing out of the ether. The strange presence Nalfa felt correspondingly grew stronger. She was convinced this person—whoever they were—was the source of it.

“Kotori, Kenji... let’s go a different way.”

“Huh?”

“What do you mean?”

“That person... They’re an unknown... An enemy!”

Nalfa cast a steely gaze upon the figure. She had no idea as to his real identity. She couldn’t see his face lurking beneath the hood. Nevertheless, she could tell based on presence alone that this man was extremely dangerous. There was something about them that was fundamentally opposed.

“What are you talking about, Nal-chan— Ah!”

“Get back, Kotori!”

The siblings finally noticed the strange new arrival as well. Kotori was primarily taken by surprise, but Kenji sensed that the figure was suspicious and stepped forward to protect the two girls. He was acting on his instincts as an older brother.

“So you sense it, do you?” the man in the hood—the Gray Knight—asked Nalfa.

He seemed pleased that she could detect the threat he presented. It suggested that she hadn’t fully lost her powers. If she recognized the danger she was in now, surely there was a way to awaken her full faculties. That was what the Gray Knight wanted.

“Wh-Who are you?” Nalfa asked him in turn.

“Nobody, but everyone calls me the Gray Knight,” he replied.

He saw no need to share his identity, but in the service of his goals, Nalfa needed to know who he was. That was why he took the title of Gray Knight. It was a moniker someone had once given him, and he’d kept it all this time.

“You’re the Gray Knight?!” Hearing that, Nalfa understood that Koutarou and company’s worst nightmare had appeared before her. “Did you... come to kill me?”

“It’s looking like that’s how this is going to play out.”

The Gray Knight approached as he spoke, closing in on Nalfa and drawing his sword. It looked like a traditional Forthorthian knight’s sword, yet the blade was dark and dull. It reflected no light, but not for lack of care for the blade. It was more apt to say that the weapon simply did not let light escape. Its very silhouette was vague.

That sword is... I know that sword!

The moment Nalfa saw the sword, she was unable to take her eyes off of it. It was familiar to her, yet she couldn’t recall when or where she’d seen it before. She had no idea how she knew it.

Nalfa stood stock-still, her eyes transfixed on the sword.

“So you react to this, do you?” the Gray Knight murmured as he approached.

“I’m starting to see the full picture...”

“What are you muttering about?! Stop right there!”

With that, six armed men in black suits jumped out in front of Nalfa. They were her bodyguards, who’d been watching over her from cover. Like the Sun Rangers, they were part of the government’s anti-invader department. Little did they know that this was their first encounter with a *real* invader.

“We’re authorized to open fire! If you take one step closer, we’ll shoot!” one of them declared.

“What will you do now, I wonder...?” the Gray Knight continued.

“Back down, everyone!” Nalfa cried. “You all have to run away!”

“Huh?” the man in black responded, baffled.

“So you can even sense this power...” the Gray Knight muttered. Standing some distance away, he swung his sword without form or technique. The arc it cut became a wave of energy that flew toward the men in black.

“Anti-energy field!” The biggest of the six men pulled out a large shield and stepped forward. His shield intercepted the incoming wave of energy, and an internal device activated to cancel it out. Thanks to that, the six men in black survived the attack unharmed.

“Oh, so the government isn’t entirely inept...”

The man in black was using the same kind of spiritual energy field that Korama and Karama did, although the government’s version of the technology still had a long way to go and hadn’t been miniaturized like the haniwas’. Instead, it capitalized on its large size to generate a high-powered, high-capacity field that was stronger than what the haniwas could project. That was how it had been able to defend against the Gray Knight’s attack.

“Captain!” the man called out to his squad leader as he forwarded him some data.

The captain saw it on the monitor built into his sunglasses and made an immediate decision. “It’s best to retreat! Nalfa-san and friends, please get behind us!”

The data concerned the remaining battery in the shield—blocking a single attack from the Gray Knight had drained nearly half of it. That meant the men in black would only be able to defend everyone from another shot or two at most. If they entered combat like this, they were guaranteed defeat. That was why the captain had swiftly made the call to withdraw.

“But that will put you all in danger!” Nalfa objected.

“Don’t worry about us!” the captain assured her. “This is our job! Think of you and your friends’ safety!”

The men in black only intended for Nalfa, Kotori, and Kenji to flee the scene. They intended to stay behind to buy the children time to get away. The men in black had already accepted their fates. Nalfa had no intention of leaving them behind to escape herself.

“...Thank you!”

At least, not until Kotori and Kenji entered the equation. She couldn’t bear the thought of endangering them. She’d never forgive herself if they died because of her. And so, reluctantly, she turned to run.

“These men are skilled and their captain is wise...” the Gray Knight continued to mutter. “The worst opponents on the battlefield.”

“Fire as one! Don’t let him get near Nalfa-san and her friends!” the captain shouted.

The Gray Knight had already attacked the men in black. That gave them the necessary go-ahead to respond in kind. And so, with smooth movements, the men in black collectively drew their weapons and opened fire on the Gray Knight.

“Using pistols against an enemy suspected to be from Forthorthe seems foolish at first, but they’ve taken the proper precautions...”

As bodyguards, the men in black couldn’t walk around with larger firearms like assault rifles. At best they could carry a pistol in a holster and a submachine gun in a briefcase. To make up for this, they’d converted to using spiritual energy-based ammunition. The bullets were still metallic, but their tips were imbued with energy so that each shot would have spiritual impact even if

blocked. They didn't yet have the technology to fire pure spiritual energy. This left them reliant on enhanced material bullets, which had the advantage of both physical firepower and spiritual force. They were bound to have some effect, even against the Gray Knight.

"I think it's working, captain!"

"Keep firing! Cover for the kids!"

The Gray Knight had created a spiritual energy field to shield himself. It would take more than a volley of imbued bullets to defeat him. Still, the hail of fire strained his generator and slowed his advance—just what the men in black wanted. They were only trying to buy time for the civilians to flee.

"I can't take too long..." the Gray Knight murmured. Nalfa and her friends had already made it twenty meters out, and he couldn't afford to let them escape. "Looks like it's come to this..." He focused on his sword. A haziness began swirling around it, obscuring its shape.

"Captain, the enemy is up to something!"

"I don't know what he's doing, but prepare for an attack! Raise the anti-energy field!"

"Understood!"

The men in black were well trained and quick to respond. Once again, the man with the shield moved out in front of the group.

"You've got the right idea, but sadly, that won't be enough..."

The Gray Knight swung his sword wide, dispersing the haze around the blade. It began drifting toward the men in black.

"It's going around my shield, sir!"

"Is it some kind of gas?! Hold your breath!"

"Y-Yes, sir!"

"Again, you've got the right idea... But you'd need the sword of kingship to protect you from that."

The captain suspected the Gray Knight had unleashed a harmful agent, hence

his order for his men to hold their breath. That would keep it from entering their lungs and incapacitating them immediately—but as the Gray Knight had muttered, that wasn't enough to protect them. The haze he'd cast out was still being absorbed through their skin. The men had only bought themselves a few extra seconds by holding their breath.

“U-Ugh...”

One after another, they collapsed to the ground. They'd played all of their cards right; their hand just hadn't been strong enough to win. The fault was hardly theirs, however. Their opponent was simply that strong. Fortunately, their good fight hadn't been in vain.

That's right... Just past those bushes... is a car... waiting for you...

As the captain was losing consciousness, he watched Nalfa, Kotori, and Kenji flee. They were approaching some shrubbery, beyond which was a vehicle that belonged to allies of the men in black. Even if the Gray Knight chased after Nalfa and her friends now, he wouldn't make it in time to stop them from getting in. That meant the men in black had accomplished their goal.

“Well played. I'd almost love to let them go on your behalf, but I'm afraid I can't let that happen...” In the blink of an eye, the Gray Knight was upon the men in black. Brandishing his sword, he called, “Stop right there, Nalfa Laren. Any farther and I'll kill these men.”

Those words reached Nalfa's ears just as she was about to round the corner. Reflexively, she stopped and turned back.

“Oh no, the men in black!”

“It's no skin off my nose. You decide. Will you abandon or save them?”

The Gray Knight really didn't care one way or the other. He was confident that he could catch Nalfa even if she chose to flee him in earnest, but he also knew what it would mean for her to abandon someone.

“You will spare them if I cooperate?” she asked. Her body was quaking with fear, but her voice was steady. A strong desire to save the men in black bolstered her.

“D-Don’t do it...” the captain begged her. “You have to run...”

“Despite my appearance, I am a knight. I don’t go back on my word,” the Gray Knight promised.

“Nal-chan, no! He’s a terrorist!”

“She’s right! There’s no guarantee he means what he says!”

Kenji and Kotori believed the Gray Knight to be a villain. His goal was to drive a wedge between Japan and Forthorthe, and to that end, he was after Nalfa’s life. Cooperating with him was out of the question in their eyes. Nalfa would just be walking into her own grave.

“Really, it doesn’t make a difference to me, although I am interested to see if you’ll turn your back on them.”

The Gray Knight leveled his sword at one of the men in black. His goal here was an experiment to see if Nalfa’s powers would manifest under mortal duress. He thought this was his best chance to draw them out, but he was willing to take a secondary approach...

So what will you do, Nalfa Laren? You’ve never intervened because it just creates parallel worlds, but here you are, trapped in a single timeline. How will you react in this situation, I wonder?

Nalfa’s own life being in danger wasn’t necessarily the only way to bring out her power. Knowing that, the Gray Knight wanted to force her into a dilemma to see how she would respond. That information could prove just as useful.

“I understand... I’m coming,” she eventually agreed.

“I see. So that’s your answer,” he mused.

“No! You can’t go!” Kotori cried.

“Nalfa-san, he’s just going to kill everyone!” Kenji shouted, reaching out for her. He had a terrible feeling about all this. Nalfa had a glint in her eye that he’d never seen before.

“I know,” she said. “But this is what Koutarou-sama would do.”

Nalfa lightly eluded Kenji’s grasp as she turned a smile on the siblings. Kenji’s

hunch was spot on—Nalfa looked just like Koutarou would in that moment. The thought shook him for a moment, and in that time, Nalfa began walking toward the Gray Knight.

“I’ll do whatever I can!”

She knew this was practically suicidal. Even so, she couldn’t help herself. She would forever regret it if she abandoned the men in black. She would never be able to look Koutarou in the eye again.

I’m scared. I bet that sword hurts... I don’t think I could dodge it. I’m not very fast. I doubt he’d let me get away anyway... Even if I picked up one of the bodyguards’ guns, I don’t know how to use it... At this rate, I really will die...

Ponder as she might, Nalfa couldn’t come up with a plan. She didn’t know the first thing about self-defense. She couldn’t imagine that anything she might try would work. But even so, she kept thinking. Koutarou would never give up, and she wanted to follow his example.

Maybe it’s pointless, but maybe I could surprise him...

In the end, Nalfa decided to take a gamble. If the Gray Knight truly meant to cut her down, there would be no stopping him. She knew she wouldn’t succeed where the men in black had failed, but she didn’t want to go down without a fight. Giving the Gray Knight a start might be all she could do. She didn’t think it would amount to anything, but it was better than doing nothing.

“Prepare yourself, Nalfa Laren.” The Gray Knight stepped forward, rapidly closing the distance between them as he raised his sword.

“Come back, Nalfa-san!”

“Don’t do this, Nal-chan!”

Kenji and Kotori snapped out of their stupor and chased after her, but they wouldn’t make it in time. The Gray Knight would reach her first. Finally, he brought his sword down...



“Here I come!” Nalfa cried.

With that, she took off running. But she wasn’t trying to escape. Instead, she was headed straight for the Gray Knight. Nobody saw it coming—not even him.

“What are you doing?!”

The Gray Knight had swung his sword to scare Nalfa, not kill her. But now that she was dashing toward him, she’d entered its range. She was on a direct course to meet his blade. Nalfa was going to die before he’d solved the mystery, and the Gray Knight couldn’t have that. In a desperate move to prevent it, he swiftly altered his sword’s trajectory.

“Ahh!” Nalfa yelped.

In the end, the sword grazed her collar before stabbing into the ground. A trickle of blood ran down her neck. The outcome was wildly different from what she expected, but ultimately, her life had been spared.

“I-I’m not dead... Why?”

“You surprised me there... but I’ve learned something. Your power doesn’t come out even when your life is in danger.”

Nalfa was quite shaken by the attack. Her wound was superficial, but being cut with a sword was still terrifying. But there was more to the Gray Knight’s assault. He’d hoped that cornering Nalfa like this would trigger the awakening of her powers.

“Wh-What are you saying...?” she stammered.

“You’re coming with me. I still—”

Right now, the Gray Knight’s attention was fully focused on Nalfa—and there was someone who’d been waiting for just that moment.

“Sudden Full-power Punch!”

It was Sanae Onee-chan, who was wreathed in light as she leaped out from where she’d been hiding. She flew at the Gray Knight, channeling all her power into her fist, which was glowing brighter than the rest of her body.

“Ugh, of course you had to show up now of all times—”

“Hyaaaaah!”

Sanae-nee’s fist met the Gray Knight’s right hand with a grand explosion. She’d actually suppressed her power in order to catch him off guard, so the surprise attack was far from everything she had. Even so, her punch had the power of a cannon behind it. It sent the Gray Knight’s sword flying. It landed some distance away, lodged in the ground.

“Tch.” The Gray Knight sneered. “Who would’ve thought you could lie in wait when you have no patience?”

“You’re the one who doesn’t have any patience,” Sanae-nee rebutted. “You’re rushing because you’re nearing your goal, aren’t you?”

The Gray Knight had indeed let his guard down. Sanae-nee had sensed his lack of killing intent from the start and bided her time accordingly. He’d remained fixated on Nalfa after she tried to run, allowing Sanae-nee to get the drop on him. She could have put more power into the attack, but because he’d been unable to shield himself with the power of chaos, the blow was still plenty strong.

“I suppose I should be more careful. People always trip near the finish line,” he mused.

“I never thought I’d hear *you* say that,” she shot back.

Sanae-nee stared down the Gray Knight as her fist began glowing again, this time far brighter than before. Since she was no longer trying to hide, she could channel her maximum power without fear.

If I let him get that sword back, I’m toast!

The Gray Knight’s sword was how he controlled the power of chaos. It was an incredible stroke of good luck that Sanae-nee had disarmed him with her initial attack. She needed to keep him that way until reinforcements arrived.

“You saved me, Sanae-sama!” Nalfa cried.

“I owe it all to the men in black,” she replied. “I only made it because of them.”

Indeed, the men in black were to thank for Sanae-nee’s arrival. The moment

the Gray Knight had appeared, they'd called for backup, which prompted Koutarou and the others to move. Sanae-nee had been nearby, so she was able to fly directly to the scene with her psychic powers. The men in black had bought enough time for her to make it there, meaning that, in the end, they'd carried out their mission successfully.

"Nalfa, you get back!" Sanae-nee cried.

"You can't fight on your own!"

"Don't worry, backup is on the way! But I can't have you getting in the way!"

"O-Okay..."

Nalfa bit her lip as she backed off. She was frustrated that she was only an impediment to the fight, but it was a reality she had to acknowledge.

"There's no need for all that," the Gray Knight insisted. "I have no intention of doing anything to her now."

Rather than giving chase, the Gray Knight simply watched Nalfa go. He'd learned at least one thing in his experiment today, and he wouldn't be able to learn more without the appropriate preparations. The best he'd be able to do now was kidnap Nalfa for future observation.

"What gives?" Sanae taunted. "You already lose interest in her?"

"If anything, I have more pressing business with you," the Gray Knight replied. "You're the last one."

"So that's how it is, huh? Your psychic powers are pretty weak."

For the time being, the Gray Knight's interest had shifted to Sanae-nee. The other girls of their world had been absorbed into the whirlpool of chaos, charging it with their powers. The only spiritual energy in that equation came from Kiriha and the haniwas. It was comparatively weak, all things considered, but the whirlpool more than supplemented it. Without the sword to control the chaos, however, the Gray Knight was at a distinct disadvantage.

"In other words... I'll never have a better chance of defeating you," Sanae-nee continued in a bold declaration.

"That's awfully clever for you," the Gray Knight remarked.

“I had to grow up sometime... even though we were both trying to avoid that.”

“...No wonder.”

With weaker psychic powers and no sword, the Gray Knight had no way of blocking Sanae-nee's attacks. But now that she was alone, this was his chance to absorb her into the whirlpool of chaos too. Thus his objective shifted: the Gray Knight's new goal was to retake his sword and take Sanae-nee before reinforcements arrived.

“I won't let you have your way,” she said. She knew what the Gray Knight was after. Carefully, one step at a time, she moved to get between him and the sword.

“I wouldn't be so sure. You know that psychic powers aren't the only thing I have at my disposal.” The Gray Knight followed suit, creeping forward to keep Sanae-nee from completely blocking his path to the blade. The only hitch was that he couldn't move but so far on the promenade.

“I know, but you can only use Forthorthian weapons right now!”

Sensing that the Gray Knight was growing desperate with her psychic powers, Sanae-nee swiftly went on the offensive. Minding her opponent and being quick to respond was the fighting strategy the Kiriha and Theia of her world had taught her. She created several fist-sized balls of energy around her and fired them at the Gray Knight.

“Getting read like a book sure is a pain...”

The Gray Knight's distortion field couldn't block spiritual attacks. Magic was an option, but he had no time for an incantation. Sanae-nee had prioritized speed over power to keep him on his toes. His only recourse, as she'd said, was Forthorthian weaponry.

“You're nothing compared to Theia!” she shouted.

“Tch, there's too many of them!” he shouted in turn.

The Gray Knight returned fire with an assault rifle. The bullets, infused with some of his spiritual energy, negated Sanae-nee's orbs on contact. But as she'd

pointed out, he wasn't as quick or accurate as Theia. He could have wiped all of the orbs out in one fell swoop with his sword, but without it, they pummeled him one after the other.

"Guh! You're pretty good, Sanae!"

Between the orbs' lack of firepower, their diminished numbers after his counterattack, and his armor, the Gray Knight was able to endure Sanae-nee's onslaught. This didn't faze her, however.

"There's more where that came from!"

The continuous explosions obscured both her and the Gray Knight's vision, which made no difference to Sanae-nee with her spirit sight. She could still see the Gray Knight's aura, so she fired a second round of orbs at him.

"Try this on for size!"

"Don't think the same trick will work twice!"

From the billowing smoke emerged three Gray Knights—he'd used the short amount of time he had to cast an illusion spell. His copies looked just like him. They even mimicked his aura and heartbeat. They were so detailed and convincing that he couldn't conjure more than two. Not even Sanae-nee could easily tell them apart.

"Now it's my turn!"

The three Gray Knights unloaded with their assault rifles. The real Gray Knight was firing with the same weapon as before, while his copies were using illusory versions so compelling that they were capable of rendering pain and even holes in their targets. It would take an individual of extraordinary will to resist them. Otherwise, they were just as effective as real guns. And since their attacks weren't physical, they bypassed most defenses. They were most dangerous.

"Child's play!" Sanae-nee shouted, repeating a line from an anime as she swept her arm through the air.

A powerful wave of spiritual energy followed that buffeted the hail of bullets and all three Gray Knights. If ever there was an individual of extraordinary will, it was Sanae-nee. Her conviction dispelled the Gray Knight's copies, the first,

the second... and then the third. It turned out that all three were fake.

“I knew it!” she yelled. “And now I know what you’re doing next too!”

With that, she whipped around and fired a blast of spiritual energy from her hands. Unlike when she’d blown away the illusions, she didn’t need to put that much force into this attack. If anything, speed was more important. The beam raced ahead and knocked the sword impaled in the ground away from the Gray Knight.

“So you noticed...” he murmured.

The Gray Knight appeared to have anticipated Sanae-nee’s move. He wasn’t surprised by it; he simply stood up and turned to face her. His three illusions had been a mere distraction. He’d remained in the smoke, casting another spell to cloak himself. He’d hoped to reclaim his sword that way, but Sanae-nee had ultimately seen through his ruse.

“That was close... I didn’t know you could use that kind of magic.”

Wrapping her spiritual energy around the sword with her signature Poltergeist power, Sanae-nee retrieved the blade for herself. When it was just within arm’s reach—

“Kyaaaah! Wh-What is this?!”

A sharp, sudden pain shot through her hand. When she looked down, she could see the power of chaos flowing from the sword and into her. That was what hurt so much.

“Tch! I-I won’t let you wiiin!”

At its current rate, the chaos would erode Sanae-nee. Luckily, she’d noticed before it was too late. In an attempt to repel the danger, she used all of her power to push it back. The force of her spiritual energy sent the sword flying again—just what the Gray Knight was waiting for.

“It would have been easier for me if you’d just let it swallow you...”

The blade spun wildly through the air, but the Gray Knight caught it without difficulty. While Sanae-nee had managed to escape the immediate danger of the whirlpool, the Gray Knight had now gotten his hands on his sword again.

The situation had officially gone from bad to worse.

Sanae-nee maintained a fearless smile, but in reality, she understood the grim nature of her situation. She'd only been able to put up a fight so far because the Gray Knight had been separated from his sword. Now that it was in his hands again, hope was all but lost. This was the man who'd defeated each of her friends.

"I'm not going to fall that easily!" she roared.

"I'd certainly hope not. You're the only one left," he replied, fixing a sharp stare on her.

Indeed, the Gray Knight was on guard. Psychic powers could be used without warning. Unlike magic and science, they required no incantation or device to activate. The unexpected could happen at any moment. Because of this, however, the output of psychic powers was generally weaker than magic with the same energy input. Thankfully, this posed no obstacle for Sanae-nee, who had vast stores of spiritual energy. She had more than she needed and then some, making it possible for her to unleash incredible attacks in the blink of an eye. Fighting a high-level psychic like her would be a challenge for almost anyone.

"And yet... there's nothing you alone can do against this sword," the Gray Knight taunted.

"I won't know until I try. Besides, you already dropped it once," she taunted right back.

"Then I'll hold on tighter!"

Quick to action, the Gray Knight charged forward. Since psychic powers made for nasty sneak attacks, he didn't want to lose the initiative. In fact, immediately after he started running, fist-sized rocks began raining down where he'd just been standing. Sanae-nee had secretly been gathering them while they were talking to try to catch the Gray Knight by surprise.

"He noticed?!"

"Now it's my turn!"

He was still some distance from Sanae-nee, but the Gray Knight swung his sword. Gray energy flew forth from the arc he carved, spinning like a boomerang as it sailed toward her.

“That’s nothing!” Sanae-nee cried. She knew the boomerang was coming, and it was moving slow enough for her to follow with her eyes. All she had to do was duck to dodge it.

“Don’t be so quick to judge,” the Gray Knight scoffed.

His attack wasn’t as simple as Sanae-nee thought. After the boomerang sailed past her, it hooked around for a second pass. It would automatically keep coming after its target over and over again.

“Oh no!”

Ducking down again, Sanae-nee manifested several balls of spiritual energy around her. Her plan was to shoot the boomerang down. However, the Gray Knight wasn’t standing idly by as she worked. He repeatedly swung his sword in her direction.

“There’s more where that came from.”

“That’s way too many!”

There were now five boomerangs sailing toward Sanae-nee. Each on its own wasn’t much of a threat, but five simultaneously was overwhelming. She had her hands full just dodging them and couldn’t spare a moment’s concentration to counterattack. While she took aim, one would swoop at her. Her aim wasn’t any good on the run either.

“Simply fleeing won’t get you anywhere.”

“Agh, then I’ll just do this!”

Without any better ideas, Sanae-nee pushed her spiritual energy outward around her like an expanding balloon. It was a desperate plan, but it worked. The Gray Knight’s boomerangs were trained on her energy, so they homed in on the wave she unleashed and exploded on impact.

“An impressive feat of strength,” he remarked.

“Yeah, how’s that?! Impressed, aren’t you?!”

“I guess relying on the ease of automatic tracking was a mistake.”

Incorporating the homing feature into an attack was convenient, but in exchange, it generally compromised firepower, speed, and duration. It also demanded a certain amount of ingenuity from the wielder, who had to specify the intended target. There were also times like this, where the function could be thwarted altogether. So, while convenient, tracking attacks still had their drawbacks.

“Ha, you’re not Ruth or Glasses! You should come at me with your fists!” Sanae-nee shouted.

“I won’t use my fists per se,” the Gray Knight replied, “but I agree.”

With that, he readied his sword once more. Sanae-nee was now darting through the air at high speed. The Gray Knight was confident that taking her down would necessitate relying on a familiar weapon rather than petty tricks. Though he wouldn’t accept her challenge directly, he was more than willing to come after her with his trusty blade.

Oh man... Fighting guys like him is the worst.

Sanae-nee’s confident voice didn’t betray her, but deep down, she was scared. In a contest of sheer strength, she knew she’d be at every disadvantage. That meant she’d have to rely on her speed—and the Gray Knight knew that too. There was no doubt in her mind that he’d try to stop her from capitalizing on it.

“Nevertheless, victory goes to the swift!”

Sanae-nee couldn’t afford to lose the initiative against someone so powerful. She also understood that he’d be looking for ways to hamstring her. She had to avoid that at all costs. She pooled her spiritual energy in her legs and took off running as fast as she could. Her spiritual circuitry advanced the transmission of information through her body via her nervous system, enhancing her reflexes dramatically.

“She’s fast!”

The Gray Knight was taken aback. Sanae-nee was moving at superhuman speeds. Moreover, she was abruptly changing directions at odd intervals. Her

trajectory was so erratic that no normal person could ever hope to keep up with her. Kicking off the various walls and trees around her, she was rapidly closing in on the Gray Knight.

“We’ve known each other for a long time, but this is the end!” he shouted as she approached. Sensing that Sanae-nee was serious, he took his sword in his right hand and drew it close to his body. Rather than moving, he was bracing to intercept her charge. “Come, Sanae!”

“Ooooooh!”

With a shout, she dove toward him. Her extended right fist, wreathed in pale purple light, contained enough spiritual energy to finish the fight in a single blow. When she got close enough, the Gray Knight thrust for her chest.

“Ack!”

In order to dodge, Sanae-nee abruptly changed directions again. When she did, the jerky motion revealed the charm dangling from her neck. When the Gray Knight saw the words embroidered upon it—“Family Safety”—he stopped for a moment. It exerted no special power over him, however; it’s hold was purely emotional.

“Raaaaaaaah!” Sanae-nee collided with a nearby wall after her evasive maneuver and used the spiritual energy stored into her fist to bounce back, unleashing a powerful kick as she flew. “Hyaaaah!”

With the Gray Knight stopped in his tracks, Sanae-nee’s kick met him square in the torso. The moment she made contact, she released the spiritual energy pooled in her leg for extra speed. This sent the Gray Knight flying. He bounced along the ground as he rolled until coming to a stop when he finally hit a concrete embankment.

“How do you like that?!”

That spiritually supercharged kick was the strongest attack Sanae-nee was capable of at present. If it didn’t work, she was out of cards to play. In a superhero anime, it would have been the equivalent of her using a forbidden technique, for she’d compromised all of her morals to use it against another human being.

“Well done, Sanae... If not for this sword, you would have won,” said the Gray Knight, slowly rising to his feet as if nothing had happened. A strange haze now shrouded his body—the power of chaos had obscured his very form to deflect most of Sanae-nee’s energy, and it had done so without the Gray Knight’s bidding. Like Signaltin, his sword automatically protected its wielder.

“Still, it looks like it didn’t shield you entirely,” Sanae-nee remarked.

“Of course not. Nothing’s ever that easy.”

The Gray Knight’s sword had indeed shielded him, but there was a limit to the protective power it could deploy instantaneously. It had only spared the Gray Knight the worst of Sanae-nee’s attack. He’d still taken a portion of her spiritual energy directly, damaging his internal organs. There was blood dripping from the corner of his mouth.

“Too true...” she muttered.

“There are times we must simply accept our fates,” the Gray Knight replied quietly as he approached. A small whirlpool began forming at the tip of his blade, and it grew bigger with every step he took. It threatened to swallow Sanae-nee.

“And there are times we simply have to challenge fate,” she countered.

With that, Sanae-nee took a single step forward and then stopped. Her whole body felt heavy. Her legs wouldn’t budge and she couldn’t move her arms—for she’d expended all of her energy in that last attack. Right now, she was both physically and spiritually drained. She’d used everything she had, and it still wasn’t enough to defeat the Gray Knight and the power of chaos.

I guess I didn’t stand a chance after all. At least Nalfa got away... I’ll leave the rest to you, Kiriha.

Victory seemed so distant now that Sanae-nee braced herself for the worst. She was actually winning the fight in terms of blows, but now that she was unable to dodge the Gray Knight’s next move, her streak would be cut short. It was all over.

“Don’t cry. All will merely return to its original state. You’ll get to see everyone else soon,” the Gray Knight assured her.

“That’s not why I’m crying. I’m sad that I couldn’t save you.”

The whirlpool was already large enough to consume Sanae-nee. All the Gray Knight had to do now was swing his sword. He laid eyes on the charm hanging from her neck, but it wouldn’t stop him a second time.

“See ya, Sanae.”

Just as the Gray Knight raised his blade aloft...

“Sanae-chan’s Special Burning Fire Mega Hurricane!”

“There’s no fire or hurricane, though...”

A massive ball of spiritual energy fell down upon the Gray Knight from above, completely taking him by surprise.

“Tch!”

He was forced to abort his attack and jumped back. Sanae-nee’s last blow had already compromised him, so taking another serious hit in his current condition would be dangerous.

“Use this!” a familiar friendly voice called.

With that, a knight’s sword with a silver blade and golden inlay came flying. It slid right into Sanae-nee’s hand as if it had a mind of its own.

“Saguratin?! This won’t—” the Gray Knight shouted. “Wait!”

Indeed, the sword was unmistakably Saguratin—the royal Forthorthian sword forged to commemorate Theia’s birth. It had once been an ordinary blade, but no longer. It was now imbued with power that made it a rival for even Signaltin. If Signaltin was a magical sword, then Saguratin was a spiritual sword. As such, it began channeling spiritual energy from above.

“And now she’s recovering?!” he exclaimed again.

The energy that Saguratin was absorbing flowed directly into Sanae-nee, replenishing her spiritual stores and stamina. Even she was surprised by this turn of events. In her stupor, Sanae-san and Sanae-chan landed next to her without a sound.

“I knew Onee-chan would be able to use it too!”

“Now all the stars have gathered! Sanaes assemble!”

Sanae-chan, who was astral projecting, struck an odd pose she’d learned from an anime as she glared at the Gray Knight. Sanae-san, on the other hand, was simply relieved to see Sanae-nee was all right. Simultaneously keeping an eye on their enemy while reveling in their friend’s well-being was something only the Sanaes could do.

“You came! Thank you both!”

Sanae-nee grasped the sword and smiled. She was truly happy that her other selves had come to her aid, but the celebration was only momentary. The enemy was still before them.

“Real heroes rush to save allies in need!” Sanae-chan declared.

“You don’t need to thank us,” Sanae-san followed up. “You would have done the same, right?”

“Yeah... Still, I’m grateful. Talk about good timing.”



Unlike the Sanaes, the Gray Knight wore a stern expression. He was coming to grips with the reality of the situation, which was far more complex than he'd first imagined. "Saguratin, hmm? So that's what happened..."

To think the power's been split into parts... There might even be more than just these two.

The Gray Knight needed the sword of kingship's true power, but based on what he now knew, it had been divided between at least Signaltin and Saguratin. He could sense its power coming from both blades, yet even combined, they still only accounted for a fraction of its *true* power. There had to be more elsewhere, meaning the Gray Knight was still a long way from accomplishing his goal.

I guess they had their own plan. Thinking about it rationally, of course they did... Ah, god damn it!

He'd been so certain that he'd put his opponent in check by coming to this world, but he now realized how far out the endgame remained. It was hard to lay blame on his lack of foresight, however. He'd accomplished the ordinarily impossible feat of crossing worlds, after all. He'd had no way of knowing what would await him here in this universe.

"Nevertheless, this tells me what I need to do now..."

The Gray Knight raised his sword again, still trained on Sanae-nee. She had no connection to this world's sword of kingship. Absorbing her would put him one step closer to checkmate.

"Here he comes!" she cried. "Be careful, you two!"

Sanae-nee responded to the Gray Knight in kind, readying her own sword. This Saguratin was different from the one she'd borrowed from Theia in her own world, but it responded to her emotions all the same and began glowing with a reassuring light.

"We'll do what we can, so you go beat him, Onee-chan!" shouted Sanae-chan, who moved into position next to her.

With their body and spirit divided, Sanae-chan and Sanae-san individually

weren't as powerful as they were when unified. Having both of them on hand, however, doubled their defensive potential. They'd leave all the attacking to Sanae-nee, who was now armed with Saguratin and refreshed spiritual energy. They hadn't just given her the sword because it was cool—it also connected them telepathically via the crests on their foreheads.

“Here we go! I'll start!” The first to make a move was Sanae-san, who used her psychic powers to fill the air with a dust cloud.

“Using your head, I see!” The Gray Knight clicked his tongue.

Clouding the area put him at a distinct disadvantage. Thanks to their spirit sight, the Sanaes didn't need to rely on their physical vision. The Gray Knight could use the same power to a certain extent, but his spiritual sight paled in comparison to theirs. The visual impediment gave them an edge.

“Environmental Protection!”

The Gray Knight cast a quick spell to shield him from his surroundings, blocking out the dust in a several-meter radius around him. It was too small of an area to be useful in battle, but he knew the girls wouldn't give him time to cast a more powerful version.

“Take this and this and this!” shouted Sanae-chan as she fired a volley of energy arrows at the Gray Knight. By the time he could see them, they were mere moments away from striking.

“Ngh!”

Thanks to his spiritual circuitry, he barely managed to defend himself. The hazy power coursing through his sword morphed into a disk-shaped shield that dispersed the incoming energy.

“You're wide open!” Sanae-nee rallied as she charged at him, her glowing gold sword in hand. She'd been waiting in the wings for just this moment.

“Think again!”

The Gray Knight immediately activated his distortion field via his bracelet. While it wouldn't do anything against Sanae-nee's spiritual energy, it would still physically block Saguratin. He wasn't prepared, however, for what came next...

“Wha-bam!”

When the tip of her sword collided with the Gray Knight’s field, Sanae-nee unleashed Saguratin’s power in a perfectly controlled directional explosion. His barrier had indeed blocked her sword, but the explosion was an entirely different story.

“Hnnngh!” The blast sent the Gray Knight flying a second time. Each time he bounced along the ground, the loud screeching of metal and ripping of pavement could be heard. “I underestimated what Sanae could do on her own... This world really is a strange one,” he muttered to himself in frustration when he came to a stop some meters away.

“All right! It’s working!” Sanae-nee cheered. Kiriha had devised ways to stand against the Gray Knight, yet Sanae-nee had feared the worst after what had gone down in her own world. It was a one-sided fight then, but no longer.

“All thanks to the power of friendship!” Sanae-chan cheered too.

“I don’t know if you can really call it friendship when we’re all the same person...” Sanae-san corrected her.

“Then it’s the power of narcissism!”

“Never mind. I’d rather call it friendship.”

The three Sanaes technically only had two people’s worth of spiritual energy between them, but Saguratin’s amplification effect helped make up the difference. Now that the Gray Knight had failed to absorb Sanae-nee, the girls immensely overpowered him in terms of energy. It was effectively three against one.

“So it’s come to this again,” he muttered. “I don’t have the luxury of holding back.”

The whirlpool conferred two different abilities upon its wielder: the ability to use the powers of anyone it absorbed, and the ability to use the power of chaos itself. The latter was inherently risky, which was why the Gray Knight preferred to stick to the former. If this battle continued at the current rate, however, he knew defeat was inevitable. He thus decided to take an uncharacteristic risk.

“Here he comes again!” Sanae-nee warned the group.

“I know,” replied Sanae-chan. “I’m getting a bad feeling from him.”

“Don’t let him get too close. He’s up to something!” added Sanae-san.

All three Sanaes raised their guard as the Gray Knight’s aura grew ominous. Sanae-chan and Sanae-nee disappeared into the lingering dust cloud to escape his detection. That was when two clear voices rang out through the obstruction.

“Sanctuary! Modifier: Maximize! Effective Area, Colossal!” they chanted in harmony.

“A ward to keep people away?!” the Gray Knight gasped. “What are they planning?!”

He’d immediately identified the wide-area barrier spell meant to unconsciously drive people away and prevent sound and light from escaping the area. It was commonly used in fights between magicians, but this particular one had been cast with the Gray Knight at its center. It had also been maximized—a precaution that wasn’t ordinarily needed. It was like an announcement that some kind of attack was coming.

“This!” Theia called from on high.

When the Gray Knight looked up, he saw a warhead emerging from the dust cloud. He recognized it the instant he laid eyes on it.

“That’s a Super Space-time Rep—”

It was mere meters away. He had no way of dodging it at this distance. Moreover, this wasn’t something that he could casually shrug off with the power of chaos. He either needed to resign himself to defeat here and now or conjure all of his power to defend himself—and he chose the latter. There was no telling where he’d end up otherwise.

Seconds later, the missile activated and a glowing cube appeared to encompass a three-meter radius around the Gray Knight.

“Aaaaaaaah!” he wailed in pain.

Everything inside the cube was shunted outside of space and time. The Gray Knight called upon the power of chaos to save himself, but it came at a high

price. Just coming into contact with it was dangerous, and he needed to summon an extraordinary amount of it to ward off the cube. In other words, he was jeopardizing his very existence. Still, he thought it was better than being thrown out of the universe.

“I’m surprised... Even if it was scaled down, you were able to endure a Super Space-time Repulsion Shell,” Clan commented, observing the situation via an unmanned fighter.

She couldn’t help being impressed with what she saw, for when the cube receded and took the dust cloud with it, the Gray Knight was still standing. He hadn’t survived the attack unscathed, however. More than half of his armor was nonfunctional now.

“I channeled a lot of energy to attack. That saved me,” he explained.

“I see,” Clan mused. “So you protected yourself with the whirlpool of chaos.”

Blocking one of her Super Space-time Repulsion Shells was no mean feat. Thanks to the information Sanae-nee was able to relay, Clan had been able to dial the strike to a hyper-specific area. Nevertheless, the Gray Knight had withstood it. Clan was genuinely shocked by his strength.

“But I did take unnecessary damage from an unexpected attack. I think I’d best retreat for now.”

Upon assessing the situation, the Gray Knight decided to withdraw. He could take on Koutarou and all nine girls if fully prepared—the power of chaos was that strong. But right now, he’d already expended both himself and the whirlpool against the Sanaes and Clan’s signature weapon. He understood that he was at a disadvantage and that it would be wiser to try again another time.

“There’s no way we’ll let you get away!” Theia’s voice shouted from her red and gold drone. She had her cannon trained on the Gray Knight and was dead set on preventing his escape. She was ready to open fire at a moment’s notice.

“That’s only if you can ignore these,” he said. Even though he was in her crosshairs, he was dead calm—for he already had an escape plan in the works. He’d only come today to find answers, not to defeat Koutarou and the girls, after all.

“Your Highness!” Ruth shouted over the coms. “I’m detecting a large number of space distortions! It appears to be a huge group of incoming mobile weapons!”

“What?! Contact Nefilforan immediately!”

Ralgwin had taken his forces and departed Earth for Forthorthe. In order to pack his ships with supplies, he’d left his mobile weapons behind on the planet’s surface—and the Gray Knight had now summoned them all. He had no other use for them, so this was the perfect plan. They would serve as a distraction for the Gray Knight the same way they had for Ralgwin. But that wasn’t all he had up his sleeve.

“I’ll throw this in as a little bonus,” he muttered.

With that, he summoned forth something from the whirlpool of chaos. Something meant to ensure his retreat.

“Isn’t that... Shijima Tayuma?!” Kiriha shouted in surprise as she observed the situation from an unmanned drone.

Indeed, appearing from the whirlpool was a giant black dog. It was the very same appearance her nemesis, Shijima Tayuma, had taken upon being transformed by the power of chaos.

By the time Koutarou arrived on the scene, it was chaos. Autonomous mobile weapons were buzzing around and a giant black hound was on a rampage. The only two reasons the battle hadn’t embroiled the whole city were its out-of-the-way riverbank setting and the barrier Yurika and Maki had put up to keep bystanders away.

“Damn it, where’d he go? No, that doesn’t matter right now!” Koutarou muttered. “Ruth-san, can you call Warlord here?!”

“Right away, Master!”

The Gray Knight was ultimately responsible for the current situation, but Koutarou and the girls didn’t have time to think about him at the moment.

“There are so many mechanical enemies! What are we gonna do, Maki-chan?!” Yurika shrieked.

“Keep your cool! We’ll handle them one at a time!” the calmer magical girl replied.

“Nefilforan’s unit just deployed!” Theia informed them. “Hold out a little longer!”

At present, the Corona House crew’s goal was to keep the enemy occupied. A swarm of mobile weapons and a giant black hound breaking out into Kisshouharukaze City would wreak havoc. Not only would there be casualties, but it could also jeopardize relations between Japan and Forthorthe. They couldn’t risk that, meaning they couldn’t afford to leave and chase after the real culprit.

“Uncle, if that thing fires a single shot toward the city, it’ll be a disaster!”

“I know! But what an annoying bunch! Their each and every movement is utterly devoid of royal grace!” Alunaya replied in frustration.

“We’ll just have to demonstrate ours and defend the city from them!” Clan chimed in.

“Well said, Princess!”

The mobile weapons were fixated on Koutarou and the girls, so they weren’t too much of a concern. Stray fire would never reach the city, as the riverside embankment acted as a natural shield. The real problem was the black hound. Since the Gray Knight had consumed a great deal of energy to protect himself against Clan’s Repulsion Shell, the black hound he summoned wasn’t as large as it had once been. Even so, it was still over twenty meters in size. Its head stood taller than the embankment, meaning it could potentially fire into the city. On task to prevent that were Shizuka, who’d taken her giant dragon form, and Clan, who was aboard the Cradle.

“Kii, we’re counting on you until reinforcements arrive!” Clan called to Kiriha.

“Got it,” she replied. “But I have little experience when it comes to being chased by monsters.”

“As long as you’re cracking jokes, I’m sure we’ll be fine.”

“My, my.”

“We’ll protect Ane-san, ho!”

“...Kurano’s daughter... Kurano’s daughter...”

“Here he comes, ho! Watch out, Ane-san!”

The black hound was calling for Kiriha. It had been searching for her ever since it manifested. Shijima Tayuma had formerly been swallowed by the whirlpool, losing himself in the process and melting into the chaos itself. All that remained of him were his strongest emotions—his hatred, his rage, his jealousy. That was what drove the black hound now. Kiriha decided that she could take advantage of it to distract the beast. That was why she’d descended to the surface.

“Now *this* is problematic...”

Kiriha had borrowed a PAF from Clan and was hovering at a very low altitude, racking her brain. Alunaya was keeping the black hound pinned in place, which left her to figure out how to handle its ranged attack—waves of six black orbs. It would spell disaster if any one of them hit the city. Moreover, she wasn’t sure how the hound would respond if she was killed or disappeared. That additionally meant she had to keep her position in mind at all times and move in a fashion that kept the black orbs from flying in odd directions.

“Ho! You’ve been locked on to, Ane-san!”

“A mobile weapon is attacking, ho!”

“It’s just one thing after another!”

The mobile weapons around the riverbed were making things tricky for Kiriha. They would occasionally target her, meaning she needed to keep a keen eye on them as well. If she evaded carelessly, the city would pay the price. Thankfully, Theia was able to lend her some assistance.

“Don’t worry!” she yelled over the comms. “Charge straight at twelve o’clock!”

“Thank you, Theia-dono!”

“Don’t thank me just yet! The next one’s coming!”

Theia was controlling three fighters remotely, which she used to shoot down

the mobile weapons closing in on Kiriha. In truth, she was itching to don her Combat Dress and enter the fray with the black hound herself. There were just too many mobile weapons around for that, so she was stuck controlling fighters for the time being. Even with AI assistance, handling three at once was a feat, but Theia managed it with ease. Nobody but her could have pulled it off.

“You can leave your defenses to me!” Ruth called out.

The vice captain of the Satomi knights was in charge of protecting Kiriha when she was under attack. Ruth had several unmanned fighters under her command, and she maneuvered them as a swarm. She wasn’t as skilled at manipulating independent fighters simultaneously, but her precision allowed her to coordinate them magnificently. That was why she could handle so many at the same time. So, given their strengths, Theia took the lead on offense while Ruth took the lead on defense.

“Also, sorry for the wait, Master!”

“Thank you, Ruth-san!”

While protecting Kiriha, Ruth also summoned Koutarou’s own mobile weapon from the Hazy Moon. A massive five-meter robot painted a vivid blue appeared from the transfer gate. It was a humanoid weapon by the name of Warlord III, which had once belonged to Elexis and had since been modified by Theia and Ruth specifically for the Blue Knight. The front of the machine opened for Koutarou as he approached, and he climbed in.

“I’ll be able to put up a fight now.”

“You honor me, Your Excellency.”

With Koutarou in position, the system booted up automatically. Like Theia’s former flagship Blue Knight, Warlord was synchronized to his armor. Just as the mobile weapon was closing back up, someone squeezed through before the cockpit shut tight.

“Mind giving me a ride?”

“Kiriha-san?!”

Indeed, the stowaway was none other than Kiriha. Warlord’s control system

had been replaced entirely, making more space inside the machine than there had been under Elexis's control. It gave Kiriha just enough room to slip in with Koutarou.

"Control method set to direct control," the AI announced. With Kiriha aboard, it automatically switched controls.

Warlord III, as the new Blue Knight battleship currently being built, had two methods of control. The first was master/slave system that read the movements of Koutarou's armor; the second required direct signal input from Koutarou's mind and body. The former could be operated intuitively and allowed greater room for error, while the latter was faster and didn't physically require him to move. They had optimal uses respectively, but with the limited space in the cockpit, Warlord defaulted to direct control.

"What are you doing here?!" Koutarou demanded.

"I wanted to try out the fabled princess carry," Kiriha replied. She was currently in his arms with hers wrapped around his neck.

"I'm being serious here!"

"This way, the black hound—Tayuma—will come after us together."

"So *that's* your plan. I sure bet he hates us."

Upon the arrival of the blue armored machine, the black hound had begun to shift its attention away from Kiriha. What remained of Tayuma's soul wanted to kill Koutarou too, which presented a new danger. If the hound was after Kiriha *and* Koutarou, it would try attacking both of them. Kiriha had joined up with Koutarou to focus its aggression.

"That's right. I certainly didn't do this just to enjoy you holding me, Satomi Koutarou."

"There must be some other way to keep Tayuma in check, right...?"

"Nope. I'll secure myself with the PAF I borrowed, so pay me no mind. Fight as you will."

"Don't think I'll forget about this afterward."

"I just hope there'll *be* an afterward."

Obeying Koutarou's will, Warlord III turned toward the black hound. The cockpit's suspension was fine-tuned, but the machine still bobbed a bit as it moved. Kiriha strapped herself in with her PAF as promised, firmly secured her arms around Koutarou's neck, and planted the gentlest of kisses on him. That last part wasn't strictly necessary... but Koutarou was too busy preparing for battle to notice it.

With Kiriha now aboard Warlord with Koutarou, the black hound pursued them even more doggedly than before. It was even starting to drag Alunaya along with it. Tayuma hated them just that much.

"Satomi-kun, I can't tell how powerful the enemy is, so I'm going to start with channeling all my magic into protection!"

As Warlord III advanced, a white light wrapped around it. Harumi was using Signaltin's power to shield the machine. The black hound was smaller than it had once been, but now that it was fully merged with the whirlpool of chaos, it was potentially even more dangerous than before. Harumi was prudent to focus on defense.

"I'm counting on you, Sakuraba-senpai! In exchange, I'll attack at full power! Authorizing automated attacks against the black hound! Fire at any opening you detect! Just make sure you don't hit the city no matter what!"

"As you wish, my lord. Firing control system settings changed. Automatic attack frequency set to high. Safety device reconfigured. Automatic defenses adjusted accordingly."

Warlord III came equipped with a variety of weapons—even more than Koutarou's armor, and he meant to take advantage of them. While the AI handled the firing, Koutarou himself would focus on his sword and shield. He wasn't especially skilled with ranged weapons anyway, so he believed this strategy to be the most effective.

"Opening chest laser cannon."

Warlord III began firing immediately. Given the battlefield's proximity to the city, lasers were a convenient choice of weapon. They were accurate and fast, striking their targets unerringly in the blink of an eye. Missiles and other types

of cannons couldn't boast that capability.

"Satomi Koutarou, Tayuma's main defense is a spiritual energy field. I'm having Karama and Korama analyze it now."

Even as she clung to Koutarou, Kiriha was still scrutinizing the situation with the help of Forthorthian technology, as well as relaying everything she learned to Koutarou via the crest on her forehead. Thanks to her, he didn't need to look at his radar and other sensors.

"So you think Forthorthian weapons will work against it, Kiriha-san?"

"I do. But stay on your guard. It may defend itself with the power of chaos."

"Got it!"

The black hound was primarily relying on a spiritual energy barrier, as it had in the past. That was perfectly within expectation, given its origins as Tayuma. It knew how to defend itself from spiritual energy and magic, but not so much against pure force. That meant Warlord III's standard armaments should be effective. The only foreseeable problem was if the black hound brought out the whirlpool of chaos—which was a perilous possibility they needed to account for.

"Activate my energy blade!"

"As you wish, my lord."

Warlord's main melee weapon was an appropriately sized knight's sword—a smaller version of Blue Knight's beam sword. Like a beam cannon, the blade used ultra-high temperature heavy metal particles, but it was even more powerful for not having to project them. A mobile weapon's beam sword could cut through almost anything. It was the perfect choice for close-quarters combat against the black hound.

"Anti-material energy blade activated in hit synchronization mode."

"Landlord-san and I will take care of the big guy!" Koutarou called to the group. "Everyone else, you handle the mobile weapons!"

"Ha! We won't have any trouble taking out pesky mechanical enemies!" Theia rallied.

“Uncle, this is where we step up!”

“Understood! We’re the only ones who can keep the black beast in check!”

Alunaya was currently grappling with the giant hound, which was trying to escape his grasp. It badly wanted to break away to attack Kiriha and Koutarou, so it conjured six black spheres to fire at Warlord III. Koutarou skillfully controlled the mobile weapon to block or dodge each and every one.

“Looks like my shield holds up against them,” he remarked.

“It’s triple-protected by Harumi’s magic, a spiritual energy barrier, and a distortion field,” said Kiriha.

“Then the rest is up to me!”

“No, to *us*.”

Suddenly, Koutarou could see several green marks in his field of vision indicating weaknesses in the black hound’s barrier. Since Tayuma had used his spiritual energy by feel, his creations were uneven. The haniwas had picked up on that, and Kiriha relayed the details to Koutarou by way of the crest.

“Good work!” he said. “Keep it up!”

“Of course!”

Kiriha rarely let Kii show, but she slipped a little while she was alone with Koutarou in the cockpit. It was somewhat unfortunate that Koutarou didn’t notice, but neither of them had the presence of mind in the heat of the moment to appreciate it.

“How’s this?!”

As he closed in on the black hound, Koutarou brought down his sword. Just before it made contact with the beast, a beam sheathed the blade. In order to conserve energy, it only activated before a direct hit.

“GRAAAAAAAAH!”

The sword struck right where Kiriha had indicated a fault in the barrier. The momentum of the blade and the energy of the beam easily broke through it, cutting into the black hound’s waist.

“Blue Knight, get back!”

“Alunaya-dono?!”

“The dog’s body is phony!”

Given the nerves and organs in an animal’s midsection, a strike like that would ordinarily be debilitating, if not outright fatal. The giant black hound, however, was only made in the image of a beast. It had no flesh—that was what Shizuka had concluded from grappling with it. Koutarou’s strike had still wounded the beast with energy, but it wasn’t nearly enough to fell the creature. It retaliated by firing another wave of black orbs.

“ROAAAAAAR!”

“Whoa!”

Koutarou was too close to have any prayer of dodging. Two of the orbs slammed directly into his shield. With his triple-layer defenses, he was able to withstand the first, but the second shook Warlord violently.

“Ahhh!”

“Kyah!”

Koutarou reflexively grabbed hold of Kiriha. He had no plan in mind; his instincts were simply to safeguard the girl in front of him. The gesture, however, proved unnecessary. There was no serious damage to the mobile weapon, and Kiriha’s PAF protected her personally. Nevertheless, she looked up at him like it meant the world to her.

He would’ve done the same thing no matter who was here, just like he did with Kii...

She tightened her arms around Koutarou, hugging him back. It wasn’t especially comfortable since he was in his armor, but being able to sense his soul so close to her comforted her in a different way.

“Are you okay, Kiriha-san?!”

“I am.”

“Give me a status report!”

“Report: Damage to the mobile weapon is minimal. Bypassing damaged circuits... Operation complete.”

“All right, then let’s go!”

Koutarou released Kiriha and had Warlord III jump back. Kiriha meanwhile held on tight, her arms firmly fixed around Koutarou. Without so much as hinting at the inner workings of her heart, she calmly offered Koutarou advice.

“Even if it doesn’t have the physical form of a living creature, try attacking its chest or head.”

“How come?”

“This creature was once Tayuma. What’s left of his human consciousness may very well be stored there.”

Though the black hound had no body, its perception of what its body *should* be shaped its form. That was Kiriha’s theory, and if she was right, then attacking the head or chest would still be effective. Though there was no evidence to support it, Koutarou didn’t question her.

“I’ll give it a shot!”

If Kiriha-san says so, I trust her judgment.

He glanced down at the girl in his arms for a moment, and she looked up at him in turn.

“What is it?” she asked.

“I was thinking that you’re as clever as ever today.”

“I’m just desperate to find a way to victory for you.”

“Guess I’d better come out on top!”

Koutarou grasped Warlord III’s sword and shield as he charged the black hound once more. The beast saw him differently than it had Kiriha. Its piercing gaze now burned with a hunger to defeat its fated foe.

In addition to the black hound, the Gray Knight had unleashed a unit of mobile weapons to facilitate his escape. As for who was left to deal with the

swarm... Magical Girl Rainbow Yurika was on the job!

“Maki-chan, get back! I’m doing it again!”

“You’ve got this, Yurika!”

With a firm hold on her staff, she incanted loudly and clearly, “Controlled Acid Cloud!”

This was an attack spell that conjured a cloud of strong acid that she could freely control, and she used it without mercy against the Gray Knight’s machines. Twirling her staff, she swept the cloud across the swarm one mobile weapon at a time. It wasn’t very fast, but the machines showed no sign of trying to evade it as it billowed over them.

Fshhh...

After a few seconds of contact with the cloud, the mobile weapons ceased to function and hit the ground. Over a dozen of them had fallen already. It didn’t take long for the acid fog to seep through the gaps in the mobile weapons’ bodies and dissolve vital circuits. By the time they realized something was wrong, the damage had already been done.

Seeing this, Theia let out an almost resigned sigh. “I guess this is what you call an egg of Columbus...”

“Their AI might be prepared to deal with acidic ammunition, but not a free-moving corrosive cloud. Yurika-sama’s creativity wins again,” remarked Ruth. She was just as surprised as Theia, but more honest with her praise for the magical girl responsible.

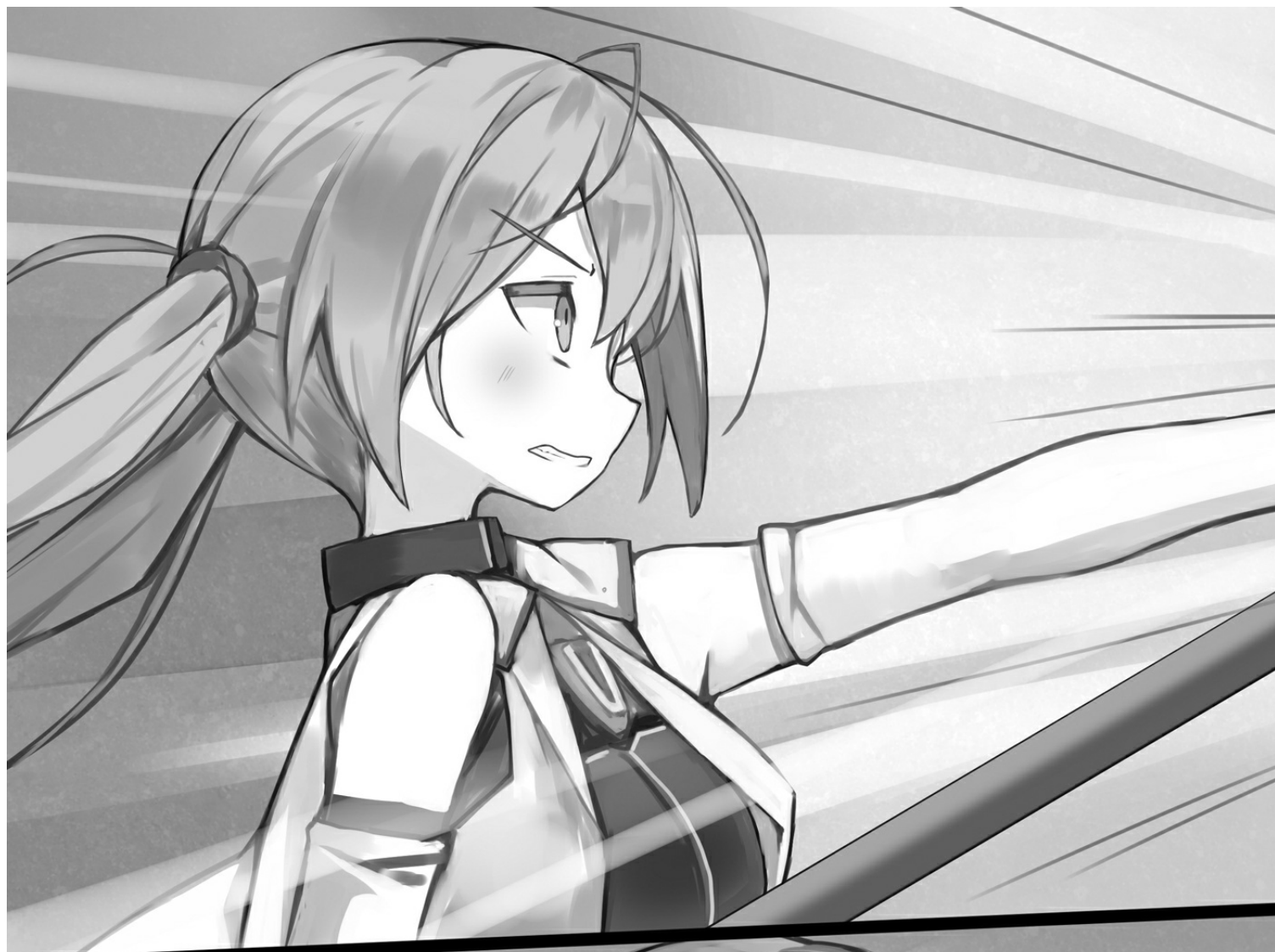
For all a mobile weapon knew, a cloud of powerful acid was just a zone of strangely high humidity. The machines could learn it was acid by deploying an observational drone to gather more information, but nothing about a high humidity reading would trigger that kind of caution. Thus the mobile weapons wrote off Yurika’s powerful magic as fog. It never registered as an attack, especially considering that the sensors designed to detect such things were the first to break down. At best, the AI would disregard it as a sudden short. If the computer knew how to detect magicians, it might have been a different story, but for now, the girl in the strange pink dress continued to wield a colorful

cloud to deadly effect—all under the radar.

“Good job, Yurika! Keep it up!” Maki encouraged her.

“I feel like this isn’t the kind of attack that a magical girl of love and courage should be using...” she whined.

If anything, the mobile weapons were on guard for Maki and her staff-made-greatsword. She seemed a far more likely cause of the mysterious malfunctions. Of course, Maki was using illusions to create the perfect distraction. They were throwing grenades at the same time Yurika’s cloud struck in order to draw the machines’ fire—all while Maki was safely away from the danger. Thanks to her assistance, Yurika’s one-sided slaughter continued without a hitch.



“Why does it seem like Yurika’s ingenuity only comes out at times like this?”
Theia pondered.

“We’re lucky to have Yurika-sama on our side. I shudder to think what might have happened if she’d been this serious when we first met.”

“You can say that again... Now, let us protect her! She’s the cornerstone of our offensive at the moment!”

“As you wish, Your Highness!”

“Nooooo, not like this! I don’t want to stand out like this!”

Although Yurika was gassing down the mobile weapons left and right, there were far too many for her to take out in one sweep. They’d yet to identify her as a threat, but she was still a potential target in their eyes. She could be attacked at any moment, which could turn the tables on the girls. To prevent that, Theia and Ruth began to assemble unmanned fighters to defend Yurika while pressing their own attacks.

Shizuka had borrowed Alunaya’s draconic form to go toe-to-toe with the black hound. Her karate holds and throws, however, were ineffective against the otherworldly beast. It wasn’t entirely corporeal, after all.

“Uncle, it looks like joint locks aren’t working either. They just bend in weird directions.”

“What if we toss the creature?”

“Dogs have a lower center of gravity than humans, so it would be hard. Most of the effective throws would only work if it was already in a joint lock.”

“Meaning we’ll have to use brute force to strike clear and obvious weak points!”

“Won’t it be dangerous to let go of it?”

Even with the hound’s vague, elusive body, Shizuka and Alunaya were able to keep a firm hold on it in a grapple. The problem was that they couldn’t attack this way. The black hound was strong enough that it could easily break free if they released it with one hand.

“Then let’s do this the dragon way!”

With that, Alunaya roared flames. He’d been avoiding such an attack for fear of their proximity to the city, so he’d waited for a safe time to unleash it.

“Uncle?! It didn’t work, Uncle!”

Unfortunately, however, safe didn’t mean effective. His flames blasted the black hound’s chest but only scorched its skin. Alunaya hadn’t used all of his power.

“Nay! All is well!”

“Try this on for size!”

Just as the draconic fire died down, Warlord III attacked the black hound. Alunaya had showered the beast in flame to inhibit its vision as Koutarou approached.

“RAAAAAGHHH!”

He aimed for the head, and the blow struck true. It was a shallow slash, but it left the hound reeling in pain unlike before.

“That did the trick!” Koutarou cheered.

“It appears that Tayuma saw his head as the container of his spiritual essence.”

The black hound, formerly Tayuma, was gravely wounded by the attack. Koutarou’s strike had not only drained it of energy, but it had damaged the beast’s spirit directly. Meanwhile, if Kiriha had been the black hound, she wouldn’t have taken damage from anything other than a blow straight to the heart—for that was where she believed her soul resided. She also kept her greatest treasure, a worn-out trading card, close to it at all times.

“Gragh, Kurano’s daughter... Graghaagh... Kurano...”

“Satomi-kun!”

“I know!”

Koutarou was already taking his distance by the time Harumi called out to him in warning. Thanks to that, a wild swing of the black hound’s claws only caught

air. Koutarou had already been hit by the beast once, and he wasn't about to let it happen again.

"It seems this creature has the best qualities of being corporeal and incorporeal at the same time."

"That's so unfair!"

A normal canine would have struggled to scratch a foe so swiftly. Attacking Alunaya right in front of it was one thing, but Warlord III slightly behind and to the side of it was another altogether. The fact that the black hound could manipulate its shoulder like that meant its limbs were closer to human—albeit with razor-sharp claws attached. Shizuka was rightfully upset.

The danger, however, had yet to pass. Warlord shook and rattled violently without warning.

"What now?!" Koutarou shouted.

"Alert: Left arm's shield has been destroyed and will no longer offer any protection. Recommendation: Abandon it."

"I thought I dodged that last attack!"

"Affirmative. No contact registered from the enemy. Alert remains: Left arm's shield has been destroyed. Warning: The enemy may have an attack undetectable by this machine."

Warlord III's AI believed that the enemy had made contact that went undetected. Koutarou, however, had a different theory.

"That sort of cheat sounds just like Vandarion," he muttered.

"It seems the rules of reality don't much matter to those touched by chaos," Kiriha observed.

They both knew that the black hound was capable of defying physics, as evidenced by the strange way it had just swung its arm, the unnatural structure of its body—and now the conveniently extending range of its attacks. Koutarou had experienced something similar during his final fight with Vandarion.

"Still, we really hurt it with that last hit! We can keep fighting!" he rallied.

“But we must finish this swiftly—before it realizes that it can alter reality,” Kiriha warned.

“Even I abide the laws of nature... This beast can’t even do that?”

“I guess that’s the power of chaos for you. Ugh.”

The black hound was merely a convenient manifestation of Tayuma. A vessel of sorts. But beyond that, its true nature was chaos. If Koutarou and the girls didn’t keep that in mind, not even Warlord III or the Fire Dragon Emperor would stand a chance. The black hound was proving to be an exceptionally dangerous foe.

Although everyone had begged her to flee, Nalfa was watching the fight from afar. She felt she couldn’t leave even though she knew there was nothing she could do. She had no special powers, no weapons training, and no technological expertise. Watching was all she *could* do, which was why she couldn’t bring herself to run. She felt it would mean turning her back on something in her heart that must never be betrayed. Thus she stood frozen in place, praying with all her might.

“Koutarou-sama... please stay safe...”

Nalfa felt a tightness in her chest every time Koutarou and the girls were attacked. She’d been scared earlier when she was attacked herself, but this was petrifying on an entirely different level. Her nerves frayed as she watched the people who’d welcomed her to this world face danger for her sake. Not being able to do anything was frustrating. If it were possible, she gladly would have traded places with them.

“Ahh, what is that...?”

Yet what struck her the most was the black hound. She sensed something extraordinarily ominous from it. It was similar to the feeling she’d gotten from the Gray Knight. It was a swirling sort of vagueness, but the threat it posed was quite clear. Nalfa wasn’t in danger, however. Koutarou and the others were, which made her all the more anxious.

“Please, anyone, protect Koutarou-sama...”

Nalfa’s heart quivered when Warlord III’s shield was destroyed. Koutarou was

safe, but his mobile weapon's left hand was now disarmed. It was an alarming sight to everyone watching—even the men in black.

“Don't worry, Nal-chan,” Kotori encouraged her. She smiled as she supported her trembling friend and said, “Have faith in Kou-niisan and the others.”

“Kotori...”

“Kou-niisan used to be reckless, refusing to rely on anyone else, but he's changed. He now has friends and allies he knows he can trust, so I'm sure he'll be just fine.”

“They're all girls though,” Kenji muttered.

“Nii-san! Why must you regard everything from such an impure point of view?! You know that Kou-niisan trusts *you* the most!”

“C-Cool it, Kotori! It was just a joke to lighten the mood! I know that!”

“There are some things you shouldn't joke about!”

“Pfft... Ahaha!” Nalfa couldn't help breaking into a giggle over the Matsudaira siblings. Seeing this, they both smiled at her.

“Kou'll be fine, so just hang in there for him.”

“Yeah, Nal-chan. If you love Kou-niisan, then you need to stand by him, right?”

“You two really understand Koutarou-sama, don't you? I'm starting to lose my confidence...”

Nalfa could feel the deep bonds Kenji and Kotori had with Koutarou, while she herself had only known him for a short while. She felt like she couldn't compare.

“It's only a matter of time,” said Kotori. “Even if you feel that way now, you won't in a few years.”

“She's right,” offered Kenji. “And unlike how he used to be, Kou's a lot more composed now. I'm sure a good, honest girl like you could slide right into his heart, easy.”

“Nii-san! Couldn't you say that some other way?!”

“M-My bad.”

“Hahaha... I think I get it now. First things first, I’ll start by believing in him.”

“That’s the spirit, Nal-chan! Believe. Believe that there’s a future for you.”

“Yes.”

With that, the fear faded from Nalfa’s eyes, giving way to a strong resolve. She looked far less frail and intimidated than before—in no small part thanks to the help of her friends, Kotori and Kenji.

I’m sure a future for me and Koutarou-sama exists... I may not measure up to the other girls, but I’m still sure that there’s something for us. I’ll have faith in that, just like Kotori and Kenji said I should...

By then, something strange had begun to happen. Nalfa was glowing with a faint light that shone with all the colors of the rainbow, just like her hair. The stronger her feelings grew, the brighter it became. The same thing had happened once in the past, but the light was now stronger than it had ever been before. The others couldn’t help taking notice of it this time.

“Whoa, Nal-chan, you’re glowing! Is that some kind of special camera light?” Kotori asked.

“Huh? What light?” Nalfa asked in turn.

Since Nalfa was from Forthorthe, Kotori was used to seeing her with all kinds of advanced tools and tech that she didn’t understand. She figured this wasn’t any different. Someone else, however, was quite surprised to see it...

“I see... So *this* is when you bring out your power!”

It was the Gray Knight, who’d been observing the battle from a safe distance all this time. The black hound made for the perfect distraction—and the perfect opportunity to study Koutarou and the others.

“Bringing out Tayuma was worth it after all,” the Gray Knight muttered.

Nalfa hadn’t displayed a single sign of her power when her own life was in danger, but something had changed now. Seeing this, the Gray Knight struggled to contain his excitement. He was finally getting closer to his true goal.

Koutarou and company continued their desperate offensive against the elusive black hound. Alunaya grappled with it while Koutarou attacked its head with his sword. It was the best they could do against the beast, yet they were slowly being driven back by the power of chaos.

“I have bad news, Blue Knight. I’m very nearly out of energy.”

“Maybe it’s because we’re touching the black hound directly, but Uncle’s mana is being polluted! We can’t keep this up much longer!”

“Then we’ll just have to go for it! Are you with me, Sakuraba-senpai?!”

“Always, Satomi-kun.”

In the same fashion that the Gray Knight’s sword had eaten away at Sanae, the black hound was wearing down Alunaya. The effect wasn’t as strong, but Alunaya had only been able to withstand it for so long because of his vast stores of mana. He could stop the drain by simply letting go of the beast, but the danger that posed to the city was unthinkable. Knowing that, Koutarou was determined to attack without regard for his own safety. Harumi, who was focusing on controlling Signaltin, agreed with his decision.

“But you won’t ask me if *I’m* with you, Satomi Koutarou?” Kiriha pressed him with a resentful look. He’d asked Harumi, but not her.

“I just wanted to know if there was mana to spare,” Koutarou replied honestly. He’d really asked Harumi if Signaltin had enough power left to pull this off.

“I know that.”

“Then don’t complain, Kiriha-san.”

“But this might be the last time we talk...”

In truth, Kiriha understood the situation perfectly well—and that was precisely the reason she’d felt the need to speak up. She didn’t care what Koutarou said to her so long as he said *something*. She wrapped her arms around his neck and drew him near.

“Do you have that card with you today too?” Koutarou asked after a pause, gently placing his hand on Kiriha’s bountiful chest. If she did indeed have the

card on her, he knew that was where it would be.

Kiriha puffed up her cheeks a little and whispered into Koutarou's ear like a young girl, "Why is it only times like this that you touch me? You can do it anytime you want, you know?"

"I can't bring myself to have designs on people so precious to me."

"Heh. No one would accuse you of that."

Kiriha smiled. Even if those were her last words with Koutarou, she was happy now. She thus placed her hand over his... and a green light began shining where they touched. The light grew brighter and brighter until it filled the entire cockpit.



“What is this?!” Koutarou gasped.

“I don’t know,” Kiriha replied, “but it seems our powers have dramatically increased!”

The crest upon her forehead was aglow with the same green light, while a similar phenomenon was unfolding with the other girls. Theia’s was red, Yurika’s was blue, and so forth. Each of the girls was now wreathed in a light that matched the color of their sword crests—proof that their powers were overflowing. Sensing this, Kiriha immediately issued instructions instead of waiting for Koutarou.

“Everyone, attack now! Before this light disappears!”

The green light enveloping Kiriha endowed her with the ability to use divination magic, but its greatest gift was sharpening her already keen mind. With her enhanced wit, she immediately recognized the situation, for it was identical to their fight against Vandarion. She thus pushed everyone to press on despite their confusion. Kiriha had no idea where this power came from or how long it would last, but she knew they hadn’t a moment to waste. They needed to act now, whether it was reckless or not.

“Karama, Korama, hurry and find Nalfa! See if she has the same light around her!”

“Ho-oh! Why can I hear Ane-san’s voice in my head?!”

“I don’t really understand, but understood, ho!”

That was the one thing even Kiriha’s enhanced mind couldn’t comprehend. She’d seen Nalfa glowing with a similar light before, but she didn’t know what it meant. The best she could do now was postulate, which was why she was sending the haniwas to investigate.

“Your Highness, if this is like that time your firepower increased, would it not be best to sortie in your Combat Dress?!” Ruth asked, a yellow light around her. In magic, yellow governed barriers and enhancements. It was well-suited to someone like Ruth, who fought defensively via coordinated unmanned crafts.

“I can do one better than that!” Theia rallied. “Forward the firing controls of

all your fighters to me! You take over everything else!”

While Ruth was glowing yellow, Theia was glowing red—the color of force. Its magic primarily enhanced Theia’s raw attack power. It would grant her dominating strength in her Combat Dress, but she didn’t think that was necessary just yet. All she needed to do at the moment was take out the remaining mobile weapons, and for that, Ruth’s fighters were more than enough. With the red light heightening her firepower, she could shoot them all down with deadly ease. She and Ruth thus worked together to make quick work of the remaining robots.

“Are all these spells yours, Aika-san?!” Koutarou shouted in surprise.

“They are! Right now, I can reach all the way to you with my magic!” Maki replied.

The former Dark Navy was wrapped in an indigo light, which enhanced her specialty magic of the same color. Thanks to that, she could cast spell after spell to help Koutarou even though he was well outside of her ordinary range. Magic didn’t do much against the black hound, but that didn’t stop Maki from enhancing Koutarou’s vision, reflexes, and the like.

“How’s Yurika doing?” Koutarou asked next.

“She’s melting all of the enemies with Clan-san,” Maki answered.

“Sounds like a dangerous combo...”

Clan was aglow with an orange light that expanded her mind and granted her the ability to alter objects. With it, she could wring more destruction from her bombs—but this time, she was using her insight and expertise to assist Yurika.

“If you follow the ratios, there’s no weapon you can’t melt!” she insisted.

“I don’t know the first thing about science!” Yurika shrieked.

“I’ll give you the numbers, so just make sure everything is within the parameters!”

“Okay, here goes... Twin Cast: Summon Acid Cloud!”

The blue light around Yurika increased her mana and gave her the power to call things from afar, enabling her to use powerful summoning magic. She used

it to conjure forth two different types of acid, which Clan then used her orange light to mix. The byproduct was an acid so potent that it could melt nearly anything. It was far more powerful than what Yurika had been using before, and it decommissioned the remainder of the active mobile weapons in the blink of an eye.

“Kiriha-san, is it really okay for us to be using chemical weapons like that...?” Koutarou murmured. The acid fog the girls had created was just as terrifying as their enemies, if not more so.

“Don’t worry. Clan-dono will break down any remaining acid.”

“Okay, so they *did* consider the consequences of this.”

“Veltlion, are you trying to pick a fight?!”

With even more mana than normal, Yurika could perform incredible magical feats—which was dangerous in its own right. Fortunately, Clan was there to act as a throttle for and a safeguard against her destructive potential. While the two girls seemed an unlikely combination at first, they had a unique and surprising combination of talents.

“At this rate, Yurika’s gonna hog all the glory! Shizuka, you should team up with us Sanaes to take down the black dog!”

“Fine by me! Uncle’s raring to go too!”

“Hahaha, with all this mana, I can really get serious for the first time in a while!”

The Sanaes were glowing purple, while Shizuka was wreathed in a black light. They governed the powers of spiritual energy and destruction respectively, which served to enhance the abilities the girls already possessed. Shizuka’s mana in particular had increased explosively, overcoming the drain from being in contact with the giant hound. And physically, she was now strong enough to hold it in place with brute strength alone. If the beast had had any bones, they would have long shattered in Alunaya’s draconic grasp.

“Satomi-kun, let’s close the whirlpool. We should be able to do it with this power,” suggested Harumi, a white light radiating from her body.

Since all nine colors of light weren't in constant use, Harumi channeled their leftover power into Signaltin. The sword glimmered like a rainbow as its power swelled. In this state, Harumi believed it was strong enough to close the gates of hell. The Gray Knight had opened them, but it was the black hound—Tayuma—that was now holding them open. It ordinarily would have been more effective to defeat the beast first, but with the rainbow-colored light, Harumi thought it was possible to shut the gates directly.

"I feel like I'm not really doing anything here," Koutarou commented with a bitter smile. Warlord III's sword was now emanating Signaltin's power, which enhanced the entire mobile weapon—but that was thanks to the girls. It wasn't Koutarou's own strength.

"In the same fashion that sails do nothing, perhaps you could say that. But a ship nevertheless needs them to move. The same way we need you, Satomikun," replied Harumi.

Indeed, the sails of a ship had no inherent power of their own—yet they were responsible for moving the ship. Without them, no wind would be strong enough. In a very similar fashion, Harumi and the other girls would never be able to move forward without Koutarou. He was the one who made use of their power.

"I keep getting full of myself because you always spoil me like that, Sakuraba-senpai."

"Boys should be at least a little proud. Hee hee."

Harumi wasn't the only one who saw Koutarou as the figurative sails of their ship. While each of the eight other girls would have expressed it differently, they all felt the same way. Theia saw him as their battlefield banner raised high over a long line of troops. Yurika had no sense of direction (in more ways than one), so she felt like he was the map app on her smartphone, telling her where and when to go. They all wanted him to lead and guide them as they supported him, and that desire made their nine lights glow ever brighter even now.

"Here we go, Sakuraba-senpai," he said.

"I'm with you."

“You too, Kiriha-san.”

“Why do I come in second?”

“Oh, don’t sulk. It doesn’t mean anything.”

“I know. I just wanted to tease you.”

“Jeez, every time...”

Koutarou ordered Warlord III to advance. The black hound stood between him and the gates of hell—his target. His plan was to attack the whirlpool itself with his supercharged sword.

Maybe I really am the only one who can catch everyone’s wind...

Signaltn, like the whirlpool, drew upon the power of emotions. And with so many of them directed toward him in the moment, Koutarou felt like a font of strength. He understood the deep bond he shared with all the girls, and he intended to use that to challenge the whirlpool and correct the distortion in the world.

“This is the result of him accepting all of us... so why does Satomi-kun feel like he has to choose just one wind to propel him in the future?”

“Because he’s an idiot.”

“Your Highness, you don’t have to say it that way!”

Unaware of the girls’ slight displeasure, Koutarou flew forward. Seeing him approach, the black hound summoned a multitude of orbs to fire.

“Hahaha, you don’t have the time for that!”

The power of destruction within Shizuka supported Alunaya, who crushed the two legs of the beast he was grappling to keep it in place.

“GRAAAGH!”

Shizuka and Alunaya had so far avoided letting the beast go for fear of it running amok, but now they had a new plan...

“Super Spiritual Energy Thunderbolt!”

Out of the blue, a pale purple streak of lightning—courtesy of Sanae-san—

struck the black hound. The beast might have been able to block or dodge it ordinarily, but with two of its legs crushed, it was a sitting duck. Regenerating the broken limbs would take energy—energy it didn't have in its weakened state. The bolt thus easily pierced the black hound's defenses.

“Spiritual Turbulent Tornado!”

Next, a purple whirlwind whipped up around the beast. Of course, this was no normal tornado. It was a creation of Sanae-chan's psychic powers meant to blind and trap the hound.

“Special Celestial Comeeeeeeeeet!”

With the black beast in check, Sanae-nee flew down at it from above while brandishing Saguratin in both hands. In terms of spiritual attack power, there was no one stronger than Sanae-nee with Saguratin. Her only obstacle was how to get in range of the beast—which was where Sanae-san and Sanae-chan had come in. Her sweeping slash left her wide open, but the attack struck true and met the beast's head with an incredible impact. In truth, her “slash” was less like a sword strike and more like being hit by a spiritual meteor. Powered by the minds of all three Sanaes, Saguratin was supercharged with energy—so much so that it was visibly spilling out of the blade.

“Were the embarrassing attack names really necessary?” Sanae-san asked with a wince.

“Yeah. It, like, totally helps you focus or something,” insisted Sanae-chan.

“Really...?”

With that fell blow, the black hound's head was destroyed. It popped like a soundless balloon, and the beast collapsed to the ground.

“Now's your chance, Blue Knight!”

“Here I come!”

“We should go too, Uncle.”

“That's the idea!”

Even now, the headless black beast wasn't defeated. It was drawing energy from the whirlpool of chaos to regenerate—meaning that the whirlpool had less

power to defend itself. The Sanaes had coordinated their attacks specifically to create this opportunity.

“Indeed, your final hour has come!”

With a flap of his wings, Alunaya exhaled a great blast of fire. It was hot enough to be plasma, but he’d avoided the risk of any stray flames reaching the city by adjusting his angle in flight. The whirlpool of chaos generated gray blobs to defend and fight back, but Alunaya’s searing breath incinerated most of them.

“I’ll take it from here!”

Shizuka took control of Alunaya’s body to unleash a karate kick at an approaching gray blob. It was several meters in size, but it stood no chance of surviving an attack from a twenty-meter dragon. The kick, supercharged by Shizuka’s black light, obliterated the blob.

“Burn, spirits of flame! Burst, breath of the stars! Spring out before me, primal power, and let the heavens and earth behold your white radiance! Halo of the Sky God!”

With Harumi’s incantation, a power as great as Alunaya’s fire breath coiled around Warlord’s sword as Koutarou thrust it into the whirlpool. Combined with the rainbow light, it was the single strongest attack they’d ever produced. A fierce crackling could be heard as the diametrically opposed energies clashed within the vortex until it climaxed into a great explosion. Yurika and Maki had cast a powerful ward over the area, but not even their combined spells were enough to contain it completely.

The rainbow light and the gray chaos had canceled out one another until it was clear which power prevailed. The whirlpool ultimately faded after consuming all of its energy. Likewise, the black hound began melting away.

Nefilforan’s unit eventually arrived to clean up the remaining mobile weapons, and with that, the battle was finally over. Though Koutarou and the girls were ultimately victorious, something was bothering Koutarou. He was concerned about the Gray Knight, who’d disappeared in the middle of the fight.

“Did he really run away...?”

Koutarou touched down with Warlord III where the Gray Knight had last been seen—where Clan had fired a limited Super Space-time Repulsion Shell. But as hard as Koutarou looked, there was no evidence of the Gray Knight anywhere now. He’d said that he was retreating, but the group had no reason to take him at his word. Believing him blindly was dangerous. Yet in the end, it seemed he’d fled as promised.

“Hmm... He must have withdrawn when we engaged the beast that was formerly Tayuma,” Kiriha mused.

“What makes you say that?” Koutarou asked.

“The Gray Knight can control the whirlpool of chaos with his sword, and he never interfered in the fight after that.”

“I feel like the Sanaes would’ve chased him down if he had.”

“Meaning that he might have stayed nearby for a time, but he ultimately retreated. Perhaps he had a reason for it.”

With his sword, the Gray Knight had full control of the whirlpool of chaos. If he’d truly been desperate to defeat Koutarou and the girls, he inevitably would have used that against them in their fight with the black hound. Instead, he’d simply left them to duke it out. Had the Gray Knight been that concerned about his own safety, or had there been something keeping him from fighting further? Kiriha suspected something along those lines was the reason he’d vanished.

“Isn’t it a simple matter of numbers?” Harumi asked. “Ralgwin’s forces are already en route to Forthorthe, after all.”

Harumi believed that the Gray Knight had fled after realizing the disadvantage he was at against the group. The only allies he had—mobile weapons and the black hound—were foes that Koutarou had already defeated once. The Gray Knight had surely realized his chances of victory were slim. Koutarou and company had had their hands tied looking out for the city, but beyond that, they’d certainly had the advantage in terms of strength.

“Either way, the Gray Knight’s undoubtedly used up most of his available forces. If he had more, he would have attacked the ceremony directly,” offered

Kiriha.

If the Gray Knight truly wanted to create a diplomatic rift between Japan and Forthorthe, creating a situation where Forthorthian blood would be on Japanese hands or vice versa would be ideal. That meant a mass attack—which he couldn't afford. Kiriha had surmised that his last remaining forces had been on reserve in the event he needed to use them as sacrificial pawns for an escape, as he had today.

That leaves the question of why the Gray Knight remained on Earth after Ralgwin and his forces departed. Kiriha was concerned about the Gray Knight's motives, but without anything conclusive, she didn't bring the matter up with the group. *And why did he make contact with Nalfa? Does it have something to do with why he's still here? Or is it just a coincidence?*

All the group knew for sure was that the Gray Knight had stayed behind on the planet and tracked down Nalfa. But what had he been up to in the intervening days? And what was his real goal? Kiriha couldn't say for sure, and his behavior unnerved her.

The worst-case scenario is if he's thinking the same thing I am...

Kiriha was left pondering Nalfa's true identity. As far as she knew, the Forthorthian transfer student had exhibited mysterious powers on at least two occasions. The first was shortly after she'd arrived on Earth, and the second was today. Kiriha hadn't witnessed the latter personally, but the haniwas had confirmed that Nalfa had been glowing with the colors of the rainbow. If the Gray Knight had stayed on Earth to investigate that as well, it could spell a great deal of trouble.

While Kiriha was turning all of that over in her mind, Kotori approached Koutarou. She'd been waiting for her chance to talk to him without interrupting anything. "Kou-niisan, do you have a minute?"

"What's up, Kin-chan? Are you hurt anywhere?"

"It's about Nal-chan, not me."

"Is she hurt?"

"No, she seems perfectly fine. That's actually why I wanted to talk to you."

“Hmm? What do you mean?”

“I don’t think there’s any way she *should* be fine... I mean, she was almost killed.”

“Ah, gotcha.”

Koutarou could see where Kotori was coming from. The Gray Knight had come dangerously close to cutting Nalfa down. She’d even been wounded in the process. No normal girl could walk away from an experience like that unshaken, yet Nalfa wasn’t showing the slightest bit of concern for herself. Kotori thought it might be because she didn’t want anyone to worry.

“So I was hoping you could help her, Kou-niisan.”

“Are you sure it should be me?”

Koutarou understood what Kotori was asking. She wanted him to support and comfort Nalfa. He just didn’t think he was particularly qualified for the job.

“Kou-niisan,” Kotori leaned in to whisper. “I’m only telling you this because it’s an emergency, but... Nal-chan likes you.”

“What?!” Koutarou reflexively looked Nalfa’s way. She was currently sitting on the stairs to the riverbank, talking with a medic.

“So I’m sure. There’s no one better, really,” Kotori assured him with a faint smile as she backed away, her voice returning to normal.

“Wouldn’t Mackenzie be perfect for this kind of thing?”

Kenji had been the one to support Koutarou when his family situation was rough. In Koutarou’s eyes, there was no better ballast than his best friend. He trusted Kenji far more than he did himself.

“He shouldn’t be allowed near a woman when she’s weak!”

“Kotori, that’s going too far!” Kenji objected. “I know how to behave myself!”

Kenji’s shoulders slumped. He didn’t feel like he’d done anything to anger his sister today. In fact, he felt like he’d done a good job protecting her and Nalfa. Yet Kotori’s low opinion of him hadn’t changed any. That hurt a little.

“So this is really a process of elimination...” Koutarou mumbled. “Still, I can’t

just leave her be.”

He wasn’t fully convinced he was the right man for the job. He genuinely believed Kenji would be a better option. But Nalfa’s best friend was telling him he should do it, so he decided to listen.

“If you would, please, Kou-niisan.”

“Okay then, here goes... Wait.” Koutarou took a few steps, then stopped.

“Kou-niisan?”

“What about you, Kin-chan? Are you okay?”

If Nalfa was upset, there was no doubt Kotori was as well. When Koutarou realized that, he turned back to her with a worried look.

“Don’t worry,” she replied. “I’ll ask you to spoil me later, Kou-niisan.”

“Not me?!”

“You got it, Kin-chan. Shall I have some sweets ready for you?”

“Yeah. That’s enough for me.”

“Good to know. Okay, here goes for real this time.”

Koutarou thus approached Nalfa, with Kenji, Kotori, and the ten other girls watching him go. The girls in particular looked strangely happy. They were glad that he was going to comfort Nalfa, but they were also glad that he hadn’t forgotten about Kotori. He’d grown considerate as of late, and they were pleased with this development.

Shortly after coming to Earth, Nalfa had been attacked. And just like today, Kenji and Kotori had been there to help her back then. The situations were quite similar indeed, with the biggest difference today being the assailant—the Gray Knight. His very presence inspired fear in Nalfa, but it was a fundamentally different fear than having a gun pointed at her. It was an alien, almost primordial fear, like mud slowly filling her mind. She’d tried to face the Gray Knight when he brought his sword down upon her—but that didn’t mean that she hadn’t been scared. When she touched the bandage around her neck, the quaking fear came rushing back to her. It had firmly taken root in her heart.

Oh no, if I look like this, I'll just make Kotori worry...

Nalfa slapped her cheeks a couple of times and tried to smile. She finally managed it after a few attempts. She then turned around to look for her best friend but found someone else approaching her instead.

"Koutarou-sama..."

"Hey. Mind if I sit here for a while?" Koutarou asked, taking a seat on the step beside Nalfa. He then opened the plastic bottle in his hand and took a sip.

"Koutarou-sama, why...?"

"Kin-chan told me I should come talk to you. Pretty sure she saw right through the brave face you put on for everyone."

"Kotori told you...?"

With that, the smile disappeared from Nalfa's face. She knew faking it was pointless after hearing why Koutarou had come.

"She's a good friend," said Koutarou.

"She is."

"I've got Mackenzie, so I know how it feels."

"Even though Kotori's always getting mad at him?"

"Girls just don't understand the real Mackenzie."

On the surface, Nalfa and Koutarou were having a pleasant chat... but Nalfa's expression remained gloomy. Koutarou noticed but continued nonetheless. He was prepared to wait until she was ready to talk. Thus their friendly conversation continued for a time, and when it finally reached a lull, Nalfa grew brave enough to broach what was really on her mind.

"Are you always fighting against this kind of fear...?"

She hardly even knew what to say, so she tried desperately to put her feelings into words. Nothing would change if she didn't speak up.

"Not exactly. Enemies like we fought today are pretty rare," Koutarou replied calmly.

“But you’ve faced them before?”

“Yeah, here and there.”

“Aren’t you scared?”

“Of course I am. We hardly know what we’re up against.”

“But you don’t *look* scared to me.”

“That’s because there’s something I fear even more than all this.”

“What?”

“That the people I want to protect will die because I’m too scared to move. Take today, for example. If nerves had gotten the better of me and delayed me even a little, those men in black or Nefilforan’s forces might have paid the price for it. Compared to the fear of losing someone, fear of the unknown is nothing.”

Koutarou’s actions bore consequences for the fates of others. That was something he’d learned the hard way along the line—and it terrified him. No matter how careful he was, the worst could always happen. He fought desperately to stave off that possibility and the regret that came with it.

“What scares you the most, Nalfa-san?” he asked. “Is it the Gray Knight who attacked you? Or something else?”

“What scares me the most...?” Nalfa had to look inward for the answer. What *did* she fear more than anything? “That you, Koutarou-sama... or Kotori, or my brother... might suddenly disappear. It doesn’t have anything to do with the knight in gray armor.”

Ultimately, Nalfa feared exactly what Koutarou did—losing loved ones.

“In that case, I think you did your best today, Nalfa-san.”

“I didn’t do anything...”

“You stood up to him, didn’t you? I heard from Kin-chan and Mackenzie.”

When the Gray Knight had cornered the group, Nalfa had done her best to resist. When things were most grim, she’d at least wanted to surprise the Gray Knight. Her efforts had given Sanae an opening to attack, and in the end, everyone was saved. Nalfa had done a spectacular job.

“It was all I *could* do...”

“That’s fine. It’s not like you’re some almighty deity. You’re just a normal person like me. What’s scary is scary, and there’ll always be some things that are impossible for us. So just do your best together with everyone.”

If Nalfa was powerless, then so was Koutarou. The only strength he had to his name was a little skill with a blade. In the end, he was only human—but that didn’t stop him from trying his hardest. Somewhere along the way, he’d gained allies willing to lend him their strength, and that was okay in his book. He’d realized there was no need for him to take on everything by himself.

“I’m not an almighty deity... I just need to do my best with everyone...”

Nalfa chewed on those words. She was happy that Koutarou was telling her that it was okay for her to be a normal person. It seemed so obvious, but it lifted a great weight from her heart. Thanks to that, she was able to smile a little. She also realized there was something else she wanted to ask Koutarou.

“Um, Koutarou-sama?”

“Yeah?”

“May I ask something of you?”

“Knock yourself out.”

“Could I borrow your shoulder for a while? Just until I cheer up a little more...”

“Sure.”

With that, Nalfa leaned over and rested her head on Koutarou’s shoulder, her rainbow-colored hair tickling his hand. When he looked at her, he felt strangely at ease.



“By the way, Nalfa-san. Can I ask something of you too?”

“Of course. I’ll do anything.”

“I think Mackenzie did his best today, so could you get Kin-chan to go easy on him?”

“I’ll give it a try, but I can’t make any promises.”

And so the two of them went back to chatting casually about their friends. Something was different now, however—Nalfa was smiling. While there wasn’t anything special about their conversation, she enjoyed it immensely.

During the battle, the Gray Knight had been hit by a Super Space-time Repulsion Shell and forced to retreat—but he didn’t consider that a loss, because he’d learned something very important in the process.

“She won’t exhibit her powers when her own life is in danger, but she won’t hesitate when the Blue Knight is in trouble. The power’s divided between Signaltin, Saguratin, and she herself. No, it’s probably split into more than just three parts...”

What the Gray Knight wanted to know the most was why Signaltin wasn’t exhibiting its true powers despite the rainbow contract. As the answer started to become clear, he was glad he’d stayed on Earth. For some reason, Signaltin’s power had been divided and distributed in a way that it could be recalled when necessary. He knew it was in three parts at the very least, but in order to accomplish his true goal, he’d have to gather them all.

“That will mean putting the Blue Knight in grave danger. If I don’t, I doubt she’ll pool all of the power...”

Since Nalfa wouldn’t use the sword’s power for her own sake, the Gray Knight would have to leverage Koutarou against her. And a small skirmish like the one today wouldn’t be nearly enough. He’d have to resort to something on a much larger scale. An all-out war, perhaps.

“It needs to be a major fleet battle at the very least. Another coup d’état might do the trick. Guess I’ll be sticking with Ralgwin for a while longer...”

The Gray Knight was strong, but since this wasn't his home world, he lacked one particularly powerful resource—connections. He would need Ralgwin's or Grevanas's assistance to snare Koutarou in a large-scale battle.

"I'll leave my Sanae with you for a while longer, Blue Knight. My goal is still a ways off. I won't have any trouble hunting her down in the process..."

The Gray Knight brought up the navigation computer and set a warp course. His destination was Forthorthe to rendezvous with Ralgwin and Grevanas. With everything he'd learned while on Earth, the Gray Knight could now clearly visualize the path ahead of him. It would be a long and arduous one, but he remained optimistic... for at the end of it lay his true goal.

The Hazy Moon detected a space quake a few days after Nalfa was attacked. Clan's bracelet rang out in alarm while she was enjoying lunch in the school courtyard with everyone.

"My sensors are reporting a large-scale space quake detected. There's a 90 percent probability that it's the warp signal of a large spaceship... from somewhere around Jupiter? That's pretty far. Perhaps that's why the prediction is so uncertain," she reported.

"None of our allies have any business in Jupiter's orbit. It's probably best to assume that the Gray Knight is headed for Forthorthe," Ruth added.

Indeed, the Forthorthian ships currently on and near Earth had no reason to travel to Jupiter. There was also no reason for anyone to go that far in preparation for a warp back to Forthorthe. They could safely initiate their warp drives in much closer proximity to Earth—unless the distance was the goal, of course. If anyone tried to warp in Earth's vicinity, Clan's Hazy Moon would track them. That wasn't a worry from Jupiter, however, and the only person who would be worried about that under the circumstances was none other than the Gray Knight himself.

"He has his own spaceship?" Koutarou asked, surprised.

"He came from a parallel world, so it's safe to assume that's how he got here," Kiriha replied.

“Oh yeah. Now that you mention it, Sanae Onee-chan has one too.”

“It’s not fair, though. His is way bigger,” Sanae-nee said with a pout.

“A big spaceship? Not a battleship?” Kiriha mused, raising an eyebrow. “What kind of ship are we talking about, Clan-dono?”

“Hang on... Okay, it’s definitely big—bigger than a royal-class battleship—so the AI classified it as a transport ship.”

At present, royal-class battleships were the biggest crafts meant for battle in Forthorthe. There were even larger vessels, however, meant for civilian use and transportation—to move mining resources or supplies to remote regions, for example. The ship the Hazy Moon had detected was larger than a royalty-class battleship, so it was naturally presumed to be one such civilian transport craft.

“Is something the matter?” Harumi asked, giving Kiriha a worried look. Whenever Kiriha reacted like this, there was usually cause for concern.

“I just find it strange that the Gray Knight is using a civilian ship. Maybe I’m overthinking things...”

That was the part that stuck out to Kiriha. Under the circumstances, a battleship would have made more sense—and it wouldn’t have been impossible for the Gray Knight to get his hands on one. She simply wasn’t sure why he would have chosen a civilian vessel instead.

“Does it have something to do with why he went out to Jupiter?” Harumi asked.

“You’re suggesting it’s just another way to thwart attention and avoid pursuit? Yes... That does seem likely.”

Kiriha believed Harumi had struck the heart of the matter, so she put any further thought of it out of her mind for the time being. It was an unsettling situation, but there was no point in dwelling on it without more information.

“The way I see it, a bigger ship will be easier to find,” Koutarou chimed in. “We’ll head that way soon, so just knowing what we’re looking for is a good start.”

“Hmm, I think I’ll follow the lead of your optimism.” Kiriha nodded and took a

sip from the bottle of tea she was holding. After calming down, a different thought altogether occurred to her. “By the way, there’s something I’d like to ask you all before then.”

“And what’s that?” Koutarou stopped eating his lunch and turned to Kiriha. Incidentally, today was Maki’s turn to make lunch, which was a simple but lovingly prepared meal of deep-fried dishes.

“I was thinking of bringing Nalfa, Kotori, and Kenji with us when we go to Forthorthe.”

“Us?!” Nalfa and Kotori exclaimed in unison, turning to look at each other at the same time.

“Yeah, why me too?” Kenji cocked his head. He could understand Koutarou going and even Nalfa, but he saw no reason for him and his sister to tag along.

“Because of the Gray Knight,” Kiriha explained. “He might come after Nalfa again, so we need to protect her.”

“That’s true,” mumbled Koutarou. “We are the only ones who can protect her...”

He knew Kiriha was right. For some reason, the Gray Knight was interested in Nalfa. As long as there was a chance he might make contact or attack her again, they needed to protect her—and asking normal soldiers to defend her from the Gray Knight was a tall order. She would be safest with Koutarou and company.

“But why bring along Mackenzie and Kin-chan too?”

“The Gray Knight might try to take them hostage. It’s well known now that they’re good friends, so we need to keep a close eye on them too.”

Indeed, there was a grim chance that Kotori and Kenji would be used against the group. The Gray Knight wasn’t the only one who might try it either. The moment Koutarou and the others left the planet, the Matsudaira siblings might find themselves in hot water.

“That’s true... Sorry, but it looks like you three are going to have to come to Forthorthe with us,” Koutarou ultimately announced.

Kenji, Kotori, and Nalfa were all dear friends to him. He had no qualms about

keeping them close to protect them, but he *did* feel bad about springing the situation on them so suddenly. Nalfa felt the same way.

“I’m sorry, Kotori. You’re in danger because of me...”

“Don’t say that! It’s the bad guys’ fault, not yours, Nal-chan!”

Kotori didn’t blame Nalfa. If anything, she was angry at the villains who were targeting her best friend. She had no objections to going to Forthorthe, but Kenji shook his head.

“I’m not going, Kou.”

“Is there a reason?”

“Yeah. I have a date next weekend.”

“A date?!”

The series expression on Kenji’s face had led Koutarou to believe his reason would be equally serious, so the truth caught Koutarou quite off guard. He nearly started choking on his lunch in surprise. Kiriha quickly handed him a bottle of tea, however, so he managed to survive without incident.

“C’mon, man, what’s more important to you, Kin-chan’s life or a date?!” he demanded.

“They’re both important! My romantic future’s on the line here!” Kenji insisted.

In truth, he had two dates coming up—one with Kashiwagi Shiori and one with Emily the transfer student. He was trying to decide between the girls by going out with each of them. Unlike Kenji’s typical dates, these were indeed serious to him.

“Don’t worry,” Koutarou assured him. “Folsaria will conjure up a body double for you.”

“Don’t worry?! How am I supposed to entrust my romantic future to a body double?!”

Even though Kenji’s heart was in the right place, the circumstances were against him. His best friend was critical of his motivations, but not more so than

his own little sister...

“I can’t believe you, Nii-san! I’m not the only one in danger here! Nal-chan is too!” Kotori was fuming. She was consumed by a fiery rage, yet her glare was icy cold. Kenji felt both frozen and burned at the same time.

“K-Kotori! Just hear me out!” Upon realizing his blunder, he tried to beg for forgiveness, but the damage was already done.

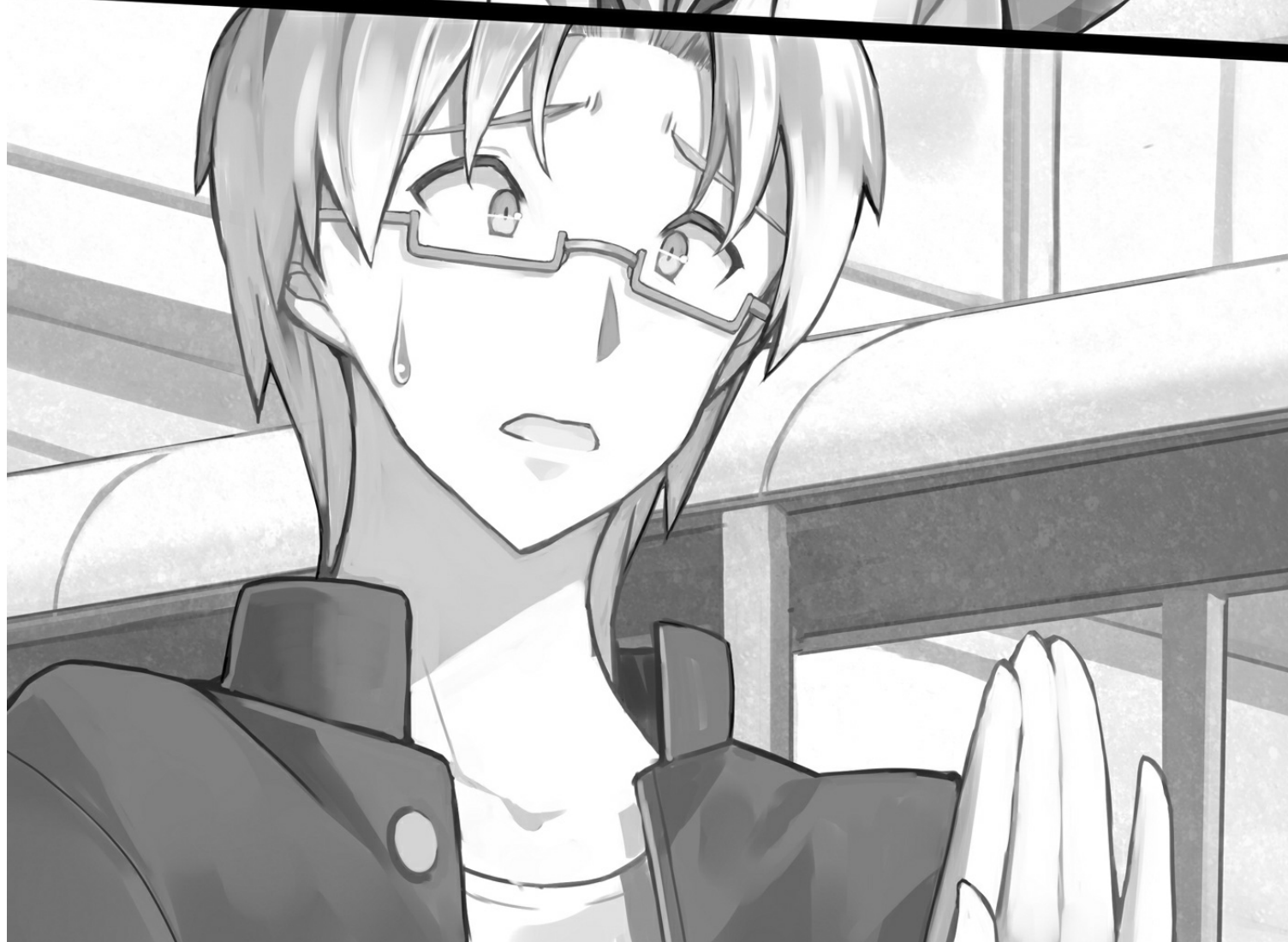
“That’s enough. My brother is dead to me. As of today, I’m Kou-niisan’s little sister.”

Someday, Kenji would understand. He would one day return to the wonderful brother he’d once been. Kotori believed in him and waited patiently for him to change. He’d even given her cause to be hopeful this time—he’d simply taken it too far. She couldn’t accept her brother choosing a date over her life.

“Help me, Kou!”

“You made your bed.”

Alas, it was a fight Kenji would have to endure on his own. Even Koutarou, who’d kindly asked Nalfa to help smooth things out between the siblings, couldn’t throw him a rope now.



Afterword

Long time no see. Takehaya here with volume 39. This afterword was written just after the state of emergency was lifted, and the city is slowly coming back to life. It's something of a relief. People are fortunately visiting bookstores again, but I'm also grateful for all of your support during the state of emergency. I'll continue to strive to meet your expectations.

Our story this time sees the Gray Knight investigating Signaltin. Thanks to that, Sanae Onee-chan gets a big role and the Gray Knight's motivations are gradually becoming clearer. His attacks become more intense, which gives Koutarou and company a hard time.

But even when things get rough, the princess of love and courage, Magical Girl Rainbow Yurika shines. I'd like to talk a bit about the acid magic she uses this time around. Acid is commonly a dangerous weapon used by villains or monsters, but in reality, it's not very practical because of how slowly it works. For example, the mafia will use it to melt bodies and such in movies, but it's not like that works overnight—even with the strongest acids to move things along. It's not a speedy process. The most you see instantaneously are color changes on the surface or the release of gas. So like in this volume, I figure machine-based foes would keep going until their circuits short rather than dissolving on the spot. There's no such thing as an instantaneous dissolution. This can be a serious complication for creators. We want dragons who breathe acid or heroes bravely jumping through the stones of an acid swamp, and we tend to forget that it generally takes a while for acid to melt anything.

Fortunately, however, we have a friendly magical girl using acid here and not an evil scientist. Yurika can create fire from nothing, so magically accelerating the rate at which acid works is perfectly conceivable. If there are spells to make people faster, then surely there are spells to make acid faster too. That said, Yurika gets her ideal partner in crime this time around—Clan. With her knowledge and power from the orange light, she makes a clever and potent ally. Please look forward to more adventures with the princess of acid and

courage, Scientific Girl Miracle Yurika.

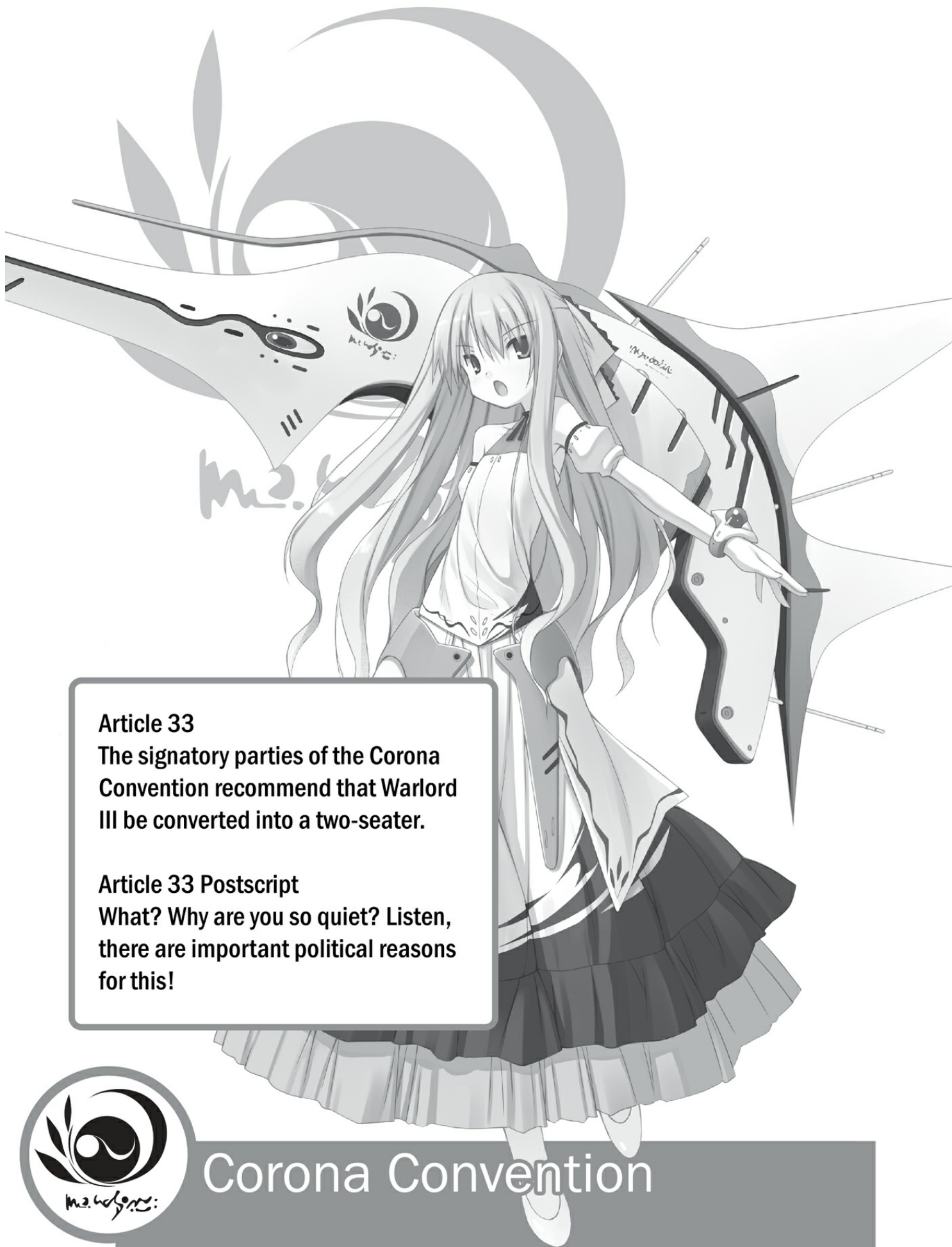
Incidentally, there's someone else I've been rooting for lately. Suzuki Eri-san, Sanae's voice actress from the anime, has started streaming and putting up gaming videos on YouTube. She's been playing *D—d by D—t*, where players are split up between murderer and survivors in a deadly game of tag. She's already streamed several times as of this writing. On her fourth play, she even had Oomori Nichika-san, Yurika's voice actress, on as a guest. It was quite exciting. I even got a little nostalgic and left a few comments myself. For anyone who's interested, please subscribe to her channel and cheer her on too. Oomori-san streams as well, although she doesn't do games on her channel. Please check her out too if you're interested. They need our support the most when working on their own, so I hope we can band together and make a difference.

Let's see. Was there anything else...? Oh, right, there's one more thing I'd like to talk about. With the last volume, there was a bonus story about Nana and Elfaria. I know it's a bit late now, but I wonder if there's any interest in a story for those two. If so, I was thinking I might write a volume mainly featuring them. In this day and age, however, it's somewhat difficult to hear what readers are asking for. There's so much information out there that voices get drowned out, so I'm not entirely sure what to do. I'm thinking of doing a survey on my Twitter account (@Takehaya_info) someday. I would be happy to hear from you then.

By the way, the bonus stories for this volume feature Theia, Kiriha, and Yurika from Melon Books, Toranoana, and BookWalker. The bookstores have been wonderful. Wait, isn't it kind of late to be saying that? (Lol!) I'm about out of space now, so allow me to close with my usual acknowledgments. I would like to thank everyone at HJ Bunko's editorial department for their assistance, Poco-san for drawing such a cute illustration of Clan in her uniform, and all you readers out there worldwide for your continued support despite the state the world is in.

Let us meet again in the afterword for volume 40 (finally!).

October, 2021



Article 33

The signatory parties of the Corona Convention recommend that Warlord III be converted into a two-seater.

Article 33 Postscript

What? Why are you so quiet? Listen, there are important political reasons for this!



Corona Convention

New! September 8th, 2011

Bonus Short Stories

Kiriha

When Kiriha asked Koutarou to go shopping with her, he agreed without hesitation. She was always taking care of him, so he was more than happy to do something for her for a change. He wanted to return the favor, even if only a little.

“This sure isn’t where I thought we’d be coming, though,” he muttered.

“Now you ought to understand why I asked you to come with me,” she replied.

“Yeah.”

Kiriha had brought Koutarou to a fishing tackle shop. He enjoyed fishing, so she’d thought he would make the perfect guide for such a shopping trip.

“I’m just not sure why you need fishing gear, Kiriha-san.”

“To tell you the truth, it’s for my father’s birthday.”

“Ah, of course.”

Kiriha was in the market for a present to give her father, whose birthday was coming up in a few days. She didn’t know any more about fishing than the average person, however, so she was hoping to rely on Koutarou for advice.

“You’ve got me curious about what fishing underground is like,” he put forward.

“We do have a few underground lakes,” said Kiriha. “That’s where my father likes to go.”

“They’re fresh water?”

“Some of them are connected to the ocean, but yes, they’re mostly fresh water.”

Koutarou was interested in the details of the underground fishing scene. Kiriha was no expert on the subject, but she'd tagged along with her father on his fishing expeditions in the past. Koutarou accordingly picked her brain to try to figure out what would make a good gift for him.

"What does your father fish for?"

"I recall him catching a lot of catfish."

"Did they have eyes?"

"Yes."

"Must be connected to a river or lake on the surface, then."

"Meaning?"

"Apparently, lots of underground fish species don't have eyes."

"And since those ones weren't eyeless, you suspect they came from the surface?"

"I bet your father was choosing fishing spots with a rich variety of fish."

Through his discussion with Kiriha, Koutarou was able to narrow down the gifting options. A fishing rod and line that could stand up to catfish. A reel to go along with them. A hook for bait fishing. Lures would have been useless if all the underground fish were eyeless, but Koutarou had learned that wasn't the case. Even lures would make a fine birthday present for Kiriha's dad.

"My father once said that he'd like to try ocean fishing, even though that was impossible for an underground dweller," Kiriha confessed.

"But not anymore," Koutarou replied.

"Indeed. The situation is changing such that his dream might actually come true."

The People of the Earth had previously been forbidden from coming to the surface. In order to avoid any trouble, they'd avoided surface dwellers as much as possible. But now that their connection to Forthorthe had come to light, that was starting to change. There were even talks of returning to Forthorthe. They could no longer avoid the world above ground completely.

“In that case, you should bring your father up here someday,” Koutarou suggested.

“What do you mean?” Kiriha asked.

“I’ll show him around. I was thinking that we could go out on a boat together.”

“Are you sure?”

“I think the least I owe him is getting to know him.”

Koutarou had met Kiriha’s father, Daiha, but their encounters were almost entirely political in nature. They’d scarcely shared a word in private before. Koutarou felt a fishing trip would be a great way to break the ice between them.

“Is this so you can ask for my hand in marriage?”

“I-It’s way too early for that kind of talk, Kiriha-san!”

“Ohoho...”

Kiriha giggled as Koutarou panicked. He’d said it was “too early,” after all—meaning that the time would come eventually. She was more than prepared to be the catch of Koutarou’s life.

Theia

Theia’s forte was marksmanship, but she was no slouch in hand-to-hand combat either. She was Koutarou’s equal whenever they found themselves grappling with each other. Her skill more than made up for her size.

“Hyaaaaah!” She let out a shout as she lithely leaped forward to unleash a flying kick at Koutarou. Flashy moves like this were her favorite.

“Don’t think you’ll get me so easily!” Koutarou cried, evading her and retaliating with a low kick aimed where he expected her to land.

“This is how you treat your future bride?!” Theia, however, didn’t stop moving when she hit the ground. She instantly flipped forward, up and over Koutarou’s kick.

“What are you talking about?! You dodged that like it was nothing!”

“Your future bride is just that amazing!”

“Who said anything about marrying you?!”

Koutarou and Theia continued to trade quips as they traded blows. They’d been in the middle of taking a breather at the park during their morning jog when the fight had first broken out. Shizuka and Ruth, who’d tagged along, now stood on the sidelines watching. The four of them would often go out to exercise together. Koutarou, Theia, and Shizuka were the most active of the bunch, and Ruth made a conscientious effort to participate in order to further her knight training.

“Theia-chan really does fight like a wild beast,” Shizuka remarked.

“Her Highness was trained in the basics of martial arts, but she’s largely self-taught,” Ruth explained.

“So *that’s* why she moves like that. She really is a natural.”

“Her Highness’s limbs are short, so using a proper fighting style would put her at a disadvantage.”

“Did you hear that, Princess?! They’re saying your arms and legs are short!” Koutarou taunted.

“Shut up! I don’t need long limbs!” Theia roared. In part, she preferred big, flashy maneuvers because they gave her the edge she was lacking in combat—and that was precisely the motivation behind the momentous chop she unleashed at Koutarou.

“Whoa!” he shouted, leaning backward to avoid the blow.

“You’re wide open!”

Theia continued her trajectory forward. With Koutarou off-balance from leaning back, he found himself unable to dodge her next move. He took the brunt of her tackle dead-on.

“Agh!”

Koutarou tumbled backward, bowled over by the princess. Fortunately, the

grassy ground absorbed most of the impact.

“Hahaha, I win!” Theia declared. She was thoroughly assured of her victory, and she had every right to be. She was now straddling Koutarou as he lay on the ground.

“All right, you win today...” He readily admitted his defeat. To continue the fight from here would go beyond “a little light exercise,” and that was normally where they drew the line.

“Take that!” Theia crowed. “How does it feel to lose to a woman with short arms and legs?”

“It was fun, so good enough.”

“But how do you *really* feel?”

“...I’ll win tomorrow.”

“Heh, you sore loser.”

Theia swiftly stood up and held her hand out to Koutarou, who gratefully took it and rose to his feet as well.

“Satomi-kun sure is kind. If he’d used his psychic powers, he could’ve easily won.”

“When I asked Master about that once, he replied, ‘You don’t blow the summit off a mountain to make it more climbable.’”

“If he sees Theia-chan as a peak, then he must really love her.”

“I thought so as well, but I didn’t say it.”

“That was probably for the better. Hahaha.”

Ruth and Shizuka knew well that these sparring matches between Theia and Koutarou were special.

“You should drink plenty of milk,” Koutarou suggested to the blonde princess.

“I already do, but it doesn’t make me grow. What more do you want from me?” Theia countered.

“Well, I guess shorties *do* make good pilots.”

“Mm, yes... That’s more like it. Heh.”

Indeed, the other girls all knew that Koutarou and Theia’s back-and-forth was just their way of showing affection for one another.

Yurika

Koutarou bought sports magazines from time to time. Rather than collecting every issue, he would only pick them up whenever they featured a player he was particularly interested in. One such special issue was coming out today, and he was planning on stopping by the shopping street after school to buy a copy. He wasn’t sure if the person he was walking home with had other plans, however, so he decided to ask her first.

“Yurika, I’m gonna swing by the bookstore. What about you?”

“I’ll come too! There’s some manga I want to buy!”

“All right, then let’s hit it up on the way home.”

“Okaaay!”

Today, only Koutarou and Yurika were going home together. For better or worse, the rest of the crew was extraordinarily busy. Sometimes this would even include Yurika, and Koutarou would end up heading back to room 106 by his lonesome.

“It’s finally starting to cool off, huh?” he observed.

“I hate summer... It’s just so hot...” Yurika whined.

It was still late summer, but the calendar was nearing September. The heat of the day would slowly subside as night came.

“You hate winter too, though,” Koutarou remarked.

“Don’t you think the seasons between ‘too hot’ and ‘too cold’ are too short?”

“Well, spring and fall are three months apiece.”

“Three months that go by in a flash!”

They continued to talk about nothing in particular as they retraced the steps

of their commute to school. But unlike in the morning, it was just the two of them right now—and they would be alone together until they hit the shopping street.

Taking advantage of the opportunity, Yurika began in a slightly lower voice than usual, “Say, Satomi-san...”

“Hmm? What’s up?” he asked. When he looked over, he could see that her cheeks were bright red. It wasn’t the uncomfortable expression she would make when she was in trouble, however.

“There’s something that every girl dreams of trying... and I was wondering if I could with you.”

“Yeah, sure. I don’t mind.” If this was something every girl dreamed of, not just Yurika, even the dense Koutarou had an idea what it might be.

“Here goes...”

Yurika moved half a step closer to Koutarou. She then took his arm and wrapped hers around it. Indeed, walking arm-in-arm like this was what she’d dreamed of trying.

“Let’s go,” Koutarou said after a moment.

“Okaaay.”

Yurika interlocking her arm with his had given Koutarou some pause. They weren’t dating, after all, but he ultimately decided to go along with it. It was the least she deserved, and walking arm-in-arm wasn’t exactly uncomfortable.

“Heehee!” Yurika giggled as they set off again. She’d been worried this would upset Koutarou, so she was quite relieved when he showed no sign of displeasure.

“You’re really okay with something like this?” he asked.

“But I never get a chance to do anything ‘like this.’”

“That’s ’cause you’re always so wishy-washy.”

Yurika wasn’t a late bloomer, but she was slow to take action. That was why, oftentimes, other girls would beat her to the punch. She preferred to wait until

she had Koutarou alone to make her move.

“You’re also surprisingly considerate of everyone,” he added.

Lately, Yurika had been much more mindful of the people around her. She was no longer as insensitive and obtuse as she’d been in the past. She’d grown. Experiencing setbacks of her own had taught her the art of holding out.

“What’s surprising about that?!” she demanded.

“You heard me.”

“Jeez! Why do you have to ruin this for me?!”

“Sorry. What should I be doing instead?”

When he stopped to think about it, Koutarou realized how hard Yurika worked for his sake. It was just easy to overlook thanks to her day-to-day carelessness. There was no harm in letting her have this.

“I’d like it if you just took the hint...” she said, her cheeks red and her eyes downcast. There was something that she desperately wanted Koutarou to do, but telling him to do it wouldn’t feel right, so she didn’t say it at all.

“I guess this is as far as we go now, then.”

Koutarou reached out and patted Yurika on the head. She was always an MVP in combat, and she’d even started putting real effort into her studies recently. He continued to pat her on the head as they walked, both proud and grateful for her contributions.

“This is... surprisingly embarrassing,” she muttered.

“What’s surprising about that, huh?” Koutarou parroted, throwing her question from a moment ago right back at her. It didn’t mean much. He was only kidding around with her.

“Pfft... Ahahaha! Oh, Satomi-san...”

But that single silly joke was enough to wipe the awkward expression from Yurika’s face. She smiled again. Beamed, even. The light in her eyes was softer than ever.

“If it’s so embarrassing, maybe we should stop.”

“Can we please keep going?”

“You got it.”

The fading sun was low in the sky, but it was still hot to cling to someone in the late-summer evening. Neither one of them seemed particularly bothered by it, however.









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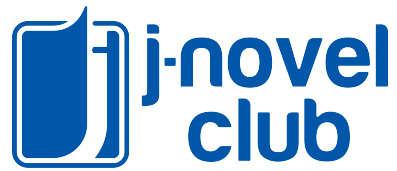
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Invaders of the Rokujouma!? Volume 39

by Takehaya

Translated by Warnis Edited by Morgan Dreher

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