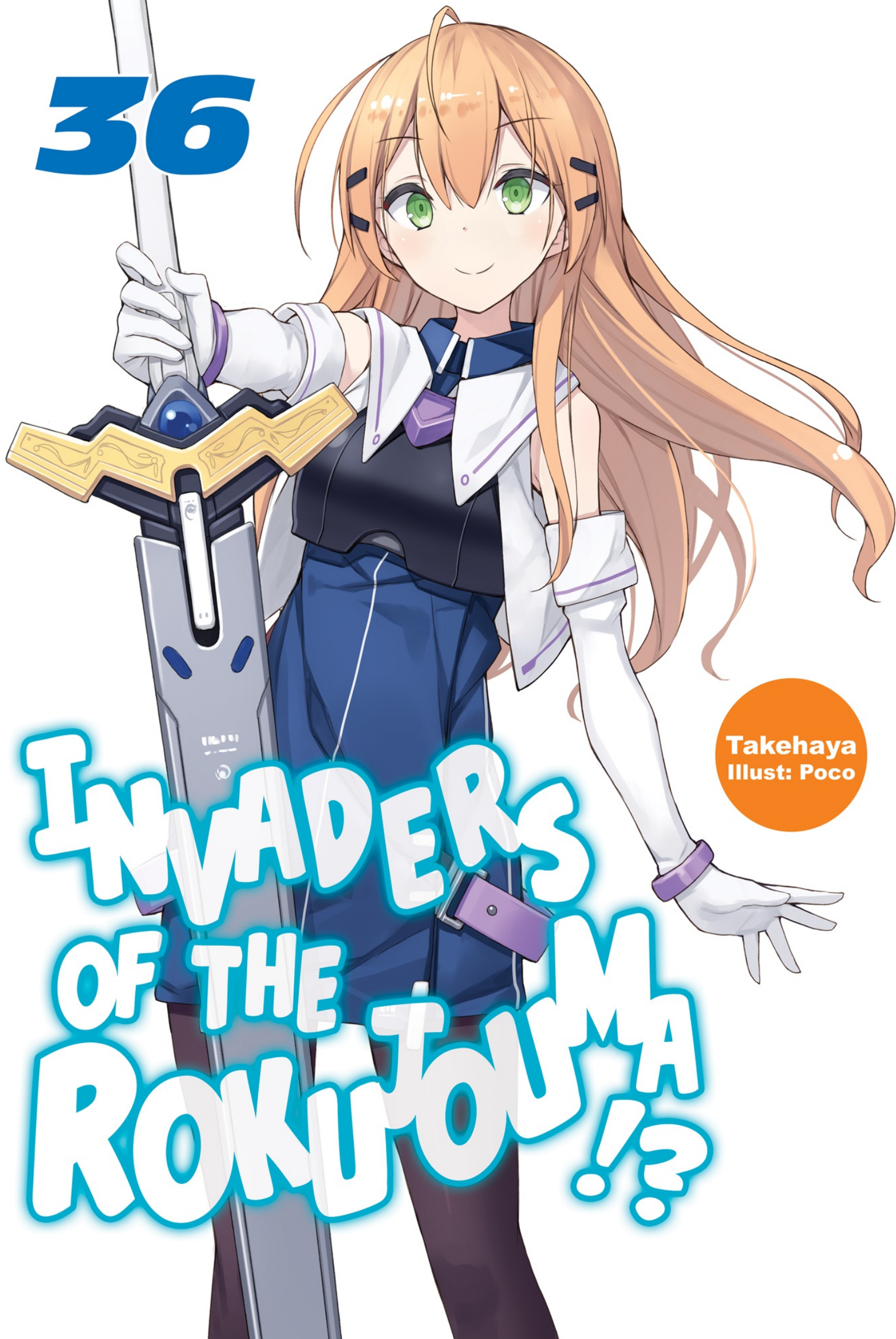
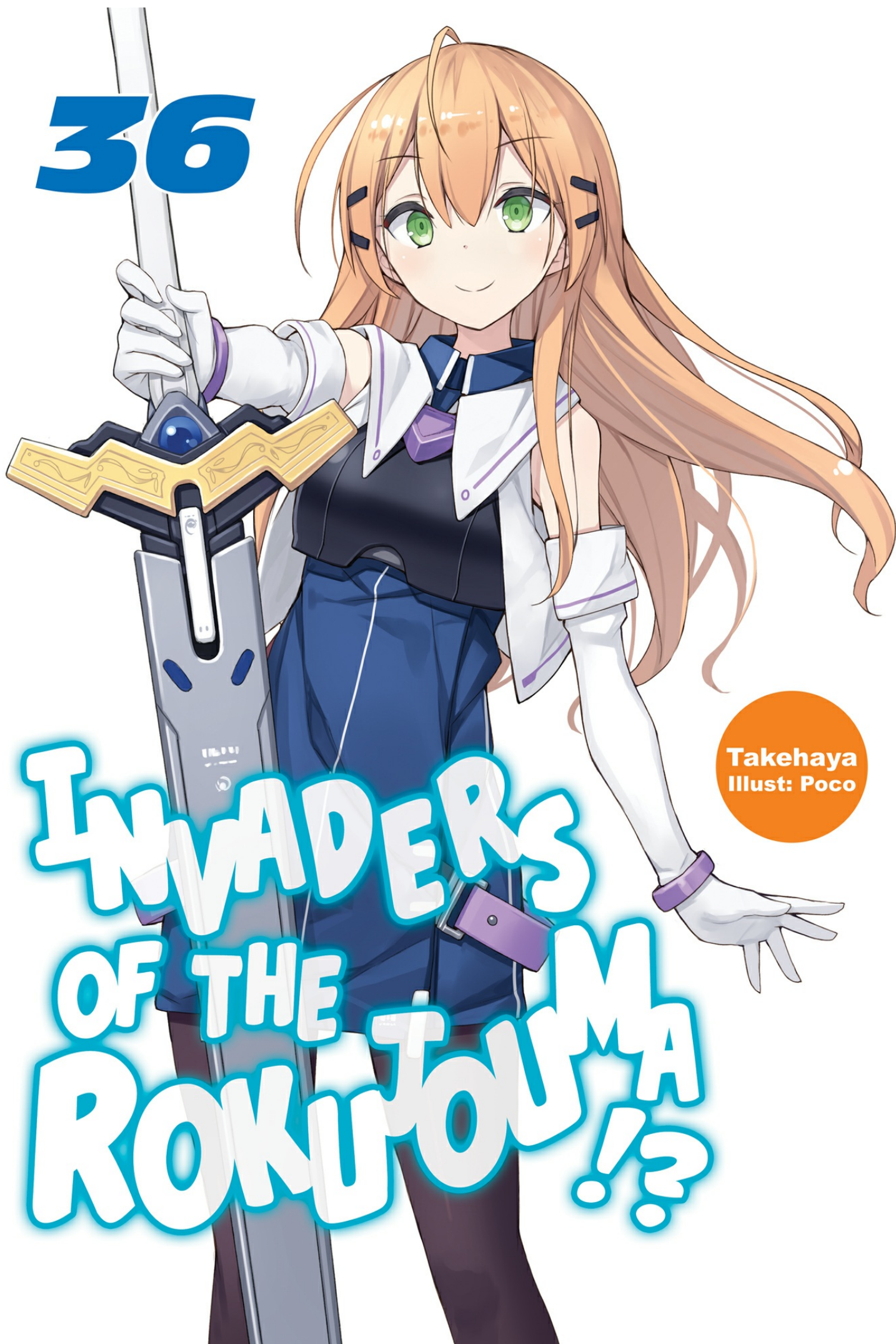


36



Takehaya
Illust: Poco

36



Takehaya
Illust: Poco



**“MAKI-SAN!
YOU’VE BEEN
INVITED TO
JOIN RAINBOW
HEART!”**

**“I’VE BEEN...
INVITED TO
JOIN RAINBOW
HEART? ME?”**



A blue-haired anime girl with short, layered hair and large blue eyes. She is wearing a blue, sleeveless, knee-length dress with a yellow belt and a crisscross pattern on the bodice. She is looking slightly to the right with a surprised expression, her right hand near her face. The background is a simple, light-colored wall with a wooden door frame visible on the left.

**“THEN
WHAT'D YOU
PUT IT ON
FOR?! JUST
GET OUT HERE
ALREADY!”**

“KYAAAAAH!”

**“WHY ARE
YOU HIDING
OVER THERE?!
YOU BOUGHT
IT TO SHOW IT
OFF, DIDN'T
YOU?!”**

**“B-BUT THERE'S
NO REASON
TO SHOW IT
OFF TODAY!”**

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Sunday, June 19th

State of Affairs

Saturday, July 9th

Maki's New Job

Sunday, July 10th

He Who Slumbers

Sunday, July 10th

The Immortal

Sunday, July 10th

Emperor vs. Ruler

Monday, July 11th

Upsy-daisy

Afterword

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 Yurika. She's a walking disaster, but she's grown into a magical girl who really makes it count when she needs to.



RESIDENTS OF CORONA HOUSE



GHOST FORM



HIGASHIHONGAN SANAE

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



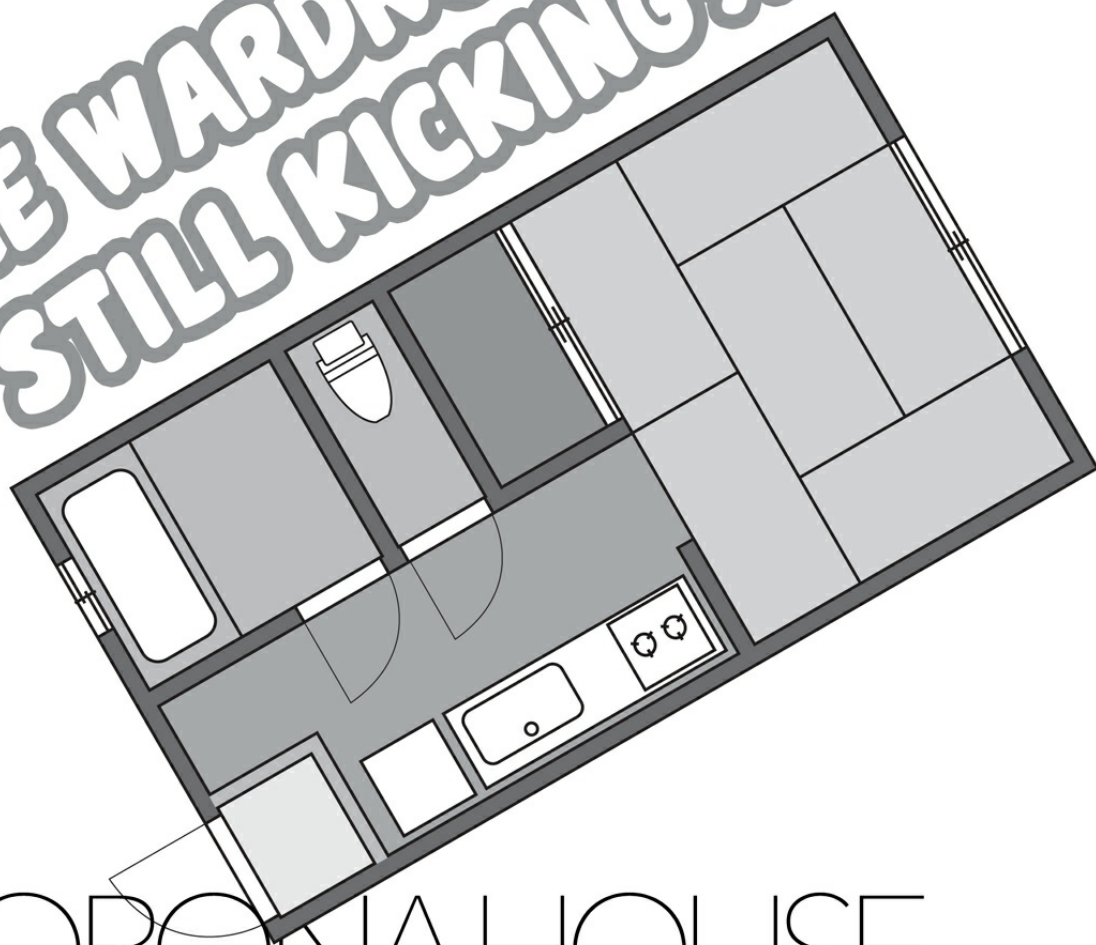
NALFA LAREN

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)

THE WARDROBE IS
STILL KICKING?!



CORONA HOUSE
ROOM 106

State of Affairs

Sunday, June 19th

Ralgwin was the type of commander who preferred to lead from the front lines himself, and his battlefield experience had annealed him. He was a hard man to crack because of it. A leader needed absolute composure, after all. Only those who could keep a calm, level head survived—that was the motto Ralgwin had lived by all these years.

“Preposterous! Is that even possible?!”

But right now, Ralgwin was shaken to his very core after learning who the Gray Knight really was.

“Yes. It should even be possible with the technology you presently possess,” the Gray Knight replied as he pulled his hood back down in the front.

The mysterious knight had revealed his face—his identity—to Ralgwin alone. They were currently in a closed room without even Ralgwin’s right hand Fasta present.

“What’s *possible* and what’s *real* are two totally different things!” Ralgwin continued to rail. “This isn’t something I can easily accept!”

“That’s quite reasonable.”

“Let me ask you a different question, then! Have I lost my mind?!”

“Absolutely not. I guarantee it. If anything, your reaction to this situation proves your sanity. It would be far stranger if you were to accept all this at face value, after all.”

“...That much is true. Perhaps I should simply take your behavior as proof...”

It took a full ten minutes for Ralgwin to calm down after a stiff glass of spirits, but even then, he couldn’t accept what was happening. He’d simply regained enough presence of mind to have a rational conversation on the matter.

“I apologize for losing my composure,” he said at last.

“I don’t mind,” replied the Gray Knight. “To be honest, my biggest concern was whether I could get you to understand.”

The Gray Knight had waited patiently for Ralgwin to come around, but he wasn’t upset with the delay. He understood how hard the entire situation was for the Forthorthian commander to swallow.

“I do. I do understand now, but I’m not entirely convinced.”

“Still, there’s enough merit to strike a deal, no? So shall we proceed?”

“Indeed. I don’t know how it was that you saved us, but I want that power for myself.”

“That’s more like it. I won’t demand that you believe, either. It’s not like I’m asking that we become friends.”

Instead, the Gray Knight was suggesting that he and Ralgwin become business partners. It was a profitable arrangement, regardless of who believed in the product. Both gentlemen could agree on that much.

“Besides, it will all be put to the test soon...” the Gray Knight said ominously.

“If magic truly exists, that is,” Ralgwin countered.

After rescuing Ralgwin, the Gray Knight had offered him magic. If it was real, Ralgwin would now be able to make a definitive move toward his goal of putting an end to the Blue Knight.

“Fret not. Magic is *very* real. And... your death match with the Blue Knight is not far off.”

Vandarion hadn’t been able to defeat the Blue Knight, Koutarou, because he lacked a critical weapon—magic. If Ralgwin could get his hands on it, he would be able to accomplish what his uncle could not. He would slay the Blue Knight and conquer Forthorthe... meaning this was indeed the beginning of a fight to the death.

“You make it sound as though it has nothing to do with you,” Ralgwin remarked.

“I’m stuck relying on you for the time being,” the Gray Knight replied. “I can’t afford to make my existence known given the current situation.”

“I don’t know if you used magic or something else to save me and my men... but it seems you paid quite a price for it. I’ll repay the favor, so by all means rest and recover for now.”

“Thank you... I think I will.”

The Gray Knight was taken by surprise for a moment. He was astonished that Ralgwin had realized the toll the rescue had taken on him.

As expected, Ralgwin is sharp...

Ralgwin had picked up on it readily, because if the Gray Knight could use his powers limitlessly... there would be no need to form a partnership with him in the first place. The Gray Knight would have been able to eliminate Koutarou and the others easily on his own. Yet that wasn’t the case, which suggested there was a steep price involved with the use of such power.

“So, what do we do for the time being?” Ralgwin asked, turning their conversation toward the future.

“We shall head for the land where the inheritors of magic have lived for generations.”

“How vague...”

“It would only sound less real if I said it plainly. Do you care to know more?”

“No... that’s quite all right. Let’s get going immediately.”

Now that they’d reached an agreement, Ralgwin and the Gray Knight left the room for their new destination—Folsaria, a kingdom of people who’d survived in the harshest of lands for hundreds of years by developing their own system of magic.

As the calendar flipped to July, the temperature and humidity in Kisshouharukaze City skyrocketed. Summer set in in full force. It was frequently a topic of discussion in room 106 as everyone began dreaming about what they were going to do over summer vacation. The most eager of its residents were

already making plans and preparations.

“What do you think, Koutarou? Impressive, right?” Theia cooed as she showed off her new swimsuit.

It was a bold, red bikini. After talk of going to the beach had come up the other day, she’d gone right out to buy it.



“I dunno about impressive, but...”

“But what?”

“It does look good on you.”

Theia was gorgeous enough that a flashy swimsuit couldn't outshine her. Koutarou also thought the crimson color complemented her blonde hair and blue eyes. Admitting that was embarrassing, but he'd decided to be honest.

“Heh, of course it looks good on me. You have a most lovely liege, after all.”

“I don't know if parading around to show it off like that is what a lovely liege would do...”

“Don't be silly. You know how truly lovely I really am.”

“Talk about confidence...”

“I have every confidence in *you*.”

There, Theia partially closed her eyes and leaned in a little. It was a subtle gesture, but it set Koutarou's heart racing. Theia seemed to have developed an extraordinary talent for throwing him off guard like this recently... In fact, all the girls had.

“A-Anyway, Theia, don't you think this shows a little too much skin?”

“Hmm? Heh, I suppose it does... Are you jealous thinking about other men seeing me in it?” Theia teased, tilting her head as she giggled.

Koutarou couldn't help thinking she was exceptionally cute in the moment.

“I-I didn't say that...”

“Don't worry. We'll be visiting a private beach this summer. You will be the only one to see me,” Theia said with a smile.

Because of security concerns, Koutarou and the others could no longer risk going to crowded places like public beaches. They were all VIPs to the Forthorthian government—especially Theia and Nalfa. They'd been able to overlook it in the past, but the circumstances were different now. Thus, for safety reasons, they would be spending their summer vacation at a private beach.

“That’s not what I’m worried about,” insisted Koutarou.

“Then what *are* you worried about?” Theia inquired.

“That’s...”

“Theia-chan, is it true that we’re going to a private beach?!” Shizuka cut in. She’d been eyeing a swimsuit catalog all this time, but Theia’s mention of the magical words “private beach” had gotten her attention.

“Yes. Arrangements are already being made,” Theia replied.

“Hmm, I see. Then maybe I’ll get myself a flashy swimsuit as well!” Shizuka jumped in.

“Not you too, Landlord-san!”

“Oh, don’t be a spoilsport, Satomi-kun! It’s not every day that us girls get this kind of opportunity!”

“Yeah, I’m just not sure this is the kind of thing unmarried girls should be—”

“Then marry us already, Satomi-kun. Just think of it as advancing the schedule a bit.”

“Now listen here, Landlord-san...”

“I’ll relent if you’re saying that you don’t love us enough to marry us.”

“...”

Koutarou and the girls had been through thick and thin over the years. They’d risked their lives for each other, bared their hearts to each other. They already had a relationship closer than most married couples—the only difference was a piece of paper recognizing it under the law. That was why Koutarou found himself unable to offer a word in argument.

“Then it’s decided! I’m gonna pick out something bold too!”

With a smile, Shizuka grabbed the catalog she’d tossed aside in her excitement a moment ago and opened it to the women’s section. She then happily flipped through the pages of revealing designs while humming to herself. As a modern girl, the mere idea of buying a new swimsuit put her in a great mood.

There was someone else in the apartment, however, who was having a rather hard time...

“Why are you hiding over there?! You bought it to show it off, didn’t you?!” Theia shouted.

“B-But there’s no reason to show it off *today!*” Ruth shouted back.

“Then what’d you put it on for?! Just get out here already!”

“Kyaaaaah!”

Ruth had been in the bathroom all this time, and she would have gladly stayed there if Theia hadn’t forcibly dragged her out into the inner room. Koutarou and the others naturally turned to see what all the fuss was about, and they spied Ruth covering herself up with both arms as best she could. Like Theia, she was wearing a swimsuit.

“O-Ohh... Oh dear...” she clamored, her face beet red.

At the beach was one thing, but wearing a swimsuit—barely different from underwear in Ruth’s eyes—around the house was just too much for an overly serious girl like her.

“Come on, Koutarou! Why don’t you say something?” Theia encouraged. “This is the swimsuit Ruth picked out for you.”

“Theia, you picked out that swimsuit because you wanted to show it off, right?” Koutarou responded.

“Well, yeah.”

“Ruth’s not like you. She’s reserved, so don’t force her into doing things like this. Don’t you feel sorry for her?”

“You have no idea what you’re talking about! Ruth’s not wearing that swimsuit because I forced her to! She saw me get changed and did the same thing herself!”

“What...?”

This unexpected news prompted Koutarou to look at Ruth. When their eyes met, she turned even redder than before. She was now flushed crimson all the

way down her neck. It was all she could do to weakly look away and shake her head.

“See? Reserved or not, Ruth is still a girl,” Theia insisted.

“Well... yeah, but...” Koutarou mumbled.

“...”

Slowly and silently, Ruth dropped her arms to her sides, revealing the swimsuit she’d been trying to hide underneath. It was a one-piece number with a simple design in pale blue with yellow accents. The color scheme was a little reminiscent of her knight uniform.

“Go on. Say something,” Theia urged Koutarou again.

“Y-You can’t put me on the spot like that! This is way too important!”

“Then kiss her or whatever you’d like instead. If you can’t tell her how you feel, show her!”

“That’s not any less important, you know?!”

“Wow, did you hear all that? Lucky you, Ruth-san,” Shizuka ribbed with a grin.

“Erk...”

With that, Koutarou realized his mistake. By claiming what he had to say was too important to utter frivolously, it became painfully obvious what he was really thinking. He’d inadvertently given himself away.

“Important...? How Master feels about me is important... Thank god...”

Ruth was still bright red, but she held her hands against her chest and breathed a sigh of relief. She knew Koutarou cared for her. They even walked arm in arm when no one else was around. But she’d never been entirely sure that Koutarou saw her as a woman.

She was always self-conscious of it, too. She worried that he didn’t see her like the rest of the girls. Ruth didn’t think she was as attractive as the feminine Harumi or Kiriha, and she didn’t think she was as engaging as the fiery Theia. She knew she wasn’t as close with Koutarou because of it. She felt like she was missing something.

But after hearing Koutarou say what he thought of her was important, that even kissing her was important... Ruth finally had proof that she too was a woman in Koutarou's eyes, and this news was a great joy to her. Like Ruth herself, Koutarou was simply too reserved to show it.

"Come on already. You *have* to say something to Ruth. She went and put that swimsuit on just for this, you know?"

Theia pressured Koutarou while prodding him with her elbow. She had a mischievous grin on her face, but there was sincerity in her eyes. This was an act of kindness on her part. One of consideration for her childhood friend. Realizing that, Koutarou caved and hesitantly spoke his mind.

"Ruth-san, um... the reason I didn't say anything isn't because I don't think you look good... It's really the opposite. I just didn't know what *to* say. You're so reserved, Ruth-san... so I didn't want to say anything to make you uncomfortable... You're beautiful and that suit looks great on you... I just didn't want to blurt that out."

In short, Koutarou didn't want to shoot himself in the foot by saying the wrong thing. He wasn't sure how Ruth might respond. He was trying to put her feelings first.

"I-I understand..." Ruth, her face still red, said with a small smile.

Koutarou was more drawn to her sweet, overjoyed smile than he was her swimsuit, but he figured now wasn't the time to tell her so.

"Those words alone are all I need to convince me to serve as your vice captain for the rest of my life..."

Ruth's head was swimming and she could hardly think straight. Nevertheless, she pressed her hands to her breast and calmed herself enough to get those words out. It was the best she could manage right now.

"I'm glad, Ruth-san... I'd be happy to have you."

Koutarou knew she meant that quite literally. She'd said it the other day on their shopping trip, too. That she wanted to be the kind of vice captain who allowed a little mixing of her personal and professional lives. That she didn't want to live strictly for work. That was why Koutarou understood the deeper

meaning behind Ruth saying she wanted to be his vice captain indefinitely.

“Then you can count on me, Master... forever...”

And best of all, Ruth realized that he understood it. That made her supremely happy. With this blessing, no matter the hardship she came to face, she believed she’d be able to stand up to it. In her elation, she had to press her hands to her chest harder, lest her heart jump right out of it. But her moment of bliss didn’t last long...

“Honestly... if not for the swimsuit, this would be the perfect scene,” Theia remarked with a sigh.

“Y-Your Highness!”

There, Ruth hurriedly covered herself up again and scurried back to the bathroom. She’d worn a swimsuit for Koutarou and gotten to hear what he thought of it—and with that, the reserved Ruth had hit her embarrassment limit. As such, she quickly fled the scene to keep herself from saying anything or doing anything more embarrassing.

“Hmm, what an unexpected turn of events...” Shizuka said as she watched Ruth run off.

“What is?” Koutarou asked, confused as to what she meant.

“That you’ll be taking Ruth-san as your second wife after Yurika-chaaan! See? You can do it if you try, Satomi-kuuun!” she explained in a sing-song fashion as she nudged Koutarou with her elbow. She seemed to be enjoying herself.

“How in the world did you get that idea?!”

“How do you think? Ruth-san said that she wanted to be with you forever. That’s not something a vice captain normally tells their captain, you know?”

“It’s not like that—”

“Is too! A girl in a swimsuit just told you that she wanted to spend her life with you, and you said you’d be happy to have her! What else could that possibly mean? In fact, if that’s *not* what it meant, something’s just plain wrong with you.”

As far as Shizuka was concerned, she believed she knew what would come of

Koutarou's relationship with the girls. It was all but set in stone in her mind, yet Koutarou stubbornly refused to accept it. He'd already gone ahead and told Yurika that she could stay with him forever... and now he'd said the same thing to Ruth. In Shizuka's eyes, that was as good as a second proposal.

"That's..." Koutarou faltered.

"That's... what?" Shizuka pressed, staring him down eagerly. She really was enjoying herself.

"That's..."

Shizuka quietly waited for a reply as she continued to watch Koutarou. She was confident that the reason he kept Ruth by his side ran far deeper than her simply being the vice captain of the Satomi knights. But wait as she did, Koutarou said not a word more.

"Heehee... See, Satomi-kun?"

In the end, Koutarou couldn't give her an answer—but that silence was meaningful. If there had been nothing more to it, he simply would have said so. Shizuka knew that, and thus couldn't help the impish smile that crossed her lips that screamed, "Got you!" She was excitedly looking forward to what Koutarou would say about the other seven girls when the time came.

Even after changing back into her normal clothes, Ruth still seemed to be embarrassed. She was seated across the tea table from Koutarou, but scooted slightly to the side to avoid his gaze while furtively sneaking glances at him. It was just a sign of how much their previous conversation had affected her.

"Hey, Koutarou," Sanae, who'd climbed onto his back, whispered in his ear.

"Hmm?"

"Did you have a fight with Ruth or something?"

With her psychic powers, Sanae could sense Ruth was agitated. She couldn't stop thinking about Koutarou. She wanted to talk to him but was too embarrassed. She didn't even know what she would say in the first place. Those were the thoughts Sanae was picking up, but she'd only just gotten back to the

apartment herself. In other words, she'd missed all the swimsuit fuss. That was why she'd come to Koutarou for an explanation.

"Nah."

"I didn't think so. She's not angry or sad or anything... She actually seems kinda happy."

"Really?"

Koutarou knew why Ruth was worked up, but he could only imagine what was going through her head right now. His psychic powers were nowhere near as powerful as Sanae's, so he was actually somewhat relieved to hear her say that Ruth was happy.

"Yup. So what happened?"

"In short, Ruth and I agreed we should get a little closer."

"Oh, then that's a good thing."

"Yeah, it is."

He'd only summed up the situation for Sanae, but it affirmed for him the true meaning of their earlier conversation. Sanae was absolutely right. Getting closer was a good thing.

"..."

Once again, Ruth's eyes fell on Koutarou. He couldn't help noticing this time.

We're supposed to be getting closer, right?

With that thought in mind, he raised his hand and gave a little wave. He knew good and well that Ruth wasn't as demanding as Sanae or Theia. Her pleas for his attention were much more subtle, so he wanted to make a better effort to recognize them.

"?!"

But the gesture surprised Ruth. She hadn't expected a response, so getting one sent her into a fluster all over again. She turned bright red and buried her face in her hands.

"Say, Koutarou..." cooed Sanae.

“Yeah?”

“That was kinda suave.”

With that, she wrapped her arms around him a little tighter in a hug. Since Sanae was in tune with other people’s emotions, she was happy to see Koutarou being considerate of the painfully shy Ruth.

“You think? I was kinda thinking I should be a bit more manly with you guys every now and then,” Koutarou confessed.

With Sanae clinging to him, Koutarou knew he could hide nothing from her. He also knew being a perfect hero was out of his league... but he at least wanted to act like one from time to time with the people he loved. They were so kind to him that he felt it was the least they deserved.

“Only every now and then?” Sanae teased.

“Hey, I’m not Mackenzie, okay?”

“That’s true. Maybe just sometimes is better, then,” Sanae giggled, pressing herself even closer against Koutarou.

This was her ultimate expression of affection. It forced Koutarou to lean a little forward, but he was used to it since it was practically an everyday occurrence. He quickly straightened up and patted Sanae’s head resting on his shoulder.

“Mm, this is the best... Heehee.”

“I don’t get what’s so good about it, honestly.”

“Everything. I told you that before.”

“Oh yeah? Everything, huh?”

With that, Koutarou turned a little and flicked Sanae square in the middle of her forehead. It was a practiced move, and the sound it made rang gloriously through the room. All the girls heard it and turned to see what had happened.

“Ow!”

Sanae frowned, quickly pulling away from Koutarou to rub her head.

“That didn’t hurt,” Koutarou insisted.

“Says you!” Sanae protested. And just like that, she was leaning against him again. “You know that I can see right through you when you do stuff like that, right?”

“I don’t mind.”

“Mm...”

Sanae was back in high spirits again. She playfully kicked her feet up off the floor like she was slowly swimming in the air—something she could do thanks to her psychic powers. She was as light as a feather when she floated this way.

Seeing that everything was normal, the other girls all went back to their respective activities. All but one, that is.

“If you two don’t have anything better to do, let me borrow your brains for a bit,” Clan said, looking up from her hologram as she watched Sanae and Koutarou play around.

“What are you doing?” Koutarou asked, moving over to the wall with Sanae still on his back.

Clan used a specialized barrier to manipulate gravity, allowing her to sit on the walls and ceiling of room 106. She’d perfected it as a space-saving measure in the tiny apartment.

“I’m deciding on the new interior design for the Hazy Moon,” she explained.

“Oh, that’s right. I forgot your ship was being remodeled,” Koutarou replied.

In the final battle against Vandarion, Theia’s Blue Knight was nearly destroyed. It was damaged to the point that making a new one was more efficient than repairing the old one, so the ship known as Blue Knight was currently in the process of being rebuilt as Koutarou’s personal flagship. Its design was completely redrafted, and it would be christened as the first knight-class battleship in Forthorthe—the biggest in all the nation’s army.

Meanwhile, Theia was having a new ship built for her, and the Hazy Moon was getting a remodel as well. All three ships were being modified jointly. It was presumed that they would frequently be in battle together, so special cooperative functions were being added to enhance their teamwork.

It was the Hazy Moon's remodel that Clan was currently struggling with.

"But what good are we gonna be when it comes to decking out your ship?" Sanae asked, genuinely confused.

"Even I have things I'm not good at..." Clan explained.

Beep, bleep, boop...

With a few taps of her bracelet, she adjusted her hologram display so that Koutarou and Sanae could see it clearly. At a glance, Koutarou understood what Clan was having trouble with.

"I see... So it's the palette you're stuck on. I guess even the technological genius Princess Clan is artistically challenged, huh?" Koutarou teased.

"The title 'genius' should be reserved for people like Kii."

"You're the kind of person who'd make it all straight lines if you could, I bet."

"More specifically, I prefer lines that can be represented by functions."

Clan showed Koutarou and Sanae the design catalog for the Hazy Moon's interior. Even with furniture as simple as chairs, there was still size, shape, color, and function to consider. It was all decidedly unscientific, and therefore outside of Clan's area of expertise.

"This isn't exactly my specialty either, you know?" Sanae said skeptically.

"Then I'll throw more people at the problem and make up for quality with quantity!"

"Yeah, I don't think that'll work either... Why don't you just go with the orange for the basic scheme?" Koutarou asked, pointing at a colored mockup of the ship's bridge.

"Why orange?" Clan asked, cocking her head and blinking repeatedly in puzzlement.

"It matches your sword crest. Wouldn't it be perfect for your personal ship?" Koutarou said, poking her twice in the center of her forehead.

It wasn't visible at the moment, but when Koutarou used Signaltin and Saguratin, a glowing orange crest manifested right where he was touching Clan.

It was a sign of the pact she'd made with the swords.

"Of course!" Clan exclaimed, her face blossoming into a brilliant smile. She then nodded. "You're exactly right. I'll go with orange, then."

She happily began tapping away on her terminal and swiftly switched the ship's mockup model to the orange scheme. This drastically reduced the number of open holograms, as it automatically eliminated the designs that didn't suit the orange scheme.

"Just don't make everything orange, okay?" Koutarou warned her cautiously.

"Of course not. Do you take me for a child?" Clan quipped.

"You know, Koutarou does enjoy thinking of you and me as his troublesome little children."

"Wha— Hey, Sanae!"

"Eeheehee! Oh, Glasses, make my room purple! But, like, a pale purple so it isn't too tacky!" Sanae squeaked, quickly changing the subject before Koutarou could get angry.

"Hmm, let's see... A pale purple..." Clan hummed.

She'd been staring at Koutarou, but she hurriedly got back to work now. She seemed a little out of it, however. Distracted, even. She kept making silly mistakes and repeating the same tasks over and over.

"Oho! So it's Clan-san after Ruth-san now, is it, Satomi-kun?"

"Please, Landlord-san. I didn't even say anything."

"You don't have to for us to know how much you looove us."

And so the conversation drifted away from the work being done on the Hazy Moon. Koutarou would have preferred a different topic—just about anything, really—but he didn't interrupt. He let the girls chat away and have their fun. He knew business would get serious again soon enough, so he believed there was no reason to rush things.

As Koutarou anticipated, the change in conversation occurred rather naturally when Kiriha returned to the apartment.

“I’m back,” she called from the door.

“We’re home, ho!” Korama echoed.

“Home from a hard day’s work, ho!” Karama chimed too.

Kiriha had left early that morning for a series of meetings, and now that she was back, the sun was already starting to set. She rightfully looked exhausted.

“Welcome home, Kiriha-san,” Koutarou called to her.

“So, did the People of the Earth come to a conclusion?” Theia inquired.

And with that, the smiles on everyone’s faces vanished as the topic turned serious. It was time to get down to business.

“We’ve decided to ally with the Japanese government, Forthorthe, and Folsaria,” Kiriha announced.

So far, the People of the Earth had kept the Japanese government at arm’s length due to a mutual understanding that both parties were better off with some distance between them. The People of the Earth’s goal was to quietly and peacefully migrate a hundred thousand citizens to the surface, so they believed it much better to play the long game—especially given that their only other option was to enter into open war with the government and take what they needed by force.

The Sun Rangers had played a large part in keeping the strategic distance between the two parties, as well as moving things forward in a progressive, positive direction. They’d advocated for the underground dwellers, vouching that they were a peaceful people who meant no harm, and the Sun Rangers’ testimony went a long way in convincing the government that there was more to be lost than gained from fighting them.

“The government will not take kindly to spiritual energy weaponry being used against surface dwellers, so the People of the Earth agreed that we needed to make a proactive move to rectify the situation,” Kiriha explained.

It had now been several weeks since Ralgwin disappeared with the last remnants of Vandarion’s faction. His whereabouts were yet unknown, meaning he and his men were currently at large with spiritual energy tech.

Given the potential disaster that might come of this state of affairs, the People of the Earth now felt it necessary to reach out and cultivate a friendship with the Japanese government. They needed to make a good impression—and fast. They couldn't risk being perceived as the bad guys by the people of Japan, lest it ruin them.

“Ralgwin sure has thrown things into confusion...” Theia grudgingly muttered as she put her elbows on the tea table in a pensive gesture.

Though she was the only one who said it aloud, everyone was thinking the same thing. The heavy tone of the conversation weighed on the entire room. This dreadful change in mood was precisely why Koutarou had been in no hurry to have this conversation, but having it was critical to the situation at hand. He saw no choice but to bear with it and resolve things.

“The question is what Ralgwin plans to do next,” Harumi volunteered, summarizing the main problem.

It was almost unthinkable that he would launch another attack without a plan. He would strike where it hurt most. He'd lost most of his forces in the raid on his underwater base, so he'd have to play his cards even more tactically now.

“I would suspect he's building an army of robots somewhere. If he can give them minds of their own like the haniwas, they would be able to replace his lost forces,” she postulated.

Harumi believed that Ralgwin would use the technologies he had at hand to pad his ranks and strength. Merging Forthorthian science with spiritual energy technology had the potential to produce incredibly powerful robots. Gun turrets with the decision-making abilities of the haniwas, for example, would be a simple yet effective combo.

“That said, we've already scouted potential sites where Ralgwin might try to set up a new base, but there were no traces of him or his men,” Ruth countered as she brought up a holographic map with the areas in question circled in red.

In total, Koutarou and the girls had learned of three potential base sites from soldiers they'd captured after the last battle. They'd sent scouts to investigate each one but found neither hide nor hair of Ralgwin at any of them. Nefilforan

concluded that he must have abandoned all three sites for fear of such a leak after most of his men were detained.

“I don’t think Sakuraba-senpai is wrong, though,” interjected Koutarou. “If Ralgwin doesn’t do *something* to bolster his ranks, he won’t be able to make a major play. And the first step to that is setting up a new base somewhere.”

Koutarou felt Harumi was right on a strategic level. Ralgwin was now down the majority of his force, meaning that serious offensives were currently out of the question. He’d be reduced to using guerrilla tactics against smaller targets, and that was hardly means to conquer an empire as vast as Forthorthe. In other words, Ralgwin had no choice but to build up his unit again—and Koutarou believed Harumi had correctly guessed how he’d go about doing it. The remaining question, then, was simply a matter of where.

“I’m not saying I disagree, but there’s another angle to consider here. He might be making a play to obtain magic,” offered Kiriha.

She was concerned that, given his dire situation, Ralgwin might be looking to make contact with magicians at present. Theia, however, was doubtful.

“I find it hard to believe that he would just suddenly go for magicians,” she said. “Aren’t you overthinking this?”

The People of the Earth lived beneath Japan, so there had always been a possibility of them being discovered. Folsaria, meanwhile, was in a different world entirely. It was impossible to reach without magic, so Theia was rightfully skeptical that Ralgwin would ever be able to get there if he didn’t already have his hands on it.

“I agree that it would be strange for him to turn to magicians all of a sudden, but we can’t ignore the possibility given how he disappeared at the base.”

Kiriha understood Theia’s reservations full well, but she feared the implications of Ralgwin’s escape. She was worried he might have gotten a lead on magic through sheer chance.

“That’s fair,” Theia sighed. “We still have no idea how he and his men got away.”

It wasn’t spiritual energy technology or a space distortion, but it *could* have

been magic. That was only a theory, however; they had no proof one way or the other. The uncertainty left the girls, who were all experts in their own respective fields, feeling rather uneasy.

“I think it was that gray spinning thing,” Sanae chimed in.

She’d sensed the whirlpool of chaos—the gray spinning thing, as she called it—when Ralgwin and his forces vanished from the base. She believed it was responsible for the strange, mist-like smoke.

“So the gates of hell opened like they did with Purple and Tayuma when their mana and spiritual energy went out of control...” Maki mused aloud.

As far as she knew, there were two ways to call forth the whirlpool of chaos. The first was to warp space with magic to force the gates of hell open. The second involved concentrating rampaging mana or spiritual energy so densely into a single point that the boundary between worlds began to blur. The whirlpool was also known to appear on its own, but those were the two primary ways of summoning it.

“But I don’t think it’s possible to accurately transport that many people with mana or spiritual energy running amok, Maki-chan,” replied Yurika.

She wasn’t certain Ralgwin had used the second method. That had been the case with Purple and Tayuma because they couldn’t control their powers, but what had happened at the base weeks ago was a precise, calculated maneuver. The mist had distinguished between friend and foe, only whisking away Ralgwin and select members of his ranks. Yurika couldn’t imagine that an out-of-control power would be able to do that.

“Which leaves the scarier possibility,” Maki said pensively. “Someone might have summoned it directly with magic.”

Indeed, there was still the possibility that someone had intentionally summoned and was able to control the whirlpool of chaos via magic. That would explain how Ralgwin had managed to escape... but it also implied that he had magic at his disposal. That was why Kiriha couldn’t overlook the prospect, no matter how remote or unlikely it seemed.

Long after the discussion about Ralgwin had ended, the mood in room 106 remained somber. The acknowledged fact that Koutarou and company might be attacked at any time made it difficult for them to enjoy themselves. And their unease was understandable. No matter how strong they might be, they were still only human.

The atmosphere seems so tense...

Nalfa didn't know what had everyone so on edge, but she could smell the tension from next door. It put her in a difficult, frustrating position. Since she didn't know exactly what was wrong, she didn't know how to help.

I don't really have the courage to go over there like this...

She'd been invited over for dinner, but couldn't bring herself to do more than peek through the curtain dividing the apartments. Things were just too ill at ease.

"All right!"

Nevertheless, she pushed herself to be optimistic. Tension was high in room 106, certainly. But that didn't mean she should turn away from it. If anything, it was all the more important for her to defuse it.

"The time has come to use my secret weapon!"

Nalfa walked over to her closet to retrieve said secret weapon, which she donned and then bravely stepped through the curtain into room 106.

She mustered her courage and loudly announced, "Hello, everyone!"

And when everyone in the apartment turned to look at her...

"Pfft!"

They all burst out laughing. The sight of Nalfa took them all by surprise.

"N-Nalfa, what's with that look?!" demanded Theia, the first to react.

She bounced up from where she was sitting, pointing and laughing. Ruth ordinarily would have stopped her, as it was very bad manners to point... but she was too busy laughing at Nalfa herself.

"Haha, I bought these because I thought they were cute!" Nalfa explained.

She was currently wearing a red, conical party hat and black-rimmed glasses with a fake nose and mustache. It was indeed a hilarious look on such a cute, sweet girl, and the ensuing riot immediately dispelled the tension in room 106.



“If you think that’s cute, you’ve got interesting tastes, Nalfa-chan,” Shizuka giggled. She was all smiles again.

“Hey, lemme borrow them! I wanna try them on too!” Sanae clamored. She rushed over to Nalfa, her hands flailing and her eyes sparkling with excitement. All she could think about was what she’d look like wearing the hat and glasses.

“Here you go, Sanae-sama,” Nalfa offered.

She happily took off the glasses and handed them to Sanae, then set the hat on her head. They were a perfect fit for Sanae, adding a comical element to her adorable looks. They were every bit as funny on her as they had been on Nalfa.

“Ahahaha!”

Room 106 was once again aflush with laughter. Nalfa’s opening move had defused the tension, and Sanae’s follow up attack had restored the mood in the apartment to normal. Sensing that, Nalfa let out a sigh of relief. Her plan had worked just like she’d hoped.

“Here, Theia! You put it on next!” Sanae insisted.

“Very well,” she agreed. “Give it here.”

“Wahahaha!”

“Heh heh... Okay, Ruth, you next!”

“A-All right...”

“Bwahahaha!”

The laughter continued as the girls passed around the hat and glasses. Nalfa took in the merriment with a satisfied look on her face... and was surprised to find someone patting her on the shoulder all of a sudden. She curiously turned to see Koutarou’s large, manly hand on her shoulder.

“Koutarou-sama...?”

“Thanks, Nalfa. You were a big help,” he whispered before turning around.

“What...?”

Rather than reply, he quietly slipped back to his seat at the tea table. And

when he sat down, Clan handed him the hat and glasses.

“It’s your turn next, Veltlion.”

“What? I have to do this too?”

“Obviously, of course.”

“Okay, fine... Here goes nothing.”

Koutarou was a little reluctant at first, but begrudgingly put on the party hat and glasses.

“Ahahahahaha!”

Laughter flooded the room once more. The girls all thought he was a riot himself... All but one, that is.

“...Koutarou-sama...”

Nalfa was seized by a much stronger emotion in the moment.

I know I shouldn’t fall in love with him... but anyone would when he acts like that...

She clutched at her heart and hung her head. She looked like she might be crying at a glance, but the truth was quite the opposite. The feelings bubbling up within her were warm and fuzzy.

Thanks to Nalfa, everyone was back to their usual selves as they now prepared for a slightly-later-than-usual dinner. Koutarou was in charge of tonight’s meal, and Harumi had asked to be his assistant as her prize for winning last night’s board game session.

“Sorry to keep you waiting, Sakuraba-senpai,” he apologized as he skillfully began carving the chicken.

Dinner was running late because he’d gone to the Hazy Moon to roast the bird. The oven in room 106 wasn’t large enough to cook one whole.

“I don’t mind. I’m the one who wanted to help out anyway,” giggled Harumi.

“Thanks again for that,” Koutarou replied.

“Are you good at cooking, Koutarou-sama?” Nalfa asked while filming the two of them. Her latest video series was on cookery, so this was a golden opportunity.

“Traveling around in the past, I naturally picked up a thing or two. I also know how to make bird traps... not that we need them in this day and age.”

“Now that you mention it, you and Alaia-sama were always on the move, weren’t you?” asked Nalfa. “After reaching Pardomshiha territory, you went from one battle to the next.”

“Yes, but Satomi-kun burned a lot of food in the beginning,” Harumi interjected.

“S-Sakuraba-senpai!”

“Nothing to be ashamed of, teehee. Campfire cooking can be quite difficult.”

Harumi possessed Alaia’s memories, so she knew how long it had taken Koutarou to perfect his Forthorthian cooking skills. He’d taken up housework after his mother died, so he already knew his way around a knife... but as far as actual cooking was concerned, he’d had a lot to learn.

“He picked most of it up from the troops, which is how he became the chef you see before you now,” Harumi continued.

“Wow...”

Nalfa looked at the roasted chicken admiringly. Outside, it was crisp and smothered with herbs. Inside, it was cooked to tender, juicy perfection. It looked absolutely delicious as Koutarou carved into it.

“Can you please spare me, Sakuraba-senpai?” Koutarou begged.

“I just wanted to show off how much I know about you,” Harumi retorted.

“Come on now...” he sighed.

“W-Wait, this means— Koutarou-sama!” Nalfa suddenly yelped in wild excitement as she sidled up to Koutarou, camera in hand.

“Hmm? What is it?” he asked, a bit taken aback. He was used to Nalfa pointing the camera at him now, but she’d never run up to him with it like this.

“You learned how to cook in Ancient Forthorthe?!”

“Well, yeah.”

“P-Please teach me, then! All of it! Everything you learned there!”

“What?! Everything?!”

“The cooking techniques of Ancient Forthorthe have been lost for centuries! It’s incredible that you know so much about it! So, please, Koutarou-sama! Teach me everything you can so that I can record it!” she clamored.

Forthorthe first entered its modern age over a millennia ago, and everything since had been recorded digitally. But prior to that, things were passed down from generation to generation by word of mouth or pen and paper, and much had been lost to time because of it. A prime example was the recipes of Ancient Forthorthe, as most of the ink spilled back then was dedicated to recording the civil war and all that came of it. As a result, little was known about the Forthorthian diet of two thousand years ago... and that was precisely why Nalfa was so fixated on the apparent treasure trove of knowledge Koutarou possessed.

“O-Okay, okay. Just calm down,” he pleaded with her.

“When can we make the first episode?! Tomorrow?!” she squealed, pressing even closer. If not for the camera in front of her, their faces might have been touching already.

“Y-Yeah, sure. We’ll do it, so just calm down, Nalfa-san.”

“That’s a promise, Koutarou-sama! I’ll hold you to it!”

Koutarou was overwhelmed in the moment and far more concerned about calming Nalfa down than he was about a cooking show. That said, he was perfectly willing to help her out. She was a good girl, and he felt like he owed her one for her help lifting everyone’s spirits earlier. He had no reason to refuse.

“Man, you’re in for it now, Satomi-kuuun,” Shizuka teased.

“Not so fast, Landlord-san! You’re doing this with me!” Koutarou quickly objected.

“Nuh-uh. Since you refuse to make me your girlfriend, I’m under no obligation to help you.”

“So do we have a deal, Koutarou-sama?! Please, a word for the camera!” Nalfa begged.

“Yeah, sure. Landlord-san was just saying she’ll be my assistant and everything.”

“Hey, Satomi-kun!” Shizuka shouted.

“You mean it, Shizuka-sama?!” Nalfa squealed with glee.

Shizuka was already helping out with Nalfa’s video series by introducing her to Japanese cooking, so Nalfa thought she’d be a welcome addition to this project too. She’d be a great boon in the kitchen, and she could help Koutarou remember anything that might be fuzzy in his mind. As such, Nalfa zeroed in on her next.

“I can’t believe you, Satomi-kun! You good-for-nothing traitor!”

“Yeah, yeah.”

“I’d like to get a word from you too, Shizuka-sama!”

“Gah!”

Koutarou left Nalfa and Shizuka to their antics while he got back to preparing dinner. He’d only served Harumi so far, so there were lots of plates left to go. Skillfully handling the knife he’d used two thousand years ago, he continued to carve and serve chicken.

“Oh, this looks delicious,” Theia remarked.

“Here’s yours, Aika-san,” Koutarou said, offering Maki a plate.

“Thank you very much,” she replied. She reached out to take it from him, and their eyes met for a moment. She then smiled softly and said, “I’m sure Nalfa-san would like to film this too.”

“Eh, she’ll have plenty of chances in the future.”

“Heehee, that’s true. I guess this means we’ll get to enjoy your cooking as long as she wants to keep filming it.”

“I guess so.”

“I’m looking forward to it, then,” Maki said with another smile. She was interrupted, however, when an unexpected ringing came from her pocket. “Oh?”

She put down the plate she’d just received and pulled out the source of the sound—a special communications device made from a crystal and electric components. It was created with a unique blend of magic and science, the likes of which was cutting edge in Folsaria. In addition to the ringing tone it generated, the crystal was flashing.

“It’s Nana-san,” she murmured, remarking the name showing on the display.

When Maki touched the screen, the ringing and flashing stopped. Nana’s image in the form of a small, magically generated hologram then appeared above the device.

“Hello, Nana-sa—” Maki began.

“Aika-san! You’ve been accepted!” Nana interrupted her before she could finish. She was all smiles, and the excitement in her voice was apparent.

“Huh...?”

Nana rarely behaved this way, and the sight of it caught even Yurika off guard. She turned away from the roasted chicken in front of her, intently listening to what had Nana in such a state.

“You’ve been invited to join Rainbow Heart!” she continued. “Isn’t that great?!”

“I’ve been... invited to join Rainbow Heart? *Me?*”

Folsaria’s national guard, Rainbow Heart, was composed of seven magic corps based on the colors of the rainbow. The Blue Magic Division in particular had invited Maki into their ranks, which was what had Nana so excited.

Maki's New Job

Saturday, July 9th

Back when Forthorthe was still gripped by civil war, Nana had suggested that Maki join up with Rainbow Heart. In Nana's eyes, Maki was a perfectly worthy magical girl. Maki only thought she was being polite and had quickly forgotten about it after the fact. Nana, however, had followed up on the offer by personally recommending Maki to Rainbow Heart herself—and with good reason.

As she was officially a member of the Satomi knights, Maki wasn't lacking for social standing. She was held in high regard in Forthorthe, which went a long way in terms of influencing her regard in Folsaria too... but, strictly speaking, there was a separation. Koutarou's special privileges as the Blue Knight didn't extend to Folsaria, meaning that Maki using magic for his sake still counted as using it for personal reasons.

Other former leaders of Darkness Rainbow were permitted to use their magic in service of the royal families of Forthorthe, but Maki was currently operating in Folsaria's jurisdiction on Earth. As such, her personal use of magic was frowned upon by Rainbow Heart. It was being overlooked at present as a diplomatic gesture of goodwill, but it was still legally problematic.

In order to resolve the issue, there would need to be extensive talk of reform between Folsaria and Forthorthe. But in the meantime, the easiest solution was to have Maki join Rainbow Heart and subsequently assigned to Koutarou like Yurika was.

"So you're finally joining Rainbow Heart, huh, Aika-san? Your Darkness Rainbow days are long behind you, so this kinda feels overdue," Koutarou said, his words echoing in the stairwell of an abandoned building.

He and the girls were currently on their way to Folsaria. Several teleportation gates existed across Japan, one of which was hidden within this disused

building.

“So you say, but Folsarians have every reason to be frightened of former Darkness Rainbow members, Satomi-kun,” Maki replied with a wry smile.

She was happy that Koutarou had so much faith in her, but that was only because he knew her personally. The same didn’t apply to Folsarians at large, who saw her as something to fear.

“But, I mean, even the other leaders of Darkness Rainbow were fighting for something they believed in, right? Besides, I’m sorta the one who put them in that position...” Koutarou pondered out loud after hearing what Maki said.

Koutarou didn’t think poorly of the Darkness Rainbow girls. Categorically, they were different from the likes of Vandarion, whose cruelty knew no limits. Koutarou had always wanted to put a stop to Darkness Rainbow and Elexis, but at the very least, he knew they would take good care of Forthorthe if they’d won in the end.

Moreover, there was the simple matter of Darkness Rainbow’s chief goal. They wanted to return to their true home—to Forthorthe—and Koutarou felt personally responsible for their banishment from it in the first place. He couldn’t condemn them as inherently evil for it.

“You only feel that way because you know the whole story, Satomi-kun. To everyone else, we were just a terrorist organization.”

“Yeah, that’s fair... I guess it’s a big deal that Rainbow Heart invited you to join them, then. How did that come about, Nana-san?”

There, Koutarou looked over his shoulder at Nana. She was short and a few steps below him, so all he could see was her face. On it was a very bright smile.

“Maki-san may have been a leader of Darkness Rainbow, but she’d only just assumed the position and had no criminal record.”

“Huh? What do you mean?” Koutarou asked curiously. He wasn’t sure how Maki, Maya’s disciple, had no criminal record.

“The leaders of Darkness Rainbow were free to join missions as they pleased, while subordinates were forced to follow orders from above. And as soon as

Aika-san was promoted to Dark Navy, she headed straight for you... and the rest is history. She technically never planned and executed an attack as a leader of Darkness Rainbow.”

“Ah, of course. And before that, she was only following orders.”

This made perfect sense to Koutarou. Maki had been ordered to commit evil rather than committing it of her own volition. She was only following superior orders.

“It’s still a mark against her that she was, even if only on paper, a leader of Darkness Rainbow,” Nana continued. “But given what she’s accomplished since leaving the organization, Rainbow Heart decided they had no qualms against inviting Aika-san into their ranks as an intermediate magician.”

“It’s true she’s been helping me out all this time. Yurika too.”

Ever since leaving Darkness Rainbow, Maki had dedicated herself to assisting Koutarou—a quest that involved protecting Folsaria and weakening Darkness Rainbow’s influence. She’d also personally been aiding Yurika, an archwizard of Rainbow Heart. As such, her name was frequently mentioned with commendation in Yurika’s reports.

That created an interesting situation. While Maki had technically been a leader of Darkness Rainbow, there were no records of her wrongdoing and plenty of evidence of her good deeds. In light of this, Rainbow Heart agreed that she should be offered a position as intermediate magician. Intermediate magicians had no political influence in Folsaria, but they were still entitled to assistance and other support.

“That’s why I seconded Nana-san’s recommendation,” Yurika said with a proud, happy smile. She was pleased with Maki’s invitation too.

“So you know she’s been saving your butt, huh?” Koutarou teased.

“That’s part of it, but Maki-chan is also my friend. I know all her good sides, and she’s definitely got what it takes to be a magical girl.”

“Yurika...”

Seeing Yurika smile, Koutarou felt something tug at his heart. Yurika had

recommended Maki not just to repay a favor or help out a friend... but because she knew Maki was right for the job. It took a magical girl of love and courage to know one, he thought. If they weren't on the move at the moment, he might have reached over to pat her on the head.

"Thank you, Yurika," Maki said instead, volunteering her gratitude. She was happy to be seen, not just as a friend, but for who she truly was.

"Heeheehee. I'm sure you would've done the same for me if our positions were reversed."

"Yes, that's true. I'm sure I would have. I know your good sides too."

"Aww, that's kind of embarrassing..."

"Isn't it? Heehee."

There, Yurika and Maki shared a laugh together. They'd been mortal enemies just two years ago, so seeing them like this now was a touching sight to Koutarou. He was on the verge of tears, but fortunately, Nana was able to bring him back.

"There are more practical reasons for this too, you know," she said.

"Like what?" he asked.

"Natural talent, for example. Gifted magicians are few and far between, and Rainbow Heart doesn't want to miss out on powerful recruits. They're also chronically shorthanded now with all the Forthorthe business..."

It took two important things to make a magician: mana and proper training. Without one or the other, magic was normally just a pipe dream. That said, there were certain people—natural-born mages, so to speak—who understood magic and its intricacies. They could use it without being taught, per se. Proper magicians were uncommon enough as it was, but natural-born mages were truly rare, even within Rainbow Heart. They didn't want to let an exceptional specimen like Maki slip through their fingers.

There was also, as Nana had said, the matter of personnel logistics. Now that it was known that Forthorthe was the Folsarians' true home, Rainbow Heart was busier than ever. If magic leaked from Folsaria to Forthorthe, there would

be unmitigated chaos. All possible precaution was necessary to prevent that from happening. Moreover, Folsaria was in the throes of a debate that divided the country in three—should they ally with Forthorthe, make a mass exodus, or keep living as they were? It was an all hands on deck situation where even former members of Darkness Rainbow were welcome assets.

“I see. That makes sense,” Koutarou said with a nod.

“Granted, that side of the equation isn’t publicly acknowledged,” Nana added with a chuckle.

But despite her demeanor, it was no laughing matter. If word got out that former Darkness Rainbow members were being recruited, the people of Folsaria would grow to distrust Rainbow Heart. Nana was only able to make jokes about the situation because she was with Koutarou, away from all the tricky post-war politics.

“Still... now that Aika-san’s joining Rainbow Heart, Yurika’s going to lose her position, isn’t she?” Koutarou asked.

“I am not!” Yurika retorted with a pout, although she was worried about the same thing deep down.

“Aika-san’s now a magical girl of justice who fights with a sword of magic, spells of all kinds, and her cat familiar.”

“Meow!”

Snoozy, resting atop Koutarou’s head, let out a small cry when he heard the word “cat.” It seemed he’d been picking up on certain words lately and could now tell when he was being talked about. Incidentally, the reason he was perched on Koutarou was simply that his head was bigger than the girls’, making him the most comfortable ride of the bunch.

“Meanwhile, you’re a chemical weapons expert who’s drowning in debt. It’s not even a contest,” he continued.

“Ngh...”

Underground and in Forthorthe, Yurika was known as a chemical warfare specialist who played with bioweapons like toys, taking out her enemies

without ever leaving a trace. She'd helped the Satomi knights overcome all sorts of crises and made quite a name for herself doing it. She was the most well-known knight of the group after Koutarou himself and Kiriha. That's right—Yurika the chemical weapons expert was a fan favorite.

"S-Sorry, Yurika-chan," Maki apologized.

"Hnnngh..."

Yurika had inadvertently gained even more attention recently because of Nana's activities with Nefilforan's squad. Nana only used normal weapons in front of the Forthorthian soldiers, but what she achieved with them was magical. As such, they'd taken to calling her "the magician." They were enamored, both with her cute looks and her performance in battle. They were likewise taken with Yurika when they found out she was her apprentice. Surely the magician's apprentice was a magician too.

And so her popularity soared—right along with her reputation as a chemical weapons expert. The Forthorthian soldiers would now gift her chemical weapons every time they saw her. They weren't confident in their own ability to use them, but they had every confidence Yurika could do something truly magical with them.

"Aw, don't be like that, Koutarou. You know you like Yurika just the way she is, since you keep her close and watch over her yourself," Sanae chimed in, exposing Koutarou's innermost heart.

Hearing this, Yurika's teary eyes lit up bright. "Really?!" she exclaimed, tottering over to Koutarou. Anyone else would have skipped, but her uncoordinated steps were strange.

"O-Of course not!" he denied fervently.

Sanae knew everything he felt thanks to her psychic powers, so she simply smiled at his denial. The other girls, however, even without psychic powers, were all smiling too. No matter what excuses Koutarou might make, he couldn't fool them

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Though Rainbow Heart's headquarters was a military facility, it was more so

administrative in function. It served as the country's point of contact with the military, so it had a rather bureaucratic atmosphere. This included a window where civilians could come to request aid when magical beasts appeared, register children born with mana, report magical crimes or accidents, and apply to join Rainbow Heart. Effectively, it was as much of a police station as it was a military base.

"Maki-san, head on over to the enlistment desk," Nana said.

Nana had gone to the information desk in the lobby and asked for further instructions. She showed the clerk the letter Maki had received, and the clerk quickly sent word upstairs that she and Maki had arrived.

"The recruiter should be here soon, so you shouldn't have to wait for long," Nana explained, handing the letter back to Maki.

"Understood. Thank you very much," she replied, taking it. Once she delivered the letter to the enlistment counter, the application process would officially begin.

"As for you, Yurika-chan..." Nana continued.

"Y-Yes?" Yurika had been totally spaced out, but hearing Nana say her name snapped her back to her senses.

All this time, Rainbow Heart had considered Maki to be Yurika's ward—but that stopped the moment they entered Rainbow Heart HQ. Maki was now a prospective recruit under Nana's supervision. Strictly speaking, Yurika's job was done. She hadn't expected to be involved in this process, and as such, she was a little surprised that Nana called out to her.

"I've also got some papers for you," Nana said.

"For me...?" Yurika asked, a bit wary.

She then reluctantly took the envelope from Nana. For Yurika, getting paperwork from Rainbow Heart usually wasn't a good thing. She skeptically scanned the envelope, which was addressed to Archwizard Nijino Yurika of the Blue Magic Division. It was unmistakably for her. She had a bad feeling about its contents, and so she slowly, dubiously opened it... But nothing could have prepared her for what was inside.

From: Rainbow Heart's Finance Department Treasury

To: Archwizard Nijino Yurika of the Blue Magic Division

We've heard of your many accomplishments, which are most becoming of an archwizard of Rainbow Heart. We expect even greater things from you in the future. In light of this, we are passing along some good news.

Congratulations. We are pleased to report that with the payment on the 30th of last month, all of your debts have been repaid. This is 58 months sooner than expected, courtesy of the allowances and bonuses you have accrued since your assignment to Japan. Again, congratulations. We'd now like to discuss your future asset management with you. Please visit the finance department at your earliest convenience.

After reading through the papers, Yurika went ghostly pale. The color drained completely from her face.

"Wh-Wha... Whaaaaaaaat?!"

This news was like a bolt out of the blue to her. It would turn her entire life upside down.

You see, Yurika had had a rather large debt hanging over her. Shortly after she was first appointed archwizard, there was an accident where her magic went rampant and demolished a facility. Folsaria had special insurances to cover damage caused by errant magic in the line of duty... but unfortunately, Yurika was on her own time when said accident happened. That meant the cost of it—repairs included—fell entirely on her shoulders. They had garnished her salary ever since, which was what had forced her into a life of poverty. The garnishments were projected to continue for another five years.

The situation, however, had changed when Yurika was dispatched to room 106. She was now receiving hazard pay, overtime, and various other bonuses for taking down dangerous enemies. She'd also been a part of a mission to Forthorthe, discovered the Folsarians' true home, rescued royalty, and more. The honorariums she'd received for her service quickly added up, rapidly

diminishing the timeline on her debt repayment plan.

“What’s the matter, Yurika-chan?” Nana asked.

“Yurika?” Maki echoed.

Both girls then peered at the paper in her hands. When they saw what it said, they rejoiced.

“You did it, Yurika-chan!” Nana shouted.

“Congratulations, Yurika! Now you don’t have to worry about your budget anymore! You can buy all the manga you’d like!” Maki likewise cheered.

Their beloved friend had earned her way out of debt with hard work. Her name—and her bank account—were now clear, which was indeed a welcome cause to celebrate.

“What’s going on?” Sanae asked, curious about the commotion.

“Yeah, let us in on it too!” Shizuka followed up.

“Did something happen?” Harumi inquired.

The three girls came closer, crowding around the smiling Nana and Maki. They wanted to know what the good news must be.

“Yurika-chan has actually managed to repay her debts!” Nana explained.

“Apparently she’s been getting lots of bonuses since being sent out to room 106!” Maki added.

“That’s great, Yurika-chan!” Shizuka cheered.

“Congratulations,” said Harumi. “Now you can eat all the delicious things you’ve always wanted!”

The girls all continued to pat Yurika on the back... All but one, that is.

“Aren’t you happy?” Sanae asked, cocking her head.

She could sense no joy in Yurika’s aura. If anything, she seemed disappointed and sad. Sanae watched her curiously as she stared down at the letter in her hands...

And then loudly ripped it up.



“H-Hey, Yurika!” Sanae shrieked.

“Yurika-chan, you shouldn’t do that!” Nana cried out.

But Yurika paid them no mind as she reduced the letter to shreds and then burned those shreds to a crisp with fire magic. Only ash remained.

“Yurika, why would you... Oh.”

Nana was about to press Yurika for the reason for her actions, but she stopped short when she saw the tears in her dear friend’s eyes.

“I want to be a freeloader for a little longer...” Yurika mumbled. “At least until we graduate high school...”

Yurika was terrified by the prospect of her life changing. Living in a wardrobe was cramped and uncomfortable, but she was always right there with Koutarou and the other girls. She was happy with the way things were. Sure, she could buy a mountain of manga and all the food she wanted with her salary reinstated... but that wasn’t bargain enough to give up the life she loved.

“Yurika...” Maki said sympathetically, keenly aware of how Yurika felt.

When she’d taken her first steps into her new life after leaving Darkness Rainbow, she too was afraid of her relationship with Koutarou changing. It had taken a great deal of courage to overcome that fear. Maki was spurred forward by knowing she was doing the right thing, but Yurika’s case was different in that sense. Harder. Maki couldn’t bring herself to be critical of her for it.

“I don’t think Satomi-kun will ask you to move out of the wardrobe just because you have money coming in now, Yurika-san. I’m sure that won’t change even after enrolling in university, either,” Harumi assured her. She was certain of that. There was no way Koutarou would tell Yurika to get out. Especially not now that she’d left an impression on his heart.

“I just wanted to be a freeloader... for a little while longer...”

“What’s the big deal?” Sanae asked casually. “This just means you’re not any different from me or Theia.”

Sanae herself was the daughter of a well-to-do family and wanted for nothing. In spite of that, Koutarou still gave her the same allowance that he always had

while she was a ghost. It was a trivial amount, but Sanae lived for it and Koutarou had never denied it to her.

The same could be said for the salary that Theia paid Koutarou. Given her vast fortunes in Forthorthe, the sum was comparatively insignificant. And yet Theia insisted on giving it to Koutarou. Sanae was sure the same thing would be true in Yurika's case.

"Do you really think so...?" she mumbled with the first sign of hope in her voice.

"Duh. What makes you think otherwise? Koutarou isn't that heartless, and he's not that tough."

"You really understand Satomi-san, don't you, Sanae-chan?"

"You should too. The worst thing about you is how much you underestimate yourself, you know?"

"I underestimate myself?"

Because Yurika wasn't any good at academics or athletics, she thought of herself as worthless—and that was precisely what Sanae was talking about. Yurika underestimated her abilities and her worth, including how much she meant to Koutarou. How much he needed her. She had trouble seeing it for herself, but she also couldn't deny it. The sword crest on her forehead was proof of it.

"I... I think I'll try and be more like you, Sanae-chan."

Thus Yurika decided that she'd slowly work on seeing her value. She had no faith in it outside of what her friends told her, but if they saw worth in her... then maybe her special someone did too.

"Attagirl! Unshakeable confidence is the foundation of any good magical girl!"

"Right!"

Thanks to Sanae, Yurika was able to smile again. This entire conversation, however, had been a time-consuming distraction from their real objective here at Rainbow Heart HQ. Nearly half an hour had passed before Maki was able to get back to her paperwork at the enlistment desk. Once all the proper forms

were filled out, she'd move on to an interview with her future boss.

Nana and Yurika were both members of the Blue Magic Division, which made its home in the appropriately colored Blue Tower. An old woman named Kaera awaited them at the top.

"Hello there! It's been ages, Kaera-sama!" Nana called to her.

"It has indeed, Nana," she replied.

"I have been in Forthorthe for a while, after all... I'm glad to see you well."

"And I'm glad to hear of all the good work you've been doing. Same as always."

"Thank you very much!"

Kaera was the base commander of the Blue Magic Division, and she held a seat on Folsaria's elder council. She was a high-ranking civil official deserving of the utmost respect. She was mild-mannered, but there was an undying passion in her eyes. Her very face reflected the weight of the responsibility she carried.

"Nijino Yurika reporting, ma'am! I've brought Aika Maki-san as a prospective recruit!"

Even Yurika carried herself properly in Kaera's presence. She minded her posture and her speech, although she could hardly hide her nervousity. Nana, however, spoke to her more like an old friend—a side effect of having known each other for over a decade.

"Well done, Rainbow," Kaera replied to Yurika.

"Thank you!"

"Now... you must be Aika Maki-san," Kaera said, shifting her gaze from one magical girl to the next. Her eyes were kind but fiery.

Maki steeled herself before answering, "Yes, I am... I'm currently an unaffiliated magician."

Strictly speaking, Maki belonged to the Satomi knights, but the real reason she claimed no affiliation was her past. Because she'd once been a member of

Darkness Rainbow, she needed to make it clear she'd washed her hands of them.

"All seems to be in order, then," Kaera replied. "Follow me this way, if you please."

"A-All right."

Kaera got up from the wooden desk where she ordinarily worked and ushered Maki into the lounge suite of her office for the interview. Maki took the seat she was offered on the sofa and practically melted into it. She was prepared to be summarily rejected and denounced. Given how Rainbow Heart was founded, she believed they would come down on her hard for her sins. Folsaria was a nation that rose from a grave sin, and Rainbow Heart's mission was to correct its ways.

But in reality, Kaera welcomed Maki. She herself had fought Darkness Rainbow and lost many allies in the process. Yet even so, she received Maki now with a smile—a sign of her strong, resolute nature. Maki felt she'd have to work hard to live up to both Kaera's kindness and her expectations.

"Nana, Yurika, would you wait in the other room with your guests?" Kaera asked.

"Oh, yes, of course. Let's go, Yurika-chan," Nana agreed.

"Huh?"

"The interview will just be the two of them. It'll be harder with us here, won't it?"

"Oh, right. Good luck, Maki-chan!"

"Thank you, Yurika."

The other two magical girls made their exit, leaving Maki and Kaera alone. The question of whether Maki would be hired now rested solely on her shoulders. She sat on the sofa steeling herself as Kaera fixed up some tea for the both of them.

"Now then... let's get started, shall we?" she said, her voice sounding much clearer now that it was just her and Maki in the room. She took a seat across

from Maki after setting the tea out, and picked up some files she'd prepared beforehand. "Let's start with the basics. Your name and age, please."

The interview was a serious process. Not even the personal friend of an archwizard could join the ranks of Rainbow Heart without her identity confirmed.

"My name is Aika Maki. I don't know my exact age, but I believe I'm around eighteen years old."

"Why don't you know your age exactly?"

"Because I was sold to a slave dealer when I was young," Maki said in a lower tone.

"My apologies for having to ask."

"No... it's fine."

With no clear DOB, Kaera had no choice but to ask Maki about it. It was a touchy subject, however, and a sad story to hear. She was sorry to press her on the matter.

"I have a few more hard questions to ask," she said, "so I do apologize."

"Don't worry. It's fine. I mean, I'm fine now... I have a home and people who love me."

Following that, Maki went through her history with Kaera. It started with her horrible treatment at the hands of the slave dealer, how she was betrayed by a friend when she tried to escape... Maki spared no detail, completely baring her heart to Kaera. She answered each and every question fully and honestly.

"Thank you, Maki-san... Your story isn't an exact match to what I have here in your profile, but there are almost always some discrepancies. Ah, but I suppose you would know far more about memory and how it works than I do."

"Yes..."

Maki had confided in Kaera things she'd only ever told Koutarou before—like how she'd gone back to get revenge on the slave dealer. She felt like she couldn't hide those details. And in truth... getting them out was actually something of a relief. Maybe, deep down, she'd always wanted to tell someone

other than Koutarou her story.

“Now then... I have ample record of your abilities and accomplishments, so we’ll skip the usual competency test. For my last question, I’d like to ask about your motivation for being here. Why do you want to join Rainbow Heart?”

On the surface, Maki was here because Nana had recommended her for the job, but that wasn’t really what Kaera was asking about. She wanted to know why Maki had personally chosen to come along.

Maki already knew her answer and explained herself thus: “There are people I want to protect. Friends I want to stand with. And to that end, I want to make this world as safe as possible. All this fighting doesn’t suit them.”

While Koutarou and the girls were constantly putting themselves in danger for the greater good, they were still only normal teenagers. They had a peaceful everyday life to go back to once the fighting was all over. That was the present Maki wanted to protect. The future she wanted to safeguard. And it was also her way of making up for the past.

“There was someone I couldn’t help... She was like a savior to me personally. I have other regrets, too. I don’t know if doing this will prevent such misfortune in the future, but I believe it’s better than doing nothing at all.”

Maki was talking about Maya. Maya had a long, dark past and Maki was irrefutably a part of it... but that didn’t change the fact that Maya was her savior. Her whereabouts were currently unknown. It had never been confirmed whether she and Elexis were dead or alive, and that troubled Maki to this day. She worried nonstop, but she also regretted the life she’d once lived with Maya. Since she couldn’t save Maya, she believed the least she could do was try to atone for her other mistakes.

“That’s why I want to join Rainbow Heart,” she concluded.

Maki wanted to protect the future and make up for the past. That was what had brought her to Rainbow Heart’s doorstep. Hearing this...

“Heh...” Kaera laughed a little. Maki looked at her in puzzlement, and in return she explained, “I apologize. You’re just like Nana said... I can’t help but find it funny.”

“Like Nana said...?”

“Yes. She wrote at the end of her recommendation ‘If Rainbow Heart does not accept this brilliant light into its ranks, I will form my own rainbow.’”

Nana believed that Maki had everything it took to become a proper magical girl. She wanted Rainbow Heart to hire her no matter what, and if they refused, she was willing to depart the organization and start her own. She was putting herself on the line for Maki.

“Nana-san wrote that?” Maki asked in near disbelief.

“Indeed. Yurika wrote something similar too.”

With that, Kaera slid Maki the letter of recommendation in question. The majority of it was in Nana’s clean script, but the last few lines next to Yurika’s signature were written in her big, bubbly handwriting: “Maki-chan has a lot of love and a strong sense of justice. I think she’ll make a beautiful Rainbow too.” From just those few words, Maki could sense their incredible bond with her. She found herself tearing up.

“Be sure to thank them later,” Kaera said.

“What?” Maki asked, hurriedly looking up from the letter.

She was taken aback... because it sounded like Kaera was implying she’d passed the interview.

“Is it really that much of a surprise?” Kaera replied. “You’re hired, Maki-san.”

“But...” Maki stammered. Kaera had made it sound like it was no big deal, but it was a very big deal indeed to Maki. “Aren’t there objections to hiring me?”

“There are. Even I was uneasy about it myself at first.”

“Then—”

“But now that I’ve met you for myself, I can see that you’re every bit the brilliant light that Nana and Yurika say you are.”

Maki wasn’t running from her past. She came to Rainbow Heart with an open heart, hiding nothing. Kaera believed that was a necessary quality for a Rainbow agent. What mattered even more than her physical strength and the strength of

her mana was the strength of her heart. And based on the interview, Kaera believed Maki had what it took.

“It’s often said that Kaera of the Blue Tower enjoys eccentrics, but that’s not what this is,” Kaera explained.

When the renowned genius Nana had pushed to make Yurika an archwizard, there were still those who objected even after seeing Yurika’s immense power for themselves. It was Kaera who’d personally pushed Yurika’s promotion through, claiming all responsibility. She had a long history of making such risky appointments, but as she said, this was different. She truly believed letting Maki go would be a big loss for Rainbow Heart.

“That said... I’m the only person who had a chance to talk with you today, so there is something Rainbow Heart as an organization would like to ask of you.”

“That’s fine,” Maki replied. “I’d feel better myself if it was conditional.”

Kaera was satisfied with the day’s interview, but she knew it would take more to convince the rest of Rainbow Heart... and so she issued Maki a challenge before she was formally brought on board.

The challenge was a simple mission that would assess Maki’s aptitude for such work, her ability to make decisions in the field, her loyalty to the cause, and her leadership potential. In short, it was a probationary trial.

“So what’s your first mission, Aika-san?” Koutarou asked.

He’d reunited with the rest of the group by the time Maki was done with her interview. Though he was Forthorthe’s commander-in-chief, there was no pressing military business in Folsaria at the moment. He believed such affairs were better left to Theia and Ruth anyway, so once the official greetings and other pleasantries were over, Koutarou had excused himself to go find Maki.

Incidentally, as he’d left the meeting, Nana, Yurika, and Kaera took his place. Nana had been serving as an advisor to Forthorthe for a while now, and Yurika had long assisted them as an archwizard. The two magical girls were thus invited alongside Kaera, a prominent member of the elder council. That left Koutarou, Sanae, Shizuka, and Harumi with Maki now.

“Civilians have been going missing in the city,” Maki explained, “so I’m to investigate what’s happening.”

“That sounds like a pretty important mission right off the bat.”

“Strictly speaking, no one’s legally been declared missing yet. If the investigation finds that nothing strange is going on, it will be considered a closed case.”

Even in peaceful Japan, tens of thousands of people disappeared every year. The same was true in Folsaria. With the tension between Rainbow Heart and Darkness Rainbow resolved, people were free to come and go as they pleased. Some simply moved or migrated away, but Maki’s mission was to get to the bottom of things. If the cause was suspect, she was to track it down, and if not, she was to file a conclusive report explaining so.

“I see,” said Harumi. “If something *is* going on and the case is concluded prematurely, it will cause problems down the line. And if there’s nothing to it, it will look bad if she takes too long to determine that. I’m sure this is a test to see if she can effectively draw the line and clear the task at hand.”

At least, that was how she interpreted Maki’s mission. The instructions were straightforward, but the mission itself was a nuanced thing. A third-party observer would also likely be accompanying her for evaluation. Kaera trusted Nana and Yurika’s reports, but the rest of the elder council and Rainbow Heart would want something more objective.

“If Sakuraba-senpai is right, then we’ll only be holding Aika-san back if we don’t bring our A game. So let’s get fired up, Sanae. You and I are the biggest liabilities here,” said Koutarou. He knew everyone else in the group was capable of keeping it together.

“Aye, aye, sir! I’m rooting for Maki here, so I won’t goof around,” Sanae declared.

“Thank you, Higashihongan-san,” Maki replied with a smile. The idea that she now had friends rooting for her made her happy.

“Besides, if you don’t get hired as a magical girl and end up forbidden from using magic, who’s gonna have *my* back? I need you if I’m gonna shine as a

magical girl myself!”

“So this is personally motivated, huh?” Koutarou teased.

“All the more compelling, right? Heehee.”

“You’re actually proud of yourself?”

“Eeheehee.”

Even if Sanae’s reasons for wanting Maki to succeed were somewhat selfish, the fact of the matter was that she trusted Maki with her life. Realizing that, Maki smiled even brighter.

Rainbow Heart first got involved in the disappearances after receiving over a dozen tips that people had gone missing. The case had now been passed down to Maki, who decided that the first thing she should do was follow up with the people who reported the tips. Basic investigative groundwork.

“Sorry to bother you, miss. If it’s not too much trouble, can I ask you to give me your report one more time?”

“Certainly. We have a daily soup kitchen here at our church, but there are some folks who stopped showing up last week...”

Maki’s first destination was a church next to Blue Tower. Folsaria’s religion was similar to Forthorthe’s, which made sense considering their shared origin. The churches here worshiped what they called the Goddess of the Sun, and they were accordingly decorated with sun symbols and motifs. Maki was currently talking to a priestess dressed in vestments of a similar fashion.

“What kind of people were they, if I may ask?”

“It was two people. One was a man in his forties, and the other was a fellow in his twenties that had been helping out with volunteer work.”

The priestess answered all of Maki’s questions, telling her everything she wanted to know about the situation. The church had a charity meal program, which brought in both the less fortunate and volunteers. The program was long-lived, so the church knew all the regulars by name and would go to check on them—especially the elderly—if they stopped coming.

Such was the case with the two men who'd disappeared. The older gentleman had been coming since he was young, and the younger man had been volunteering for several years now. They both missed a day every now and then, but never a week at a time like this. When a church rep had gone to visit their homes, there was no sign of them there either. That was why the priestess had reported the matter to Rainbow Heart.

"Thank you for the information. Did you notice anything strange about the two men who went missing?"

"No, nothing in particular... If anything, I would say they were acting quite normal before they disappeared."

"I understand... I'll look into it."

"Please do."

The priestess bowed to Maki as she returned to Koutarou and the rest of the group. They'd kept their distance because this was Maki's mission. They only intended to step in if she asked for their help. In other words, they were playing the role of her subordinates.

"How did it go, Aika-san?" Shizuka asked worriedly when Maki returned with a tense expression.

Maki answered honestly, explaining the situation and what she'd heard from the priestess.

"So you still don't know if there's something going on, huh?" Shizuka said after hearing the story, sounding a little relieved.

She'd feared the worst when she saw the look on Maki's face. Fortunately, she'd simply mistaken Maki's pensiveness for dread.

"That's right," replied Maki. "But this is still only the first place, so let's get a move on."

"That's true. They say investigations are all about legwork, after all."

Though the church hadn't yielded any leads, Maki was still hopeful. The investigation had only just begun. She and the rest of the group thus made their way to the next destination.

Over a dozen people had been reported missing, but Maki was having a hard time finding a decisive lead. Based on the information she'd gathered so far, she was starting to worry foul play was involved. It seemed that all of the people who'd gone missing were acting perfectly normal before they disappeared. Maki hadn't heard one word about anyone being in debt or anyone getting into trouble. The stories were all the same in that regard. The first bit of interesting information came up while investigating the thirteenth disappearance...

"Labor recruitment, you say?"

"Yeah. They were looking for people to do some heavy labor. The pay was pretty good, so I wanted to go myself... but as you can see, I got this bum leg."

The person who'd reported the thirteenth disappearance was a middle-aged man who was concerned about a friend who hadn't been home for a while. According to the friend, they'd been offered jobs by a well-dressed stranger. The middle-aged man couldn't take the work because of his leg, but his friend accepted and left with the stranger. According to the man, he hadn't been back since.

"Can you tell me about your friend?" Maki asked. "His name and what he looked like?"

"Name's Karuto. He's a big, burly, bearded bastard."

"Big and burly..."

That struck Maki.

Come to think of it, all of the missing people are...

The first twelve people to go missing were all men, and they were all big by description. The thirteenth was apparently no exception, but if they were being recruited for labor, that all made sense. And given the current state of Folsaria, it could be legitimate work. Reconstruction was well underway after the final battle with Darkness Rainbow. None of the missing men were terribly well off either, so it was easy to believe they'd jumped at a well paying job.

"Which way did they go when your friend left with the stranger, sir?"

“Thataway.”

“The west gate, huh?”

Maki continued to talk to the man for a bit, collecting as much information as she could. Once she was done, she headed for the west gate herself. She had several more people on her list to talk to, but if someone had really been recruiting laborers, perhaps there was a witness by the west gate. The group discussed the situation as they went.

“Hmm, maybe this is just some temp gig and they’re out on the job,” suggested Koutarou.

“That’s the best case scenario...” replied Maki. “But I still think it’s strange that all contact has been lost.”

If it weren’t for the lack of communication with the missing men, it would seem that they were simply away on work. Yet no one had heard a word from them, which Maki found suspicious. Though not as widespread as in Japan, Folsaria still had several means of personal communication available to civilians.

“Maybe they just can’t get in touch because they’re in a remote location with no signal or something,” offered Koutarou.

He then pulled out his smartphone, which he’d recently upgraded for security reasons at the behest of the Forthorthian government. He showed it to Maki, indicating that he had no bars. Since Folsaria didn’t have any cell towers, he had no way of calling anyone here.

“I certainly hope you’re right, Satomi-kun...”

If the men were working in a remote area, it was indeed possible they were simply outside Folsaria’s communication network. The network was mana based, but it was still under development and didn’t cover the entire nation. The men wouldn’t be able to phone in through it without coverage... but Maki doubted that was the issue at hand. Construction sites needed to be able to report accidents and injuries, so setting up means of communication would be a priority task on any jobsite.

“It’s starting to seem more and more like something is amiss,” Harumi concluded, looking a little upset.

She would have preferred better news, but the scales were tipping toward something unpleasant. Rather than every single one of them coincidentally being outside comms range, it seemed more likely that someone was keeping the men from communicating. Prospects were looking grim.

The group continued to walk along toward the gate, when all of a sudden Maki came to a dead halt.

“Huh...?”

“What’s the matter, Aika-san?”

Noticing her stop, Koutarou did the same and turned back. Maki was looking around in a strange fluster.

“This area feels familiar for some reason...” she said.

She then took a step as if drawn to something. Then another. And for each step she took, the sense of déjà vu she was feeling grew stronger.

I’ve seen this scenery before. But where...?

She searched her memories. It wasn’t anything from the past two years. She’d only been to Folsaria a few times since meeting Koutarou, so it had to be from before that...

This... Could it be?!

Maki’s eyes darted to a narrow alleyway. When she saw it, it hit her.

“I know this place!” she cried.

“Aika-san?! What is it?!” Koutarou called after her.

She’d taken off running and didn’t seem to hear him. Whatever was going through her mind right now occupied her entirely.

“It’s just past here!”

Her conviction only grew stronger as she leaped into the alleyway. Somewhere down it should be a house that the afternoon sun hit just right.

“I knew it! there’s no doubt about it!”

The instant she saw it, her memories came rushing back to her. The small

house bathed in light was in fact...

“This is my house! I was born here!”

This was Maki’s home. It was where she’d been born. Where she’d spent her early childhood with her parents. She was vacantly staring down her old family house.

It was an emotionally complicated thing for her. After all, she was forced to leave her home when she was sold to a slave trader as a child. This wasn’t a place full of warm memories for her—it was where her parents had betrayed her. That was why she’d never sought it out before. Folsaria wasn’t that big of a place; the house wouldn’t have been hard to find. She’d just never wanted to.

But now here it was, right in front of her again. She couldn’t look away from it. She was practically frozen in place.

“I was born here, and then a few years later...”

She was sold.

Maki had a few faint memories of living here, but almost none of her parents. She barely recalled their faces, much less actually doing anything with them. She was sold at an early age, so her memories from that time were all vague. She had only a fuzzy recollection of the neighborhood, too. A strong sense of nostalgia was what had led her to the house upon entering it.

“This is where you were born, Aika-san?” Koutarou asked. He’d only heard part of Maki’s mumbling, so he wasn’t quite sure what had gotten into her.

“Y-Yes... This was my home.”

Hearing Koutarou’s voice brought Maki back to the present. She’d forgotten she was with anyone. She considered that a shortcoming on her part, but it also reminded her how precious it was to have such friends at her side.

“I see. What a coincidence...”

Koutarou didn’t ask anything more. He knew that Maki had been sold to a slaver as a child, so he could only imagine what painful feelings must be plaguing her in the moment. He struggled to come up with the words to comfort her. Fortunately, someone else knew exactly what to say.

“It’s okay, Maki.”

It was Sanae. Maki’s intense, turbulent emotions reached her through her aura, so she knew just what Maki was feeling... and just what to do about it.

“No matter what happened here, you have us now,” she said as she wrapped her arms around Maki from behind.

She then hugged her as tightly as she could. She hoped she could hold Maki securely enough that she could forget about her past and her pain, even if only for a moment.



“Higashihongan-san...”

Sanae’s hug broke Maki out of her frozen state. She put her hands on Sanae’s arms around her chest and sighed. Her expression, slowly but surely, returned to normal.

“I’m fine now. Thank you, Higashihongan-san.”

“I need you to ace this challenge, remember?”

“You did say that. Heehee.”

“Heeheehee.”

When she heard Maki giggle, Sanae let go of her. She knew what Maki was planning on doing next.

“I’ll be back in a minute,” she said.

“Yeah, we’ll be waiting for you here,” Koutarou replied.

Maki then left the group behind and stepped inside the house. It was brighter than she’d imagined, primarily because the back wall of the building had collapsed. The sun poured in through the gaping hole, illuminating what remained inside the house.

“Nobody’s lived here in a long time...” Maki remarked.

The wear and tear of time was obvious. The shelves were caked with dust, and the kitchen was draped in cobwebs. As Maki approached the collapsed back wall, she could see the cracked foundation of the house covered in mud that had blown in with the rain. The stairs leading up to the second floor were still intact, but the floorboards of the second story had long rotted and fallen away.

“Careful in there, little miss! It’s dangerous!”

Maki didn’t recognize the voice that called out to her from beyond the collapsed wall. It was the elderly woman who lived in the house across the street. Maki stepped outside and approached her.

“As ya can see, the place is fallin’ apart. The children keep playin’ around in it, so they’re talkin’ about tearin’ it down next month. What’re ya doing in there?”

Are ya all right, missy?" the woman asked, looking Maki over.

"Yes, I'm fine," she replied.

The old woman had been worried about her, so she was pleased to see that Maki was okay. She gave a satisfied nod and said, "Glad to hear it. But what on earth were ya doin' in there? It's dangerous."

"Someone I know used to live there..."

Maki technically wasn't lying, but she avoided spilling the whole truth. She didn't have the courage to tell someone she'd just met that she'd been sold into slavery by her parents.

"That so? No big deal then, I s'pose... I haven't been here long myself, but a young couple used to live there decades ago."

"What happened to them?!" Maki asked, unable to keep from raising her voice.

The old woman didn't seem to mind, however. Perhaps she was hard of hearing. She simply replied, "Word is that they passed away in an epidemic, and nobody's lived in that house ever since. No one dared after the epidemic, I reckon."

"I... see..."

In an unexpected turn of events, Maki now knew what happened to her parents after all these years. She turned around to look upon her old house once more, but nothing settled in her mind. So many things were hitting her all at once that she could hardly keep them straight. It was all she could do to stare at the dilapidated building...

Maki only returned to her senses when she suddenly realized Koutarou was standing in front of her. He'd come to check on her when she didn't return to the front of the house.

"Oh...? Satomi-kun?"

"Thank goodness. I was worried something happened."

"It... sort of did."

“What do you mean?”

“The old lady from over there told me what happened to my parents.”

“The old lady?”

Koutarou looked where Maki was pointing, but the elderly woman was long gone. She must have decided it was best to leave Maki be.

“Yes. She told me that the couple who lived here died in an epidemic over a decade ago.”

“I see... So we don’t really know what happened...”

Maki was also sold to a slave trader over a decade ago, but the exact timeline of events was unclear. Did the epidemic happen before or after she was sold? Or was she perhaps sold off while it was ongoing? That knowledge would change the circumstances immensely. Maybe she wasn’t sold strictly for money. Maybe her parents had already passed by the time it happened.

Maki could try to investigate, but many of the residents from that time had likely perished in the epidemic or since been evacuated. They would be difficult to track down. Most of the neighbors in the area now were new here, like the old lady Maki had talked to. That meant almost all possible leads were long gone.

“Honestly, Satomi-kun... I’m a little relieved.”

“Why is that?”

“I don’t hate my parents anymore...”

Maki had always resented her parents. They’d betrayed her. Abandoned her. Tossed her to the wolves of a harsh life. But now Maki knew they were dead. There was also a possibility that they might not have been responsible for what happened to her. And even if they were, they’d already gotten their due. In short, Maki no longer had any reason to hate them.

“...Hic...”

Despite that, Maki was crying. She didn’t know where the tears were coming from. She wasn’t sad that her parents were dead. And she wasn’t sad that she’d been sold all those years ago. She was just... overwhelmingly sad. Something

that had long been cut off inside her was now welling up.

“Aika-san...”

Seeing Maki in tears, Koutarou felt he had to do something. He knew he would regret leaving her alone if he did, so he desperately racked his brain for a plan. He couldn't do this haphazardly. He had to do the right thing...

He knew what the right answer was, but he couldn't bring himself to act on it right away. This was a big deal to him, and a major decision to make.

Still, there's no other way... Besides, she's already done the same thing for me...

And so Koutarou made up his mind. He stared at Maki's forehead for a moment, then put his plan into action.

“I'll just have to be careful...”

“Huh? Wha— Satomi-kun?!”

Koutarou had lifted Maki up—an easy feat for a strong boy like him and a delicate girl like her. Completely swept off her feet, Maki looked up at him in surprise.

“If I ever hurt you, I know you'll hate me forever.”

“...Satomi-kun...”

There, Koutarou embraced her. He knew this was what she really needed. A friend or classmate couldn't save Maki right now, so he'd decided to be more than those. A kiss would have been better proof of his dedication, but as expected of a teenager, he couldn't quite yet act as an adult would.

“That sounds like you're saying you'll never hurt me, that you'll never let me go... So if you do... I'll never get over it...”

Maki relaxed, entrusting her body to Koutarou. As he'd expected, she desired the warmth of family more than anything.

“Why not check things out with magic? You're an indigo magician, after all.”

“It's fine... I choose my love for you over being an indigo magician,” she whispered as she buried her face in his shoulder.

Koutarou couldn't see her expression like this, but judging from her voice, he was sure she was better off than before.

“Then dry your tears for now. The others will find us soon, and they'll think I'm the one who made you cry.”

“It'll be hard, but I'll give it a try. You really are making me cry...” Maki said, smiling through her tears as she hugged Koutarou tighter.

She tried her best to stop crying before the other girls arrived, but in the end, Koutarou ended up getting an earful from them.

He Who Slumbers

Sunday, July 10th

Once Maki collected herself, Koutarou and the girls made their way toward the west gate. Fortunately, everything seemed to be back to normal now. Snoozy was restlessly running circles around Maki at first, but he'd since climbed back atop her left shoulder and settled down in the usual fashion.

"Hey, Koutarou..."

Meanwhile, Sanae likewise plopped her head over Koutarou's left shoulder, craning her neck to talk to him.

"Yeah?"

"Sorry about earlier. I said a bunch of stuff that I shouldn't have."

When the girls had discovered Maki in tears, they'd instinctively laid into Koutarou without a second thought. Later, however, Sanae came to realize that Koutarou wasn't the reason Maki had been crying. That was why, to her credit, she was apologizing for the mistake now.

"It's okay," he replied.

"You're not mad?"

Sanae felt Koutarou was at least a little angry about the misunderstanding, but he certainly wasn't acting like it. He didn't look it, either.

"Truthfully, it would have been better if I *had* made Aika-san cry."

At first, Koutarou was glad that he wasn't the reason for Maki's tears. But the more he thought about it, the more he felt he'd rather her cry over him than her sad past with her parents. That was why he hadn't raised one word of protest when the girls berated him, and why he wasn't upset about it even now.

"I see... Eeheehee."

“What?”

“You’re so manly, Koutarou.”

“Like I said before, I’m trying to be for you guys.”

“I think you’re doing a good job. Two thumbs up from me.”

Sanae left the conversation at that and simply clung to Koutarou’s back. It was the best way she knew to convey her true feelings.

“...”

“...”

Silently watching on from behind were Harumi and Shizuka. When they saw Sanae clinging to Koutarou, they shared a glance and a smile... all while thinking they’d like to try doing the same thing later for themselves.

In the working-class districts of Thorthe, labor recruitment was anything but rare. A well dressed man doing the recruiting, however, was a different story. Foremen usually recruited for themselves, relatably dressed in work clothes as fellow laborers on the job. That was why an expensively dressed recruiter stood out like a sore thumb.

“It should be around here...” Maki mumbled.

She then came to a stop a few dozen meters beyond Thorthe’s west gate. The area outside of the city was almost completely undeveloped, so the land was rather bare and desolate. She’d asked around inside the city limits and heard that the recruited men had all gotten into a vehicle waiting here outside the gate.

“It would make sense to gather the laborers out here. Which is why nobody suspected anything,” Koutarou said as he looked around.

Civilization in Folsaria was concentrated in the most defensible areas for fear of Darkness Rainbow attacks—which were now a thing of the past. Consequently, less defensible real estate was now starting to see development as well. It was cheaper to buy up and build on, so it was a no-brainer investment.

“Maki-san, what should we do now?” Harumi asked.

She already had several ideas, but this was Maki’s test. Barring an emergency, she wouldn’t interject herself unless Maki specifically asked for her help.

“Let’s have the haniwas take a look,” Maki decided.

To the naked eye, there were no traces of what had happened, but that didn’t mean the trail had gone cold. The haniwas would be able to run all sorts of analyses.

“Piece of cake, ho!”

“Ho! Leave this to us, Maki-chan!”

At Maki’s summoning, the two haniwas seemed to appear out of nowhere, eager and raring to go. Upon seeing them, Snoozy let out a small cry.

“Meow!”

“Little Brother, if you ever have any doubts about your relationship with your master, you can talk to us! Ho!”

“We’re veteran familiars ourselves, you know, ho!”

“Meow!”

Despite the haniwas’ sudden appearance, Snoozy didn’t seem the least bit surprised. Perhaps he’d come to understand this was how they operated, or maybe his instincts had alerted him to their presence.

“I’ll look too!” volunteered Sanae.

“We want our turn in the spotlight, ho!”

“You’ll outshine us, ho!”

The haniwas’ tiny bodies were packed with all sorts of useful functions, but in terms of raw spiritual power, Sanae had them beat by a landslide. If she threw herself into the running, they knew she’d outperform them.

“Then let’s all work together!” she offered.

“Good idea, ho! I shall focus on image processing, ho.”

“Then I shall analyze the network, ho.”

“All right, let’s do this!”

“Ho!”

“Ho-oh!”

The two haniwas floated over to either side of Sanae’s head and merged their auras. The three of them then gathered information from all around, sharing it mutually via their spiritual connection. This allowed them to collect and process a much more in-depth analysis than any one of them could have alone.

“Hmmmmm...”

Sanae looked around with an uncharacteristically somber look on her face. Since this mission determined whether or not Maki would become a magical girl, she was taking it very seriously.

“How does it look, Sanae-chan?” Shizuka asked, peering at her.

Sanae seemed troubled as she replied, “Well, there was a weird guy mixed in with the other people gathered here. He was using his head like Theia and the others.”

“A weird guy? Like Theia-chan and the others?” Shizuka repeated with a perplexed expression.

She was struggling to connect the dots in her head. The rest of the group shared her confusion.

“We don’t understand, Sanae,” Koutarou said on everyone’s behalf. “Can you explain yourself properly?”

“You should always understand me! You love me, don’t you?!”

“Love has nothing to do with this.”

“Gosh, you’re such a pain! Now, you... c’mere!”

Giving up on explaining, Sanae decided to use force to get the answers needed...

Pop!

“Kyaaaah?! S-Sanae-chan!”

In other words, she reached inside of herself and forcibly pulled out Sanae-san. Sanae-chan still dominated Sanae's personality, generally speaking, so it was rare for Sanae-san to make an appearance alone. She was utterly shocked to be so rudely brought to the forefront like this.

"What are you doing?! What's going on?!"

"I'm busy working here, so you do the talking."

Indeed, Sanae had brought out Sanae-san to explain things to Koutarou and the others for her. As the calmer, more rational side of Sanae, Sanae-san was much better suited for the job than Sanae-chan.

"That's all you're giving me?!"

"Yup! The rest is up to you."

"A-Auuugh..."

Sanae-chan thus happily withdrew inside Sanae to concentrate on gathering information with the haniwas. This left a troubled Sanae-san to relay said information to the group.

"It's probably best just to give in and leave her be," Koutarou said of Sanae-chan. "She's incorrigible when she's like this."

"You don't have to tell me that... I mean, it is me we're talking about."

"Yeah, you've been pretty crazy lately."

"I'm really sorry about Sanae-chan..." Once she got a handle on the situation, Sanae-san let out a resigned sigh and shrugged as she composed herself. *"Um, so where was I?"*

"You were saying something about a weird guy, and something about him being like Theia."

"Ooh! Right, right!"

"Heh."

"Huh? What's so funny?"

"You're just you, Sanae."

Forgetting where she was in the middle of her own explanation was just like Sanae, Koutarou thought. While Sanae-san and Sanae-chan were polar opposites personality-wise, they shared some rather comical traits. Koutarou couldn't help but find it amusing.

"O-Of course I am."

"Yeah. Sorry for interrupting. Carry on."

"Sheesh..."

Sanae-san was modest to a fault, but Sanae-chan had summoned her here on business today—and she took her job seriously. She puffed her cheeks out in a pout at the interruption. That reminded Koutarou of Sanae-chan too, but he refrained from saying anything this time.

"Saying the guy was weird and that he was like Theiamillis-san meant the same thing."

"What are you talking about?"

"Um, he was thinking in a way that stood out from everyone else. Like he was using some kind of machine or some kind of magic to translate for him."

Although all languages used the same language center in the brain, no two had the exact same formation process. The transfer of one into another manifested as a subtle difference in one's psychic wave patterns—that was what Sanae had meant when she said he was using his head in a weird way.

"Aha, so you mean he's using some kind of automated translation like Theia, Ruth, and Clan."

"Yes. I think there were even some instances of unique Folsarian words he didn't know being replaced with other words."

"You can even tell things like that? That's impressive."

"It's thanks to the haniwas' help. And it's not like I can tell what the actual words were or what the conversation was about. I'm just picking up on the residual energy from it."

Sanae had only noticed the subtle difference in the waves because the two haniwas were helping her pick up on and analyze them. Three heads were

better than one, so to speak.

“It’s still impressive.”

“Th-Thank you.”

Sanae-san bashfully turned red. Both Sanae-san and Sanae-chan were part of Sanae, so she naturally felt like she was being complimented to her face when Koutarou praised Sanae-chan.

“The weird guy left in a vehicle that went that way, ho!”

“Looks like the tracks continue to the northwest, ho!”

“Great! Can you follow them?” Koutarou asked.

“Never fear, ho! The dependable Flame Knight is here, ho!”

“Don’t forget the Cat Knight, ho! I’ve determined that it was a large work vehicle, ho!”

With the information Sanae had picked up, the two haniwas were able to find and follow tire tracks from the vehicle in question via their high-powered image processing. It was something Sanae never would have been able to do on her own.

“The question now is if this weird man and the well dressed stranger are the same person,” Harumi put forward, addressing the real problem at hand.

Their only psychic lead right now was that someone using automated translation of some kind had left the city in a work vehicle. There was no guarantee it was the same man who’d been recruiting in the city. If they followed these tire tracks, they could be taking themselves on a wild goose chase.

“Investigations are all about legwork... I think we should follow the tracks. Witnesses say the recruiter left in a large vehicle, so this sounds right. It would also make sense that he needs automated translation if he’s a foreigner here. I think we need to check it out,” said Maki.

She didn’t think it was a bad lead. A large work vehicle made sense for gathering and transporting laborers. And even if the weird stranger was unrelated to the recruitment, he at least had magic or technology that

exceeded what was available on Earth. She believed they should confirm his identity.

The land west of Thorthe was almost completely untouched, which made it easier for Koutarou and the others to follow the tire tracks. Once they were far enough away from the city, they were virtually the only tracks around.

“Even I can see them now. That’s what these are, right?” Koutarou asked.

“You got it, Big Brother!” the haniwas confirmed.

Koutarou had spotted three different sets of tracks. The first was set with deep grooves, the second was lined with side-by-side treads, and the third was largely unremarkable. Since Koutarou knew they were following a work vehicle, he guessed the plain set of tracks was what they were after.

“Meow!”

“Little Brother got it right too, ho!”

It was unclear if Snoozy actually understood what the group was talking about or not, but he leaped from Maki’s shoulder and happily began following the third set of tracks. He looked like an adorable little hunter on the move. The girls instantly fell in love with him all over again.

“I can’t help feeling mellow with Snoozy around...” Shizuka sighed.

She was the most smitten of all with the kitten. While she knew they were out here on serious business, she just couldn’t keep her eyes off of him. With the draconic emperor inside her, however, a little distraction here and there was no real danger. Alunaya would never let anything happen to her.

“I know what you mean. But don’t worry. I have a feeling Maki-san will evacuate him soon,” Harumi said with a smile.

“Ah, I’m glad.”

“Heehee, speak of the devil...”

Whenever danger loomed, Maki would put Snoozy inside a special carrier Clan had made for her with a combination of magic and technology. It had the stealth and flight capabilities of the haniwas, and was programmed to follow

Maki from a safe distance. Its intelligent AI would navigate away when there was combat and return when it was over. With its magically enhanced cloaking ability, it would never be discovered short of entering an enemy base directly. It was also equipped with a barrier just in case, though it would likely never see any use.

“Snoozy, come here,” Maki called.

“...Meow...”

“Don’t be selfish. Please. This is an important job.”

“Meow.”

Though resistant at first, Snoozy entered the carrier of his own accord when Maki asked nicely. Her specialty was indigo magic, so even when she wasn’t doing so actively, she could read the minds of others to a certain extent through their mana. That power came in handy with animals.

“I’ll bring you back out later.”

“Meow!”

Once Snoozy was inside, the carrier seemed to vanish into thin air before everyone’s very eyes. It wouldn’t appear again until Maki judged that it was safe.

“If you’re hiding Snoozy, does that mean you’ve detected something, Aika-san?” Koutarou asked once the carrier was out of sight.

Maki only hid Snoozy when she felt things were getting dangerous—a good sign she’d sensed something. Koutarou accordingly unfastened the clasp on Signaltin’s sheath as he asked her about it.

“Yes. Please look over there,” she replied.

Maki had the sharpest eyes of the group after Shizuka (with Alunaya) and Theia. Combined with her military experience, her scouting abilities were first rate. It was no surprise she’d spotted it sooner than anyone else...

“A truck, huh? Kind of weird for it to be all the way out here,” remarked Koutarou.

The group was currently walking along a road that ran through the forest. A few hundred meters behind them was a truck coming up a different road from below. Nothing was unusual about the truck itself—it was a standard transport truck common in Folsaria. Aside from its slightly older design and the fact that it ran on mana, it wasn't any different from one you might find on Earth. The real question, as Koutarou had implied, was what it was doing here. That was why Maki sent Snoozy away.

"Looks like we're headed in the same direction," observed Sanae. It stood to reason that their destinations were the same too.

"There must be something up ahead after all, then," Harumi said as she looked up the road.

The forested path led up a small mountain. The truck below was only at the base of the mountain now. The group had a good vantage point on it because they'd gotten a head start up the slope.

"Satomi-kun, Uncle is saying that the truck is carrying food."

"Are you sure?"

"Indeed. I hunt from the skies, so I am confident in my senses."

Fire Dragon Emperor Alunaya's sentience and mana resided in Shizuka, and he shared them with her. He could smell spices, meat, and bread from the truck—even at this distance. He was certain it was carrying food.

"Thinking about it, I guess it *would* be pretty funny if a dragon like you mistook something inedible for prey, Uncle."

"If I do happen to be wrong here, I hope you'll kindly forget all about it."

"Haha. Sure thing, Uncle."

Shizuka and Alunaya shared a familial laugh together, but Maki and Koutarou still looked quite stern. The size of the truck had caught their eye.

"If that truck is carrying food, it must be quite a lot of it," she remarked.

"That's true. It's as big as the ones that deliver to the supermarket," he agreed.

Approaching was a large box truck. If it was packed with food, it would be several tons' worth of provisions. A supply like that would take some serious storage to keep—and some serious mouths to feed. Exactly how many people it was intended to sustain would depend on the frequency of the deliveries, but it had to be at least several dozen.

About two kilometers from where Maki had first spotted the truck, it turned onto the road that led up the mountain. As Sanae had guessed, they really were headed in the same direction after all.

“It’s hard to tell because it rained recently, but it looks like a truck comes through here more than once a week, ho!”

“If that’s all food deliveries, ho, there must be more than a hundred people up ahead!”

“If there are really that many people here, you’d think this place would get a signal...” grumbled Koutarou.

Folsaria, like Earth, had reached the age of mobile communication. It was standard practice for jobsites to have it set up for the sake of efficiency and safety. That was true across all lines of work, so it bothered Koutarou that it didn’t seem to be the case here.

“Maybe this is a confidential job and only the foreman has access to a phone,” Shizuka suggested.

Such was sometimes the case at factories that handled precision instruments and the like. The matter of classified information aside, specialized work was also often done in clean rooms where unsterilized personal items were forbidden.

“They should still be allowed to make supervised calls while they’re off the clock...” Harumi said darkly. She had a bad feeling about the fact that no one had heard from the missing men.

“Maybe there’s some funny business going on here, then,” offered Shizuka. “Like maybe the company’s found rare metals and pressed everyone into forced labor.”

Something common like iron would be nothing to hide, but rare materials

would be a different story. If metals of significant value had been discovered, perhaps the laborers had been sequestered without means of communication to prevent a leak. If word about the discovery got out, after all, other mining companies would swoop in to claim a share.

Folsaria was home to special metal deposits that were steeped in mana, so such incidents weren't unheard of. Mana-rich nickel and cadmium were used to make devices that stored magical energy. Mana-rich iron could be used to forge weapons, and mana-rich silver made excellent armor against demons. All of these metals fetched extremely high prices, and they had a long history of being mined in a secretive, unsavory fashion because of it. It was an undeniable downside to Folsaria's magic-driven society.

"I think I'm starting to see what's going on here..." Koutarou mused.

"What do you mean?" Maki asked.

"Maybe Rainbow Heart picked this assignment for you because they suspected something like this might be the cause of it. Even though they're hiring you as an intermediate level magician, they know good and well that your abilities rival Yurika's."

Koutarou believed that busting an illegal mana-rich ore mining operation was a job worthy of an archwizard. It would be a good test of what Maki could truly do. He also thought it made sense given her history as a member of Darkness Rainbow since she would be familiar with such crimes, although he didn't say that part out loud.

"Rainbow Heart is shorthanded right now, so maybe Satomi-kun is onto something," Shizuka agreed with a bitter smile.

Folsaria was in the midst of a hectic reconstruction. With peace restored and their true home discovered, everyone was as busy as could be—especially Rainbow Heart. Putting Maki on a job like this would save them the time and trouble of handling it themselves.

"I'm not sure I follow, but we just have to beat the bad guys, right?"

"If everyone is right, it's not that simple, Sanae-chan."

"If this really is a case of forced labor, then beating the bad guys can wait.

First things first, we need evidence,” Koutarou explained.

“Yeah, I guess that’s what heroes of justice should do,” Sanae replied.

“You still think just like you did when you were a ghost.”

“Don’t be like that. I know you love it,” she teased, poking Koutarou’s cheek with her finger.

“I do get jealous of your confidence sometimes,” he admitted with a shrug.

At that, stern expressions overtook the girls’ faces. They all understood now—even Sanae—that this was serious.

“Want me to go scout?” Sanae offered, although it would have been a much more honorable suggestion if she hadn’t been pointing at Sanae-san, who was currently astral projecting, when she’d said it.

“Wait, I have to go?!”

“They might find me if I go.”

As one person, Sanae-chan and Sanae-san shared the same psychic powers. Sanae-san, however, had grown up like a normal girl oblivious to them. She was far less experienced with them and almost always left their use to Sanae-chan, even now. That meant her spiritual signature, so to speak, was diminutive compared to Sanae-chan’s. Necromancy or divination magic would have a much harder time detecting her because of it.

“Hey, that’s a pretty clever trick, Sanae,” said Koutarou.

“I think about stuff too, y’know!”

“What’s your take on this, Aika-san?”

“I’m grateful. It would be a huge help,” Maki said with a nod. She felt a little sorry for Sanae-san, but it was indeed a smart plan.

“Yay!”

“Noooooo!”

Thus it was decided that Sanae-san would handle the scouting herself. This was only preliminary reconnaissance, so she’d be flying high overhead—well out of danger—just to get an idea of the place. That said, it was still her first

mission alone. She was understandably anxious.

“Come on, you! Get going already!” Sanae-chan urged her.

“But...”

“There won’t be any bad guys all the way up in the sky.”

“Really?”

“Why would I lie to you?”

“You do say the craziest things sometimes...”

“Listen, our future as magical girls is at stake here!”

“Oh, yeah... I guess you’re right.”

The two Sanaes argued for a little while, but Sanae-chan eventually convinced Sanae-san to agree to the job. She slowly floated up into the air.

“I’ll be back, everyone!”

“Yeah! Come back before anything happens!”

“What?! Something’s going to happen?!”

“It’s just a figure of speech! Now get outta here!”

“O-Okay!”

Slowly but surely, Sanae-san looked around as she rose skyward.

“Jeez, that girl...” Sanae-chan muttered, watching herself go with folded arms. She felt like an older sibling seeing her little sister off on her first errand.

“That was pretty nice of you, Sanae,” Koutarou remarked.

He suspected that Sanae-chan had forcibly pulled Sanae-san out today to keep her existence from fading. Koutarou and the others shared a strong bond with Sanae-chan, so they might not notice if Sanae-san faded away. But her parents and her friends from school were the other way around. They would miss Sanae-san dearly if she were gone.

“Right?! Feel free to praise me even more!”

“Yes, yes. Good job.”

In the end, Sanae didn't seem like an older sister for long. The second she presented her head to Koutarou for patting, she looked just like a child wanting to be spoiled.

While spiritual energy was detectable, it was much harder to pick up in a dense forest. That was the idea behind rising into the sky—the obstructions weren't an object from a bird's-eye view. As such, Sanae-san returned not long after she first flew off. She'd already sensed something.

"If she's right, there should be people gathered just past that rocky outcrop," Sanae-chan reported.

"Wait here, then. Aika-san and I will go check it out," Koutarou instructed.

"Be careful, you two," Shizuka called out.

"We will," he replied.

Koutarou and Maki carefully approached the point of interest that Sanae-san had located. Since they still didn't know what was going on, they wanted to avoid detection until they could confirm the details of the situation. That caution increased as they neared their objective.

"Aika-san."

"Yes?"

The rocky outcrop was just in front of them now. Sanae had reported a cluster of people behind it. And if something nefarious were going on here, they could fairly expect a strict surveillance network in the area. That was why Koutarou had asked Maki, who had a wealth of field experience, to take point. He was confident that he could follow her lead.

"Avoid that tree over there. There's a camera and a microphone on it."

"Got it."

They whispered advice to each other as they stealthily made their way up the slope. As they'd anticipated, the mountainside was dotted with cameras and bugs. Maki, however, artfully evaded each and every one. She moved more smoothly than Koutarou had expected.

“There it is...”

A good distance past the outcrop, as Sanae had said, was a group of people. They seemed to be spread out working on something. Out of an abundance of caution, Maki got low in a patch of nearby brush to observe further. If they could see their targets from here, then the reverse was also true.

“What are they doing?” Koutarou whispered, pulling out two pairs of binoculars and handing one to Maki.

“They have several tents set up... and there’s a small structure made from stone or something...”

It was a largely open area lined with a stone structure and tents. The stone structure saw some foot traffic, but the tents seemed to be getting the majority of the use.

“Satomi-kun, the truck we saw earlier is past the tents...”

“There’s a work vehicle too. Might be the one we were following...”

Both were parked beyond the line of tents. People were offloading the contents of the box truck into them.

“It looks like they’re doing something farther back, but I can’t see from here...”

There was more activity behind the trucks and tents, but Maki and Koutarou couldn’t tell what it was through the trees from their current position.

“What should we do?” Koutarou asked quietly.

“Let’s regroup with Higashihongan-san and the others, then move a little closer. I at least want to confirm what they’re doing...” Maki instructed.

Small-scale or not, she was technically on a military operation. She needed to bring back enough information for her superiors to make an informed decision. And right now, all she knew for sure was that someone had set up surveillance on the mountain. Most commercial enterprises used it nowadays, so that wasn’t even circumstantial proof of anything. She needed more than that, so she wanted to press onward.

“Got it, captain,” Koutarou said with a playful salute.

“Captain...?” Maki asked, taken aback by his reaction.

“Well, this is your test, so you’re in the lead here.”

While he’d asked what they should do, Koutarou too had felt like they should press on for more information. This was Maki’s mission, however, so he deferred to her to make the call.

“Even so, it doesn’t feel right...”

Maki personally would have preferred Koutarou to be the one giving orders. Not because she wanted to take a backseat in the operation, but because she felt assured that his decisions took her into account—like he was always thinking of her. That said, since they always talked things out, Maki’s decisions were never much different from Koutarou’s. All the more reason, she thought, for him to take the lead anyway.

“Don’t sweat it. That’s just how tests work. Now, c’mon, let’s go...” Koutarou said, keeping low as he crept through the underbrush back toward Sanae and the others.

“Yes...” Maki replied softly, following him.

Though she had mixed feelings about giving Koutarou orders, he was right. A test was a test. She squeezed his hand, settling for accepting his help as they both stood up on the other side of the brush.

Sanae was the first to realize the location they’d stumbled upon was a cemetery. This discovery put certain parts of the scene in context—the stone structure Koutarou had seen through his binoculars was a tomb. Sanae couldn’t tell as much by looking at it, but the concentration of ghosts in the area gave it away.

“Enough with the scary stories, Sanae-chan!” Shizuka shrieked, going pale at Sanae’s report.

She’d never been scared of Sanae while *she* was a ghost—perhaps because she always looked and seemed so real—but Shizuka had a hard time with spooky tales and paranormal phenomena that she couldn’t confirm for herself.

“Don’t worry,” Sanae assured her. “They’re all about to disappear. I’m not

even sure if Koutarou can see them.”

“I’d need to focus. I’m amazed you can spot them so easily, Sanae...” he replied.

“Eeheehee. They can’t see us, though. And even if they could, they couldn’t do anything, so there’s nothing to be afraid of!”

“That only makes it scarier...” Shizuka whined.

Since she was once a ghost herself, Sanae knew more about them than anyone. That was also why she wasn’t particularly afraid of them. Shizuka, however, was a different story. She just couldn’t sit still knowing there was something invisible and otherworldly all around her.

“Blue Knight, is Shizuka saying that she’s afraid of even me?”

“The opposite, I think.”

“Yeah, you’re not scary at all, Uncle. I mean, I *know* you.”

“Glad to hear it.”

“Uncle, can’t you do something with your powers to keep the ghosts away?”

“Don’t worry—they won’t come near regardless. If they did, they’d probably be blown away.”

“Really?”

“Indeed. They’re boring evil spirits who would be overpowered by my very aura.”

“Wait, what?! They’re *evil* spirits?!”

“Yup!” piped up Sanae. “They’re keeping their form in the afterlife through sheer obsession.”

“That’s even worse!” cried Shizuka.

With mixed feelings, Koutarou and the others carefully made their way closer to the cemetery. Shizuka understood the gravity of the situation and did her best to keep calm by trying not to think about the supernatural side of things.

“Satomi-kun, I think this is as far as we can safely go. Any closer and we’ll be

inside the range of standard detection spells,” Maki whispered from the shadow of a nearby tree.

The group was now about a hundred meters out from the low stone wall surrounding the cemetery, and even farther from the people milling about. They were safe from sight, but Maki knew there were other ways—magical ones—to detect intruders. Caution was required from this point forward.

“What are they doing over there?” Harumi asked.

She’d sneaked over to Maki and poked her head out from behind the tree to get a peek at the cemetery. There were men carrying pickaxes and shovels. It seemed they were digging for something, but it was unclear what.

“Sakuraba-senpai, they’re probably excavating some ruins,” offered Koutarou unexpectedly.

He had a hunch because he was familiar with this type of work. He recognized the brushes, trowels, and small hammers the men were using—tools he himself often used at his part-time job.

“If this is an excavation, it must be something *really* important,” mused Shizuka.

She couldn’t imagine why else the job would sequester its workers and suppress all communication. Harumi felt the same way.

“Now that we’re this close, I can sense profound mana just over there,” she added. “That might be what they’re digging up.”

Folsaria was home to mineral deposits naturally steeped in mana, and many of its citizens carried magical devices on their person. Mana was everywhere here. But even so, Harumi could still sense a powerful mana through it all from just beyond the cemetery—and that was without any spells to aid her perception. Maki believed she was right on the mark, too.

She nodded and replied, “I think so as well. That’s why—”

But all of a sudden, a voice cried from the cemetery, “Found them! Over there!”

Movement and panic spread through the camp. The men threw down their

tools and took up weapons instead. Folsaria was home to the likes of demons and monsters, so even the average civilian armed themselves for emergencies. That was what Maki suspected at first—that a demon had appeared. Sanae, however, could sense more about the situation.

“Th-They’re onto us! Lots of people are headed this way!” she announced.

This news took Maki aback. But though she was surprised, she swiftly pulled herself together and made a decision.

“Let’s run! I want to avoid combat!” she ordered.

Maki still didn’t have the decisive proof she wanted—nor did she understand the full extent of what was going on in the cemetery. And without knowing that, she couldn’t fight the workers in good conscience. As an agent of Darkness Rainbow, she wouldn’t have cared either way... but Rainbow Heart did things differently.

“Karama, Korama! Sakuraba-senpai!” Koutarou called out.

“Got it, Big Brother! Leave it to us, ho!”

“Ho! Ready to fire smoke grenades!”

“At your service, Satomi-kun!”

Folsaria was a kingdom of magic. It was a foregone conclusion that Koutarou and the group would be pursued by magical means—meaning they’d need all kinds of tricks, magical and not-so-magical alike, in order to get away.

“Targeting fifty meters out, ho, adjusted for accuracy!”

“Fire immediately, ho!”

Pop!

The haniwas fired a round of mundane smoke grenades. They were the same kind Yurika had gotten from Nefilforan’s squad, so their effectiveness was guaranteed.

Poof!

Smoke billowed out of them, blanketing the area between the group and the cemetery.

“Gather, spirits of lights! Transform into threads of radiance and weave a temporal image! Captivate, Luminous Dancer!”

As the smoke blocked line of sight, Harumi cast a spell that created illusory copies of everyone. She then sent the illusions running.

“Mass Invisibility!”

And for the finishing touch, Maki swiftly cast a spell to make the real group disappear. With that, they’d safely be able to get away. When the smoke cleared, their pursuers would chase down the illusions instead of them.

In the meantime, they took off running in the opposite direction. Once they were far enough away, Maki let out a sigh of relief. Since she was in charge of this operation—and therefore responsible for everyone’s safety—she was more tense than usual.

“That sure surprised me... But I’m glad everything worked out,” she remarked.

“Me too, but I wonder how they detected us,” Koutarou mused.

He was relieved as well, but there was still something bothering him. He thought Maki had made the right call to flee; they didn’t want to take any unnecessary risks. That said, they’d moved carefully while taking into account the range of detection magic. So how had they been so easily discovered?

“Maybe they set up military-grade defenses,” suggested Maki. “In that case —”

“They’re coming again! We’re invisible, but it’s like they can still see us!” yelled Sanae.

“—we won’t be able to escape just by doing this!”

“Round two, everyone! Get ready!” shouted Koutarou.

It was now evident that the cemetery worksite had defenses that far exceeded the group’s initial expectations. Maki felt such precautions were extreme for a job that wanted to prevent security leaks and keep workers from escaping. That meant there had to be something else going on... which boded ominously.

The workers had quickly discovered the group and given chase with military tactics and persistence. Shaking them wasn't easy. Koutarou and the girls could have retaliated to put a stop to the pursuit, but they were wary of attacking anyone under such uncertain circumstances. They also wanted to avoid revealing anything about themselves, so they opted to keep running. Night fell before they at last managed to break away.

"Hmm, looks like the last of them went back," reported Sanae as she scanned the area. "I think the only other living things around now are animals."

"Sheesh, so they finally gave up..." Koutarou said with a relieved sigh as he refastened the clasp on his sheath. He wouldn't need to use his sword now. "Still, what were they excavating over there?"

Although the group had evaded danger, that question remained. They were a good distance from the cemetery now, too. The investigation had taken a rather large step back without much to show for it.

"Not only did they chase us off, but they followed us all this way... They must have had a good reason," Harumi said, her brow furrowed.

All they knew for certain was that something was being excavated at a cemetery—and the crew was on high alert. But even with that small lead, there were things the group could puzzle out. For instance, why whoever was in charge of the worksite didn't want it discovered. That said, the labor conditions and the purpose of the excavation were still unclear.

"What do you want to do, Aika-san? Sneak in again more carefully?" Shizuka asked.

She felt like it would be possible to go back a second time, avoiding detection with careful use of magic and the haniwas' power. Maki's job wasn't over yet, after all. They still needed to confirm exactly what was happening in that cemetery.

"They'll probably be on their guard now, so it wouldn't be wise to try it again right away," Maki replied with a shake of her head.

If she were in charge of the worksite herself, she would stop the operation for

the day and focus instead on keeping an eye out for the intruders. It was common for them to return, after all. That was why Maki thought going back so soon would be dangerous. If they were going to do it, they'd need to take their time and be prepared.

"As such, let's return to the capital for now," she suggested.

"To meet up with Theia and the others?" asked Koutarou.

"That too, but there's something I'd like to confirm," Maki replied with a nod.

"What's that?" Sanae inquired curiously. She couldn't think of anything more important than regrouping right now.

"That place was without a doubt a cemetery, right?"

"Yeah, totally. There were a ton of ghosts there."

"Don't remind me..." whimpered Shizuka.

"Then there should be records of who's buried there," Maki explained.

Folsaria's records office kept data on burial sites. This particular cemetery might be too old to be logged, but aside from an extreme exception like that, the group should be able to learn more about it from public records. In other words, their work in the mountains might already be over.

As Maki's current mission was a probationary test for her hire with Rainbow Heart, Koutarou and the others were trying to refrain from using Forthorthian technology and spiritual energy as much as possible. Maki was in charge of the investigation, and she was trying to do as much as she could by her own hand. If they intervened too much to help her, they were worried Rainbow Heart would find her results lacking.

Given the current situation, however, the group decided it was necessary to contact Theia and the others. There was a possibility the cemetery was currently being raided, after all. As Folsaria was a magical kingdom, the dead were often buried with magical articles and such. Grave robbing was a serious offense. So with something so reprehensible on the table, the group had decided to contact Theia via gravitational wave comms, as magical ones were

out of range in the mountains.

“Have you heard anything yet?” Koutarou asked.

“Not since that last reply,” Maki replied.

“I wonder what that means...”

Maki had messaged Theia and asked her to relay what happened to Kaera. She also asked for details on the burial site. Within minutes, she’d received a reply flagged as urgent mail. It was simply an order to report, however, and contained none of the requested information.

“We’re almost there, so let’s just ask her ourselves when we see her,” suggested Sanae.

“You’re right.”

Koutarou and the girls were already back at the Blue Tower, currently taking the elevator to Kaera’s office at the top. Koutarou had asked Maki if she’d heard anything else just to make conversation, but Sanae was indeed right. The fastest way to get the information they wanted would be straight from the horse’s mouth.

Ding!

Before reaching the top floor, the elevator stopped to let more passengers on. The door opened to reveal a few familiar faces.

“Koutarou! You’re back!” exclaimed Theia.

“Hey, everyone.”

Theia, Ruth, Clan, Kiriha, and Nana all boarded the elevator. They’d been standing by on a reception floor and were also on their way to Kaera’s office.

“What’s the situation?” Koutarou asked.

“I don’t know. Shortly after we relayed Maki’s message, our meeting was suspended. Kaera-dono only just now called us back,” Theia replied.

Upon receiving Maki’s report via Theia, Kaera was stricken with a stern look on her usually smiling face. The same stern expression struck the rest of the elder council as well. They paused for a few moments to check with their

subordinates and consult a map, and the meeting was called off immediately thereafter. Theia and company were then asked to wait on one of the reception floors of the Blue Tower.

“They probably want to talk with all of us now that we’re back,” suggested Koutarou.

“I imagine,” said Kiriha. “This seems to be a pretty big deal.”

She too wore a stern expression. Given how Kaera and the other elders had behaved, it seemed something serious was afoot. Something serious enough to warrant interrupting a diplomatic meeting between Folsaria, Forthorthe, and the People of the Earth. Kiriha had a bad feeling about it.

“It is a problem... We were in a very important meeting about all of our futures,” Ruth added in a disappointed tone.

There was no shortage of obstacles in the way, but Theia and the other girls had been in the midst of a discussion about the futures of all three nations. For it to be put off, however long, was tragic.

“Now that it’s come to this, we should focus our efforts on resolving the problem at hand,” volunteered Clan.

She was being unusually positive. Her eyes were bright with vigor and determination, and her spirits lifted Ruth’s downcast face. It also had a notable effect on the worried Kiriha and Shizuka.

“Looks like your hidden good side is coming out, princess,” remarked Koutarou. He had a much easier time complimenting her now than he used to.

“All to keep the Blue Knight sleeping within you from coming out,” she replied.

Koutarou was happy Clan had grown so much, but at the same time, there was something sad about it. He’d never hated taking care of her when she was immature and selfish, and he hated seeing her take charge when danger was involved.

The group found Kaera waiting for them when they reached the top of the Blue Tower. She’d been wearing her loose-fitting elder’s robe before, but she

now donned a blue uniform. When Nana saw it, her expression changed.

“Kaera-sama, is the situation really that serious?!” she gasped.

Kaera was the Blue Tower’s commander, and she was now dressed the part. That meant she was here as a military official rather than an advising elder—a sign the Blue Tower was prepared for battle. It was a rare sight for the mild-mannered Kaera to look ready for war, which was why it shook Nana so.

“Unfortunately, it seems that way,” Kaera responded.

Nana and Kaera skipped the pleasantries of greetings. They both believed in proper manners, but this wasn’t the time for them. They wanted to get straight to business.

“Maki, I’d like to hear your report,” said Kaera. “Directly from you, if you will.”

She felt such formality was necessary before mobilizing the Blue Tower’s troops. Rainbow Heart required justification for such an act. An indirect message from Maki wasn’t enough. She needed an official report.

“Yes, ma’am! Intermediate magician Aika Maki of the Blue Tower reporting.” As a former member of a militaristic organization, Maki understood the importance of procedure. She properly saluted Kaera and began, “After accepting my mission, I spoke with the individuals who reported the missing persons.”

From there, she told Kaera how she’d heard about the recruiter. How witness reports had led her outside the city, where she’d followed tire tracks to the cemetery on the mountain. How she’d discovered the excavation there. Maki spared no detail.

“There were too many uncertainties, so I made the decision to avoid combat and retreat. That was when I messaged Princess Theiamillis, asking her to relay the circumstances to you. And afterward, I returned here per your reply.”

“Retreating was a wise decision. You could have been in danger if you’d stayed to fight,” Kaera concluded with a nod. She approved of Maki’s actions during her mission, and Maki had now reported everything she needed to know.

“Kaera-sama, just what was that place?” Maki asked.

She wanted to learn more about who was buried in the cemetery, but that information so far had eluded her. She’d have to find it from somewhere—from someone—in order to continue her investigation.

“That’s a Folsarian top secret,” Kaera replied.

“It’s classified, then? So that’s why no one replied to my inquiry...”

Such sensitive material couldn’t be divulged so carelessly. Especially not over wireless communication that could be intercepted by anyone. When she realized that, Maki understood why she’d gotten no answer.

“That’s right. That’s also why I need you to keep quiet regarding what I’m about to tell you.”

The situation was such that Kaera could no longer keep this from Koutarou and the girls. They had every right to hear it.

“The truth is,” she began in a low voice with a somber expression, “that place is where the earliest inhabitants of Folsaria are buried.”

“Why were they buried somewhere so remote?” Maki asked.

If they were the founders of the nation, they were of great historical significance. Maki wanted to know why their graves were so far removed from the capital. Koutarou and the others were wondering the same thing too.

“Long ago, they committed the great sin that resulted in us Folsarians being banished from our true home. As such, people objected to burying them anywhere near the city.”

Once they were exiled, many of them reformed and devoted themselves to finding a way to survive in Folsaria. But even so, the generations to follow considered what they’d done to be unforgivable. The crime was far too great and the consequences far too severe. That resentment outlived them, so it was clear that an easily accessible graveyard would only be an object of vandalism. To avoid that, Rainbow Heart instead buried Folsaria’s founders deep in the mountains.

“Their research was another reason for it. The studies of their leader, the

Grand Wizard, were particularly dangerous. And so it was all buried with them in a cemetery on the outskirts of society.”

Kaera was referring to research and studies on dangerous magics. There were calls for it to be destroyed outright, but people were afraid that would cost them their only means of defense against it if it were ever leaked to the wrong parties. Like an infectious disease, it couldn’t be completely disposed of just because it was dangerous. And so the founders’ arcane research was sealed away in the cemetery instead—that was why its location was considered top secret.

Not incidentally, Nana had been so wary of Koutarou when they first met because she caught him using the type of magic the Grand Wizard himself had specialized in. Rainbow Heart believed it to be extremely dangerous.

“What was his name?!” Koutarou demanded. He’d been quiet thus far because this was Maki’s mission, but he had to know.

“We are forbidden from speaking it.”

Like with the People of the Earth, most Folsarians distanced themselves from talk of their original leader. For generations, Rainbow Heart was forbidden from speaking his name as a form of self-censure.

“Was it... Grevanas?” Koutarou asked.

Kaera hadn’t said it, but he suspected as much. Court Magician Grevanas was one of the masterminds behind the coup d’état in Forthorthe two thousand years ago.

“How do you know that?!” Kaera exclaimed.

Seeing her reaction, Koutarou knew he was right.

“No... I should have expected as much, Koutarou-dono,” she relented. “In our texts, you are known as the Arbiter.”

Over the past two years Yurika and Nana had spent with Theia and the other Forthorthians, they’d come to understand that Forthorthe was their true home. The deciding factor was finding Sariachal Castle, which Koutarou and Clan had seen in past Forthorthe. After hearing word of this, Kaera recalled the legends

claiming a man in blue armor had been the one to exile Grevanas and his magicians.

“The Arbiter, huh? I guess that’s one way to look at it, but I was just desperate at the time.”

Koutarou didn’t think of himself as a judge. His intention wasn’t to banish anyone as punishment; he’d only meant to stop Maxfern from destroying all of Forthorthe. His last resort was the Super Space-time Repulsion Shell, and the rest was history.

“I understand,” Kaera said calmly.

She knew the story. While speaking Grevanas’s name was forbidden, the details of what had happened were passed down for posterity. She didn’t hold it against Koutarou, but there was no way of telling how anyone else might respond, so she’d kept the truth to herself. Theia and the others didn’t spread word of Koutarou’s identity to the Folsarians for the same reason.

“How were Grevanas’s final years?” Koutarou asked after a long pause.

“I do not know if he repented for what he did or if he died resenting the man who banished him from his home... It was many centuries ago, after all, and records of that kind have not survived. That said, the Grand Wizard’s influence has lived on over the years. To this day, he has many ardent followers. Even if his research had been utterly harmless, he still would have been buried in an unmarked grave far outside the city.”

“Ardent followers, you say? If the people at that cemetery are after Grevanas’s magic...” Kiriha said quietly.

She couldn’t help finding Kaera’s mention of “followers” troubling. That would explain why people were excavating, and Koutarou and the other girls tensed up when Kiriha suggested as much. The motives of the grave robbers were now alarmingly clear.

“Satomi-kun, Grevanas was researching necromancy, with a focus on plagues! If—”

“If the magic he used to control me gets out, it will spell disaster!”

Harumi and Alunaya knew better than anyone what evil Grevanas had been capable of working. Necromancy was deathly magic that included spells of poison and plague. Alaia and Charl had fallen victim to such in the past. Moreover, Grevanas had access to strong mind manipulation, the likes of which had enslaved Alunaya and deprived him of his freedom.

Kaera had suspended the diplomatic meeting earlier when she realized that the diggers at the cemetery might be after such terrible magics. Fearing the worst, she'd issued the order for Maki to return to base. There was far more than just a state secret at stake here... This could mean the return of a nightmare from centuries ago, or millennia for some.

The Immortal

Sunday, July 10th

The excavation was ongoing at the cemetery where Grevanas was buried. The likely culprit was a circle of his followers—a cult, by most standards. Even if someone else was behind it, unearthing Grevanas’s research would be considered a high crime in Folsaria. Grave robbing was heinous enough, but stealing forbidden magic was tantamount to stealing a fighter jet in modern society. It would be even worse yet if the stolen magic concerned poison, plague, or the ability to completely control another individual against their will.

Now that they were clued in to the situation thanks to Maki’s investigation, Rainbow Heart had decided to take military action. The compromise of potentially catastrophic magic was more than enough to warrant it. The case was so severe that they were deploying Maki, as well as Koutarou and the others. Since they knew about Grevanas’s magic, Kaera had requested their backup. Little did she know they would have accompanied Maki regardless.

“A circle of magicians who worship Grevanas... Darkness Rainbow had a goal, so they never went too far, but I imagine that won’t be the case with these people,” Koutarou pondered aloud with a severe expression on his face.

Grevanas had taken to researching terrible magics, suggesting that his followers wouldn’t hesitate to do the same. Grevanas, however, had pledged himself to Maxfern. Without such purpose and loyalty to guide them, his followers had only inherited the worst of their evil master. That might make them even more dangerous than Darkness Rainbow.

“But why would they make their move now?”

That was what bothered Koutarou the most. He couldn’t understand what had spurred Grevanas’s believers to action all of a sudden. Why hadn’t this come sooner?

“For better or worse, it’s likely because of Darkness Rainbow. Grevanas’s

followers couldn't touch this area before because they wanted to form a united front against the government under Darkness Rainbow," answered Kiriha, true to form.

When it came to anti-government factions, Darkness Rainbow was the largest and most powerful of its kind. As such, lesser organizations did what they could to stay on their good side. It was no secret that Darkness Rainbow was gathering magic and magical research. Grevanas's followers had probably avoided excavating the graveyard under their watch to avoid upsetting the balance of power. But now that Darkness Rainbow was gone, Kiriha believed the cult had no reason to hold back anymore.

"Of course, where Grevanas is buried is top secret, so the timing could be mere coincidence if they've only just now discovered it," she clarified.

"So Darkness Rainbow served as a sort of safety..." Koutarou murmured.

Overall, their existence kept other factions from running amok. And in that sense, they'd been a stabilizing force in society. Yet on the other hand, their main goal was to disrupt it... It was hard to say in the end if their presence was good or bad.

"This world is complicated," said Kiriha. "Things are never as simple as defeating an enemy and securing peace."

"You mean to say that after Darkness Rainbow comes the next enemy? Huh... we might be fighting forever," Koutarou replied, his shoulders slumping.

After they'd defeated Darkness Rainbow, another faction had made its move. So even if they defeated the cultists, yet another enemy might pop up to take their place. That prospect put a damper on Koutarou's mood, and the girls all felt similarly.

"But even then..." But even then, there was one among them who could dispel the gloom. That honor belonged to the beautiful, delicate, and oh-so-fragile-looking Harumi. "We can ensure de-escalation. This cult is a smaller group than Darkness Rainbow, and the next will be even smaller. The threat diminishes every time, and the periods of peace between will grow longer. I'm sure that we won't be fighting forever."

Koutarou and the girls fought for those who couldn't. But as the enemy grew weaker, there would be others who could safely handle the situation. That would allow Koutarou and the girls to go back to their peaceful everyday lives as normal teenagers.

"That's true... There are other people we can rely on."

With a small smile, Koutarou looked out the back window of the transport vehicle. Following behind was a convoy carrying soldiers from Rainbow Heart—and Koutarou knew he could count on them rather than shouldering everything himself. Harumi reminding him of that lightened his spirits.

"Watch yourself," she said. "You sometimes worry that you're not a perfect hero, but there's no need for you to be."

"Sometimes you're a perfect princess, you know that, Sakuraba-senpai?" Koutarou said with a happy smile.

Whenever Koutarou looked like he'd lose his way, Harumi showed him the path. Just like a legendary princess of the past. Harumi, however, was unhappy with this appraisal.

"Hmph. Then maybe I'll try being a tyrant once in a while."

"No way. You don't have it in you, Sakuraba-senpai."

"Ooh, I hate this side of you, Satomi-kun."

"Hey, that sounds a little more tyrant-y."

"Satomi-kun, you bully!"



A shadow had started to settle in over Koutarou and the girls, but thanks to Harumi, everything was back to normal. Koutarou couldn't help thinking to himself that she was really the strongest of the group, but it also occurred to him that her princessly strength only came out when she was with everyone. As she sat there pouting, he reminded himself that he'd need to support her too from time to time.

The convoy could only take Koutarou and the others so close to their destination. Military vehicles would be too easy to discover within a certain proximity. They'd stand out like a sore thumb on the road leading up the mountain.

After disembarking, Koutarou got a chance to see Rainbow Heart in formation.

"I didn't know there were male magicians too," he remarked, impressed at the sight.

After meeting Yurika, Maki, and Darkness Rainbow, he'd gotten the idea that girls were more suited to magic. But beholding Rainbow Heart's troops now, he saw both men and women in formation.

"Of course there are. There're lots of men who take on the job," replied Yurika. This wasn't news to her.

"All the magicians I know are girls, so I just figured that was normal."

Koutarou recalled that there were plenty of male mages in past Forthorthe—Grevanas included. But he'd never met one in the present day, so he'd vaguely assumed that magic had become a woman's job in Folsaria. It wasn't until much later that he learned that Folsarians were descended from Forthorthe, so he hadn't really given the gender ratio much thought before now.

"Ahaha, well, you're right about the discrepancy," Nana said, responding to Koutarou. As a former magical girl herself, she understood the reason for the difference. "It's unique to Folsaria, or rather, how men and women are raised here. You see, in Folsaria, men enter the workforce relatively early, so they tend to see themselves as divorced from the world of magic."

Magic was an incredibly nuanced art that altered the world via the power of a caster's will and mana. Thoughts like "magic is silly" or "magic isn't for me" unironically inhibited that power. When casting spells, the user needed to believe in magic wholeheartedly. Training necessarily started at a young age, and if a potential practitioner got it into their head that they couldn't use it, then magic would elude them no matter how much mana they might have been born with.

Moreover, the population of Folsaria was small. Labor was in short supply, so children tended to enter the workforce early. In many cases, that solidified for them the idea that they would never be magicians. And, as a result, Folsaria tended to have fewer male practitioners. This was especially true in terms of high-ranking magicians.

"Ah, so *that's* why magicians tend to be on the cuter side," Koutarou observed.

"I'm not really sure how to respond to that when you're staring right at me..." Nana replied, fiddling with her hair. She definitely gave off a cute impression.

"Sorry, you were just the cutest one around."

On the other hand, girls who weren't cut out for physical work—like Nana—were often picked up by Rainbow Heart before the idea that they weren't cut out for magic could settle in. That was the societal reason Folsaria had more magical girls than magical boys.

"Gee... Well, anyway," Nana continued, "that doesn't mean male magicians are any less valuable. There may not be many high-ranking ones, but they tend to outperform their female counterparts."

"Why is that?"

"It's a matter of physique. Men can use larger magical tools, and their bigger bodies naturally mean they can store more mana."

Men could wield bigger staffs and gear than most women, which gave them an advantage. And since magicians generated mana with their entire body, men could generally use more magic overall. So while female magicians had magical strength, male magicians had physical strength and magical staying power.

“That’s true. I don’t think Nana-san or Yurika could use those huge shields,” Koutarou commented, looking at Rainbow Heart’s troops.

The men on the front line were holding large shields, which were magical tools that enhanced defensive magic. Their primary job was maintaining magical protection over the course of a battle. The female magicians behind them, meanwhile, were in charge of attacking. Rainbow Heart had thus split their troops by gender, assigning them to the roles they were most suited for.

“Huh, so those magic dudes are important...”

The group was talking about magic, yet Sanae had been unusually quiet and attentive. She was repeatedly nodding and mumbling to herself. Seeing this and the look on her face, Koutarou could tell precisely what she was thinking.

That girl... She wants to try to make me one of those “magic dudes,” I just know it...

He couldn’t help feeling like he’d find himself caught up in Sanae’s antics at some point, but he didn’t mind the thought. If he could wield a large magical shield and protect the girls that way, they’d have an easier time attacking. Many of them had specialized talents, so Rainbow Heart’s strategy would be effective for their smaller group as well.

Rainbow Heart was composed of experts in magical warfare. This included specialized teams whose forte was evading magical detection and traps. They scouted ahead of the other troops, disabling and thwarting spells of that nature as they went. Each stealth scout’s ability might have been inferior to Maki’s or Clan’s, but their teamwork elevated them and they worked quickly. They had a path secured for their allies in no time.

“It’s up ahead...” murmured Koutarou when he spotted it.

The cemetery was now just within sight. The stone tomb had a forlorn feel to it at night. The lights set up at the worksite weren’t enough to dispel that impression.

Thanks to the good work of the scouting team, Koutarou and the others had made it to the cemetery much faster than he’d expected. They were now

cleared for combat, not to mention supported by Rainbow Heart troops. There would be no retreat this time. The plan was to launch a frontal attack and arrest the tomb raiders.

“So this is where Grevanas and his faction were buried... What a lonely final resting place. If possible, I’d like to transport their remains back to Forthorthe...” Theia whispered piteously as she looked over the graveyard.

Grevanas and his magicians had aided Maxfern in his coup millennia ago, but she believed they’d already been punished enough. They were banished from their home and forced to live out the rest of their lives in this harsh land. And even now, hundreds of years later, they were still exiled from society. That was why, as a Forthorthian royal, Theia wanted to return Grevanas and his mages to their true home.

“Oh, huh? Hmm...” Sanae, who was looking at the cemetery alongside Theia, tilted her head. She narrowed her eyes, opened them wide, then cocked her head to the other side.

“What’s the matter, Sanae-chan?” Shizuka asked worriedly. She was bad with cemeteries, so she took Sanae’s consternation as an ill omen.

“Uh, well, the ghosts are gone,” Sanae said plainly.

That was what had her so puzzled. The ghosts that had been at the cemetery previously were presently missing. This was good news to Shizuka, who threw her fist in the air in celebration.

“Yay!” she exclaimed. She was as pumped as she was before a karate match.

“Also, the spiritual energy around here is decreasing too...” Sanae mumbled.

“Now that you mention it, yeah,” Koutarou agreed.

Folsaria had always been a land abundant with magic and lacking in spiritual energy. That was reflective of its harsh environment; there was little life overall. But the spiritual energy levels in this particular area were lower than they had been before—so much so that even Koutarou noticed.

“Sanae, what could cause something like this?” he asked curiously.

“Dunno. This is my first time seeing it too.”

“Let’s hurry up and get in there!” Kiriha replied unexpectedly. “If there’s less of it here, then it’s probably being gathered somewhere else!”

As an underground dweller, she was experienced with this kind of phenomenon. There were primarily two reasons for spiritual energy dropping in a given area: instances where it fused with negative energy and was exorcised, and instances where it had moved. If the former were the case here, then whatever happened had already passed and there was nothing to worry about. But the latter would be a big problem.

If the spiritual energy in the cemetery had moved, that meant it was being gathered for some purpose. Worse yet, it was known that research on necromancy and mind manipulation magic was sealed in the tomb. Collected spiritual energy could be used for all manner of things, but it had an alarming synergy with such dark spellcraft. That was the reason for Kiriha’s sense of urgency. It was better to act with haste than be sorry given what was at stake.

“Koutarou, hold on to me!” Theia shouted.

“What are you going to do?!”

“This! Assault Red!”

Ping!

Theia’s bracelet registered her call sign and summoned a black disk in the air. It was a hole in space-time, and from the other side came several chunks of metal painted a vivid red. They connected to the armature of Theia’s Combat Dress, granting her considerable firepower and the ability to fly. Of all the accessories Theia had for her armor, Assault Red was her personal favorite.

“Master, I’m bringing out your armor too!” Ruth called.

She tapped away on her bracelet and summoned a black disk just like Theia had. It opened up in a similar fashion, but this one produced Koutarou’s power suit. Seeing it, Koutarou was shocked.

“How did you do that?! It wouldn’t work last time, right?!”

The last time the group was in Folsaria, they’d been unable to use space distortions to transport objects from their spaceship. Because of that, Koutarou

and Theia had had to travel with all of the gear they needed. But something was clearly different now, as Theia and Ruth had just done what was previously impossible.

“It’s simple. We brought our equipment and a transport device over to this world. We’re on friendly terms with the Folsarians now, and the situation called for it,” Theia explained.

It was true. At this point, Forthorthe and Folsaria had a diplomatic relationship. They’d also realized a common enemy was after forbidden magic. As a means to counteract that, they were cooperating on a joint operation and had willingly brought in Forthorthian technology—including the transfer gate.

“We brought in your armor and Her Highness’s accessories with us, Master.”

The transporter had been set up in a storage room at the Blue Tower, which was where the equipment had been summoned from. That was what had made the impossible possible.

“You’re as perfectly prepared as ever, Ruth-san.”

“Save your praise for later!” roared Theia. “Let’s go!”

“Already on it!” rallied Koutarou.

Having swiftly donned his armor, he tightly grabbed hold of the booster unit on the back of Theia’s Assault Red. Though Assault Red was an accessory for her Combat Dress, it was essentially the equivalent of wearing a small fighter. Koutarou would be able to move much faster riding with Theia than he could on his own, even with his armor.

“I’m coming too!” Sanae shouted.

“Oh, fine! I’ll go too!” Shizuka shouted as well.

Sanae and Shizuka could fly on their own, so they had no trouble following after Theia as she rose up into the air with Koutarou. Their acceleration was no match for hers, however, so they’d be a little slower getting to the tomb.

“We’ll stay with Rainbow Heart and investigate the worksite as we make our way forward! If you run into any trouble, call us right away!” Clan called out to them.

Strictly speaking, she had the technology to enable flight for the entire group. Under the current circumstances, however, she thought it would be unwise for everyone to go. Rainbow Heart was no normal army—they stood for love, courage, and justice. They had an obligation to uncover evidence that a full use of military force was warranted.

“Got it! I’m leaving things here to you then, Clan!” Koutarou called back.

“We’re out of here!” Theia thundered.

Fwoom!

As hasty as ever, she slammed her boosters to max thrust as soon as Koutarou’s words had left his mouth. The two of them took off like a shooting star.

“Yurika, take care of everyone else! I’m going to go with Satomi-kun!” Maki instructed.

“U-Understood!”

Maki then threw her staff up into the air and jumped onto it sidesaddle. Her accustomed dexterity was an excellent showcase of her mastery with her weapon.

“I’m losing...” Yurika sighed, her shoulders slumping despondently as she saw Maki off.

She wasn’t sure she could take off so quickly and gracefully if she were in Maki’s shoes. She could only imagine herself desperately clinging to her staff. Like Koutarou had said, Maki made for a much more proper magical girl.

“What are you talking about, Yurika-chan? Lots of people have high hopes for you,” said Nana encouragingly.

“What?! Really?!” Yurika exclaimed, perking right up.

“As proof, here. I’ve got something for you.”

There, Nana handed Yurika a gift she’d received from her colleagues while on assignment.

“I-Is this...?!”

It was a new type of gas grenade Nefilforan's troops had given her as a token of goodwill, hoping to make friends with her apprentice. It included a note that read, "This is a new model we stole from the development department. If possible, we were hoping you could use it and tell us what you think or if it could use any improvement." It was clear they meant well, but...

"I don't think I'm worthy of being a magical girl anymore..." Yurika groaned.

"What? H-Hey, Yurika-chan!"

The gas grenade was *clearly* not meant for a magician. When Yurika realized what the soldiers must think of her, it set her sobbing.

Sanae had said that the ghosts were gone from the cemetery, but the truth was that the people were now gone as well. The place was desolate, so Clan and the others were able to enter without any resistance. Ignoring the graves, they began inspecting the tents set up around the site. Many of them served as storage for excavation equipment, or as sleeping quarters for the workers. Others housed tools for magical rituals.

"These are the materials required for Dispel, and these are for making an anti-magic field. There're even supplies for Magic Protection. Wait, is this a Void Converter?! I've never seen the real thing before!" Nana remarked.

The majority of stored tools were to destroy or nullify seals, barriers, and traps. Nana was surprised by the wealth and variety of catalysts in the stash.

"No way! Isn't this Saint Karnak's Holy Hand Grenade?!" she continued in amazement.

"Nana-dono, what are these used for?" Kiriha asked.

"Oh, sorry, uh... I'm sure they're to unseal Grevanas's tomb. They wouldn't need them for the other graves."

All of the graves at the cemetery were sealed, but the strength of each seal was dependent on how dangerous the material—the mage and the research—contained within was. None were as powerful as the seal put on Grevanas's tomb. Digging up the other graves would have been a much simpler affair, so it was now clear that their true goal was to excavate Grevanas's specifically.

“All right. Let’s leave two-thirds of us here to secure the evidence and send the remaining third after Koutarou and the others,” Kiriha suggested.

“I shall inform Master,” Ruth replied.

Based on the number of beds in the tents, Kiriha now had an idea of how many workers there were. And as they were mostly simple laborers, she believed a third of their troop—along with Koutarou, Theia, Sanae, Shizuka, and Maki—would be more than enough to handle them. The more pressing issue at hand thus seemed to be securing the evidence at the worksite. A single high-ranking magician could turn it all to ash in the blink of an eye.

“Kii, wouldn’t it be better if Harumi and I stay behind?” Clan suggested.

“Me too, Clan-san?” Harumi asked curiously.

“Ah, yes, of course,” mused Kiriha. “You two can read the ancient language.”

“Oh, that’s right! Clan-san and I could help preserve the evidence!”

Clan had data on both High and Low Ancient Forthorthian, so she could use her automatic translator to read documents in either language. And Harumi could do the same thanks to the memories she’d inherited from Alaia. Some of the tools and documents gathered in the tents used ancient magic. Folsaria had long modernized its language, so only researchers and specialists were familiar with the older version. A mere handful of Rainbow Heart’s troops fit that bill, so Clan thought it would be better if she and Harumi stayed behind to assist.

“In that case, would you two mind staying here?” Kiriha asked to be sure.

“Not at all,” Harumi replied.

“Just be careful out there, Kii,” said Clan. “Don’t you go losing to something as illogical as mag— Waaaaaaaah?!”

Just as Kiriha and the others were about to depart, Clan let out a wild scream. She went as pale as a sheet and her glasses slid partway off her face.

“What is it, Clan-san?!” Nana asked immediately. Something was clearly wrong.

“Th-The people excavating here aren’t after Grevanas’s research!” she shouted.

“What?!” Kiriha exclaimed.

She then whipped around to see what Clan had in her hands... It was a research note written in the ancient language.

“Their real goal is to revive Grevanas!” Clan continued. “It says here that he’ll be revived as an immortal using necromancy!”

Grevanas’s followers were no mere grave robbers. No, they were after something much grander—they wanted to bring back Grevanas. If they could do that, then they wouldn’t need his sealed research. His revival would be their first step to taking over all of Folsaria.

Grevanas’s tomb was a large stone structure, but only its outward entrance was visible. The rest stretched deep into the mountain, so it was hard to get a handle on its true size. The entryway alone was over ten meters high and wide. Surely the interior had to be even bigger.

Before Clan figured out the true agenda of Grevanas’s followers, Koutarou and the others had already reached the tomb. They’d gotten word from Ruth that the rest of the group was in the process of securing evidence, so the impatient Theia was champing at the bit.

“I won’t let these villains unseal that wretched research!” she bellowed.

“Don’t you think we should wait for backup first?” argued Koutarou.

There was no sign of anyone around at the entrance to the tomb. That meant it would be easy to get inside, but it also meant Grevanas’s followers were likely already inside as well. Kiriha had apprised them of the urgency of the situation, but these circumstances were... unexpected, to say the least. Koutarou’s gut told him it was safer to wait for reinforcements.

“Don’t lose your nerve,” Theia scolded. “This concerns both Forthorthe *and* you.”

“Yeah...” he relented.

Koutarou wanted to avoid a reckless charge, but Theia had a point. This whole mess was caused by Koutarou and the royal family two thousand years ago, so

it only made sense that they should be the ones to clean it up now. And considering the black vials the demons had been banished with, this could be a full-on crisis. The thought of any one of those vials having survived intact was horrifying.

“I think we’ll be fine on our own,” Sanae said, dispelling Koutarou’s doubts.

“What makes you think that?” he asked.

“Well, there don’t seem to be that many people inside.”

Sanae believed the odds were in their favor, as she could only sense a few auras within the tomb. Maybe a dozen or so. Even if they were powerful magicians, it was unlikely that Sanae, Shizuka, Maki, and Koutarou himself wouldn’t be able to handle them.

“Okay, then let’s go,” Koutarou decided. He believed if Sanae was right, they should prioritize protecting the seal.

“That’s more like it! Combat Dress change—Command Green!”

Ping!

With a grin, Theia switched out her accessory again. Assault Red specialized in flight and heavy firepower—neither of which could be used indoors. Command Green, which came equipped with information gathering tools and a variety of weapons that could be switched out depending on the situation, was a much better choice given the environment.

“Satomi-kun, I’m not sure what to make of there being so few people here,” piped up a worried Maki.

If they were here to rob the tomb, it would’ve made sense to have as many hands on deck as possible to get the job done quickly. The fact that this seemed to be a small operation was troublesome.

“That’s true,” agreed Koutarou. “It might be a trap.”

He had to wonder if this was some kind of ambush setup. Ruth had reported that there were fewer of Grevanas’s followers than there were Rainbow Heart soldiers, so it would be a smart tactic for the enemy to use.

“Aika-san, can you keep an eye out for magical traps or any attempts at

concealment?”

“Understood.”

“Same goes for you, Sanae, Theia.”

“Aye aye!”

“I know that, obviously. I’ve grown too, I’ll have you know.”

Maki would be in charge of magic, Sanae spiritual energy, and Theia technology. The three of them would work together to survey their surroundings via their respective areas of expertise. Anything could happen in this unknown place. There was no such thing as being overly cautious when it came to magic.

“I’m not good with this kind of hide-and-seek game...” Shizuka squeaked.

Be it ghosts, hidden traps, or ambushes, she hated anything that made her jump. She couldn’t help the heavy sigh that left her lips as she followed close behind Theia and Koutarou. Then, all of a sudden...

Bwoo, bwoo, bwoo! An alarm rang out.

“Yeeeeeeek!”

The startled Shizuka screamed and ducked low. The surprise noise had come just as she was trying to pump herself up, and the effect had been disastrous. The alarm, however, was really just a call from Kiriha. It was apparently urgent, so she’d used the alarm function to draw attention to it.

“Satomi Koutarou!”

“What’s up, Kiriha-san?”

“Charge in immediately!”

“Got it!”

Kiriha’s instruction was clear. And the moment Koutarou received it, he took off running. He had no reason to question her, so if she said to go, then he was full speed ahead.

“Nightwalker!”

Maki charged right after Koutarou. She would follow him wherever he led, even if it was a mistake. That was why she was so quick to take action, including transforming her staff into a greatsword. She'd judged a weapon would be better than offensive magic in the battle to come.

"Come, Sanae, Shizuka! Let's go too!"

"Yeah!"

"Jeez, don't scare me like that, Kiriha-san..."

Theia, Sanae, and Shizuka took off as well. All three were ready for battle—Theia with a large gun in hand, Sanae with Saguratin, and Shizuka in her half-dragon form.

"So what's going on, Kiriha-san?!" Koutarou asked as he ran.

He used his armor's AI to relay the call to the four girls as well so that they could all hear the conversation in real time.

"We figured out what Grevanas's followers are really after," Kiriha reported.

"What do you mean? Aren't they after his research?"

"No, they want Grevanas himself! They're trying to revive him!"

"What?!"

This news left Koutarou and the girls utterly dumbfounded.

Yet at the same time... things started to make sense. That would explain why Kiriha had issued the order to charge without any preamble. If the believers were only after Grevanas's research, they could have easily played things safe and waited for backup. Even if the followers had already undone the seal, it would simply be a matter of defeating them and securing the material.

But if they were looking to resurrect Grevanas, that act needed to be stopped immediately. His followers were likely prepared to do the deed as soon as the seal was broken. Koutarou and the others had no information on their enemy and they had no idea what traps might lay ahead, but time was of the essence. The ritual *had* to be interrupted.

The underground tomb was large, but Koutarou and the girls managed to make their way through it without encountering a single enemy or trap. All they saw along the way were the sarcophagi of the mages buried with Grevanas. They eventually reached a massive door leading to the inner sanctum of the tomb where Grevanas and his research were enshrined. This was it—the destination for Koutarou and the girls, as well as the cultists.

“It seems the seal is already broken. But what is this? There are no traces of it being destroyed...” said Alunaya through Shizuka’s mouth.

In their hybrid form, he was also using her eyes to stare scrutinizingly at the door. He could tell it had been protected by a powerful seal based on its condition. The passage of centuries had weathered the surrounding walls, but not this door. It was as pristine as the day it had been constructed, as the magic of the seal repelled all manner of attack and interference—including the wear and tear of time.

“What does that mean, Alunaya-dono?”

“It would be hard to explain with my vocabulary. Maki, you take over.”

“Okay... Based on the traces of mana here, it’s clear that the cultists tried several different spells to undo the seal. These traces are all around us, but not on the door itself... I can’t sense any mana on it at all. It’s like there was never a spell on it to begin with. This shouldn’t happen even if they used the right magical key to unlock it. It’s very strange.”

Even if the seal had been opened in the proper way, the mana concentrated in the door wouldn’t simply disappear all at once. Just like how hot things cooled over time, the mana should have gradually dissipated. But the door had no trace of mana on it whatsoever. It was like the surroundings were hot, but the door itself was ice cold. It was truly bizarre.

“If they’re going to revive Grevanas, maybe they opened the gates of hell like Dark Purple,” Koutarou suggested.

Dark Purple had been researching how to bring back her dead lover. By using magic to open the gates of hell, she drew on the whirlpool of chaos’s power—the same whirlpool that totaled Blue Knight in the decisive battle against Vandarion. Koutarou had a hunch the same thing might have happened here.

“That’s correct. You’ve learned well, Blue Knight,” hissed a decrepit voice suddenly.

“Who’s there?!” Koutarou demanded, a chill running up his spine.

“Grrr!” Alunaya growled, baring his fangs.

Both of them recognized the old voice. Koutarou was surprised, but Alunaya was livid. His eyes burned with rage.

“Grevanas...” Koutarou gasped.

“Don’t think you can show your face to me again and live to tell the tale, old mage!” the Fire Dragon Emperor roared.

“I’m glad you remember me, Blue Knight. And could this be... Alunaya? What a strange turn of events! Do come in, you two! We have much to discuss!”

The door to the chamber slowly opened with a heavy grinding sound. Darkness lay beyond it, but when it opened fully, a light came on that faintly illuminated the interior of the chamber. It must have been a few dozen meters wide. The circumference was lined with research equipment and bookshelves. In the center was a two-meter sarcophagus with the lid already removed. Standing before it was a lone man covered in a robe. His hood hid his face, but Koutarou knew who was beneath it. He recognized that robe and that posture...

“Incidentally, Blue Knight, I seem to have misplaced my staff, Encyclopedia. You didn’t happen to take it, did you?” Grevanas said as Koutarou stepped into the room.

That was something only the real Grevanas could have known, and that was more than enough to convince Koutarou of his identity. There was no doubt about it—this was Grevanas.

“I did, but I gave it to an acquaintance of mine. I don’t have it anymore.”

Koutarou had first given Encyclopedia to Yurika. Then when they were making Nana’s prosthetics, they’d used it in her left arm in order to restore her ability to use magic.

“I suspected it was left behind in Forthorthe when I was exiled... No wonder I couldn’t find it when I searched here. Hweh hweh hweh.”

“...”

While Koutarou was sure this man was Grevanas, something felt wrong. It was his laughter that tipped him off. Had Grevanas always laughed like that? Moreover, was he the kind of man who enjoyed making such trivial conversation?

“Well, the staff matters not... It’s been some time, Blue Knight, Alunaya. Around seven hundred years, I believe.”

“Enough drive! I hope you’re prepared to be incinerated!”

“I understand how you feel, Alunaya-dono, but please restrain yourself. We still don’t know what he’s planning.”

“Grrr!” Alunaya growled, baring his fangs again.

As a former victim of Grevanas’s mind control magic, Alunaya was extremely hostile toward him. He would’ve attacked already if Koutarou hadn’t been there to stop him.

“I thought it was strange, but it appears Alunaya has inhabited a person,” Grevanas remarked, taking a few steps closer.

When he did so, the shifting angle of the light shone up underneath his hood.

“Kyaaaaaaaaah!” Shizuka screamed when she saw his face.

“Grevanas, you—” Koutarou gasped in surprise, reaching for Signaltin.

For Grevanas’s face... was dried up like that of a mummy.

“Ah, I apologize for startling you. This is part of the price one pays for raising the dead... I am a magical being in the form of an animated corpse.”

Grevanas was a necromancer who’d been researching how to bring the dead back to life as a means to assist Maxfern in his plans for domination. As expected, the greatest obstacle in the way of the would-be king of the world was his own mortal lifespan. Even if he managed to conquer Forthorthe and the rest of the world, he would only have a finite number of years left to enjoy his rule... unless he was undying. Ultimately, Maxfern had sought to use the sword of kingship to grant himself eternal life, but that didn’t invalidate all of Grevanas’s research. He’d now been revived by it... and perhaps he could use it

to bring Maxfern back too. All's well that ends well, he thought.

"I may have my intelligence, but I am not much different from a zombie or golem. In magical terms, I am what you would call a lich."

There were multiple ways to raise the dead, and Grevanas had taken the avenue of magical life. The method involved infusing a corpse with magical energy and bonding it with the soul of the deceased. This had three distinct advantages.

First, it wasn't a complete resurrection, meaning the hurdles were somewhat lower. Second, becoming a magical being was akin to gaining immortality. It also meant that he no longer needed to breathe or eat to sustain himself, and that he was resistant to poison and disease. Third, as he came into his own as a magical being, his magical abilities would improve drastically. He was essentially making his own body a high-level magical relic.

Those three advantages made this revival method a very attractive option to evil magicians. History was blackened with many a disaster that such immortalizing had caused in the past.

"You said it's *part* of the price you pay..." Koutarou said in a low voice.

He'd picked up on the sinister, unspoken meaning of that sentence—there had to be at least one more part.

"Indeed," Grevanas replied. "But I'm sure you already have a feeling about the second."

"Yeah. There's something off about you."

"Is there really? I had expected as much, but I could not quite see it for myself."

Koutarou felt like Grevanas's personality had changed. And if Grevanas could be taken at his word, it seemed that was the second sacrifice.

"You were a little more rational in the past," Koutarou remarked. "I'd say you're acting more like Maxfern now."

"No one in this day and age knew me back then... Perhaps if you had been the one to perform the ritual, it would have turned out better."

Grevanas seemed amused by the change in his personality, despite the horror of it. Koutarou's gut was telling him that Grevanas had lost his rational mind and that madness filled the void.

"You're saying... that the image of the people who revived you is what supplemented your soul?" Maki questioned.

"That's right, young lady. It appears Maxfern-sama is not well known in Folsaria, and so the people here believe that I was the leader of the rebellion. This is how they imagined me, and how they revived me."

Turning someone into a lich involved conjuring the soul of the dead and magically fixing it to their corpse. But because souls deteriorated over time, much of Grevanas's was worn away after several hundred years. It was possible to supplement that with residual thoughts, but only so much. The rest was filled in by the ritual holders. In Grevanas's case, his followers imagined him as the Grand Wizard, mastermind of the rebellion, thus giving him a personality similar to Maxfern's.

"Strictly speaking, the power of chaos had something of an effect as well. Chaos blurs the boundaries between all sorts of things... including Maxfern-sama and myself. That said, I welcome this change."

"Why? You're losing yourself."

"I admired Maxfern-sama. I wanted to be like him. And now I've been revived in his image. What is there to complain about?"

"There's something wrong with you."

"If not, I never would have risen up. Although... I suppose I only aided in the rebellion back then."

"I should've known..."

With that, Koutarou clasped Signaltin and slowly drew it. Grevanas looked on in a daze.

"Done catching up already, are we?" he asked with a smile.

"Yeah. If you've revived a bit more like Maxfern, you can only have one goal, no?"

“Yes. If possible, I would like to revive Maxfern-sama and continue our rebellion. But I am alone at the moment. I’m glad I had the chance to speak with someone who knew my old self... though I suppose we must move on.”

Whoosh!

No sooner had Grevanas finished speaking than a large group of people appeared from the darkness. Though whether or not they were human was questionable...

“Eek!” Shizuka reflexively yelped when she saw them.

“Grevanas! How dare you!” Alunaya howled with fiery rage.

“Koutarou, only about a third of them are actually alive!” Sanae warned.

“The others are skeletons or zombies,” Maki explained. “I can see magic hanging over the ones who are alive! They’re being controlled!”

A third of the crowd that had appeared, about ten enemies, were walking skeletons with clubs and shields in hand. They were clearly melee fighters. Another third were zombies. They had no weapons, but they were fleshy and therefore sturdier than the skeletons.

The final third were humans being manipulated like puppets. They were all carrying guns, which they had the dexterity to use as living beings with articulate bodies. They were also spread out across the room. This was to discourage Koutarou and his group from using explosives and the like.

“And this was the third sacrifice...” Koutarou said in a whisper.

“Correct. They were trying to bring back the dead, after all. Living sacrifices were necessary. I simply reused them as zombies. Efficient, don’t you think?”

Grevanas’s followers weren’t gathered here just to excavate the tomb... Once they discovered the tomb and opened the door to the deepest chamber, they were sacrificed. Then once Grevanas was revived, he recycled them as zombies. Truly three birds with one stone.

“I used the bones lying around to create skeletons to bolster the ranks as well.”

“This kind of extreme method is just like something Maxfern would do...”

“You’re right there, Blue Knight. My old self would have hesitated. What a pleasure this is.”

In Koutarou’s mind, Grevanas was always the more rational of the two men. Even at the bitter end, he’d tried to stop Maxfern from resorting to the black vials... Yet there was none of that compunction left now. The sacrifices of his resurrection and the taint of chaos had warped his soul.

“There’s no way you’re getting out of here, Grevanas. We’ll put you back to eternal sleep,” Koutarou declared, leveling his sword at the crazed mage.

Signaltn had the power to dispel magic, meaning it should be especially effective against a magical being like what Grevanas had become. He was already dead—magic was the only thing holding a simulacrum of his former self together. Koutarou was sure of that after talking to him. He wouldn’t hesitate to use Signaltn against him now.

“Is that so? I believe you’ll make way soon enough,” Grevanas taunted, raising his staff on high.

There, his zombies, skeletons, and puppets gathered around him. It seemed they’d be putting up a fight.

“You won’t get past us so easily! Let’s do this, Grevanas!”

“My, my, how impatient. The young never learn...”

Grevanas specialized in necromancy and mind manipulation, and his soul had now been twisted through his resurrection. If he got away, Koutarou was certain he would take up Maxfern’s quest for world domination... and he didn’t even want to think about the lengths Grevanas would go to in order to achieve it. That’s why Koutarou was determined to settle things here and now.

True to form, Theia was the first to attack. She was the very definition of trigger-happy. By the time Koutarou took off running, gunfire was already ringing out.

Bang, bang, bang!

Command Green’s primary weapon was an assault rifle, and Theia put it to good use. She’d fired a precise three-shot burst at the skeleton in front of

Koutarou, hitting its forehead, chin, and neck. The monster then clattered to the floor in pieces.

“It seems its weak point is its head!” she called out.

Theia had suspected that the skeletons’ weakness would either be their head or their heart. If magic had functionally taken the place of their brains, then the head would make sense. But there was also a chance that they used a magical core corresponding to where a human heart would be. That was why she’d aimed for the head first—the heart would have been her second guess if that hadn’t worked.

“To think there’s anyone more hasty than the Blue Knight. Now...” Grevanas thrust his staff out in front of his chest and began a chant. It was an incantation from Ancient Forthorthe, so he recited it in the ancient language. “Heed my call, spirits of light and darkness! Blend together! Mix and drown out the colors of this world! Come forth, Gray Army!”

The spell he cast was an illusion, and a simple one at that. All it did was give his soldiers a murky, uniform appearance. As a result, even though he’d disguised thirty or so targets, the spell hardly taxed him.

“Theia, don’t fire at random!” Koutarou shouted.

“I know that! I’m not interested in killing any civilians!” she shouted back. With an annoyed look on her face, she adjusted her weapon selector and switched over to nonlethal rounds. “So we’ll try this on for size instead!”

Bang, bang, bang!

Theia fired off another three-shot burst. Just like before, she targeted the gray soldier closest to Koutarou, but this time she was aiming for the chest. Regardless of the ammunition she used, a high-powered blow to the head from an assault rifle would kill a normal person.

“No good! It’s not enough to take out the inhuman ones!”

Unfortunately, it seemed she’d hit either a zombie or a skeleton. As they all looked the same now, there was no way to distinguish between them—and the nonlethal rounds Theia was forced to use wouldn’t work on the monstrous soldiers. Weapons that relied on pain, shock, and trauma were virtually

worthless against the undead.

“Aika-san, is there nothing we can do?!” Koutarou asked in desperation.

The current situation put everyone but him and Sanae in danger. Thanks to Signaltin, he was equipped to fight both the living and the dead, and Sanae could see through Grevanas’s illusion thanks to her psychic powers. But without either of those, Theia and Shizuka were in trouble. If Maki couldn’t assist them in some way, they would be in a tough spot.

“I have an idea! True Seeing!”

Maki thus cast a spell on herself, Theia, and Shizuka that would likewise allow them to see through the illusion. With this, the gray soldiers reverted to their original forms.

“Oh, so the young lady is a magician too. You must have studied quite hard. However—”

“Watch out, everyone! The enemy is behind us!” Sanae warned the group the moment she noticed.

Theia, Shizuka, and Maki were all distracted temporarily by Maki’s spell and their new sight, leaving them slow to react.

“Kyaaaah!” they all screamed out in unison.

A skeleton had ambushed each one of them, and the three stunned girls took the surprise attacks at full force. Thankfully, the skeletons’ decayed weapons were practically just sticks. If not, the girls could have been seriously injured or worse.

“You still have a long way to go in combat, young lady. You must study even harder,” Grevanas said, full of confidence.

This had all been part of his plan. Of his puppets, the skeletons were the fastest. He’d used his large-scale illusion spell to allow them to sneak into the shadows while leaving illusory copies of themselves behind. Koutarou and the girls had been so occupied with their current predicament that they hadn’t noticed. If Grevanas had one thing over them, it was decades of experience.

“Koutarou, this is bad!” Sanae shouted.

“I know,” he replied.

Grevanas wasn't about to let the two of them go unchallenged. While the other girls tangled with the skeletons, he set the remaining twenty-six gray soldiers on Koutarou and Sanae.

“You fool! Did you think this would be enough to defeat me, Sanae-chan?!” Sanae crowed, sounding a bit like a villain as she radiated a wave of spiritual energy that pulsed through the room.

“Hey, don't attack me alongside them, Sanae!”

“Aw, don't you worry! Love will keep you safe!”

Sanae had synchronized her aura with Koutarou's so that her wave would simply pass through him. Effectively, she was only attacking the enemy soldiers.

“This is completely absurd, but well done, Sanae!”

“Ohoho, let's keep it up!”

But clever though the move was, Sanae had pulsed her aura in all directions. That greatly diminished the force of the attack, so it did little more than keep the enemies at bay.

“I'll take it from here!” Koutarou rallied.

And with a swing of his sword, he began blowing the gray soldiers away with shock waves. The human ones fell to the ground unconscious, whereas the zombies and skeletons were dispelled of their illusions, if not altogether destroyed. Though Sanae's attack had appeared random at first, she'd read the room and set Koutarou up for success—a sign that even she had grown a little.

“Of course I wasn't expecting this to be enough to defeat the Blue Knight and his allies... I've prepared plenty for you,” Grevanas said, raising his staff with his right hand while gesturing a symbol with his left. “Oh, restrained spirits of fire! Now is the time to unleash your power!”

Kaboom! The chamber was instantly rocked by a powerful tremor.

“Koutarou, we're being attacked by magic!”

“I know, but from where?!”

Koutarou looked around and laid eyes on a nearby stone pillar over a meter wide. It was one of many that was supporting the ceiling of the chamber... and it was now falling toward them.

He set off that explosion to topple the pillar!

Still locked in a fight, Koutarou and Sanae could hardly move. The pillar leaned dangerously over them. Koutarou could only see the one, but there was actually a second just behind it. Grevanas had knocked down two pillars to cover a wider area.

“I can only hope this will kill you, Blue Knight,” he hissed.

Everything had gone according to plan so far. Grevanas had waited to get Koutarou in just the right place, then set his soldiers upon him. And while Koutarou was occupied with that, he toppled the pillars for the clincher.

Koutarou wielded Signaltin, so magical attacks were practically powerless against him. But a stone pillar was a different story. This was the nefarious plan devised by someone who’d faced the Blue Knight firsthand before. Grevanas had waited for Koutarou to come find him in the sepulcher precisely for such a trap.

Whoom!

The two pillars, weighing well over ten tons each, collapsed upon Koutarou and Sanae. Grevanas stared intently at the scene. He wasn’t going to let his guard down against the Blue Knight for even a moment. He knew better than anyone what would happen if he did.

“Don’t think you’ll ever be able to outwit me again, Grevanas...”

Crash!

The pillars that should have crushed Koutarou and Sanae were slowly shoved to the side. It appeared to be Shizuka’s handiwork, but because this was an emergency, Alunaya had taken control of her body. The ten-ton pillars were nothing before the strength of the Fire Dragon Emperor.

“Alunaya... I suppose *you* would catch on.”

Despite Alunaya foiling his trap, Grevanas still seemed confident. With

Alunaya present, he'd guessed as much might happen. Alunaya truly lived up to his majestic title. He was also naturally resistant to magic. Grevanas had only been able to control him in the past with sinister traps and tricks that compromised him. Alunaya, however, was on guard for them this time, which was what had allowed him to save Koutarou and Sanae.

"Thank you, Uncle Dragon!"

"You really saved us, Alunaya-dono."

"Be careful, Blue Knight. Magic is not his only weapon."

"I can see that now..."

Grevanas used magic as powerful as Yurika's and possessed a mind as clever as Kiriha's. Assuming anything less would be a deadly mistake. Two thousand years ago, he'd been focused on controlling Alunaya. Koutarou had never truly seen what Grevanas was capable of until now, where he was fighting with everything he had. He was not to be underestimated.

"Sorry I was slow to respond to that ambush," Theia called as she regrouped with the others.

"I will focus more on the magic around us," Maki said, shortly behind her.

As long as they fought calmly, they would never lose to a couple of skeletons. But they had to stay vigilant about their surroundings. Theia held her gun at the ready and Maki cast a spell to detect mana in the area. The ambush leading up to the stone pillar trap had thoroughly spooked them, and they were determined not to make the same careless mistake twice.

"It's fine. We escaped unharmed..." said Koutarou. "But so did he."

"What do you mean, Blue Knight? I've lost fourteen soldiers," Grevanas replied.

Theia had shot two at the beginning of the fight, and Koutarou had defeated four. Theia, Maki, and Shizuka had also taken out the three that attacked them. And lastly, the stone pillars had crushed five. In total, Grevanas had indeed lost fourteen fighters... and yet, somehow, his army still numbered thirty. It seemed the bones lying around the chamber were rising up as more skeletons.

“With the way you’re replenishing your soldiers, I’d say you haven’t suffered any casualties,” Koutarou retorted.

“You could call it a home advantage. That said, my mana is not unlimited. It’s not as though this is at no cost to me.”

“If you’re willing to say all that, I imagine it’s still close enough.”

“You’re more clever than you used to be, Blue Knight. Experience makes people smarter. But you are indeed right... Given the expected length of our battle and the rate at which I can restore them, my resources are hypothetically infinite.”

Resurrected as a lich with a plethora of magical tools at his disposal, Grevanas’s overall mana had increased drastically. There was no telling how many skeletons he could raise if given the chance. There were plenty of bones to go around in the tomb. Moreover, the battle at hand wasn’t likely to last long. That was the heart of Koutarou’s point—given what Grevanas had left to spend, he’d barely suffered any losses.

“If we go all in, we’ll be playing into his hands. But if we take things slow, there’ll be no end to it. What would you do, Theia?”

“Simple. Snipe Grevanas.”

Bang!

No sooner had those words left Theia’s mouth than she fired a shot. If Grevanas was going to continue making skeletons, then in her eyes, all they had to do was take him out. Alternatively, interrupting his spells would also work. It was an aggressive and rash play—just like Theia.

“I see the princess of today makes quick decisions. These modern weapons are also quite menacing.”

Grevanas wasn’t quick on his feet, partly because he was old and partly because he was undead. Liches weren’t physically much different from zombies, so he could only move about as fast as one. So with no other recourse, he switched to chanting a defensive spell while he issued his soldiers the order to attack.

“Good job, Theia! Keep it up!”

“Leave it to me! Your liege is more than capable!”

Grevanas tried using a few gray soldiers as shields, but Theia was a crack shot. She was easily able to fire between them. It was all Grevanas could do to cast a quick, albeit weaker, defensive spell to protect himself. He would have been wide open otherwise. The incantation to summon his skeletons was long and complicated, making it tricky for him to use under fire.

“Sanae, Aika-san! Keep an eye on Grevanas! Don’t let him do anything strange!”

“What about me, Satomi-kun?!”

“We charge together!”

“You got it!”

“It’s finally my turn to shine!”

There was no telling how many more traps Grevanas had in his sepulcher. Sanae and Maki thus had to stay on their guard, leaving Koutarou and Shizuka to deal with the enemies. Fortunately, the gray soldiers were weak. With sword and fist alike, Koutarou and Shizuka steadily whittled down the enemy army.

“A fighting princess and Alunaya... What a troublesome situation.”

Grevanas’s confidence was now shaken. He felt his chances of victory were incredibly low—even with effective use of his traps. He’d only just revived, and he’d misjudged his enemy. Grevanas was guilty of two major miscalculations.

The first was not getting a proper read on Theia’s abilities. He had seen Clan fight before, but Theia was on a different level. She was physically primed for combat, and she was quick with an accurate attack. He simply hadn’t made plans against a fighter of her caliber.

The second miscalculation, the presence of Alunaya, further backed him into a corner. Grevanas had never imagined he’d find the Fire Dragon Emperor in this day and age. Even weakened in human form, he still had explosive power. Though Grevanas was now a lich, there was no guarantee that he’d be able to block Alunaya’s attacks.

“If I continue fighting like this, I’ll end up right back in my coffin. I wonder...” the necromancer mumbled.

“You’re not getting out of here, Grevanas!” Koutarou shouted.

“Let’s do this, Blue Knight! I never dreamed I’d have my chance for revenge here and now!”

Koutarou and Shizuka were closing in on the necromancer as they cut their way through his army. With Signaltin, Koutarou could incapacitate the soldiers without worry, be they skeletons, zombies, or living humans. Shizuka had Sanae supporting her from the rear line, so she could fight without killing anyone. The biggest danger were the traps in the chamber, but Maki had collected herself and was now giving effective orders to avoid them. The battle was proceeding to their advantage. Within seconds, Alunaya would have his claws within Grevanas. But then, all of a sudden...

Beep, beep, beep!

A loud alarm began blaring. It was coming from Koutarou’s armor and the girls’ bracelets. A comms window promptly opened, and a familiar voice rang out.

“Terrible news, Master! We’ve received word that a horde of zombies and skeletons is headed toward Thorthel!”

Ruth was practically screaming, conveying just how panicked she was. Nana and Yurika could also be heard frantically talking in the background. It seemed the whole group was in quite a panicked state.

“What?! Then Grevanas is—”

“That’s right, Blue Knight. You fell for my diversion.”

Grevanas’s voice echoed through the chamber, but he was no longer anywhere to be seen. He’d been quick to seize the opportunity to meld into the shadows while Koutarou and his cohort were distracted by the call. If anyone had been watching, they would have seen his body shrouded in a gray mist or smoke, but they’d completely missed it. By the time they looked up again, only Grevanas’s gray soldiers appeared to remain in the room.

“Didn’t you find it strange, Blue Knight? Where did the people who were excavating this place go? Why was I the only one here? And where might those black vials responsible for our exile be?”

The signs had been there from the start. The worksite had been populated with over a hundred laborers, yet only twenty were accounted for between the humans and zombies here in the sepulcher. Where had the other eighty gone? And Grevanas was right—where were all the black vials that had been sealed with him? Now that he was a lich, he himself was practically immune to disease. Why hadn’t he used them already?

“Are you planning on destroying Folsaria?!”

“That’s correct, Blue Knight. Do you not remember my and Maxfern-sama’s ambition? Folsaria as it stands would be a terrible impediment, so I will send it plummeting into ruin.”

Grevanas’s, or rather Maxfern’s, goal was to rule Forthorthe. But if Grevanas were to have his followers rise up against Forthorthe, Rainbow Heart wouldn’t take it lying down. Eliminating such opposition early would be key to his success—ideally right now, before Rainbow Heart was aware of his return and the terrible black vials he had at his disposal. That was why Grevanas had sent his main force to march on Thorthie while he diverted Koutarou. He had guessed that Koutarou and Rainbow Heart would let their guard down if he waited for them at the tomb—and he was right.

While Koutarou, his allies, and Rainbow Heart were all mired at the graveyard, Grevanas’s real army was closing in on the capital. The city still had soldiers to guard it, but all Grevanas needed was one zombie to get inside with a vial. That would accomplish his mission to deadly effect. He would love to destroy Folsaria completely, but just crippling the nation for months or years as it tried to recover would do. That would give him plenty of time to stage a revolt in Forthorthe.

“Now what will you do, Blue Knight? You can stay here and try to find me, or you can run to Thorthie. Choose wisely. Folsaria exists because of you, after all. Its future rests on your shoulders.”

Grevanas’s voice continued to echo through the chamber. It was possible he’d

already escaped the tomb and was simply communicating via magic now. The group might be able to hunt him down and capture him, but disaster might befall Folsaria in the meantime.

It was unclear if the guard left in Thorthé was enough to prevent all of Grevanas's soldiers with black vials from getting inside. This could be the end of the nation. That said, even if Koutarou and the girls fled for Thorthé now, there was no guarantee they'd make it in time. In the worst case scenario, Grevanas would get away *and* Folsaria would be ruined.

"We don't have time to play around here... Let's head back."

Even so, Koutarou didn't hesitate. Folsaria was a long-lost part of Forthorthé, so he would uphold Alaia's ideals here. Nothing mattered more than the citizens—not even justice. Koutarou had to prioritize saving lives over defeating Grevanas.

"Are you sure?" asked Sanae. "Mummy man's going to get away."

"I know. Something even worse might happen in the future if we let him go, but that doesn't mean we can stand by and let Folsarians die right now."

If Grevanas got away, he could make more vials of black liquid. He could make more zombies, living puppets, and other horrors. But right now, those were far-off hypotheticals while the people of Thorthé were in very real, imminent danger. Koutarou decided that once they'd saved Folsaria, they'd come up with a plan to capture Grevanas.

"Are you fine with that too, Uncle?"

"We have no other choice. Seeking personal revenge at a time like this isn't befitting an emperor. That would be the behavior of a tyrant."

Alunaya couldn't help grimacing. His vendetta with Grevanas was indeed personal, and in truth, it burned him to let the necromancer get away. But he also agreed with Koutarou. The lives of the people were far more important right now.

"So you make way at last, Blue Knight..." Grevanas's voice hissed from the shadows.

“I’m not making way.”

“Oh?”

“I’m just moving a little further down the road. I’ll still be there to stand in your way at every turn.”

“Then I shall take preventative measures for our next encounter.”

With that, Koutarou and the girls exited the tomb. Truth be told, nobody was happy about the retreat, but it was necessary. They had to stop the undead army marching on the capital no matter what.

Emperor vs. Ruler

Sunday, July 10th

When Clan shared the note revealing the true goal of Grevanas's followers, two thoughts flashed through Kiriha's mind. First was the instinct to send reinforcements after Koutarou and the girls who had gone ahead. Second was a question of what would happen if Grevanas had already been revived.

Either way, the group needed to enter Grevanas's tomb. If the resurrection ritual was ongoing, it needed to be stopped. And if it had already taken place, they needed to find out what had come of the Grand Wizard's research. That was why Kiriha ultimately issued the order for Koutarou to charge in. Following that, she promptly sent reinforcements his way.

Prepared for the worst, however, Kiriha then investigated the area. If Grevanas had already been resurrected, what was he up to? The answer couldn't be anything good. At the most innocuous, he'd escaped somewhere. And at the most vile, he would immediately move to attack Folsaria. After running through all sorts of scenarios in her head and searching out the surrounding area, she came to the conclusion it was the latter.

She had two primary reasons for this. The first was the lack of vehicles at the cemetery. There only appeared to be two large transport crafts, which was hard to believe at an excavation site. There should have been trucks for moving dirt, vans for moving tools, and other vehicles for moving people. Yet there were only the two large transport crafts.

That led Kiriha to believe Grevanas's followers were using the trucks, vans, and such for something else. And with that many vehicles, they wouldn't be hard to follow. And indeed, it hadn't taken the haniwas long to pick up their trail. The tracks headed toward Thorthe, complete with a detour around the incoming Rainbow Heart troops.

That was the second reason Kiriha believed that Grevanas was on the attack.

There was no other reason to move on the capital with such a force. No matter where in Thorthé they might be headed, such a large convoy of vehicles would stand out like a sore thumb.

That inevitably meant the newly resurrected Grevanas would be discovered right away. Kiriha couldn't imagine he and his followers would be so stupid as to give themselves away by accident... which meant they were doing it on purpose. They were prepared to be discovered, and yet they'd been careful to leave quietly. Kiriha believed a coordinated assault fit that bill.

"Ruth has a drone following them. We can still make it in time," she announced.

"Phew... I'm glad you're here, Kiriha-san," Koutarou replied. "But how do we catch them?"

He couldn't help the chill that ran up his spine when he first regrouped with Kiriha and heard the details of the situation. If she hadn't picked up on it, he would have been stuck fighting Grevanas while Thorthé was laid waste. But now he had a different set of worries, including how the group was going to catch up to the cultist army. They wouldn't make it in time if they loaded everyone into the transport crafts and drove after them. Ruth, however, had an idea.

"Master, first we send unmanned fighters over via a transfer gate in order to attack and stall the enemy. Meanwhile, we'll call a ship to fly there ourselves," she explained.

"That's right! You brought all that equipment to the Blue Tower, didn't you?"

"Heehee... Your liege and your vice captain are both quite capable."

"I was the one who set up the transfer gate, though," interjected Clan.

Installing a transfer gate in Folsaria had turned out to be a brilliant idea. They normally required about an hour to prep for human use, but no such safety precautions were necessary when transporting machines. If it failed, they could always try again. So Ruth's plan was to buy time by bombarding the enemy with unmanned fighters. Meanwhile, she and the group would catch up on a speedy ship. As someone who used transfer gates on a daily basis, Ruth knew how to

get the most out of them.

“All right, then we should attack as soon as possible,” Koutarou ordered.

“Already on it,” Theia replied. “I destroyed the road just now.”

She showed Koutarou the footage she was watching, which revealed black smoke billowing up from the mountain road. She’d used a fighter to blow up it, leaving a gaping hole in the road that would make traversing it impossible by car. She’d also done the same thing a little farther down the road, effectively trapping the convoy between two craters.

“Why not just attack them directly?” Sanae asked.

Koutarou smiled wryly as he explained, “There are still people on board. Not to mention those black vials...”

“Oh. Yeah, I guess you’re right.”

Wooo...

As they were talking, the ship Ruth had called for landed next to them. Now that Theia had destroyed the road, Grevanas’s followers would either need to find some way around or make the necessary repairs to get by. Either way, leaving by air would allow the group time to close the distance.

“Looks like we should hurry,” Clan urged. “They’ve brought out something strange.”

“What is that?!” Koutarou exclaimed.

“Mountain Ruler... I was hoping they were still alive, but...”

Mountain Ruler Darzakah was another elder dragon that Grevanas had captured in the past. Darzakah was also an old friend of Alunaya’s. Their whereabouts had been unknown for some time, but they’d now reappeared in Folsaria centuries later...

“To think Darzakah would be reduced to this state! Curse you, Grevanas! I swear you won’t walk away in one piece the next we meet!”

Unfortunately, Darzakah was now nothing more than a skeleton. Grevanas had raised the Mountain Ruler from the dead and turned them into a familiar.

Like Alunaya, Darzakah was easily over twenty meters tall. In terms of pure strength, the Mountain Ruler exceeded the Fire Dragon Emperor. That held true now even in skeleton form, so lifting vehicles was a simple matter for Darzakah. Yet while it could easily lift the vehicles up, that didn't mean it was dexterous enough to carry them without damaging them.



Darzakah had always been on the clumsy side, and their intelligence was greatly diminished as a skeleton. A magician needed to give the undead dragon instructions at all times, so it took a while to transport the entire convoy over the crater Theia had made. Still, the endeavor was far faster than trying to fill it in or build over it.

A few minutes after being summoned, Darzakah had already carried the majority of the convoy safely across. The large vehicles that couldn't make it were abandoned, meaning a commensurate number of troops had to stay behind. By picking and choosing carefully, however, they were able to ensure minimal compromising of their force. Their plan wasn't to storm Folsaria with military might, after all. The black vials were the most important here. Their victory was contingent on getting those inside the capital.

"As long as I stand, you will never breach the city!"

Rrrumble!

Out of nowhere, a giant dragon with crimson scales landed on the road. His massive body made the very earth tremble, but that wasn't all he shook. Grevanas's followers were quaking at the mere sight of him.

"Wh-What's going on?!"

"A red elder dragon?!"

"Where did this monster come from?!"

Folsaria was home to lesser dragons of little intelligence, but elder dragons were unheard of. Even the great Darzakah was just bones lying around in the basement of Sariachal Castle. Nobody had ever seen one alive... until now.

"The penalty for desecrating the body of my friend Darzakah is death! I am Fire Dragon Emperor Alunaya, and I swear on my name that I will turn you to ash!"

"Th-The Fire Dragon Emperor?!"

"The legendary Alunaya?! It can't be!"

Alunaya's colossal figure and booming voice froze the cultists in place. This unexpected turn of events threw them all for a loop. Even if they could use

magic, they were still only human. They couldn't keep cool like Grevanas.

"Alunaya-dono sure is impressive..."

Thanks to Alunaya distracting the enemy's attention, Koutarou and the crew were safely able to land behind them. Alunaya, essentially, was just a diversion—albeit a very powerful one. Koutarou and the girls knew Grevanas's followers had powerful magicians among their ranks, so they had to be careful in their approach. That was why they'd had Alunaya make a grand entrance for them.

"He's certainly a good actor. Who could remain calm when faced with that?" Theia asked.

"It's not really an act, though." Shizuka's voice reached everyone's mind through the magical communication enabled by Koutarou's sword and the crests on the girls' foreheads. *"He's angry about his friend, you know?"*

"That's true. I can understand how he feels. Who wouldn't get angry to see such a fate befall a loved one?" said Koutarou. He tried to imagine how he would feel if someone was manipulating Kenji's bones. Just the thought of it made his blood boil.

"So feel free to get serious, Uncle."

Shizuka was now channeling her voice directly to Alunaya. The Fire Dragon Emperor normally left Shizuka to control her own body freely, but not like this. When inhabiting his native form—a massive red dragon—Alunaya had full control.

"Are you sure? If I get serious, that will mean using a lot of mana."

"It's fine this once! I can't stand what happened either!"

The more mana Alunaya used, the more of an effect it had on Shizuka's weight. It was a cruel curse for a sensitive teenage girl, but Shizuka was prepared to pay the price to help Alunaya save an old friend—even a skeletal one. If she were faced with her parents the same way, she knew she would pull out all the stops to help them. That was why she believed in Alunaya and supported him completely now.

"I'm most grateful that you came to be my host! Allow me to show you my

gratitude later!”

“I don’t need that! Just get to work!”

“Gladly!”

With a flap of his wings, Alunaya charged at Darzakah. He didn’t want to hurt his old friend, but the fastest way to return a raised skeleton to inanimate bones was to destroy the part containing the mana that held the skeleton together. In Darzakah’s case, it was the dragon’s forehead. Alunaya wanted to destroy it as soon as possible and put his friend to eternal rest.

“ROOOAAAAAR!”

Darzakah let out a thundering cry in return and charged as well. Skeleton or not, it was still the Mountain Ruler. The earth shook as its mountainous body moved.

“Alunaya-dono charged in! We’re going too!” Koutarou rallied.

“Whatever you do, don’t damage the small truck in the center!” Kiriha called after him.

“Oh, I know! I don’t wanna die just yet!”

After Alunaya made the first move, Koutarou and the others began their attack on the believers. Koutarou was specifically after the truck that Kiriha had cautioned him about. It was the only vehicle with refrigerated storage in the back, so the group suspected it was most likely the one carrying the black vials.

The biggest question at first was how to get the cultists away from it. If Koutarou and the girls had bombed it from the sky, not only would they have risked sending black liquid everywhere, but they might have killed some of the missing workers from the capital in the process. That was why they’d employed the roadblock, which forced the people riding in the truck to temporarily disembark.

The plan was almost ruined by Darzakah’s appearance, but the riders had still emerged from the vehicle while the dragon was moving it. That gave Koutarou and company the opportunity they needed all the same. If they could just get a hold of the truck now, victory would be theirs.

Kaboom!

Meanwhile, two twenty-meter giants clashed. The collision was so intense that it sounded like a thunderclap. Both dragons locked arms, grappling with one another, but it wasn't enough to kill their momentum. Their combined weight was several dozen tons, and the impact when they crashed together splintered the bedrock beneath their feet. It could be heard all the way in distant Thorth.

The overwhelming sight and sound of their clash bought Koutarou and company time to close in, but the enemy magicians were prepared for attack. Their approach didn't go unnoticed.

"Detecting mana from behind us!" one mage called out. "It might be whoever attacked the road!"

"I have visual confirmation! I see roughly twenty of them! Damn it, we were almost there!"

"So the elder dragon is just a decoy?! Let's leave him to Darzakah!"

"The enemy is fast but few in numbers! Keep calm and dispatch them!"

Grevanas's followers had never imagined Rainbow Heart was working alongside an elder dragon, but they had their own trump card in Darzakah. So after the initial surprise and confusion, they were able to collect themselves. They knew they didn't need to win the fight here—only escape to the capital with the black vials. As such, they made a bold move and summoned flying demons to carry them.

"I was worried they'd do that," Koutarou groaned.

"It's just like you said, Satomi-san," Nana remarked, impressed by his ability to predict the enemy. Meanwhile, she drew her guns—Over the Rainbow—which were specially designed to shoot magic bullets.

"They did the same thing seven hundred years ago by their timeline," he replied.

"Not changing their methods for so long speaks volumes to their negligence."

"If they'd had you on their side, Nana-san, we'd be in a whole lot of trouble."

The ten flying demons the cultists had summoned approached the small truck, where they would pick up the vials and depart for the capital. They could fly over any obstacle, and if they were shot down, they'd simply drop the vials on an unsuspecting Folsaria. The situation was grim.

Koutarou and the others made for the truck, but there was no way they'd intercept the demons in time. Yet in spite of that, Koutarou and Nana seemed almost casual about the whole affair. The reason was soon apparent...

"What?!" one cultist exclaimed.

"The winged demons are falling one after another?!" cried another.

As the demons approached the truck, they collapsed without warning like puppets whose strings had been cut.

"The demons are under attack!"

"Blurgh! W-We are too..."

A colorless, transparent gas had wafted by without notice, knocking them out cold on the spot. No one had seen the attack coming—the enemy was too distracted by Alunaya and Koutarou. So without being any the wiser, all ten demons fell prey.

"That's Yurika-chan for you. She's a real artist when it comes to this kind of attack," remarked Nana.

"Maybe she had a good teacher," remarked Koutarou in turn.

"Oh, aren't you a smooth talker, Satomi-san? That said, it seemed it wasn't enough to deal with the casters..."

"It guess this won't be like a normal fight."

Yurika was the one controlling the gas. Her master, Nana, was proud of her work, but she vigilantly kept an eye on the enemy. The gas had put the demons to sleep, but the cultists still had fight in them thanks to magical resistance. They'd seen the demons collapse and taken protective countermeasures for themselves. The invisible gas trick would have worked against most Earthlings, Forthorthians, and People of the Earth, but Folsaria's magicians were better equipped to counteract it.

“I guess Yurika-chan’s master and her guardian are going to have to put in some work,” remarked Nana.

“Her friends are here too,” added Koutarou.

There, Maki appeared from his shadow and used a wide-area version of a spell she usually favored in close combat.

“Tiny Memory Flash. Modifier: Area Effect.”

“What?!”

“The winged demons are falling one after another?!”

“They’re under attack!”

“Blurgh! W-We are too...”

Thanks to Maki’s magic, the minds of the enemy magicians were sent a few seconds back in time. They thus forgot what they were doing, forcefully interrupting their spells and making them repeat themselves. This bought Maki a little bit of time and allowed her to home in on the cultist who was using defensive magic. She quickly transformed her staff into a greatsword and charged.

“Maki-san reminds me of myself back in my Rainbow Heart days,” said Nana as she opened fire on the collapsed demons.

Summoned demons existed in this world with borrowed bodies made of mana. When hit with Nana’s special bullets, they lost their form and returned to their own world.

“I guess it’s a good thing you scouted her,” Koutarou replied before charging after Maki.

They then engaged the cultists together, fighting in perfect harmony. They covered each other’s blind spots and worked in tandem on tag-team attacks, alternating between their blades and magic. They used every tool at their disposal to smoothly take down one enemy after another.

“Satomi-ku— Yes, next a sword— use that to—”

“My footing— Are you serious, Aika-sa— Cast a spell to— bounce up—”

They were talking to each other all the while, but so fast that they were hardly getting out full sentences. The conversation made no sense to Nana. Nevertheless, their teamwork was in peerless sync. It was like a majestic dance. Nana was convinced that each had to know what the other was thinking.

It looks like Maki-san needs Satomi-san to bring out this side of her... I wonder if he would join Rainbow Heart too.

Koutarou couldn't use magic. He was constantly relying on tools. But he was the only one who could bring out Maki's full potential. It was unheard of, but Nana was seriously considering scouting the first magical boy who couldn't cast a single spell.

Koutarou, Maki, and Nana were given the role of engaging the magicians because they were the most suited for the job. Koutarou had Signaltin, while Maki and Nana had a wealth of experience.

And as the three of them were holding the wizards at bay, the remaining seven girls were fighting off the horde of zombies and skeletons with the help of ten Rainbow Heart soldiers they'd managed to bring along. Sanae and Theia were good with big, bold attacks, and Ruth and Clan were skilled at fighting large groups of enemies.

"I've confirmed their total force: 136 units in all," Ruth reported.

The majority of those units were skeletons and zombies, so they could easily be taken out with explosives and rapid-fire arms... but that led to a problem. There were humans mixed in with the undead army, including some of the workers who'd gone missing from the city and had been lucky enough to escape sacrifice in the resurrection ritual. They'd done nothing wrong; they were simply innocent bystanders under the influence of mind control.

Their purpose in Grevanas's army was to prevent the Blue Knight's team and Rainbow Heart from using powerful weapons, but they could also perform useful tasks the undead couldn't, like driving cars and firing guns. So that they wouldn't stand out, they were cloaked with the same gray soldier illusion Grevanas had used in the tomb. It was still possible to differentiate them from the undead up close, but not from a safe distance.

“What should we do, Kiriha?!” Sanae shrieked. “If we take too long here, they’re going to push through!”

She was unusually panicked because she couldn’t see through the illusion with her spirit sight like this. The enemy wouldn’t let her get close enough. It seemed they were trying to power their way toward the truck with overwhelming numbers.

“Don’t worry. I have an idea,” Kiriha replied.

She had indeed come up with a plan for exactly this situation. One she was rather confident in, even. But the key player was resistant...

“No way! I don’t want to!” Yurika whined, shaking Kiriha’s confidence.

“Please,” she begged. “It’s the most effective way.”

“I said I don’t want to! If I do any more of this stuff, I really won’t be able to call myself a magical girl anymore!”

Kiriha had already shared the details of her plan with Yurika, which was why she was objecting so adamantly. She shook her head so furiously that her twintails swung back and forth behind her head.

“But if you don’t do this, Yurika-san, it will mean the end of Folsaria,” said Harumi.

“Hrngh...”

Those words made Yurika freeze up on the spot. In truth, she already knew that. She knew she needed to act; she just couldn’t bring herself to do it.

“So it’ll cost you either way... How pitiable,” remarked Theia.

“This is no laughing matter,” scolded Clan.

“Oh, I’m not laughing. I was simply thinking that geniuses have it hard sometimes. I’ve been through something similar myself, so I wouldn’t dare laugh. The same goes for you too, doesn’t it?”

“That’s... true.”

Because of their pasts, Theia and Clan both sympathized with Yurika. Nevertheless, the situation was worsening with each passing second. In spite of

their feelings, they needed Yurika to act.

“I will do everything in my power to keep what happens here under wraps. You have my word,” Kiriha swore in an attempt to assure her.

“But...”

“Can you really call yourself a magical girl in the first place if you’re willing to just abandon Folsaria like that?” asked Sanae. “I guess you can always join Darkness Rainbow.”

“U-Ugh... Fine... I get it...”

Albeit reluctantly, Yurika steeled her nerve. Sanae was right—as a magical girl, she couldn’t just abandon Folsaria. She was a proud member of Rainbow Heart, and she couldn’t let anyone take that away from her. She would do whatever it took to defend.

“Just let whatever happens happieeeen!” Yurika shouted.

And with that, she tossed a metallic cylinder a few centimeters in diameter. Or, perhaps it was really her identity she was throwing away...

Boom!

The cylinder began spewing gas that immobilized anyone who inhaled it. Indeed, it was the “gift” she’d gotten from Nefilforan’s squad.

“It’s working!” Kiriha rallied. “Theia-dono, attack!”

“Well done, Yurika! You have my royal praise!”

Theia began firing her assault rifle in the same direction Yurika had thrown the gas grenade. The gray soldiers were falling one after the other.

“Here’s anoootheer!”

“I wanna play too!”

Yurika was nearly in tears, but Sanae seemed to be enjoying herself as they threw more grenades. The other girls and the Rainbow Heart soldiers followed up by attacking with their weapons and magic. They weren’t holding back either. They were using deadly force.

“This was a brilliant idea, Kiriha-san,” praised Harumi.

“It’s all thanks to Yurika’s relationship with Nefilforan’s squad. That’s what made this possible.”

Kiriha’s plan revolved around exploiting the unique characteristics of zombies and skeletons. As undead, they had no need to breathe. On top of that, they were resistant to poison. That meant only the live humans in Grevanas’s army would be affected by Yurika’s gas grenades.

As the latest models from Forthorthe, they were incredibly effective and had no side effects. The girls watched as the disguised puppets fell to the ground in swift order, leaving only the zombies and skeletons standing. That let Theia and the others safely open fire.

“Their algorithm for independent action is too simple, ho!”

“It’s the result of trying to cut costs by specializing in battle, ho!”

Zombies and skeletons were only equipped with the bare intelligence required for combat. They weren’t capable of complex thought, which was unsurprising, really. No one raised the dead to cook and clean, much less handle negotiations. Zombies and skeletons would never think to save themselves by lying down on the ground and feigning passing out.

There would normally be magicians giving the undead orders, which would have been an issue if Koutarou and company weren’t currently keeping Grevanas’s mages in check. Kiriha’s plan was thus going smoothly, and the enemy’s numbers were rapidly decreasing.

“Sanae-chan, can you pull the pin on five grenades at once?!” Yurika asked.

“You bet! Want me to do it now?” she replied.

“Do it!”

“Here goes!”

Ping, ping, ping, ping, ping!

Sanae tossed five gas grenades up into the air, then ripped the pins out of them simultaneously with her psychic powers. All that was left was to actually throw the grenades, but Yurika had a plan for that...

“Short Teleport! Modifier: Area Effect, Minimum!”



The instant she cast her spell, all five grenades disappeared... and reappeared amidst the gray soldiers.

Ba-Ba-Ba-Ba-Boom!

They were staggered a few meters apart but all went off at once, covering a wide swath of undead soldiers.

“Good one, Yurika!” Theia roared.

“Since there’s no need to worry about the human puppets anymore, she can compromise on safety and cut the incantation short to save on mana. And by sending multiple grenades at once, she’s getting a grapeshot effect... I’ve never thought of this combination. Keep it up!” called out Kiriha.

Yurika’s teleporting grenade combo was getting rave reviews from her teammates. It wasn’t just Theia and Kiriha either. The other girls and the Rainbow Heart soldiers were equally impressed. As expected of the legendary Rainbow Nana’s disciple, they thought, even though her talents were quite different. By combining magic and weapons of science, she was effectively cutting down the enemy while safeguarding human life. Little did Yurika know she was winning over the hearts of the Blue Tower soldiers this way. Their morale skyrocketed and their attacks intensified, as they were now determined to do their archwizard justice.

“Great showing, Yurika!” Sanae cheered. “Let’s do it again!”

“Augh... We can’t let anyone find out about this...”

Yurika’s morale, however, was plummeting despite the glory she was earning. It seemed less and less likely that stories of her accomplishments would be kept under wraps.

Meanwhile, Koutarou and the others’ battle against the magicians was likewise proceeding well, but Shizuka and Alunaya were struggling against the skeletonized Mountain Ruler Darzakah. Darzakah had unlimited stamina and could continue fighting without tiring—a perk of being undead—and that was in addition to Darzakah’s original strength.

“HYAAAH!”

Alunaya attacked with claw, fang, and tail alike. Wreathed in magical flames, each blow was devastatingly powerful. They came at unbelievable speeds, too.

“RRROAR!”

But the undead Darzakah wouldn’t be driven back. It swung its own claws, blocking Alunaya’s and following up with a great earthquake spell while Alunaya was in the middle of his next tail sweep. This was magic Darzakah had been skilled with in life, and it rocked the ground under Alunaya to make him lose his footing.

“What?!”

“RRROAR!”

Using both arms, undead Darzakah grabbed hold of Alunaya and threw him with all the strength it could muster. The ground cracked and crumbled under Alunaya’s weight.

At his size, an attack like that should have been devastating—but the Fire Dragon Emperor wouldn’t let himself be felled so easily. He’d spread his wings midair to break his fall and land on both feet. Now some distance from Darzakah, the two dragons squared off once more.

“I knew something was strange...” Alunaya said, glaring at Darzakah.

He seemed suspicious, and Shizuka was curious about what. Since Alunaya was controlling her body, she was watching over the battle from within. Yet she hadn’t noticed what was bothering Alunaya.

“What is it, Uncle?”

“That’s Darzakah all right.”

“Didn’t we know that already?”

“No, that’s not what I mean. I’m saying those moves are Darzakah’s too. Mountain Ruler could always read me like that.”

Shizuka now understood what had Alunaya concerned. The dragon in front of them was nothing more than a skeleton of the former Mountain Ruler Darzakah, yet it was behaving like the real deal. The magic and combat abilities were identical, not to mention its familiarity with Alunaya’s moves.

“What?! Is such a thing even possible?!”

“I don’t know. You’d have to ask someone better versed in magic,” Alunaya replied as he readied himself.

Darzakah was coming again. It wasn’t going to wait for him to solve the mystery.

Kaboom!

The two dragons clashed. Though they’d been evenly matched in the past, Darzakah’s limitless stamina would make the difference now. Eventually, Alunaya wouldn’t be able to keep up. Even if that small refrigerated truck was destroyed here, the contents of those horrid black vials would still get out without Grevanas’s army ever reaching the capital. There would still be countless casualties. They had to stop that from happening somehow.

“I’m on it, Uncle! Just hold on! Let’s see... Aika-san, can you talk right now?”

Using the crest on her forehead, Shizuka magically called out to Maki. Nana might have been the ideal magician to consult on the subject, but Maki was the best option Shizuka could reach with her means.

“Yes, of course. What’s up?”

“Uncle’s saying that this skeleton dragon is moving just like it did when it was alive—just like the real Darzakah.”

“When making a skeleton, the problem is how you teach the lifeless body to move.”

Fortunately, Maki knew about skeletons. Even if they were raised with necromancy, it took indigo magic to control them.

“For a human skeleton, it’s easy enough for it to copy its master. But that doesn’t work with nonhuman subjects. Familiars like wolves and owls already have formalized controls, but there’s no such system for an elder dragon.”

Maki explained clearly that Darzakah couldn’t be controlled like a normal skeleton because of its anatomy. That meant whoever had raised the skeletal dragon had also called forth Darzakah’s soul and bound it to the animated bones, which then allowed them to use mind manipulation magic on it. That

was why Darzakah moved the way it always had and knew all of Alunaya's moves. Darzakah was still in there, but had no freedom—just as Alunaya had feared.

“Curse you, Grevanas! You dastard!”

Alunaya had once been controlled by Grevanas himself. Darzakah was going through the same thing now in skeletal form. Alunaya couldn't bear to see his old friend this way. Driven into a blinding rage, he bucked like he was ready to charge.

“Uncle, you can't! It's dangerous to rush in like that!”

Thankfully, Shizuka managed to stop him. With Darzakah's advantage in stamina, Alunaya couldn't afford to let his emotions get the better of him. It would be his downfall.

“Then what should I do instead?! I can't just leave Darzakah like this!”

Though he'd backed down from his charge, Alunaya was still raring to go again. He just couldn't sit still watching his old friend suffer so.

“Use me, Uncle!”

“What?!”

“If we work together and combine our moves, Darzakah-san won't have the advantage anymore, right?”

“Ah, you're right! That just might work!”

Darzakah knew Alunaya's moves because they'd fought together as friends in the past. But if Alunaya worked in Shizuka's moves too, they might be able to take the skeletal dragon by surprise.

“Leave the close combat to me! You focus on ranged combat and flying, Uncle!”

“Be careful, Shizuka! Mountain Ruler is stronger in terms of close combat!”

Setting aside the matter of stamina, Alunaya and Darzakah were overall evenly matched. Darzakah's true strength was physical rather than magical. They were powerful—far more so than the average elder dragon. Meanwhile,

Alunaya was more of an all-rounder. He was no match for Darzakah in close combat.

“Don’t worry, Uncle! Their teamwork might be all over the place, but ours is perfect, right?”

“Indeed it is!”

Shizuka believed that, if she and Alunaya could put their moves together, they would be uniquely unstoppable.

“Let us do this, Shizuka!”

“Yeah!”

Alunaya advanced in a karate stance before flapping his wings to take to the skies and plunge toward Darzakah.

“That’s it, Shizuka! It’s working!”

For a moment, Darzakah was stunned. It didn’t know how to respond to the unfamiliar move, so it decided to take up a defensive posture. The plan was to counterattack after blocking.

“Uncle, breathe fire!”

“That’s not very effective against Darzakah.”

“Just obstruct their vision!”

“Understood!”

Fwoosh!

Since it was clear Darzakah was on the defensive, Shizuka wanted to stymie any possible counterattack. The trick she settled on was Alunaya’s fiery breath. She wanted Darzakah to close its eyes, even if only for a moment.

“Let’s finish this here and now! If the fight drags on, it’ll only be doing our opponent a favor!”

“Raaaaaaaah!”

While Darzakah was concentrating on Alunaya’s fire, Alunaya landed just behind its flank and attacked with a backhand chop from its blind spot. Shizuka

was in charge of the aim, and the blow sailed straight for Darzakah's head.

"ROOOAAAR!"

"Too shallow!"

However, Darzakah refused to go down without a fight. It moved its head and right arm in an attempt to dodge and defend. It wasn't able to block the blow entirely thanks to the fire breath distraction, but it was able to prevent a direct hit.

"The counterattack is coming!"

"Don't worry! I can see it!"

It was now Darzakah's turn to go on the offensive, and it swung their claws at Alunaya. A human never would have been able to attack from such a tilted position, but Darzakah used their tail to balance themselves.

"If you learned all this on your own, I'm most impressed!"

Whap!

Using the momentum from their last chop to spin around, Shizuka turned Alunaya around and pressed his left arm against Darzakah's wrist to stop the incoming swipe.

"But you'll have to do better!"

Bam!

Shizuka then quickly moved into an attack. She pulled Alunaya's left hand inward, folding his arm and rotating as she slammed their elbow into Darzakah's chest.

"RRRRROAR?!"

The blow had Alunaya's full weight behind it. The impact broke Darzakah's sternum and pushed the skeletal dragon back a couple of steps. If it had truly been alive in a flesh-and-blood body, it would now be seriously injured.

"Uncle!"

"Leave it to me!"

Quick to action, Alunaya opened his mouth wide and exhaled a blast of white light. It was his fire breath, which was so condensed and hot that it was more akin to plasma.

“RAAAH?!”

The light pierced through the right side of Darzakah’s chest and passed by its spine. If it had made contact there, Darzakah would have been split in two—a decisive victory for Alunaya and Shizuka. They’d missed that chance, however, yet neither seemed particularly upset. In fact, they were smiling.

“We can do this, Shizuka! Darzakah can’t read your moves after all!”

“Let’s give it another go, Uncle! We’ll finish things this time!”

They were celebrating that their plan was working—Darzakah couldn’t keep up with their combined attacks. As long as they could keep putting the pressure on the undead dragon, missing one lucky shot didn’t faze them.

“Go for it, Shizuka!”

“Yeah!”

Shizuka took off running, but not the way an elder dragon would run. Her gait was much more human. Since Darzakah didn’t know anything about Shizuka, it was puzzled by seeing Alunaya move this way. It was strange. Darzakah reflexively assumed it must be some kind of trick and used magic to try to keep the Fire Dragon Emperor at bay.

“RRROOOAAARRR!”

The spell created an intense earthquake, which Darzakah intended to disrupt Alunaya’s charge.

“Shizuka, jump!”

“Got it!”

But thanks to Alunaya’s warning, Shizuka was off the ground before it started shaking. Since he was concentrating on the fight rather than on moving himself, Alunaya’s predictions were fast and insightful. Another merit of the two of them fighting together.

“Hyaaaaah!”

Alunaya flapped his wings and whipped around. Based on their experience living and fighting together, Shizuka knew what Alunaya meant for her to do next based on their angle of approach. Darzakah, however, didn't. It was oblivious to Shizuka's karate techniques.

“How about this?!”

Shizuka lashed out with a flying kick, putting all of their momentum and weight into it. Since dragons had tails, they rarely resorted to attacks with their legs. Their tails were longer and more powerful, after all. Darzakah was no exception. The skeletal dragon was on guard for a claw rake, a tail swipe, or even a body slam... but this leg-forward kick was unexpected. Once it realized what Alunaya and Shizuka were trying to do, it hurriedly tried to defend, but the delay cost the dragon dearly.

Crunch!

Shizuka's mighty kick made contact with Darzakah's crossed arms, which weren't quite in the right place to receive the attack. Her kick blew through them and into the dragon's chest, shattering its ribcage and sending its body crashing to the ground. The impact smashed in its arms and wings, leaving a large crater in the ground. So grievously injured, there was no way Darzakah would be getting up out of it.

“Now's your chance, Uncle! Do it!”

“But of course!”

Seizing the opportunity, Alunaya grabbed hold of the two horns growing out of Darzakah's head. When the skeletal beast realized it had been caught, it tried to flail its arms, but they were too badly damaged to move properly.

“HYAAAH!”

With a firm grasp on Darzakah's horns, Alunaya spun around to slam its head into the ground.

Crack!

This was a fighting technique unique to elder dragons, where they snapped

their opponent's neck. And with the skeleton's neck destroyed, the spell cast on Darzakah's skull to control the undead dragon could no longer relay commands to the rest of the body. It stopped moving altogether, like a toy that had run out of batteries. Then again, it was in such terrible shape after Shizuka's last attack that it wouldn't have been able to move much anyway.

"You're as strong as ever, even after centuries, Mountain Ruler Darzakah... Rest well, friend."

Using their special finishing move on Darzakah was Alunaya's way of showing respect. He wanted to see his old friend off properly as an elder dragon. Last but not least, Alunaya crushed his forehead where the evil magic lingered, at last freeing Darzakah's soul.

When Grevanas's followers saw Darzakah defeated, they panicked. Anyone would upon seeing their trump card fail. They'd been so sure the Mountain Ruler would clinch their victory, yet it was the Fire Dragon Emperor who'd come out victorious... and was now coming for them. Staying calm and collected under the circumstances was unthinkable.

In an act of desperation, the magicians tried to send Grevanas's entire army—zombies, skeletons, and puppets alike—at Alunaya. It was unfortunate for them that Theia and the others had already taken most of them out. The ones who remained standing were locked in combat, pinning them uselessly in place.

So with no recourse, Grevanas's followers surrendered. That automatically meant their undead army surrendered with them. Darzakah's defeat set off a domino effect, with everything quickly falling into place afterward.

Upsy-daisy

Monday, July 11th

With the fighting over, Maki found herself looking over the mountainous roadway where the battle had taken place. Much of it and the surrounding area was destroyed. Black smoke rose up here and there. Remains of skeletons and zombies were scattered all around. The sight of such devastation broke her heart—a sign of the change that had come over her. Such sadness was something that had eluded her before, but there was another feeling welling up in her chest too. One she didn't recognize.

"What are you doing over here, Aika-san?"

"Satomi-kun..."

Koutarou had noticed Maki standing off on her own and come over to check up on her. She hadn't noticed him until he spoke up.

"I was just contemplating what it is that I'm feeling," she confessed.

"If it's not too much to ask, could you tell me about it?" he asked.

If he left her be, Koutarou knew she would just keep worrying on her own. And so he'd decided to pry a little deeper.

"Sure," she replied with a nod. She would never consider hiding anything from Koutarou, though it was true there were times that she didn't speak up unless someone asked. "When I was fighting... I was angry the entire time..."

"Angry? That's unusual for you."

"Is it?"

"Yeah. Lately, you're always calm and kind."

Maki blushed at Koutarou's unexpected, honest appraisal. She was pleased, and also embarrassed to hear it to her face. But most of all, she was thrilled that she truly had changed.

“Er, sorry for saying something unnecessary,” Koutarou apologized when he saw her face. “Please, continue.”

“O-Oh, right...”

Maki didn’t think he’d said anything “unnecessary” at all, but she could appreciate that they were straying off topic. Maki looked over the devastated battlefield once more and tried again to explain herself.

“When we were fighting... I was thinking, ‘What if my parents were among the zombies and skeletons?’”

Her parents had died in the epidemic over a decade ago, but they hadn’t been buried in the mountain cemetery. Maki was speaking purely in a hypothetical sense.

“The thought made me unreasonably furious... and that anger lasted the entire battle.”

“So you’ve already forgiven your parents, huh?”

“What...?”

Maki was taken aback by Koutarou’s question. She’d thought she still bore a grudge against them for selling her all those years ago.

“If you hadn’t forgiven them, you wouldn’t get angry about what might have happened to them. Pretty natural, don’t you think?”

“I’ve already... forgiven my parents?”

Maki pressed her palm to her chest and looked back over the battlefield. When she mulled it over for a moment, she felt Koutarou might be onto something. She still didn’t know why her parents had sold her, and now there was no way to find out. They were long dead, meaning they’d suffered the worst possible punishment even if they were guilty. When she thought of it that way, the idea that they might be tortured even still as undead puppets infuriated Maki all over again.

“Maybe you’re right, Satomi-kun...”

When Maki interrogated her feelings more, all she wished for her late parents was peace. She no longer resented them for what had happened.

“So, are you still angry?” Koutarou asked.

“I think it’s settling down,” Maki replied. “Now I just feel sorry for the zombies and skeletons...”

“Don’t worry. Rainbow Heart will make sure they’re all buried properly.”

“I’m glad...”

“Since you’re part of the organization now, maybe you’ll even get to help out in the process.”

“If I am formally hired, I would like to help out,” Maki said with an embarrassed smile.

Koutarou could read her true emotions through that smile. They were endlessly beautiful in his eyes.

Aika-san is too good for her own sake... She needs someone to notice her and praise her more.

Right now, Maki was a genuine magical girl of love and justice. That much was clear to him. If Yurika was a sunflower that bloomed in the light, Maki was a nameless, shade-loving blossom. She flowered secretly out of sight. But what if someone shone a light on her? Or, better yet, moved her into the sun? What if someone—

Am I the only one...?

There, it finally hit Koutarou. He was the only one who saw this nameless indigo flower, meaning he was the only one who could transplant it. And so...

“Okay then.”

He picked up Maki. He was exhausted after the battle, but with his powered armor, she felt as light as a feather.

“Kyah!”

This unexpected turn of events made Maki yelp, although she wasn’t upset. She was just a little embarrassed to be so close to Koutarou. She quickly piped down and slowly turned her earnest eyes up toward him.

“Upsy-daisy,” he said, lifting Maki high into the air like a child.

“Satomi-kun?” Maki asked with a questioning look, unsure what the gesture meant.

Her hair fluttered as she looked at him, and he smiled at her in return.

“I’m just praising a good girl who always does her best. You couldn’t tell?”

“I’m not a child anymore.”

“But you’re still my little Aika Maki.”

Those words held great meaning for her. They encapsulated everything that had happened between her and Koutarou, everything that had happened between her and her parents, how her life had changed, and so, so much more. He couldn’t have said anything more profound.

“You’re the only one who would say that to me...”

Drops of salty water began raining down on Koutarou’s forehead—a sign that the true meaning of his words had reached Maki. That’s why he pretended not to notice.



“The others don’t know that you’re still just a child, Aika-san. You’ve still got a ways to go. The only thing that’s grown about you is your appearance. Everyone else is just fooled because you *look* so mature.”

“Then... will you watch over me? Until I become a proper adult?”

“Only until then?”

“I think I’ll be an old lady by then...”

“Ahahaha, I’m no match for you, Aika-san.”

“In return, I will watch over you too. Forever...”

“...I really don’t stand a chance against you, Aika-san...”

They smiled at each other. That was all they needed right now. They both understood that, and so they kept smiling until the other girls came to get them.

After winning the battle, Koutarou and the others returned to Grevanas’s tomb to find it empty. Grevanas was missing, and no clues remained behind. The lich and his research were nowhere to be found. As for where they’d gone...

“I believe this has helped you understand magic.”

“Oh, I understand perfectly now, Grevanas! Magic is a wonderful thing! No wonder it got the better of my uncle!”

Grevanas was currently with Ralgwin. The Gray Knight had brought them together after he and Ralgwin had worked behind the scenes to spur Grevanas’s resurrection by his followers. He’d orchestrated the incident to bring Grevanas to their side and to show Ralgwin what magic could do. It was a success on both fronts...

Especially because Koutarou and company still didn’t know that Grevanas and Ralgwin were allied. They’d yet to realize that the Gray Knight had been the one behind Grevanas’s followers. So even though the immediate battle had been lost, victory was truly theirs.

“Indeed. Magic, the power to alter the world, is what kept Vandarion from

achieving his goals,” said the Gray Knight. “But not you, Ralgwin.”

“That’s right! I shall defeat the legendary Blue Knight with this!”

Ralgwin had now succeeded in uncovering the mysteries behind the Blue Knight’s spiritual and magical powers. The fact that he now had access to both for himself thrilled Ralgwin. This was a feat that had eluded even his uncle—and it meant he was just as powerful as the Blue Knight. He had every right to be excited.

“Grevanas, how many of those vials were you able to retrieve?” the Gray Knight asked. Quite unlike Ralgwin, there was no hint of elation in his calm voice.

“Thirty-eight. I had fifty-eight in a usable state, and twenty of them went with the horde.”

“Twenty? Don’t you think that was giving them too much?”

“If it were any less, the Blue Knight would have been suspicious. You could also say it was a little thank-you gift for resurrecting me.”

“I suppose. But so be it. We’ll just cultivate what we have and make more.”

“A wise decision.”

In reality, Grevanas’s followers moving on Thorthé were nothing more than a decoy. The Gray Knight’s real goal in the Folsaria operation had been to retrieve Grevanas and the vials of black liquid. Koutarou and the others had caught on much faster than expected, so he’d given the followers a few vials as a diversion. It had been a last resort, but a rather successful one.

“By the way, Sir Gray Knight...” Grevanas started to ask.

“What?”

“Is it true that Ralgwin-dono is Maxfern-sama’s descendant?”

“It is. Maxfern’s family was ruined after the civil war, but their bloodline carried on in the Vandarion family.”

“Meaning... *that* is your true intention?”

“If it wasn’t, would I have resurrected you? It’s clear what you wish for.”

“How frightening you are sometimes... But what is it that’s changed you so?”

A strong tension hung in the air. And there was an awkward atmosphere between the two men, like two gears grinding against each other.

“ ... ”

Someone silently observed them from the sidelines. It was Ralgwin’s subordinate, the sniper Fasta. Ever since the Gray Knight had appeared, things had been going smoothly for Ralgwin. Too smoothly. They’d solved the mysteries behind the Blue Knight’s powers in the blink of an eye. It made Fasta wary. This was all just too good to be true.

Even if the Gray Knight was in this for Ralgwin’s troops and technology like he said, why would he introduce them to magic for free? Ordinarily, someone would expect *something* in return. And now the Gray Knight had brought Ralgwin here to resurrect the Grand Wizard.

Fasta couldn’t help worrying that the Gray Knight was up to something far more dangerous than what Ralgwin believed. She was also leery of the Gray Knight’s assertion their alliance was only temporary. That could mean he planned to betray them eventually.

“Behold the wonders of magic, Fasta! Let us make you a rifle with it at once!”

Ralgwin, however, didn’t seem to share any of Fasta’s concerns or even notice how apprehensive she seemed to be. He was completely charmed by his new toy, magic.

“Ralgwin-sama...”

And so Fasta made up her mind then and there. If there was a conspiracy looming over Ralgwin, she would put an end to it herself.

Though Grevanas had ultimately escaped, Rainbow Heart secured both his followers and the black vials. There were twenty in total. Nineteen were safely incinerated, and one went into heavily guarded hazmat storage just in case. The reason was the same as why Grevanas’s research had been sealed away intact—a precaution in case it should be used against them one day.

And with that, Maki's test mission was concluded. Rainbow Heart gave her an excellent grade. She didn't get full marks because Grevanas had escaped in the end, but her assessors understood why. The mission had turned into something much larger than anyone had expected, so they left a note in Maki's file explaining that her evaluation should be given special consideration accordingly. She really was a top-class magician. In other words, Maki was hired.

Now that she was formally an intermediate Rainbow Heart agent, Maki was immediately dispatched to Corona House's room 106. Her official mission was to support Yurika. Yurika was technically supposed to be showing her the ropes, but anyone who knew them both knew that Yurika would be learning more from Maki than the other way around.

Maki's assignment to room 106 wasn't just because Yurika and Signaltin were there, however. It was a special place for Forthorthe, Folsaria, and the People of the Earth. It was also a critical location where emissaries of all three factions met for secret discussions, making it invaluable from a political standpoint.

There was a secondary objective to the magical girls' mission as well: keeping watch over Kisshouharukaze City. A major incident had happened in Folsaria, which was on the verge of major political changes, but cracking down on magic-related crimes and preventing such things from happening in the first place was a magical girl's *real* job. That was why Yurika sometimes went out on patrol with Nana and Maki. Today was one such occasion, and the three girls departed Corona House after dinner to survey the city.

"Wow, Satomi-san really did that?" Nana asked.

"Augh, that sounds nice... He'd never do that for me..." Yurika whined.

Whenever they were out on patrol together, the three magical girls would pass the time chatting about this or that. It was awkward to walk around in silence, and there were things they could only talk about when it was just the three of them. In that sense, going on patrol was convenient.

"But he wakes you up all the time, Yurika," Maki reminded her.

"Not nicely or anything! He does mean things like make me too hot or cold, or even keep me from breathing... Every morning is an ordeal!" Yurika continued

to complain.

“I wish I could find a special someone who’d do that for me too,” said Nana enviously.

She’d been mature from an early age, so she’d essentially missed out on the simple pleasures of her younger years. No one could blame her for wanting a doting boyfriend of her own.

“Your ‘special someone’ isn’t supposed to treat you like that!”

“But Satomi-san *is* your special someone, isn’t he, Yurika-chan? You’ve paid off your debts, and yet you’re still living in a wardrobe in his apartment.”

“Well... yeah...”

Yurika blushed when Nana pointed that out. She had indeed now paid off her massive debts, but she was ignoring that fact and voluntarily living a life of poverty... all because she wanted to stay close to Koutarou, at least until they graduated high school.

“It doesn’t matter if you’re in debt or not. Satomi-kun isn’t going to kick you out,” said Maki.

“Meow,” Snoozy agreed. He didn’t understand what Maki was saying, but he was always on her side.

“But... I still want to be a little troublesome for him...”

“Heehee. That’s just your way of showing love, Yurika-chan. I really envy you.”

Nana truly was jealous, but she was also relieved. Yurika was easy to misunderstand, so she was glad that her pupil had settled into such a happy life. Such pleasant thoughts were interrupted, however, when Nana thought she heard a low hum from somewhere.

“...Oh?”

“What’s wrong?” Maki asked.

“Do you hear that strange noise?”

Nana focused on her left arm as she spoke. Grevanas’s old staff, Encyclopedia, had been incorporated into her body there. Using its power, she cast a spell to

enhance everyone's senses.

"It's up there!" Maki then called out.

She was pointing above them at what looked like a star... but it was slowly getting larger as the humming noise got louder.

"Why is that light getting bigger?" Yurika asked. "What is it?"

"It's a meteor! And it's falling!" Nana screamed.

Meteors always had tails streaking behind them with one exception—if they were headed straight toward the observer. The tail wasn't visible in that case, as it was trailing out of sight on the other side of the meteor from the viewer. The light just got bigger and brighter.

"Everyone, run!"

"Kyah!"

"Nooooo!"

Even three powerful magical girls were powerless against a falling meteor. They scrambled for a moment before throwing themselves behind the closest cover.

Kaboom!

Seconds later, the meteor became a meteorite... But no matter how long the girls waited, there was no shock wave from the impact. Confused, they all peered out to see what had happened.

"Owowow..."

And where they'd expected to find a space rock, they found a lone girl. When she stood up to brush herself off, the nearest streetlight illuminated her face.

"Higashihongan-san?!" Maki and Nana exclaimed.

"Sanae-chan, why did you fall from the sky?!" Yurika shouted out in surprise, one beat later.

Hearing their voices, the girl's eyes opened wide.

"Yurika! Maki! And Nana too! I did it! It worked!"

Indeed, there was no doubt that the girl standing before them was Sanae... although she looked a little older than the three magical girls recalled.



Afterword

Long time no see. Takehaya here. We meet again. The coronavirus is still running rampant, but I'm relieved that I was safely able to deliver this volume. I can only hope all the turmoil is put to bed by next year.

(Note: This afterword contains lots of spoilers, so I recommend that you read the volume before continuing.)

I have quite a bit of room for the afterword this time because this book hit the next sixteen-page bracket (like I was talking about in the last afterword), so I'd like to go over some of the content that we glossed this volume. First is cars and cell phones in the Magical Kingdom of Folsaria.

Folsaria has lots of cars, but they're a little different from the ones we know. They're powered by mana, making them a sort of magical item. The origins of this are old, with the first prototypes produced about three hundred years ago. Back then, they were horse-shaped golems that pulled carts. Over time they became smaller and more efficient, especially after referencing the cars of Earth. They eventually became identical aesthetically, although they work magically on the inside.

They're actually quite simple mechanically compared to modern cars. The stored mana is used to directly turn a drive shaft, so there's no engine and no mechanism to transmit power from the engine to the tires. The body is also partially strengthened by magic, so their construction is simplified as well. Because of this, their performance is lacking. Comparatively, the equivalent of Earth cars a couple of decades ago.

They have their merits, however. Namely that they're environmentally friendly and automatically controlled. Since they run on magic, there's no exhaust. And since they were developed from golems, they can operate on their own to some extent. That said, they still need drivers on complicated roads and unpaved areas. In combat, too. As such, all Rainbow Heart vehicles require a driver. There are magical lifeforms that can take the place of a human driver,

but they're rare and expensive.

Now, as for cell phones, Folsaria only recently entered the age of tech-based communication. Just a few years ago, it was all magical. Any remote communication required a spell or item of some sort. Maki herself used one such item when she first appeared, but these items have their drawbacks. First and foremost is that the range and the quality of the devices depend on the skill of the user and their inherent mana. Magic is also an analog technology, so it's not suited for transmitting large amounts of information. Another problem is that such devices are quite expensive.

That was why Folsaria decided to go digital, using earth's cell phones and smartphones for reference. These newer devices are better at compressing and sending information. This reduces the mana they need to use, which makes them smaller and cheaper to produce. As a result, more and more people have bought them. Lots of Folsarians have their own cell phones now.

That doesn't mean traditional magic methods of communication are obsolete, though. They're still used in confidential discussions. The introduction of digital technologies that share common features makes them relatively easy to hack and eavesdrop on, so traditional magic communication will stick around for a while.

That about covers everything on cars and cell phones. Since life in Folsaria plays such a big part in this volume, I'd like to touch on one more thing: writing a modernized magical kingdom is rather tricky. There's lots to consider, like the fact that science is lagging behind because most problems can be solved with magic. Now, Grevanas's resurrection is a complicated thing too, so let's go into a little more detail on that.

In this series, magic works by using mana to alter reality. For example, the spell Explosion causes an explosion with no actual explosives. Since nothing is legitimately exploding, the scale, color, and speed of the blast are all determined by the caster's imagination. In many cases, they recreate explosions they've witnessed before. Sometimes they replicate their master's spells, or even something they've seen in a video.

In other words, as long as they could properly envision it, they could emulate

fast-burning plastic explosives with almost no visible flame, or even slow-burning gasoline explosions with lots and lots of red fire. If someone fed Yurika false information on explosions, she'd likely be able to succeed in reproducing what was described to her as long as she had the necessary mana to make it happen. Appearances aside, the power of the Explosion spell depends on how much mana the caster puts into it.

Now, let's apply this same logic to Grevanas's resurrection. The man himself died over seven hundred years ago. His soul has either reincarnated into a different body or lingers in the world as an evil spirit.

If he were reincarnated, his soul would need to be restored first. That would be done artificially via the residual thoughts in his diaries and other belongings. Not so different from how Sanae returned to her body.

Meanwhile, if he'd become an evil spirit, his soul would have been consumed over seven hundred years ago. It would be something else entirely, so it would need to be restored in much the same way. This step wouldn't be necessary if he were resurrected soon after he died. For example, Dark Purple wouldn't have had to do it for her lover, although there was a risk of his soul being altered by the whirlpool of chaos's influence.

In short, Grevanas's soul needed to be restored regardless of whether he'd been reincarnated or turned into an evil spirit. Doing so just based on his diaries and belongings, however, would only yield incomplete results. He wrote his thoughts in his diaries, but did he record every detail of his entire life? That's hard to believe. So no matter how many residual thoughts can be collected, they'd never fully constitute a soul. And that's not even mentioning the bits and pieces lost to time. As such, the result is guaranteed to be an unfinished product.

The missing details are filled in by the caster's imagination—same as the Explosion spell. Maxfern isn't well known in Folsaria, so the common perception is that Grevanas was the real mastermind behind the coup d'état. In other words, people believe the rational Grevanas to be a fierce conqueror. That image of him supplemented his soul, bringing his personality closer to Maxfern's. The power of the whirlpool of chaos also had an effect on him. That's why the resurrected Grevanas shows no remorse about using the black

vials, despite his hesitation in the past.

Given all this, how could someone have revived him closer to his true personality? The answer is simple: resurrect him sooner. It would also be important to eliminate the whirlpool of chaos's influence. His soul would need to be shielded from those two factors—time and chaos. That way, even if a caster's image of him shaped his resurrection process, the alterations would be minimal so long as the caster knew him in life. That's why Grevanas said he would have stood a better chance if Koutarou had been the one to revive him. Unlike the believers who'd only ever read about Grevanas, Koutarou actually knew the man. He'd even fought with him before.

Now, Grevanas was resurrected by having his restored soul affixed to his body. This is similar to what happened to Darzakah, but unlike the skeletal dragon, Grevanas still has free will. His revitalized body is essentially a magical object, allowing him to use greater magic more efficiently. It's essentially the equivalent of Maki's or Yurika's staff—just far stronger.

In magician lingo, Grevanas is now a lich. Rather than completely resurrected, he's been brought back to life as undead. The benefits of being a lich aren't limited to his increased magical powers, however. As he is no longer a living being, he doesn't need to eat, sleep, or breathe. He's also resistant to poison and disease. Indeed, you could say he's our favorite magical girl's nemesis.

But on the other hand, being a lich isn't all perks. In his new form, Grevanas shares the same weaknesses as zombies and skeletons. Vulnerability to exorcism by a priest, for example. Moreover, his body is mummified. He's basically sacrificed his humanity for magical power—a transformation that was supercharged by the whirlpool of chaos. The Grevanas of old may very well be disgusted by what he's become.

That about covers the special circumstances regarding Folsaria, but as I have some space left, I'd like to touch on something that intentionally went unaddressed. Koutarou speaks Japanese. He was born and raised in Japan, and the series is mostly set in Japan, so he has no reason to speak anything else. The same is mostly true for other characters.

So what language does the resurrected Grevanas speak? The answer,

naturally, is Lower Ancient Forthorthian. (The same language he spoke in life. It was referred to as the common tongue in his time, but it's now regarded as an ancient language.) Koutarou and Clan learned it in past Forthorthe, so the two of them would have been able to hold a conversation with him just fine.

The same goes for anyone who has a translation device. This would include Ralgwin and his men. And as a skilled magician, Grevanas can also use translation magic himself. So since he would be able to communicate with anyone he chose, I didn't bother addressing what language he was speaking in the course of the book. There were much more important things going on.

Theia, Ruth, and Clan are all in the same boat. In the early volumes, they're dependent on their translation devices to communicate. They speak the Forthorthian common language (different from the ancient version), and they couldn't initially understand Japanese. Two years have passed since, and they can now speak it without difficulty. When especially complicated topics are involved, however, they still use their translation device to avoid any misunderstandings.

I just didn't see the point in describing all of these transitions. There might be fun instances where things are different between what's spoken in Japanese and what the translation devices render, and while bringing that up when it happens would be fine, I don't believe there's any meaning in detailing it in the course of daily conversations. As such, the matter of language rarely comes up in the books. Only when necessary. Like when Koutarou converses with the Forthorthian children in volume 14, for example.

I think all four topics I've covered in this afterword are important to the setting, but it's also important not to overdo things. I feel that what I choose *not* to write is just as important.

Welp, it looks like I'm finally running out of space, so let's wrap things up here. I'd like to sign off with the usual acknowledgments. To everyone at the editorial department for their help in producing this volume, to Poco-san for pulling through when I asked for one last illustration of Maki as a child, and finally, to all of my readers for your continued support... thank you.

Let's meet again in the afterword for volume 37.

October, 2020

Takehaya



Article 30

Those who have ratified the Corona Convention are to keep Nijino Yurika's involvement in the battle on July 10th, 2011 top secret. Kasagi Shizuka's weight that day is likewise to be considered confidential.

Article 30 Postscript

I think Landlord-san should be proud of her weight this time—it's like a badge of honor. I really wish you'd think more about what comes out of your mouth, Satomi-kun. Really? Yes, really! W-Well, that aside, Yurika's just... Aww, yeah, she's not looking so hot.



Corona Convention

New!

July 7th, 2011

Bonus Short Stories

Side: Clariausa

Clan was gifted with a great many things that didn't interest Koutarou. He never had much of a reaction when she showed him a new program or design. Assembling parts to make something intrigued him, like with the radio, but the process of actually creating the parts themselves was too complex for his tastes. Still, there was one element involved that caught his eye.

"You're really good at soldering," he remarked as he watched Clan work.

"I've been doing it since I was a child, so I'm rather accustomed to it," she replied.

"I guess you do get good at what you like doing."

"That's right."

Today, Clan was making an electronic circuit in room 106. She often assembled simple ones by hand for prototypes or stopgap measures. Koutarou sat across from her at the tea table, captivated by the sight of her skillfully weaving her magic.

"Isn't this boring to watch?" she asked.

"You'd think so, but seeing those silver bits line up is kind of satisfying."

Clan made perfect little balls of solder as she worked. Each one was the exact same size and fell into place flawlessly. Watching it had a calming effect on Koutarou similar to playing with bubble wrap.

Suddenly, Clan's hands stopped moving.

"What's wrong?" Koutarou asked.

"I-It's nothing," she stammered, quickly getting back to work.

"Liar. Your handiwork's gone all wonky."

Koutarou couldn't see Clan's face, but it was clear from her suddenly shaky soldering that something was on her mind.

"Jeez... I was just thinking that if you like watching soldering, you should watch a machine do it instead," she reluctantly confessed. Machines were more accurate in their work and, unlike humans, they didn't need any rest. So if Koutarou enjoyed watching the process, she thought a machine would make for a better show.

Koutarou stopped to think about this.

"Veltlion?"

"Hmm," he mumbled, now staring down Clan.

"Wh-What?" she asked.

"I'd rather watch you work."

"Why, though?"

"You only need to see a machine do it once. It just mechanically repeats the same motions over and over, but human hands move a little differently every time."

"So you like the human element?"

"I guess? But that's why I could just watch this forever."

"..."

"You're turning red, Clan."

"It's nothing!"

Koutarou wasn't watching the soldering itself so much as he was watching Clan's hands. He enjoyed the variance unique to her and her work, meaning she was what really calmed him—even if he didn't realize that's what he'd just said.

"I can tell you're lying," he pressed her.

"There are some things I can't tell you!" she insisted.

Of course, Clan wasn't going to explain it to him. If she said the wrong thing now, it would ruin the moment.

“You say the weirdest stuff every now and then, you know that?”

“You just don’t get it! Ugh!”

Clan loved this time she spent with Koutarou. Him watching her hands calmed her too... even if it flustered her sometimes.

Side: Sanae

Koutarou believed that his appointment as the commander-in-chief of the Holy Forthorthe Imperial Army was a temporary emergency measure. So when the war was over, he’d left the rest to Theia and returned home. Otherwise he would still be in Forthorthe to this day.

As Forthorthe opened diplomatic relations with Earth, however, their commander-in-chief being on the planet suddenly had great significance. It had served as the legal basis for the swift deployment of Forthorthian forces. And now that the diplomatic mission had progressed, Koutarou found himself with deskwork from time to time.

“This is a pain, but it sure beats fighting,” Koutarou muttered as he stretched his neck and rubbed his shoulders. Being reduced to paper pushing was something worth celebrating in his eyes, as it meant there was no reason to rely on force at present.

“Koutarou, are your shoulders stiff?” Sanae asked with a smile when she saw him rubbing his neck.

She usually clung to him whenever she could, but while he was doing serious work, she would instead obediently sit to the side and read manga or play games. This was because she knew that Koutarou would finish up sooner if she didn’t get in his way. She was willing to interrupt him for one thing, however.

“Huh? Oh, actually, yeah,” he replied. “Could I ask you for a massage?”

“Eeheehee!”

With that, Sanae eagerly held out her hand to Koutarou. In it, he placed a slip of paper—a handmade “Super Sanae Shoulder Massage” ticket. Koutarou cashing in one of these was the only reason she would bother him while he was

working.

“Wow, you really are tense,” she remarked as she moved behind him and began kneading his shoulders. She didn’t knead too hard, which wouldn’t make for a good massage on its own, but she had her psychic powers. Spiritual energy flowed into Koutarou with every touch, refreshing his muscles and improving his circulation.

“This is what I get for doing something I’m not used to,” he groaned.

“Don’t worry! I’ll give you a massage whenever you want one,” Sanae assured him.

“Your service is appreciated, Private Sanae.”

“Heehee. Your stiff shoulders affect your back and subsequently my own personal comfort, sir!”

Whenever Sanae clung to Koutarou, she could feel his stiff shoulders for herself. Her incredible powers had certain such drawbacks. So, like she said, she was partly doing this for her own comfort.

“I guess psychics have their own problems too, even if they’re little, huh?” said Koutarou.

“This isn’t little at all,” Sanae countered. “It’s no exaggeration to say it means everything.”

“Yeah, it is.”

“Private First Class Koutarou, you underestimate love, sir!”

“Can’t really argue with that.”

“Sir!”

Sanae continued to massage Koutarou’s neck and shoulders, and the two of them chatted away about everything and nothing until the sun started to set. Sanae adored the time they spent this way.

“Welp, here’s a new ticket for you, sir. Please come and visit us again sometime.”

“Say, Sanae...”

“Hmm?”

“Whenever I ask you for a massage, you just end up giving me another ticket, don’t you?”

“Yeah. I’m just giving you back the same one.”

“So is there any real point in the ticket?”

“Hmm, I guess not.”

“I didn’t think so...”

“Yeah, no point at all, actually. You got a problem with that?”

“Hmm, I guess not.”

“See?”

With her psychic powers, Sanae could instantly tell when she’d relieved Koutarou’s stiff shoulders. Nevertheless, she continued to massage his back for a little while longer. If asked why, she probably would have said it was out of love.









Table of Contents

[Cover](#)

[Color Illustrations](#)

[Factions Map](#)

[State of Affairs](#)

[Maki's New Job](#)

[He Who Slumbers](#)

[The Immortal](#)

[Emperor vs. Ruler](#)

[Upsy-daisy](#)

[Afterword](#)

[Bonus Short Stories](#)

[Bonus Textless Illustrations](#)

[About J-Novel Club](#)

[Copyright](#)



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Invaders of the Rokujouma!? Volume 36

by Takehaya

Translated by Warnis Edited by Morgan Dreher

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Ebook edition 1.0: April 2021

Premium E-Book