

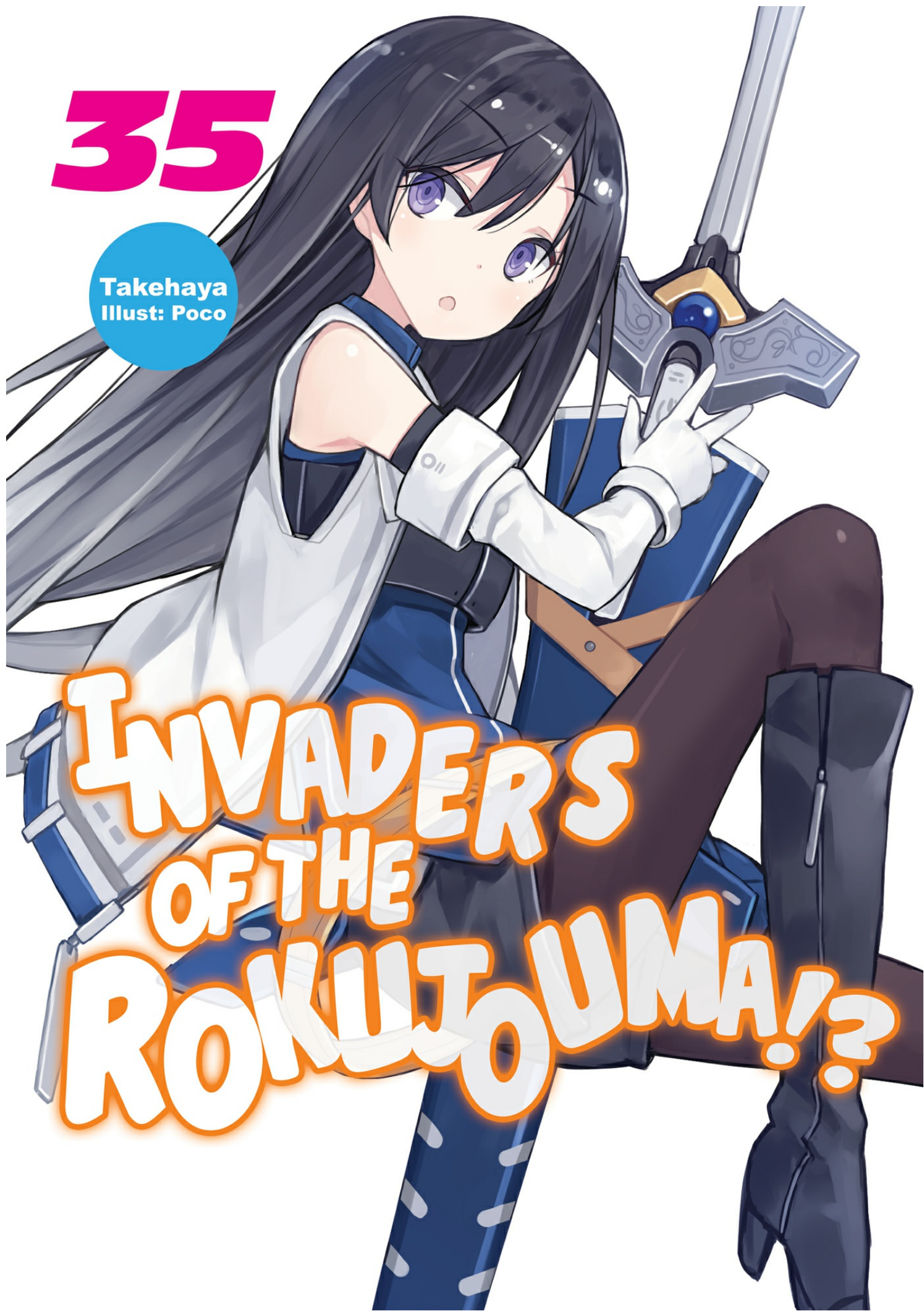
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Takehaya
Illust: Poco

INVADERS OF THE ROKUTUMA!?

35

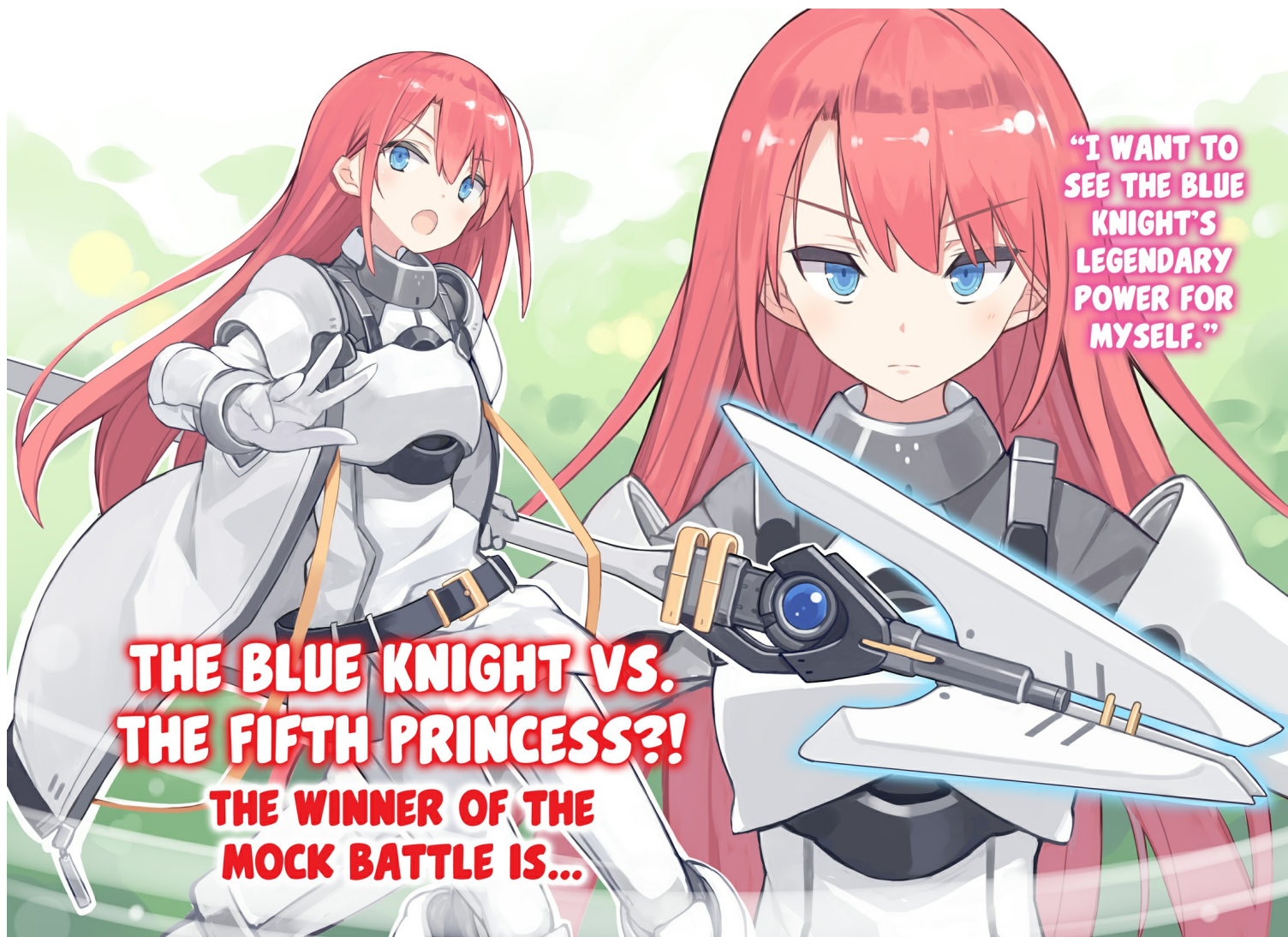
Takehaya
Illust: Poco



A full-page illustration of a young woman with long, vibrant red hair and bright blue eyes. She is wearing a white military-style uniform with a black tie, black epaulettes with gold stripes, and a black belt with a gold buckle. She is saluting with her right hand. The background shows a modern building with large windows and some greenery.

THE MARTIAL PRINCESS JOINS THE CREW!


**“IT’S BEEN SOME TIME,
LORD VELTLION. I
ALSO SEE SEVERAL
NEW FACES HERE. IT’S
A PLEASURE TO MAKE
YOUR ACQUAINTANCE.
I AM NEFILFORAN
CANON FORTHORTHE, A
PRINCESS OF THE HOLY
FORTHORTHE GALACTIC
EMPIRE JUST LIKE
THEIAMILLIS-SAN AND
CLARIOSSA-SAN HERE.”**



"I WANT TO
SEE THE BLUE
KNIGHT'S
LEGENDARY
POWER FOR
MYSELF."

**THE BLUE KNIGHT VS.
THE FIFTH PRINCESS?!**

**THE WINNER OF THE
MOCK BATTLE IS...**



**“THOUGH WE
MAY BE FEW
IN NUMBER,
WE FIGHT
TO PROTECT
FORTHORTHE!”**

**“DEFEND
LAYOUS-SAMA!
ATTACK!”**

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FACTIONS MAP

KASAGI SHIZUKA

Koutarou's classmate and the landlord of Corona House. Alunaya the Fire Dragon Emperor resides within her.



KURANO KIRIHA

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



UNDERGROUND DWELLERS (OF THE PEOPLE OF THE EARTH)

SATOMI KOUTAROU

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



MATSUDAIRA KOTORI

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



MATSUDAIRA KENJI

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



KOUTAROU'S CHILDHOOD FRIENDS



AIKA MAKI

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

MAGICAL GIRLS (OF THE MAGICAL KINGDOM OF FOLSARIA)

NIJINO YURIKA

The Magical Girl of Love and Courage, Rainbow 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.



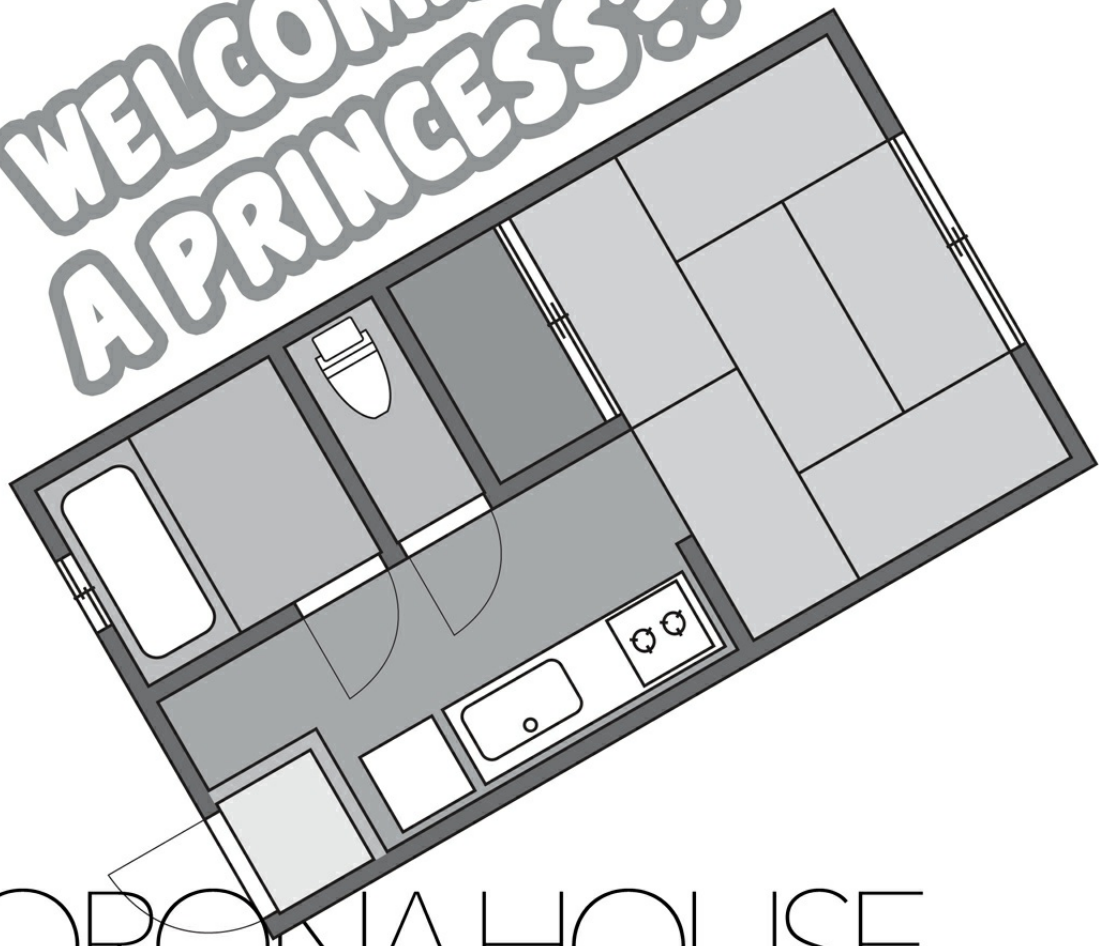
NALFA LAREN

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)

WELCOMING
A PRINCESS?!



CORONA HOUSE
ROOM 106

Everyone's Circumstances

Monday, June 13th

Matsudaira Kotori was proud of her brother Kenji. He was smart, kind, and caring. He was a little overprotective of his younger sister, but that too was a virtue in its own right. Kotori looked up to and respected him... That is, until her first year of high school.

"Listen to this, Kou-niisan!"

"What's wrong, Kin-chan? What's the panic?"

"My brother went out on a date with Emily-san!"

"He still hasn't given up on her, huh?"

Indeed, when she began high school, Kotori's image of her brother was completely destroyed. She'd discovered that he used all of his so-called virtues to charm and seduce girls. There were even rumors of him dating multiple girls at the same time! That was enough to alarm any little sister, but Kotori was particularly devastated because of how highly she'd always regarded her older brother. It was a terrible blow, and as a result, she was now exceedingly strict with him.

"Some of my classmates saw them together alone last Saturday!"

"And they're sure it was Mackenzie and Emily-san?"

"They know who my brother is, and 'tall, blonde, and stacked' describes Emily-san to a T!"

"Yeah, okay. There's no mistaking her for Theia with *that* description..."

There, Koutarou leaned over and offered the petite princess a piteous pat on the head.

"Remove your hand from me at once!" she demanded.

Kenji and Emily had met at the beginning of May. Upon hearing the rumors that a beautiful foreigner had transferred to Harukaze High, Kenji tracked her down immediately to introduce himself. He'd come to hear of her circumstances afterward from Koutarou and the gang, and thus agreed to help out with the rescue mission. He and Emily had gotten close in the process. Close enough, apparently, to be going out on dates now.

"I want to know what happened to Kashiwagi-senpai!" Kotori wailed. "I got my hopes up when he said she might be the one!"

"Oh, is that what this is about...?" Koutarou mumbled.

"Do you mean Kashiwagi-san from our class, by any chance?" Shizuka cut in.

She'd taken a sudden interest in the conversation. As the resident chatterbox of Corona House, she loved a good gossip—especially if romance was involved.

"Yes, that's her," answered Kotori, tears still in her eyes. "I heard they got close during last year's school trip."

The whole situation was a nightmare for her. She was disappointed in her brother, who'd told her just the other day that he wanted to start seriously dating Kashiwagi Shiori for real. That was why Kotori had gotten her hopes up that Kenji would forgo his philandering ways and settle down... only to have those hopes crushed now that she'd found out he was going on dates with Emily.

"During the school trip?" Shizuka said pensively.

The school trip had been a momentous time for Shizuka and Kashiwagi Shiori, as well as the other girls around Koutarou. Kotori wasn't any the wiser, however, and Nalfa was too busy daydreaming about school trips to ask any questions right now.

"You guys might not believe me," interjected Koutarou, "but Mackenzie's actually a late bloomer."

"Whaaat?!" the girls all shouted in unison.

He'd expected a reaction, of course, but not one that strong. He couldn't help the wry smile that crossed his lips.

“W-We’re talking about our Mackenzie-kun, right?!” Shizuka exclaimed.
“There’s no way he’s a late bloomer! He’s *always* got a girl on his arm.”

“That’s the problem, Landlord-san. He’s never found the right one. I know he’s always quick to the rescue and seems like he can handle himself, but he’s actually really kind of introverted when it comes to personal things like that.”

This was a side to Kenji that only Koutarou knew. He was clever and quick to make decisions, which was reflected in how he was quick to move from girl to girl. But Koutarou had seen him stall out before. An easy example was when Koutarou first announced he was giving up baseball in high school.

When he heard that, Kenji had hardly known what to do. He loved baseball and wanted to keep playing, but it just wouldn’t be the same without his best friend. He’d pondered the dilemma for over a month, dragging his heels until eventually deciding to join the drama club instead of the baseball team. Koutarou believed that was the true start of his philandering ways, as Kotori would put it, so he also felt somewhat responsible for that.



“Are you saying my brother really is interested in Kashiwagi-san?” Kotori asked hesitantly.

“I don’t know,” replied Koutarou. “Emily-san is pretty assertive, after all.”

Emily had never hesitated to make her feelings for Kenji known, which complicated the situation. It was entirely possible *she* was the one who’d asked him on a date. She might even be leading him around by the nose while he was stuck in his own head. That was hard for Kotori to accept, but Koutarou didn’t think it was fair to pin all the blame on Kenji.

“Honestly, Kin-chan, I can understand if he’s stuck between Emily-san and Kashiwagi.”

“I guess that’s fair... They aren’t just your average girls.”

Complicating the matter further was the fact that Shiori and Emily both seemed to be genuinely interested in Kenji. Neither one was after him for his looks. They cared about him for who he was.

“So can you cut him some slack when it comes to Kashiwagi and Emily-san, Kin-chan? I’m sure he already knows just how much of a pickle he’s in.”

“Kou-niisan...”

“As long as he doesn’t do anything untoward, of course.”

Koutarou would support Kenji as long as he was serious. In his eyes, both Shiori and Emily were wonderful girls. Moreover, while he couldn’t exactly admit it... Koutarou was in quite a similar situation himself. Worse, even. He had nine girls he couldn’t choose between, so he had no room to be critical of Kenji.

“I understand,” Kotori reluctantly conceded. “I’ll keep watching over him.”

“Thank you, Kin-chan.”

“Why are *you* thanking me, Kou-niisan?”

“Hahaha. I am his friend, you know? We’ve known each other for a long time.”

“Heehee, that’s true. I forget sometimes.”

Fortunately, Kotori seemed to be in a better mood now. She was a kind girl at heart and, deep down, wanted to believe in her brother. So if Koutarou said she should give him the benefit of the doubt, she would.

“By the way, how are things going for you, Kin-chan?” he asked.

“Me?” she asked in turn, her eyes wide.

She hardly seemed to have any idea what he was talking about. Seeing that, Koutarou volunteered an explanation.

“According to Mackenzie, you’re getting quite popular yourself.”

“Th-That’s, um...”

When she realized what he was really asking, Kotori blushed and looked away. It was true, however; like Koutarou had said, Kotori had been getting a lot of attention from the boys at school lately. She’d spent all of her elementary and middle school years shyly hiding behind Koutarou and Kenji. But now that she was good friends with Nalfa, she was naturally putting herself out there more. She was seeing and talking to people she never would have before, and thus her popularity skyrocketed.

“I hear some boys have even asked you out already,” Koutarou said with a smile.

“Y-Yes, th-that’s true...” Kotori admitted, still looking away.

“But she turned them all down!” Nalfa cut in. As Kotori’s best friend, she had privileged firsthand knowledge of her affairs.

“Nal-chan!” Kotori shrieked.

“That’s a shame.”

“Kou-niisan!”

“I think it might be your fault, Koutarou-sama.”

“What? How?”

“Because of you, Kotori’s standards are too high. Nobody’s going to stand up compared to an actual hero.”

“You think so? Kin-chan knows who I really am, though. Bad sides and all,”

Koutarou said, cocking his head.

Kotori had borne witness to all of Koutarou and Kenji's stupid antics since they were children. If anything, he felt like he was actively bringing Kotori's standards *down*.

"You don't have any bad sides, Kou-niisan! You're a model guy, and you always have been!" she declared.

"Ahaha, I see why all those boys got rejected!" Shizuka laughed.

At that, Kotori immediately realized she'd said too much. Her face turned beet red.

"If Satomi-kun is still your ideal guy even after you've learned all his faults, it's no wonder other guys are having trouble moving your heart."

Shizuka understood Kotori's feelings. The question of romance aside, she felt something similar herself. She too loved Koutarou in spite of his faults. If anything, they endeared him to her—and she and Kotori had that in common.

"Th-That's..." Kotori stammered.

"Am I wrong?" Shizuka asked with a sly grin.

"You're not, but..."

"So all I need to do is ruin my good image in Kin-chan's eyes, right?"

"K-Kou-niisan!"

"Yeah, I'm pretty sure that's impossible, Satomi-kun."

"I can be a bad boy too, you know."

"Is that so, Satomi Koutarou?" Kiriha piped up in a challenging tone. "You really think you can be a badboy without hurting anyone?"

Kiriha, for one, couldn't imagine Koutarou ever doing anything to hurt someone intentionally. The idea that he could play a badboy was preposterous.

"Er... Oh, I know! I could probably do gold smuggling!"

Gold smuggling was a patently white-collar crime. It took advantage of the system at the taxpayers' expense, but it was largely victimless, so to speak.

“Augh... Waaah!”

“Koutarou, Koutarou!” Sanae cried. “Yurika just burst into tears!”

Unfortunately, however, one such victim lived right here in room 106. Koutarou had seen its devastating consequences firsthand, meaning gold smuggling too was out of the question.

“Shoot. Then there’s... What else *is* there?” he pondered.

“Master, why not just give it up? I don’t think it’s possible for you,” Ruth advised.

“Kou-niisan, please don’t do things to try to make me dislike you on purpose!”

“But it’s kind of fun to think about.”

“Please!”

“You tell him, Kotori!”

Koutarou and the girls continued to chat away until everyone gathered in the apartment. Once they were all together, it was time to get to business. The current matter at hand was how things would be proceeding with Forthorthe, which came with all sorts of headaches. As such, the conversation turned quite serious.

“Speaking of... how are the dorms going?” Harumi asked.

She wanted to know about the state of the new student housing being built for Kisshouharukaze High School. Since she’d graduated, she wasn’t there frequently anymore and didn’t know how the construction was coming along.

“The dorms themselves are almost complete,” Koutarou explained. “From what I’ve seen, they’ve started building sidewalks, convenience stores, and such around them.”

In regard to housing, there was far more than just the dormitories that needed to be accommodated. The students would need somewhere to eat, buy necessities, et cetera. Harukaze High stood atop a hill in Kisshouharukaze City, so it was something of a lonely structure. In order to keep live-in students from having to go all the way down into the city every time they needed something, the committee was working on building a small commercial district nearby—

something akin to a miniature city unto itself with a doctor's office, post office, and more.

"Oh, I know! Kotori and I did a story on the dorm just the other day, Koutarou-sama!" Nalfa announced excitedly.

"Would you like to see the footage?" Kotori offered, holding up the camera. She'd recently taken on the role of helping Nalfa out as her assistant.

"Thanks, Kin-chan. That'd be great."

"Just a second."

Kotori smiled away as she clicked through the files on the camera. Since she'd filmed everything herself, she knew where all the data was and could pull it up quickly. She handled it like a real professional.

"Come take a look too, Sakuraba-senpai."

"Thank you very much... Oh, I see. So there's a bus stop there now."

The more she served as Nalfa's assistant, the more Kotori got to know her way around a camera. She could record just what Nalfa wanted without having to do multiple takes or cuts. Harumi was impressed with the raw footage itself, so it was clear how talented Kotori had become as a camerawoman.

"The roads had to be expanded for moving and loading trucks, so they included the bus stop while they were at it," Kiriha explained as she reviewed the footage with Harumi.

She'd had a hand in the construction plans herself, so no one knew about the project better than she did. Her strategic knowledge of defenses and urban planning made her a valuable asset.

"By the way, whatever happened with the hidden cameras in the dorm, Nal-chan?" Shizuka asked.

Nalfa had originally moved into a dorm that was rushed to completion ahead of the others, and Koutarou and company eventually came to discover it was bugged with cameras and microphones installed by people hoping to get their hands on Forthorthian technology. Shizuka was wondering what had come of that.

“We called in a specialist to remove everything,” explained Theia. “We also switched construction companies for the other dorms. We’re having a specialist check them out just to be sure, too.”

As the leader of the Forthorthian mission, Theia had special insight into the situation and how it was being handled. Kiriha had actually been the one to make the arrangements, however. They needed companies they knew they could trust, so her extensive list of contacts had been a great help. When so many businesses were frothing at the mouth to get their hands on the slightest lead, it was particularly comforting to have reliable partners and contractors on their side.

“I’m glad to hear that. Sounds like there shouldn’t be anything left to worry about,” Shizuka said with a satisfied smile. As a landlord herself, she hated the idea that someone’s private living space had been invaded like that.

“Oh, yeah. By the way, how is the next wave of transfer students and Forthorthian personnel looking?” asked Koutarou. With the matter of the dorms cleared up, his mind turned to the people that would be filling them come fall.

“Things are proceeding without issue, although there have been a few changes,” said Theia. “Would you fill him in, Ruth?”

“Of course, Your Highness. Because there were so many volunteers, the first group of transfer students was chosen from a low-risk pool of candidates.”

The initial influx of volunteers was whittled down by raffle, and the final pool of candidates was scrutinized by their character. The first group of Forthorthian transfer students, then, were chosen after a lengthy series of interviews with both the Forthorthian and Japanese governments. It was a somewhat biased methodology, but the idea was to minimize any potential problems since the process was new to everyone involved.

“The second wave, however, is being chosen entirely by lottery. Because of that, staff and training will need to be increased considerably.”

Things would be different this time. Other than those disqualified for extraordinary circumstances (like criminal records), anyone was allowed to apply for the transfer student lottery, and the winners were chosen at random.

There would also be significantly more of them coming this time, meaning the opportunity for things to go awry was equally increased. Forthorthe would be sending teachers of its own along with the students to facilitate the transfer, but they would in turn need more Japanese instructors to teach them the local language and culture.

“I see. So Nalfa-san got to come early because she’s a good girl,” remarked Koutarou.

Nalfa’s brother was a well respected reporter, even if Theia practically considered him her nemesis. His good name went a long way to Nalfa’s credit, but she had ultimately been chosen for the first wave of transfer students on her own merits.

“Good for you, Nal-chan. Kou-niisan called you a good girl.”

“Ah... Heeheehee...”

Nalfa giggled nervously as she scratched at her cheek. She was pleased with the compliment, of course, but didn’t know how to respond. Koutarou surely only meant it at face value, though she hoped there was more to it than that. The conversation kept going, however, leaving the red-faced Nalfa to her imagination.

“Japan has finally approved an increased security budget, as they believe any shortcomings will reflect poorly on all of Earth,” Kiriha explained.

“Yeah, that makes perfect sense,” added Koutarou with a nod.

The Japanese government was deeply concerned about the safety and wellbeing of its Forthorthian guests, so the enhanced security budget had been in the works for some time. It was a lengthy process given all of the required input and other necessary decisions that factored into it, but everything had finally gone through.

“In essence, Japan and Forthorthe have been just as formal, diplomatic, and considerate of each other as they can,” Clan put forward in summary.

Ultimately, she was right. Both sides were doing everything properly and thoroughly in the interest of goodwill. Spirits were high and everything was going smoothly. That is, except...

“The problem is Ralgwin and the remnants of Vandarion’s faction. A lot could go wrong if we don’t deal with them,” Theia said with a stern expression, her arms crossed.

Indeed, they were now the greatest danger to the diplomatic mission. No matter how much goodwill was generated between the nations, the rebels could ruin it all with one ill-timed display of force. And Japan wasn’t all that was at risk. It was highly likely the underground and Folsaria would get caught up in any mess.

“Regarding the holdout rebels, Maki-sama was able to locate their base. We will be able to launch an offensive soon,” Ruth reported.

So far, Koutarou and company had lacked the information to make a decisive move. That had changed now thanks to Maki, who had tracked down the location of Ralgwin’s stronghold the other day. The group could now pool their resources and launch a preemptive strike to put an end to Ralgwin’s antics for good.

“So, where is their headquarters, Maki?” Kiriha asked.

“To the east of the ridge atop Mt. Kisshou is a lake,” she replied. “The entrance to their base is inside that lake.”

“It’s in the water?!” shouted Sanae, her eyes sparkling. “Then it’s like the Thunderbird!”

“So the entrance is underwater, huh?” remarked Koutarou with a sage nod. “No wonder we couldn’t find it.”

Until now, Ralgwin’s holdout had been a mystery to the group. They knew he was somewhere on Earth, but that was it. It was a possibility he was hiding on a ship in Earth’s orbit, but Theia had yet to detect any unauthorized warps going back and forth from the planet. That led them to believe Ralgwin had taken up somewhere on the surface.

And yet... they still hadn’t been able to locate him. His holdout had to be big enough for a spaceship to come and go, so its docking gate should have been large and quite obvious—but they’d never found any such thing. It all made sense now, however, as the structure had been underwater all along.

“I’d considered this, but there were too many potential locations to be able to narrow it down effectively,” admitted Kiriha.

“Even you have your limits, Kii. Don’t worry about it,” consoled Clan.

Kiriha had factored in the possibility of an underwater base in her many searches, but there were too many lakes, rivers, and swamps to explore—not to mention the open ocean. Divers were a limited resource as it was, and they weren’t especially effective in terms of stealth. If the enemy detected them, they might relocate their operation entirely. Discovering the base without being noticed was paramount, which was why Kiriha had assigned the task to Maki personally.

“Koutarou, we should attack right now!” rallied Sanae.

“You just want to see the secret underwater base, don’t you?” asked Koutarou rather skeptically.

“Heck yeah!”

“At least you’re honest... Nevertheless, I agree that we should make our move soon.”

Sanae’s overenthusiasm aside, Koutarou believed that made the most strategic sense. They needed to act before Ralgwin realized his base was compromised.

“Wait. I’d like to delay a couple of days,” countered Theia.

“What’s wrong? I thought you’d be the first to rush in,” joked Koutarou.

Theia was short-tempered and impatient, so she was usually the first to spearhead an attack. Koutarou couldn’t help remarking this unusual lapse in character.

“Actually, my mother has asked us to wait.”

Theia had received a directive from Empress Elfaria the other day in the middle of her regular reports: she and the others were to hold off on any offensive operations, even if the enemy stronghold should be discovered.

“Knowing Elle, she must be planning something.”

“You’re exactly right. Mother is sending Nefilforan with backup.”

“Nefilforan? You mean...”

“Yes, Princess Nefilforan.”

Elfaria had specifically asked Koutarou and the girls to hold back while they waited for Forthorthian reinforcements. That notably included Princess Nefilforan, who was known for her martial skill even among the royal families.

Her full name was Nefilforan Canon Glendad Aldousine Forthorthe, her personal title meaning “piercing greatspear.” She was two years older than Theia and hailed from the proud military house of Glendad. The princesses of Forthorthe generally saw each other as rivals, but Nefilforan was somewhat special.

“What’s she like?” Koutarou asked.

“She’s an excellent soldier and an expert with spears. As I’m sure you can imagine since she’s leading the reinforcements, she’s incredibly strong,” Theia replied.

“So a lot like you, huh?”

“I don’t care to admit it, but in terms of pure power, she has me beat. I have an advantage with ranged weaponry, however, so I suppose we’re about even.”

“If a sore loser like you is willing to concede that much, she must *really* be strong.”

The Glendads were a family that traditionally excelled in martial arts; they were more likely to be generals than emperors. They saw more value in leading the military than leading the people, one could say. And Nefilforan was no exception to that. She’d been training ever since she was a child, and her skill was proof. She expertly wielded a greatspear even longer than she was tall.

“She also has a flair for military matters. She’s already a regimental commander,” Theia continued.

“Hmm... Isn’t that, like, right below me?” Koutarou asked.

“Indeed, it is. The only rank between the two of you is general.”

“Pretty impressive for someone so young.”

“She’s earned it. She has quite a track record, and she’s worked hard for it.”

“I guess that’s the real difference between you.”

“Hm?”

“Natural talent versus hard work.”

“Well, I suppose. I’m also much cuter, I’ll have you know.”

“Yes, of course. You’re absolutely adorable.”

Nefilforan was an incredible soldier who had begun distinguishing herself in her teens. And now she’d climbed her way up to regimental commander, one step short of becoming a general. That wasn’t through favoritism as a member of a royal family, either; she’d achieved it through her own hard work. She’d earned her place.

“I guess she just didn’t make much of an impression...” Koutarou mumbled.

Try as he might, he remembered very little of Nefilforan from his time in Forthorthe. He vaguely recalled meeting her when he took command of the army, but if she was really the standout soldier Theia was describing... Koutarou couldn’t help wondering why he hadn’t seen more of her in action.

“That was the fault of the Glendad family at large,” Theia clarified.

“Did something happen?” Koutarou asked, curious.

“You could say that. As you know, the Glendad family has produced a long line of generals. Their ties with the military are quite strong.”

“Oh, I get it. So they were stuck between Elle and the military.”

Nefilforan was well on her way to becoming a general when Vandarion’s coup reared its ugly head. The Glendad family had been divided on the matter of whose side to take in the uprising, effectively paralyzing them for most of the civil war. Thanks to that, Nefilforan was sidelined until the endgame.

“Yes, that’s right,” Theia said with a satisfied nod.

“That’s why the Glendads are desperate to make up for it now,” Clan chipped in. “You returned to Earth right away, so you wouldn’t know, but Nefilforan-san

has led the charge in rooting out Vandarion's remnants in Forthorthe."

"Her Majesty Elfaria is well aware that we lack the forces to move on a stronghold," added Ruth as she pulled up data on Forthorthian personnel currently on Earth.

The numbers made it clear a skeleton crew had been sent to guard Theia and the rest of the diplomatic mission. That was an inevitability at the time given the lack of established relations with Japan, but things were different now that legislation was picking up. Nevertheless, the detail on Earth wasn't enough to safeguard the delegation and assault a military stronghold simultaneously.

"However, Nefilforan-sama is available now that she's more or less taken care of the remaining rebels on the home front. So Her Majesty has sent her to assist us here on Earth."

Ruth tapped away at the terminal she was using to change the data being displayed. She now pulled up information on Nefilforan's forces, which were large enough to supplement the delegation guard *and* mount an impressive offensive. That—in a nutshell—was why Elfaria has asked Koutarou and the girls to hold off. They were awaiting Nefilforan's arrival.

"I see... So Elle is helping us out while also giving the Glendad family a chance to save face."

"Yes. Given the vast size of the imperial army, she could have easily sent another unit. But the Glendads are serious about this. They're personally funding Nefilforan's forces, so it's a win-win situation for Forthorthe."

"So Elle can make them happy and win another military ally in the fight for disarmament..."

"Bingo."

"She sure is a shrewd one," Koutarou said with a wry smile. He couldn't help regarding Elfaria's clever ways with both exasperation and affection.

"Um... May I have a word, Koutarou-sama?" Nalfa asked politely with a worried look on her face.

"What is it, Nalfa-san?" Koutarou inquired, snapping back to his senses.

“Are you sure it’s okay for me and Kotori to be here when you’re talking about military moves and state secrets?” she asked sheepishly.

To a normal girl like Nalfa, this entire conversation was utterly beyond her. She was dumbfounded that Koutarou and the others were talking about it all as casually as they had Kenji’s girlfriends.

“What, is that all?” Koutarou asked with a relieved smile.

Nalfa had looked so concerned that Koutarou was worried it was something much more serious. He was relieved that it wasn’t, but Kotori seemed to think otherwise. She turned to him with a pronounced pout.

“Don’t just brush it off like that, Kou-niisan! Nalfa-chan and I are both worried about propriety here.”

Kotori never behaved this way with anyone other than her closest friends, which included Koutarou first and foremost. And he knew good and well that it meant she was quite serious.

“Sorry, Kin-chan. But in all honesty... we don’t feel like it’s anything we need to hide from you. You’ve kept a lot of secrets for us, you know? So we all trust you.”

Nalfa and Kotori knew a great deal of the secrets surrounding Koutarou and the other girls. The most precarious one given the current political climate was the existence of magic, and they hadn’t spilled the beans about that to anyone. So as far as Koutarou was concerned, there was no reason to keep their next military move from the two first-years. They were both part of the team now, so to speak.

“Thank you very much, Koutarou-sama!”

“Isn’t that great, Nal-chan?”

“It’s wonderful!”

Nalfa and Kotori were both overjoyed to hear this and exchanged a smile. The information flying around room 106 right now had the power to change the future of Earth, and they’d been worried their access to it might incidentally put that at risk. Koutarou, however, had given them just the reassurance they

needed.

“But still, Kou-niisan, you have to promise to chase us out when you talk about the *really* important stuff, okay?”

“We’ll feel more at ease that way.”

“Yeah, yeah. I’ll be sure to kick you two out when I talk about Mackenzie’s new girlfriend.”

“Kou-niisan!”

From there, the conversation once more moved back to trivial everyday topics. As of late, the ordinary and the extraordinary coexisted in room 106. Koutarou and the others realized this, of course, but they all quietly accepted it for what it was. They wanted to keep a hold on the ordinary, no matter how extraordinary their lives became.

Manufacturing weapons came with a number of practical challenges. There was the primary matter of securing basic needs: an energy source, a water supply, reliable waste disposal, and more. These were required before equipment and other hardware could be brought in, and establishing them was no mean feat for Ralgwin.

First off, he couldn’t rely on any of his space-age Forthorthian technology for power. It didn’t exist here on Earth otherwise, so its unique reactions and signatures were easy to detect. Instead, he had to rely on locally sourced energy. The manufacturing plant also needed clean water and a quiet, effective way to dispose of waste, as any excess pollution could give its location away to the eagle-eyed Theia.

Functionally, Ralgwin needed an Earth-powered plant that ran cleaner and more efficiently than anything currently on Earth. It was quite a task, yet in spite of the obstacles... Ralgwin finally had his own spiritual energy beam rifle in his hands. He stood there admiring it after a few test shots.

“Interesting... The automatic aim response is far faster. And its ability to slip through space distortion fields is fantastic.”

Today was the grand test fire of the weapons Ralgwin’s plant was now

producing. All kinds of problems had cropped up during the manufacturing process, as was typical. But Ralgwin had overcome challenge after challenge until he was met with reward at last. The production line was running smoothly, and the rifle in his hands was proof. Indeed, this was no prototype; it was an actual, finished weapon. And its performance exceeded Ralgwin's expectations.

"The enhanced response time is because the rifle reads your aura and moves ahead of you, Ralgwin-sama," explained an engineer.

"So what happens if you're tired and your thoughts are foggy?"

"Then it would automatically default to the normal aiming mode, so there are no disadvantages."

"That's more than satisfactory. I like it."

"I'm honored, sir."

Ralgwin looked understanding at first glance, but he was known for severely punishing those who didn't live up to his expectations. As such, the engineer showing him the rifle was truly relieved that he seemed to be pleased with it.

Fasta, however, was less so. She took a few shots of her own and issued a harsher assessment.

"It has less lethal potential than our current weapons."

As a sniper, she highly prized the firepower of a weapon. And in that sense, spiritual energy weapons were indeed lacking.

"I believe its ability to slip through distortion fields makes up for that," countered Ralgwin.

"It's my job to worry about heavily armored enemies too," rebutted Fasta.

"Don't worry. When we get to making yours, I'll be sure to have an underslung grenade launcher added."

"Thank you very much. I'd prefer a sniper rifle, if possible."

"Of course. Now... you there! Get to it!"

"Understood, sir. I'll ready a replacement right away, so please continue with the testing at your leisure."

“Very well.”

“Then, if you’ll excuse me...”

The engineer in charge of the test bowed to Ralgwin and Fasta, then swiftly exited the firing range. When Ralgwin said to get to it, he meant immediately.

After the engineer left, Ralgwin and Fasta continued testing out the new rifles. They would be trusting their lives to these weapons in combat, so any flaws needed to be uncovered now before they proved fatal. Since Ralgwin and his men were isolated here on Earth, there was no backup when something went wrong on the battlefield.

“Hm. It seems that the stronger your will is, the more power you can draw out of the weapon,” noted Ralgwin.

“That’s both an advantage and a disadvantage. If you outfitted an average squad with these, they wouldn’t be able to make the most of them,” Fasta argued.

“That’s harsh, Fasta. This weapon is incredible. In the hands of a specially trained unit, it will work wonders.”

At the very least, they both agreed that the performance of the spiritual energy rifle varied based on its wielder—which was a perk or a flaw depending on how it was used. Strictly speaking, the weapons responded to a user’s spiritual energy, but interpreting that as “will” wasn’t too far off the mark. A specialized squad who learned to use the weapons without hesitation would gain the maximum effect from them. They would be a force to be reckoned with indeed.

Even the best soldiers couldn’t maintain perfect focus forever, but the potential for concentrated strike forces or ambush teams was incredible—especially given spiritual energy’s ability to penetrate distortion fields. In the right hands, spiritual energy weapons were more than enough to dispatch ordinary soldiers.

But there was something else about them that Fasta had noticed. Something only she could have.

“Ralgwin-sama, about the aiming function where the gun reads its user’s

mind..."

"Is there some problem with it?"

"No, not that. I was just thinking that's what the Blue Knight did... reading his enemy's mind to beat them to the punch."

Fasta was still bothered by the fact that Koutarou had dodged a shot from her sniper rifle. But as she began playing around with spiritual energy technology, she slowly began wrapping her head around how he might have done it.

"Hm, that's an interesting idea. It seems we've cracked one of the Blue Knight's mysteries," Ralgwin mused with a satisfied nod.

If a rifle could take aim at someone before its user could, then perhaps the same ability could be used defensively to dodge a bullet. An incredibly long-range shot would have only given him more time to respond.

"Yes... but only one."

Despite uncovering this secret, Fasta didn't seem pleased in the slightest. Ralgwin understood why, however, and nodded with a slightly grimmer expression than before.

"That's true. There's much that remains unexplained. Whatever technology it is that can create highly detailed holograms instantly, the unknown bioagent that has no side effects and seems to be untraceable... and that's just the tip of the iceberg."

Ralgwin was stumped by Maki's illusions and Yurika's poisons. They were magic, of course, but Ralgwin and the other Forthorthians simply understood them to be new technologies of some kind. The legends of the Blue Knight mentioned magic, but never did they think it actually existed. It was a logical trap. A bias, in a way. Not even the most brilliant minds in Forthorthe could have imagined Koutarou was in possession of magic from the past along with cutting-edge futuristic tech.

"We still don't know how they sank our siege cannons the other day."

"According to the guys in the tech department, it's possible to soften up the ground with vibrations... but not from that distance."

Ralgwin was oblivious to the fact that Yurika had teleported directly to the cannons. Nobody had seen her use her bog spell either. So as far as Ralgwin's camp was concerned, what had happened the other day was the biggest mystery of all.

“What a troublesome foe...”

“You can say that again, Fasta. We'll need to be well prepared and act with extreme caution. And next we fight, I'd prefer it to be an ambush.”

When they were up against so many unexplained phenomena, Ralgwin wanted to keep all other uncertainties to a minimum. If he could control the circumstances just right and get to Koutarou before he ever had a chance to use his strange powers, Ralgwin was sure he could win. It was curious, almost. Now that he'd uncovered the secret of one of Koutarou's strange powers, he was more wary than ever of the others. Their danger felt more present now, more real. He too, much like Koutarou right now, felt like he was in for a tough fight.

The Name's Nefilforan

Thursday, June 16th

The fifth princess of Forthorthe, Nefilforan, arrived on Earth with her forces in mid-June just as summer was setting in. She was known far and wide for her prowess, and she gave off a powerful impression in spite of her femininity. Her custom-tailored military uniform suited her remarkably well.

“It’s been some time, Lord Veltlion. I also see several new faces here. It’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance. I am Nefilforan Canon Forthorthe, a princess of the Holy Forthorthe Galactic Empire just like Theiamillis-san and Clariossa-san here,” she announced with a salute.

Since Nefilforan was royalty, Koutarou would have ordinarily been the one saluting *her*, but she offered the gesture out of deference to Koutarou’s position as commander-in-chief. It was a testament to her proud, respectful Glendad upbringing.

“I believe it’s been since I was first officially assigned to the Forthorthian army,” Koutarou replied formally.

He was doing his best to be as knightly as possible. Nefilforan saw him as the Blue Knight, after all, and he wanted to live up to that name. He was earnest, respectful, and kind to the princess in addition to the men and women behind her who put their lives on the line for Forthorthe.

“Yes. I do apologize for not greeting you properly back then,” she responded.

“Think nothing of it. Those were chaotic times,” Koutarou said politely.

Koutarou and Nefilforan had met once before. In the final stages of Vandarion’s coup, Koutarou stepped up as the imperial army’s commander-in-chief. The battle in the asteroid belt came shortly thereafter. All of Forthorthe’s princesses—apart from Ceilēshu who was acting as regent—took part, so Koutarou was introduced to Nefilforan by way of the strategy meeting that took

place beforehand.

“I’m also sorry... that I was unable to help more back then,” Nefilforan said with a pained expression.

The Glendads were still somewhat divided at the time, which raised concerns about the internal management of Glendad forces. As such, Nefilforan and her flagship were relegated to the rear lines, effectively hamstringing their contribution to the battle. It was a terrible blow to her storied military family, who considered themselves to be the rivals of the Pardomshiha and Wenranka families who fought boldly in Elfaria’s defense.

“I ran off right after the war ended myself, so I don’t really have any right to criticize you.”

“Velt...”

Nefilforan’s expression went stiff for a moment when she heard Koutarou say that. She quickly regained her composure, however, and eased up a bit.

“I’ve learned a great deal from my failings, and I would like to put those lessons to use in our battles to come,” she declared with another salute.

Just like before, she was the spitting image of proper respect. She was much like Ruth in that regard. But Koutarou, who was standing right in front of her, saw a glimpse of relief in her eyes.

“I’m looking forward to working with you, Princess Nefilforan.”

She was a prospective general, serious and proud. Yet precisely because of that, she tended to bottle up her worries. Though they’d only had the chance to talk for a few moments, that was the strong impression Koutarou got from her.

As Koutarou and Nefilforan were wrapping up their chat, another figure approached.

“Hello, everyone. It’s been a while,” she said politely.

When Yurika saw her and heard her force, her expression lit up.

“Nana-san! You’re back?!” she exclaimed, running over and clasping both of her hands.

Nana was extremely special to Yurika. She was her master and mentor, but she was also like a sister to her. They shared a long, close history together.

“Yes, I offered to be Princess Nefilforan’s guide. It is her first time here, after all,” Nana explained, clasping Yurika’s hands in return and smiling just as brightly.

“Oooh, I see. I’m glad you got to come, Nana-san.”

“Me too, Yurika-chan. It looks like you’ve gotten a little taller since we last met.”

“Yeah! I’ve grown two whole centimeters this year!”

After that, Yurika and Nana began chatting away about what they’d been doing recently. They had a lot to catch up on, so Koutarou quietly stood by and let them have their fun uninterrupted.

“Nana-san has been assigned as my adjutant,” Nefilforan turned to him and said.

“So she’s a guide in that sense too,” Koutarou replied with a nod.

Nana was a valuable asset; she knew her way around Japan as well as her way around the battlefield. Moreover, she was a former genius magical girl. Her potential was boundless.

“I imagine Nana-san will surpass your expectations, Your Highness,” Koutarou remarked.

“Oh?”

“She’s rather special.”

Koutarou was well aware of Nana’s incredible talents. He was looking forward to seeing Nefilforan’s surprise when she got to witness them for herself.

While Yurika and Nana were catching up, Nefilforan struck up a chat with the other girls. They began with simple introductions, but things evolved from there and the conversation had now taken a strange turn...

“M-Magic?!” Nefilforan exclaimed.

“I know it’s hard to believe, but it’s the truth,” assured Koutarou.

“To think the legends about Signaltin are true... When I heard you came from the future, I was sure it was all science...”

“Vandarion’s faction seems to think the same thing—that Master’s a fake Blue Knight and all his weapons and armor are byproducts of technology,” explained Ruth.

Her presence was a great comfort to Nefilforan. The Pardomshihas were loyal to the Mastirs, but as a historic family of knights, they also had close ties with the Glendads. Moreover, Ruth shared Nefilforan’s serious personality. They got along well. Hearing her break down some of the outlandish claims she was hearing—including about magic—made them easier to swallow.

“Heehee, my maiden powers are another one of the reasons Koutarou is so strong!” Sanae proclaimed.

“Your... maiden powers?” Nefilforan asked, unsure what she meant.

“Sanae-sama has psychic abilities,” Ruth explained. “And she’s been at Master’s side for so long that she’s wired into him the spiritual circuitry he needs to use them as well.”

“Yup! It wears off if he’s away from me for too long, though.”

“I just barely managed to scrape by in the past thanks to you.”

“Heehee! Then you should thank me more!”

“I’ll be forever in your debt, Angel Sanae.”

“That’s more like it!”

What took Nefilforan the most by surprise, however, wasn’t talk of magic or psychic powers...

“If we’re talking about the past, you really got through it thanks to me, didn’t you?” interjected Clan.

“Well, yeah,” Koutarou conceded.

“Then sing my praises too, won’t you?”

“Isn’t it fair to say that you were the one who got us in that whole pickle to

begin with?”

“Erk...”

What took Nefilforan the most by surprise was the casual way Koutarou bantered back and forth with the princesses. He and Clan hardly seemed like a princess and her knight. If anything, they were more like old friends. And even more alarmingly...

“*I’m* the one Koutarou should really be thanking the most,” Theia cut in.

“You? Why?” Koutarou asked skeptically.

“Because I’m your liege! Who do you think beat swordplay and manners into you?! And gave you that sword and armor, huh?!”

“Oh yeah, that’s right. I had nearly forgotten *you* were the real cause of everything...”

“You wretch! Sit yourself down right here! I’m going to beat some manners back into you!”

“You wanna go, you hack princess?”

“I think that’s going too far, Master...”

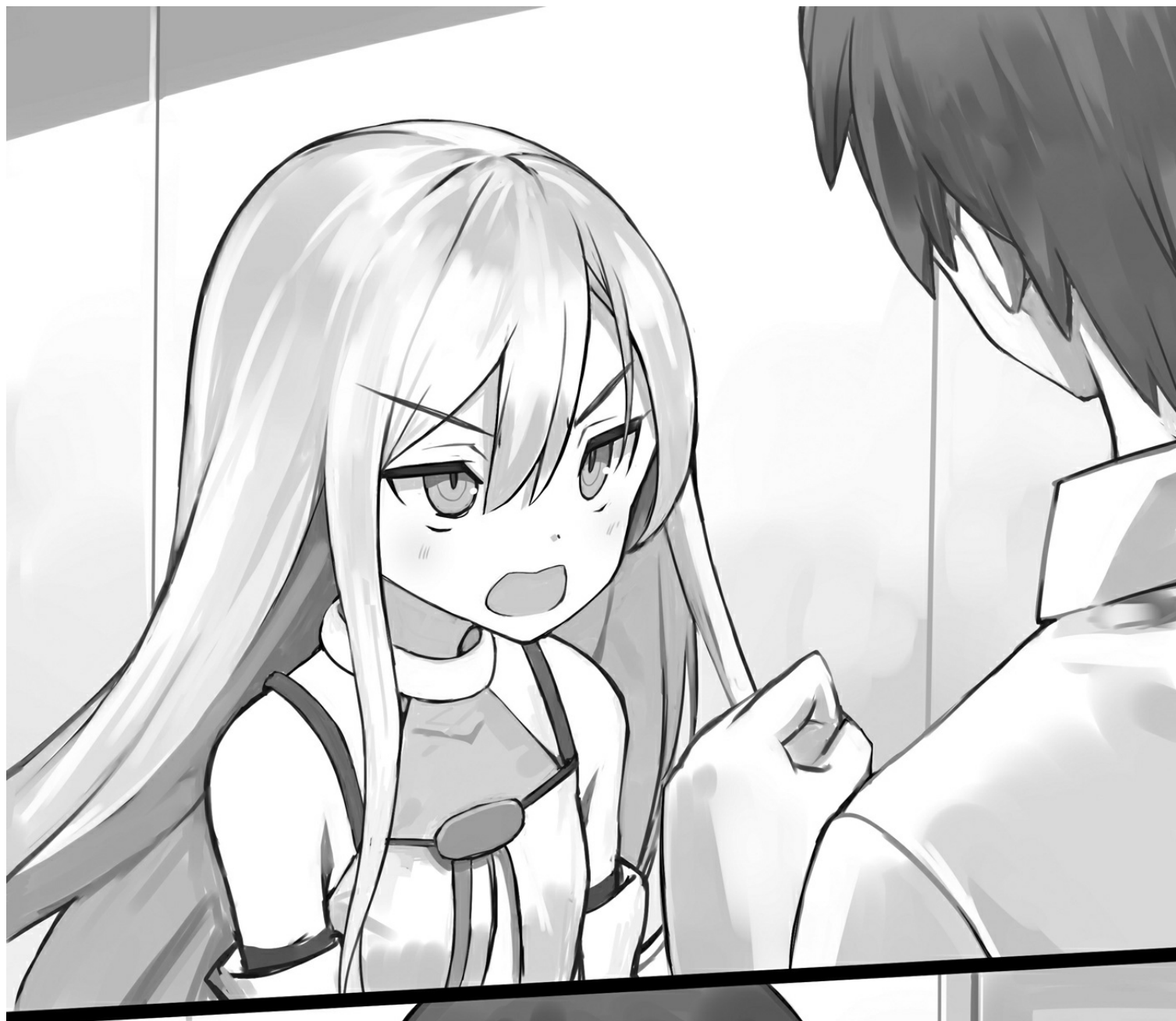
“Bring it on!”

“Hyaaah!”

Koutarou and Theia fell into a full-on fistfight. Nefilforan was aghast at the sight... yet there still seemed to be love and respect between them. Neither took cheap shots; they were trying to outmaneuver one another with skill and technique. It was almost like they were just having fun roughhousing. No one tried to stop them, either. Not even Ruth, who was simply watching on with a smile.

“What in the world...?”

Nefilforan was utterly taken aback by this. Not just Koutarou and Theia brawling, but the whole scenario. Koutarou’s ties with the royal families ran deeper than she had ever imagined.



“Seeing Satomi-kun and Theiamillis-san fight for the first time must be quite a surprise. Especially as a Forthorthian,” Harumi giggled.

She’d seen plenty of Forthorthians, starting with Nalfa, absolutely shocked by Koutarou and Theia’s behavior. She was unsurprised, you could say, by Nefilforan’s surprise.

“Y-Yes... it’s quite something,” Nefilforan stammered.

She’d seen Nalfa’s videos of Koutarou and Theia, even ones of them fighting. But actually seeing it firsthand was a completely different experience. Especially now that she could appreciate that no one was intervening. Koutarou’s relationship with the princesses was truly special.

“This is just how Satomi-kun and Theiamillis-san show their affection, so we let them be,” Harumi continued. “It’s serious, of course. But not like you might think it is.”

“Yes, I think I can see that. It certainly doesn’t look like they’re trying to hurt each other...”

“Speaking of, Nefilforan-san, you’re an expert in combat yourself, aren’t you?”

“Yes...”

“Are you all right?”

“Yes, it’s just... I’ve never seen Theiamillis-san and Clariosa-san like this before...”

This too overwhelmed Nefilforan. As a soldier, she strictly believed in discipline and moderation. She rarely wore her heart on her sleeve, yet she found herself easily opening up to Harumi. She was as much in awe of that as she was Theia and Clan.

“We’ve all overcome great trials together, so it’s difficult to see each other as anything but close friends... Don’t you have someone like that too, Nefilforan-san?”

“I do, but I don’t let it show.”

“We used to be like that too,” Harumi said with a smile. “Perhaps it’s only a matter of time.”

As Nefilforan beheld Harumi, something dawned on her.

“Oh, you’re the one who controls Signaltin now, aren’t you?” she asked.

“Yes, I inherited that duty from Alaia-san.”

Whenever Koutarou used Signaltin, a silver-haired girl who controlled the sword’s power fought by his side. Nefilforan had only just now noticed it was Harumi.

“So your hair is normally black? I didn’t recognize you at first.”

“Heehee. I don’t stand out very much.”

Koutarou could use magic via Signaltin; Harumi’s hair changing color was hardly a surprise compared to that. Forthorthian technology could accomplish the same thing.

“By the way, Harumi-dono—”

“Just Harumi is fine.”

“I could never be so casual with the inheritor of Empress Alaia’s sacred duties.”

Harumi had the power to control Signaltin, making her Alaia’s successor in that regard. As such, Nefilforan believed her to be every bit as invaluable to Forthorthe as Koutarou was.

“Then I’ll call you Nefilforan-sama in return.”

“Anything but that, please.”

Nefilforan couldn’t stand the thought of Alaia’s successor—who looked just like the late empress, no less—treating her as a superior. It just wouldn’t feel right.

“No? Teehee.”

“Please allow me to call you Harumi-san instead...”

“Then I’ll call you Nefi-san.”

Thus Nefilforan folded. She would much rather back down here than live with Harumi treating her with such unnecessary respect. Seemingly satisfied with this, Harumi giggled.

“So, Harumi-san,” Nefilforan began, turning the conversation to more important matters, “what’s the difference in Signaltin’s strength with and without you?”

It was a necessary question for a commander. There was no guarantee that Koutarou and Harumi would always be together in battle. There might also be times when Koutarou fought without Signaltin. Nefilforan needed to know the details of how their strategy worked to plan for it accordingly.

“There is none, actually.”

“Truly? It doesn’t seem that way...”

“Well, you see, when Satomi-kun is fighting alone, Signaltin emits a certain amount of power. Controlling that in battle is hard, which is why I take over when I’m with him. I can adjust it so that it only uses power when it’s needed.”

“I see! So it’s not strictly a matter of power, but that you’re able to manage things more efficiently.”

“Yes. I believe that’s what creates the perceived difference.”

“So that’s how it works. Hmm...”

Harumi’s explanation was easy to understand, but Nefilforan still had a few lingering questions. It seemed to her that things would change depending on the circumstances.

“Would you mind, Harumi-san, if I asked you to show me later?”

“Not at all. You’ll be seeing it when we fight together anyway.”

“Thank you very much.”

“Now... Yoo-hoo, Satomi-kun!”

“What’s wrong, Sakuraba-senpai?”

When Harumi called out to him, Koutarou stopped what he was doing and turned to her. Theia could have taken the opportunity to knock him out cold,

but she refrained. That would have been a boring conclusion to their fight.

“Don’t just play with Theiamillis-san. Play with me and Nefilforan-san some too,” Harumi cooed.

At this, Koutarou and Theia exchanged a glance and let go of each other.

“Go ahead,” Theia offered.

“We can pick up later,” Koutarou offered in turn.

They both knew good and well that Harumi never interrupted their fights without good reason.

“Thanks for your cooperation, you two!”

“W-Wait! What are you doing, Harumi-san?!”

This unexpected turn of events initially had Nefilforan flustered. She was being given the chance to duel Forthorthe’s living legend, Layous Fatra Veltlion. As intimidating as it was, however, it was also a good opportunity for her to assess his power—both raw and enhanced.

“So basically... you want to know how strong I am and how strong the Blue Knight is?” Koutarou inquired.

When Nefilforan had asked to fight him twice, he’d immediately grasped her intentions. If she could come to understand exactly how strong he was ordinarily versus fully prepared for battle, then she would know how best to protect him when they were on the defensive as well as how best to capitalize on him when they were on the offensive. This was must-have knowledge for a commander.

“That’s correct. Do you mind?”

“Not at all. Should I go unarmed?”

“No. Let’s assume the baseline at least includes having a weapon to defend yourself.”

“Okay, then... Ruth-san, can I borrow a training sword?”

“I’ll bring one right away, Master.”

Koutarou armed himself with a knight's sword and Nefilforan a greatspear, both of which were dulled practice weapons. But despite that, neither fighter looked like they were preparing for a practice match. They both knew that there was no point in this exercise if they didn't take it seriously, regardless of their weapons.

"What are the terms of the fight, Princess Nefilforan?"

"Think of it as actual combat. We'll call it when one of us takes what would have been a fatal blow."

"Understood."

Koutarou and Nefilforan squared off about ten meters apart in the Hazy Moon's training room, which was about thirty meters across in both directions. When the fighters faced each other, it felt like the temperature in the entire room dropped several degrees. The tension was palpable.

"Here I come, Lord Veltlion."

"Try to go easy on me."

"I've never been good at holding back!"

Nefilforan stepped forward as soon as those words left her mouth. Even with a fighter at the top of their game, conversation was a distraction. There were precious few other interferences in a mock battle, so she would exploit every opportunity to her advantage.

"Hah!"

With a powerful shout, she brandished her greatspear that allowed her two methods of attack: thrusting and slashing. She was opening with the latter, swinging at Koutarou with all her might.

Whoa! She's not a regimental commander for nothing!

Koutarou could decipher her strength from the way she carried herself. Nefilforan was tall for a woman, and she swung her giant greatspear without letting it throw her even the tiniest bit off balance. She had incredible mastery over her weapon of choice, clearly the byproduct of years of dedicated training.

"I might be in trouble here..."

Koutarou couldn't step forward as Nefilforan charged. Rather, he chose not to. When fighting spearmen, it was better to get up close and personal. Polearms were vulnerable in close-quarters combat because of their length... but there was no way Nefilforan didn't know that. Koutarou suspected her charge was a trap. The fact that she'd chosen to swing rather than thrust only furthered that suspicion. So he held his sword firmly with both hands, ready to receive her attack.

"Haaah!"

Nefilforan's weapon met Koutarou's in a great clash. Her blow was swift and heavy, but Koutarou was prepared. He deflected most of the force, but it still pushed him back a little.

"Tch..."

"Well played! But—"

But that wasn't the end of Nefilforan's attack. She spun with the momentum of her deflected spear, whipping around to check Koutarou with her shoulder.

To think she'd still try to fight with a spear this close up!

Koutarou was surprised. Caught off guard, even. He hadn't expected the princess to voluntarily enter close-quarters combat. This was her real trap all along, and he'd fallen for it.

"No way am I gonna let this end with a single blow!"

He was still braced from receiving the princess's charge, leaving him in a poor position to muster a counterattack. The best he could do was thrust at her with the butt of his sword.

"I missed?!"

"Hyah!"

Effectively tackled, Koutarou went flying backward as Nefilforan brought herself to a stop. She took another swing at the off-balance Koutarou, but he was already out of her range.

"You're good, Princess Nefilforan. I thought that was the end of me," Koutarou confessed, beads of sweat dripping from his forehead.

It had truly been a close call. Only his luck and honed battle instincts had allowed him to survive thus far.

“You’re just as good as I’d hoped, too. Your swordsmanship is extremely polished, Lord Veltlion,” praised Nefilforan.

She was just as taken with her opponent as Koutarou was. The biggest surprise of all was that he hadn’t fallen for her trap. The more experienced the warrior, the more likely they were to close in on a spearman. The Glendad family’s signature fighting style included moves specifically to counter that, so Koutarou would have been in serious trouble if he’d chosen that route. Fortunately, however, he’d sensed danger and chosen to hold his ground instead.

So he’s the Blue Knight, with or without the armor... heh...

Nefilforan couldn’t help chuckling on the inside. As a Forthorthian, she naturally held the Blue Knight in the highest regard—and Koutarou lived up to all of her expectations. That pleased her immensely, but as serious as she was, she wouldn’t let it show. Koutarou might have picked up on it if he’d been using his psychic powers, but he was intentionally abstaining for the sake of this fight.

“You’ve adequately demonstrated your ability to handle surprise attacks, so I’ll abandon petty tricks here.”

“So that’s what you were doing?”

“Yes. And so, from this point forward... I’ll come straight for you in a direct attack.”

With that, Nefilforan changed her posture. She grasped her spear with both hands and leveled it at Koutarou—a stance that indicated she’d be thrusting rather than slashing.

“Honestly, I feel like I have a better chance of winning like this.”

“Perhaps. But I wouldn’t get to see your true prowess any other way, Your Excellency!”

As Nefilforan spoke, she launched herself forward with her spear at the ready. She was just waiting for an opening to strike.

“Let’s do this!” Koutarou rallied, stepping forward himself.

He was still wary of Nefilforan’s attacks, but standing still against a master spearman was just asking for defeat. He knew he needed to get close to fight her, even if approaching was dangerous.

“Haah!”

As expected, Nefilforan made the first move. She knew the range of her spear like the back of her hand, and the second Koutarou entered her reach, she unleashed several thrusts.

“Wh-Whoa!”

Clash! Schwing! Slam!

Koutarou deftly moved his sword to fend off Nefilforan’s rush of attacks. Her thrusts came at him like a whirlwind, and it was all he could do to deflect them.

“Hahh...”

Seeing that Koutarou’s attention was fully devoted to parrying her, Nefilforan sharply exhaled and moved into a low, sweeping attack. Switching attack heights to catch an opponent off guard was a standard practice in spear fighting.

“Whoa there!”

Fortunately, Koutarou was able to react in time. He realized he’d never be able to block it with his sword, so he jumped instead...

“Wrong move, Your Excellency!”

But jumping was a mistake. While he was in the air, he was completely defenseless. He couldn’t dodge or get out of the way of her next attack, so by the time he landed... the tip of Nefilforan’s greatspear was at his throat. Had this been a real battle, Koutarou would’ve been a dead man.

“I surrender...”

Koutarou lowered his sword and admitted his defeat. Nefilforan pulled her spear back in response, standing it upright beside her. Seeing it like this gave Koutarou a chance to appreciate just how long it really was—its tip stood well

above the princess's head.

"Yeah, that was a terrible mistake. I jumped on instinct," he conceded.

There was little else he could have done in the face of such a big, heavy spear at such speeds. His defeat, however, didn't seem to trouble him much. In truth, he was enjoying himself. This reminded him of his old days with Flairhan.

"Normally, things would have been over before my opponent hit the ground."

"Well, I have a little experience fighting spearmen from back in the day. You still had me dead to rights, though."

Koutarou and Nefilforan chatted about their match as they returned to Theia and the others. Their fight wasn't over, however. They were simply changing their gear before round two.

"Come to think of it, spears were the favored weapon of infantry two thousand years ago, weren't they?"

"Yeah, they use rifles nowadays. I miss the old ways sometimes."

"That's perfectly understandable, Your Excellency."

Even outside of battle, Nefilforan remained as serious as ever. She reminded Koutarou of Flairhan more and more. It was amusing.

"Is something the matter?" she asked when she saw the smile on his face.

"I was just feeling a little nostalgic... I used to know someone a lot like you, Princess Nefilforan. Someone just as serious."

"Serious? Do you mean Lady Pardomshiha of yore?"

"Hahaha. So you know about her, huh?"

Nefilforan still wore a serious expression, but Koutarou was all smiles. Theia didn't take kindly to it.

"Koutarou! What are you smiling for when you lost?! She's your enemy right now!"

No matter the circumstances, Theia wished to see Koutarou victorious—both as a girl in love and as a member of the proud, undefeated Mastir family.

“What gives? You’re not like that with me in practice matches.”

“Of course not! I’m your master, not your enemy!”

“Princess Nefilforan isn’t our enemy either. Besides, she’s using a spear. This was pretty inevitable.”

In a battle between sword and spear, the spear would win as long their users were evenly matched. That was common battlefield knowledge—a fact of combat that hadn’t changed over the past two thousand years. And in that sense, it was indeed inevitable that Nefilforan, who’d trained with a greatspear all her life, had won. Koutarou had only first picked up a sword two years ago.

“No excuses! I won’t forgive you if you lose the second round!”

“I know, I know...”

“Just say it once! It sounds insincere otherwise!”

“Yeah, yeah...”

“Why, you!”

Theia didn’t care for Koutarou’s attitude after being defeated, so she gave him an earful as she helped him change. His armor opened and shut automatically, so he didn’t need any help with that. But his mantle and other equipment were a different story.

“Surely I don’t need my mantle and insignia.”

“That’s for *me* to decide.”

“If anything, I’d like a shield if I’m going to fight Princess Nefilforan.”

“But you hardly ever use one.”

“I did in the past.”

“You can’t use a shield *and* two swords. More importantly, you don’t use one in the script I wrote the other day.”

“...As you wish, my princess...”

Nefilforan watched on as Koutarou and Theia bantered. She was still quite curious about their relationship as knight and princess, as well as man and

woman. She wasn't sure how they could coexist without contradicting each other. Shizuka, who was standing next to her, seemed to have some insight into the situation...

"Gosh, Theia-chan's so lucky. She's the only one who's that close to Satomi-kun. I wish I could do what she does, but I don't think I could pull it off. Besides, I'm not a princess," she muttered as she watched them go at each other.

She fought Koutarou from time to time herself, but never like Theia did. It was always regular sparring matches. She couldn't say exactly why, but she was a little jealous.

"Can you tell me more about Lord Veltlion and Theiamillis-san's relationship?" inquired Nefilforan.

"Those two? Well, they started off as rivals. Then they became friends, then finally liege and retainer. That's why things are so complicated between them."

"I see. He and I have only ever been knight and princess, so I guess that's impossible for us."

There, Nefilforan smiled for the first time. Sensing special meaning in that smile, Shizuka smiled back and couldn't help asking...

"Are you interested in Satomi-kun too, Nefilforan-san?"

"As a Forthorthian, of course."

"Now that you mention it..."

Koutarou was a hero to Forthorthe, both past and present. He was an exemplary knight and moral bastion for the galactic empire. So, indeed, of course he'd caught Nefilforan's eye much the same way he had Nalfa's.

Koutarou was now wearing his armor fashioned with GoL, and had both swords hanging at his waist. In effect, he was armed to the teeth. With all of his equipment, his combat prowess increased severalfold. But the piece that caught Nefilforan's eye was the unique insignia adorning his breastplate.

"Could that be Princess Charl's?" she asked.

"Indeed, this insignia was bestowed upon me by Princess Charl herself."

“And surely the Super Important Bodyguard of Princesses Charl and Alaia stands undefeated...”

Even the steadfast Nefilforan cracked a little when confronted with the pure, innocent wish of a child. She wasn’t quite smiling, but there was a warm, gentle look in her eyes. Koutarou could sense it in her aura, too.

“That’s right. I believe Theia equipped me with this as a reminder of just that, so I need to take this fight seriously.”

“Good. I want to see the Blue Knight’s legendary power for myself.”

“I think I’ll live up to your expectations. I’m not thrilled that I’m playing right into Theia’s plans, but I’m more motivated than ever.”

With that, Koutarou drew Signaltin from his waist and swung it two, three times to get a feel for it in his hand. In the process, the sword started faintly glowing—a sign Harumi was drawing out its power.

“Satomi-kun, how far should I go?”

“Nefilforan-san, Sakuraba-senpai can manipulate the sword’s power and amplify it. What do you think?”

Nefilforan was fighting Koutarou to gauge his strength, and he wasn’t sure how Harumi factored into that equation. He figured her participation was a call best left to the princess.

“Let’s assume that Harumi-san’s contribution to the sword’s power is part of our baseline. After all, Signaltin is an important part of the Blue Knight’s image,” she decided.

“Then let’s do things like usual, Sakuraba-senpai.”

“Okay, I’ll do my best.”

“Hey! What about us?” Sanae whined.

“I’ll take the opportunity to learn about everyone else’s strengths when I get the chance,” Nefilforan explained.

“Okay!”

Strictly speaking, if Harumi was factored into the Blue Knight’s baseline

strength, then the other girls hypothetically should have been as well. In practice, however, the group often split up to fight. It was more realistic to use just Harumi, who was often partnered with Koutarou explicitly because of her powers over Signaltin.

“All right... Sorry for keeping you waiting. I’m ready now.”

Nefilforan once more raised her spear and leveled it at Koutarou. She too now donned a set of armor. It was a power suit that looked and functioned much like Koutarou’s, but hers was designed explicitly for battle. Since it didn’t double as a control for a spaceship, it had increased power and performance. It was clearly made to be used with the large, heavy greatspear in Nefilforan’s hands. In other words, she was armed to the teeth now herself.

“I guess I had better get my act together. This is going to be quite a fight.”

A single glance at Nefilforan in her armor told Koutarou this fight would be different. The princess was not to be underestimated. She was far greater than anything he’d expected.

“You can tell?” she asked.

“I can sense residual spiritual energy, the byproduct of intense experiences, in your armor and greatspear. In other words, I can tell you’ve fought and trained hard with them. I’d have to be a fool to think I have an easy fight ahead of me. Especially after our bout with training weapons just now.”

“So you saw right through me, did you? I would have preferred to strike before you were any the wiser.”

Nefilforan had indeed put in intense practice with her armor and greatspear. That was simply how the Glendad family trained. Moreover, she had a wealth of real combat experience. Her crusade to stomp out the last of Vandarion’s faction was but a fraction of it. She’d bested everything from alien creatures to criminal organizations, and traces of each and every fight lingered on her armor. Her greatspear was also imbued with her spiritual energy from frequent use just the same way Signaltin was. Koutarou thought it might even be strong enough to vanquish a ghost.

“As expected, Your Highness, you are a worthy opponent.”

“I am the proud daughter of a royal family of martial artists, after all. I have a reputation to uphold.”

Clank!

Nefilforan struck a mighty battle stance. She was primed and ready for combat. The light in her eyes rivaled even Theia’s fierce desire to win.

“I understand your position. As indicated by my insignia, I too have a reputation to defend.”

“We both carry a heavy burden.”

With those final words, the expression on Nefilforan’s face changed. All traces of kindness were overridden by determination. She was no longer a princess, but Regimental Commander Nefilforan.

“Sakuraba-senpai, let’s do this!”

“Right!”

The first one to make a move this time was Koutarou. After calling out to Harumi, he rushed forward far faster than before. Since he had no way of telling just how strong Nefilforan was when fully equipped, letting her take the initiative here was dangerous.

She really is impressive...

Koutarou concentrated his spiritual energy in his eyes and could distinctly see Nefilforan’s intent to attack. He visualized a line. No, there were several of them—each thin, focused, and glowing like the rapid fire of a beam cannon. Nefilforan clearly wouldn’t hesitate to attack. She had good aim and pinpoint focus. Koutarou only knew one other person who attacked so decisively, and that was Theia. Not even the sniper the other day had been able to string together multiple determined attacks like this. In other words, Nefilforan was at least as much of a threat. And in reality, likely a far greater one. Koutarou would have to fight her every bit as earnestly as he did Theia, or else he would be in real trouble.

“Hey... Koutarou might actually lose,” Sanae commented when she realized the same thing.

When those words left her mouth, the other girls watching the fight unfold all looked shocked. The only one who wasn't surprised by this news was Nana, who'd already sensed it for herself.

"What do you mean, Sanae-chan?!" Shizuka asked frantically.

"Um, the trajectory of one of her potential attacks is slightly different than the others, and I don't think Koutarou can see it. Maybe he could if she wasn't using a spear."

Koutarou's spirit sight was effectively an inferior version of Sanae's, and Sanae herself could only just barely make out the anomaly. If Koutarou didn't pick up on it somehow, she could foresee it being his downfall.

"Let's just wait and see what he does," she said. "I'm kind of looking forward to it."

"You don't seem too worried, Sanae-chan."

"It makes me happy that Koutarou's so strong, but what's so bad about him having weaknesses too? We'll just have to protect him ourselves!"

"Yeah... You're right."

With that, Koutarou and Nefilforan's fight began in earnest. They closed in on each other at rapid speeds, and Koutarou brought his sword down. Nefilforan moved to block it with her spear... but Signaltin had the power of Harumi's magic and Koutarou's armor behind it. It should have been unstoppable.

Clang!

Yet contrary to Koutarou's expectations, Nefilforan's greatspear still managed to block it. He was utterly shocked, if not outright impressed.

"Wow, Your Highness!"

"I didn't come into this fight unprepared!"

Koutarou wasn't the only fighter utilizing the strength of their armor. Nefilforan had been especially clever with hers.

"Aha!" he proclaimed when he realized the trick. "You narrowed your distortion field!"

“That’s right!”

Nefilforan had concentrated her distortion field on her greatspear. The field was normally projected around a fighter to protect them, but the standard barrier wouldn’t have been enough to defend against Signaltin. It was too broad and too thin, so Nefilforan had maximized its defensive potential by focusing it in one specific place. She’d chosen her greatspear, leaving her no choice but to use her weapon to block. It was a risky gamble and a great feat of strength, but she’d done it with ease and grace.

“Hyaaaaah!”

She then used the power of her armor to spin with great force, pushing Koutarou away with the haft of her spear as she did. She had him right where she wanted him now, and she didn’t hesitate to strike.

“So this is what fighting a *real* master is like!” Koutarou exclaimed.

He seemed to be enjoying himself in spite of the precarious situation he was in. This intrigued Nefilforan.

“Are you suggesting you’ve fought someone similar before?!” she asked as she attacked.

She launched thrust after thrust, far faster and more powerful than ever before. Koutarou responded in kind, deftly blocking each one as he answered her.

“The young CEO of DKI had a robot that could block like you—by focusing its barrier on its blade and anticipating my attacks! I didn’t honestly think a person would be able to do it!”

Koutarou was talking about Elexis’s Warlord, which had the ability to concentrate its barrier on its beam knife to increase its strength severalfold. It would then predict Koutarou’s attacks and block them with the enhanced knife. Koutarou had thought only a machine was capable of such a feat, but Nefilforan was proving him wrong. He was thrilled to see that Forthorthian royalty was so incredible.

“Satomi-kun, don’t you think we should switch things up?!” Harumi called.

She was hurriedly preparing an enhancement spell, believing it would be better for Koutarou to focus on speed over power against Nefilforan. Koutarou, however, shook his head.

“It would be dangerous to do that now! Wait until I get a little more distance!”

“O-Okay!”

Koutarou was worried a sudden increase in speed would throw him off in such a close-quarters fight. It would be like abruptly changing gears while driving, and he was quite certain Nefilforan would take advantage of it. As such, he wanted to gain some distance before trying anything, but...

“Not so fast!”

“Whoa!”

Nefilforan saw what he was trying to do, and thus increased the fury of her attacks to keep him pinned down. If she gave Koutarou half a chance, she knew he’d slip away from her and Harumi would cast a spell. She needed to make a decisive move before that. If she wanted to win, it would have to be here and now... and she *desperately* wanted to win.

“Tch... Not good...”

Clash! Clang!

Koutarou had his hands full with Nefilforan’s onslaught. He could see where each and every attack was coming, but it was all he could do just to follow them. Her speed and accuracy were terrifying. She then began chaining attacks together in a way that made them almost impossible to read. She was relying on muscle memory and reflex, which left Koutarou struggling to keep up with swordsmanship alone.

Blow after blow was steadily getting through his defenses. He was relying on Harumi and his armor to protect him, but the sheer force of Nefilforan’s spear was overwhelming. He wouldn’t make it for much longer if things kept up at this rate. She was gradually wearing him down. His AI was already blaring warnings about the barrier’s integrity.

“Alert: Distortion field is down to 30 percent energy. Calculations suggest this fight is disadvantageous. Retreat is advised.”

“Just focus on defending!”

“As you wish, my lord.”

When Nefilforan heard the warning from Koutarou’s armor, she decided it was time to finish the fight.

“I’ve got you now!” she cried as her greatspear flashed yellow.

Her armor was generating a high-voltage current, which it was then channeling directly into the tip of her weapon. Koutarou had mostly been managing to block her attacks so far, but just touching her weapon now would mean game over. One direct hit would collapse his barrier for sure—and Nefilforan knew it.

“Are you trying to kill me, Your Highness?!”

“You knew this would be a serious fight!”

“Yes! Yes, I did! But not *this* serious!”

Unable to block any longer, Koutarou had no choice but to flee Nefilforan’s spear. She gave chase, however, slowly but surely closing the distance between them.

“Satomi-kun, you can use your sword now!”

“Thank you, Sakuraba-senpai!”

When Harumi called out to him, Koutarou suddenly switched tactics again and caught Nefilforan’s spear with his sword... yet there was no shock. Harumi had strategically cast a spell to protect him from exactly that.

“Hyah!”

Seeing an opportunity, Nefilforan let go of her spear with her left fist and swung it at Koutarou. This fluid transition from a thrust to a punch was a signature of the Glendad family’s fighting style. A spear was weak in close combat due to its range, so the Glendads had developed a few techniques to compensate for that. Nefilforan also had her armor on her side, which

concentrated a distortion field around her clenched fist. It wouldn't be as effective as attacking with her spear, but her punch would still pack quite a wallop. Moreover, she intentionally swung at Koutarou's blind spot.

"Whoa, it's just one thing after another with you!"

As such, he was late to see it coming. He'd only noticed it because he could read Nefilforan's aura. Otherwise, the fight might have ended right then and there. Harumi was too far away to do anything about it, so Koutarou would have to defend himself here. But if Nefilforan was going to pull out all the stops, then so was he.

"How about this?!"

Koutarou poured his soul into his left fist, which began generating flames at an explosive rate. The Blue Knight's armor, after all, was outfitted with a special gauntlet. With it, he could convert his spiritual energy into either fire or lightning, and he'd chosen the former to assault Nefilforan.

"Tch, of course! The legendary gauntlet!"

With fire rushing at her, even the stalwart Nefilforan relented. Worried about being both burned and blinded, she instinctively jumped back to protect herself—an opportunity Koutarou didn't fail to seize.

"Take this!"

He lunged right after her. Like with the mistake he'd made earlier, she should be defenseless midair, but...

"Not bad, Lord Veltlion! But I'm not done yet!"

Pew, pew, pew!

Several beams suddenly shot out from the tip of her spear. The weapon itself looked traditional enough, but it was an advanced piece of Forthorthian technology. As a last resort, it even doubled as a beam cannon. This was the strange attack Sanae had detected among the others earlier, and as she predicted, Koutarou never saw it coming.

"Whoa!"

He activated his emergency thrusters to narrowly escape the beams, but he

wouldn't have made it without Harumi's help. She'd cast a support spell to enhance his reaction time.

"You're wide open, Lord Veltlion!"

Pew, pew, pew!

Nefilforan's assault didn't stop. Before Koutarou could do anything else, more beams were headed his way. The tables had turned on him in an instant, as he was now the one powerless against an incoming attack midflight.

"Good thing for me the Silver Princess of this age is just as skilled as she ever was in the past!"

"Heed my call and rise, spirits of the air! Form a swirling wall to repel any arrow, any foe! Wind Shield!"

Harumi's hair shone silver as she chanted her spell, which created a sturdy shield for Koutarou. Rather than use it to defend himself, however... he kicked off of it and changed his trajectory midair. He whizzed past Nefilforan's beams, which sailed on to scorch the roof of the training room.

I've lost...

In that instant, Nefilforan realized her defeat. Koutarou had dodged her beams, but he wasn't on the defensive. No, he was currently flying toward her with his sword held fast in both hands. Nefilforan was still holding her greatspear like a cannon, braced from firing. There was no way she could switch to a defensive posture in time.

"...I surrender, Lord Veltlion..."

"You really are strong, Princess Nefilforan. If this had been one on one, I would've lost."

Koutarou stopped his swing short and landed right in front of Nefilforan. Had this been actual combat, he could have finished her off just now. She was summarily defeated, and she was keenly aware of it. However...

That was quite fun. This incredible man... He truly is the Blue Knight.

Nefilforan wasn't terribly upset by her loss. She'd wanted to win, but somewhere deep down, she was also rooting for Koutarou. All Forthorthians

were the same at heart in that regard. They believed the Blue Knight was the strongest in all the universe. No matter the foe, he would come out victorious.

Greeting the victorious Koutarou upon his return was a rather cocky Theia. She stood with her arms proudly crossed, and her breathing was ragged from all the excitement... but she looked pleased.

“Good work, Koutarou! You have my praise!”

“What are you acting so big-headed for?”

“How many times are you going to make me say it? Your victories are my victories.”

“Says the girl who’s always trying to beat me into the ground...”

“Tut! Those are two entirely different matters.”

“Talk about selfish.”

Still in high spirits, Theia helped Koutarou disarm. She lovingly took his swords, insignia, and mantle, all of which she put away with great care. While she was doing that, Koutarou’s armor disengaged and allowed him to step out.

“Good work, old pal,” he said.

“It is an honor to be of use, Your Excellency,” the AI responded as it returned the suit to its default position.

Koutarou had been battling alongside his armor for two years now. He knew it wasn’t strictly necessary, but he couldn’t help talking to it every now and then—especially after a good fight. Meanwhile, Nefilforan disengaged from her own armor and approached Koutarou from behind.

“Lord Veltlion.”

“Princess...”

“Thank you again for your cooperation,” she said with another formal salute.

“Did you get what you needed?”

“Yes, this is very useful for reference.”

Nefilforan now had a clear understanding of how strong Koutarou was, both as himself and as the Blue Knight. On his own, he was as good as any well trained knight. But in his armor... he truly was legendary. This information would be invaluable in future security and strategy planning. There was one lingering question on her mind, however.

“I thought I noticed while we were fighting, Lord Veltlion... Were you somehow able to tell where my spear would be coming from?”

Only a keen-eyed professional soldier like Nefilforan would have picked up on that. She'd watched Koutarou carefully for chances to strike, and she saw him consistently shift his posture and his blade to catch her attacks. It was like he beat her to the punch every single time. That was why she'd fallen back on her spear's reach and speed to overpower him, but she was still curious about how he'd so accurately been able to read her moves.

“Not always,” he confessed, shaking his head with a smile. Really, the number of attacks he *couldn't* see was a testament to the princess's skill. “I could predict your moves at first, but not after that. Your training really shines through, Princess Nefilforan.”

Koutarou had only been able to see Nefilforan's initial attacks clearly. The aura of the ones that followed were almost invisible. When she fell back on muscle memory, there was very little conscious thought in her attacks. That made them incredibly difficult to pick up. It was a unique phenomenon that set her apart from a natural-born fighter like Theia. It was something that could only be achieved through extreme dedication and hard work.

“I also couldn't really tell the difference between your melee and ranged attacks. Those beams got me good. You whipped those out because you realized I was reading your attacks, didn't you?” Koutarou asked with a bitter smile.

Nefilforan had been looking for an opportunity to fire her beam cannon from the start. And because greatspear thrusts and cannon fire both registered as straight lines, Koutarou hadn't been able to tell them apart. In fact, he hadn't even considered that her weapon was multipurpose... And when Nefilforan realized that in the middle of their fight, she opted to fall back on the surprise

as her finisher instead.

“Yet you were still able to dodge it in the end.”

“Only thanks to Sakuraba-senpai. It was the right attack at the right moment.”

That was how Koutarou truly felt. He hadn't realized she was going to fire until just the moment before, when the tip of her spear charged with light. She would've had him under ordinary circumstances, but Koutarou had extraordinary aid on his side. Nefilforan completely outclassed him in terms of martial experience and fighting strategy.

“You honor me with your praise, Lord Veltlion,” she said with a satisfied look on her face.

The Glendad family had been polishing their techniques for generations. Their style evolved with changing times and technology, which was how the spear-cum-cannon had come to be. Nefilforan had nearly gotten the better of the Blue Knight with it, too. She felt like she could hold her head high as a Glendad.

“Yeah, that was close. I noticed from the start though!” Sanae bragged.

“Ah, so that's what you meant when you said that Satomi-kun might lose,” Shizuka remarked.

“But he didn't! Eeheehee.”

Sanae was pleased, if not proud. Even though she'd known it was a possibility Koutarou might lose, she'd still wanted him to win. She was doubly happy it was her power that had protected him.

“You surprised me yourself, Lord Veltlion, when you jumped in the air like that,” Nefilforan continued.

She'd never anticipated that Koutarou would avoid her beam attack by jumping around it midair. The trick had caught her completely off guard, ultimately spelling her defeat.

“Oh, that? I often use barriers as footing.”

“I see... The Glendad family does its best to stay on the cutting edge of warfare, but it seems there are things even we can still learn.”

Nefilforan had felt certain of victory when she fired her cannon, yet Koutarou had managed to overcome with his wits. *Of course* a distortion field could be used as footing in the air. Nefilforan had lost in a battle of imagination, first and foremost. That wasn't an utter defeat, however. This was information she could use to her advantage in the future, and she was quite certain her family would be interested in it as well.

"Don't get the wrong idea. I didn't win with some kind of evolved fighting style. It was all teamwork," Koutarou said with a small smile and a glance behind him.

Harumi had done it today, but Maki was actually the inventor of the move. She'd read his mind, understood his heart, and given him exactly what he needed in the heat of battle... It was the very definition of teamwork—something they could only accomplish by believing in each other and pressing forward, just like today. As Koutarou said, today's victory was a team effort. Harumi and Maki both smiled when they heard that.

"I'm honored to be a part of your team from now on, then."

Nefilforan had come to Earth to join forces with Koutarou and company. She wanted to be able to help and support him the same way Harumi did, even if it wouldn't be easy.

"I look forward to fighting alongside you, Princess Nefilforan."

"Likewise."

Koutarou was grateful for her aid. He now knew firsthand just how capable she was, and she had an entire regiment to back her up. That was a welcome boon to Koutarou and the girls, who were currently quite short on manpower.

"Oh, and... Lord Veltlion..."

"Yes?"

"Pardon the imposition, b-but, um... Would it be all right if I took a picture with you?"

"Your Highness?!"

"Listen, Koutarou. Nefi's as much of a history buff as I am. She's only managed

to reign it in all this time because she's so serious and proper."

"Really? Heh. Well, Your Highness, if it's a picture you want... we just so happen to have an excellent photographer right here."

"I-I was also hoping you and Harumi-san would sign this flag of Alaia-sama's..."

"Anything else?"

"That'll do... for now..."

"Then, Nalfa-san, would you mind taking a picture for us?"

"Sure thing!"

If all Nefilforan wanted in return for her help was a commemorative photograph and an autograph, Koutarou would gladly play along. He and the other girls were simply happy to have a powerful new ally in their ranks.

Theia hadn't waited for Nefilforan's arrival for personal reasons; it was simply because she and the others couldn't move on Ralgwin alone. Theia was chiefly on Earth as part of a diplomatic mission, so she didn't have the soldiers or resources to spare on an offensive operation. Without Nefilforan's regiment, an attack on an enemy base would be nigh impossible.

"But you're still not supposed to have proper military forces here, right? What excuse did you have to use to justify bringing Princess Nefilforan over, Theia?"

Indeed, the Forthorthian delegation had come to Earth to establish friendly relations. As such, bringing in a heavily armed detachment without just reason wasn't a good look. It would most likely be presumed an invasion.

"Well, we had timing on our side. Since more transfer students and personnel will be arriving soon, doesn't it make sense for us to increase our guard here?"

"Indeed, Lord Veltlion. Half of my regiment is formally assigned to security detail for future students and teachers, and the other half is formally assigned to guard the spaceport."

"Oh, I see. That'll mean the dorms are all safe and sound for sure. And I guess it would be kind of boring if only Earthlings were guarding the port..."

In the Forthorthian Imperial Army, a regiment consisted of 2,500 soldiers. Half of Nefi's regiment, then, would be divided and sent to various schools and organizations around Japan. The other half would be sent entirely to the spaceport, which was a far larger facility with unique needs and security. The port, for example, required Forthorthian pilots and crafts for the transfer of goods, people, supplies, and more.

"Still... it feels like a bit of a waste," Koutarou said with a wry smile.

Hearing that, Nefilforan looked at him with a dubious expression. She wondered if something about the plan wasn't agreeable to him.

"Is there some kind of problem, Lord Veltlion?" she asked.

"I only mean that it's a shame to put you on guard duty, even as a formality. Normally princesses are the ones being guarded and not the other way around," he replied.

"Veltlion, have you forgotten that both Theiamillis-san and I are princesses too?" Clan cut in.

"Of course not. You two are just..."

"Just what?"

"I dunno."

"How do you not know?!"

"Nefi and the rest of the Glendad family are nervous about their longtime rivals, the Wenrankas, outdoing them," Theia explained. "I told you about that before, didn't I?"

"I remember. But couldn't you come up with something other than guard duty for her?"

"We're doing this precisely because there *was* no other option. Moreover, I want to avoid dishonesty if it can at all be helped."

"So it's politics..."

Of course they could have come up with a different cover story. They could have even smuggled 2,500 armed soldiers to Earth. But that wasn't what Theia

wanted. She didn't want to lie to the Japanese government. It was true that a certain amount of lying was unavoidable in politics, but she and her mother both believed it was best to be honest whenever possible.

"I'm glad you understand," Theia continued. "Now, thanks to what we've accomplished, we have a regiment at our disposal. I'd like to take this opportunity to attack the main base of Vandarion's faction here on Earth."

In truth, Nefilforan and her forces had several jobs on Earth, but first and foremost among them was dealing with Ralgwin. Theia had been patient all this time, but she was now eager to get down to business.

"That's why I've called you all here. I'd like to consult your insight and wisdom," she announced as she looked at everyone in turn.

She, Koutarou, the other girls, Nefilforan, and Nana were all currently seated in the Hazy Moon's conference room. As this was serious business, Nalfa and Kotori weren't around today.

"How much do we know about the enemy's base?" Nana asked first.

Her primary concern was a matter of intelligence. How they planned this attack would depend entirely on the information at their disposal.

"Ruth, if you will," Theia urged.

"Yes. Everyone, please have a look at this. This is the data we've gathered based on the information that Maki-san retrieved."

Ruth tapped the panel in front of her to bring up several holographs. In the middle was a 3D model of Ralgwin's base, surrounded by various specs and other numbers.

"Wow, we've already got this much?" Koutarou remarked. "If I recall, you said you only saw the area around the entrance, didn't you, Aika-san?"

The data displayed far exceeded the reports Maki had initially brought back upon discovering the base. Koutarou wasn't sure where the rest of the information had come from, so he turned to Maki with a puzzled look on his face.

"That's correct. Past the gate was a waterway, and past that some kind of

dock... I also saw these maintenance and warehouse areas myself,” Maki explained while pointing at the hologram.

The areas she indicated were only a small portion of the map on display. Still puzzled, Koutarou turned to Clan for answers.

“How did you find all this?”

When it came to advanced investigation without getting caught, Clan was their MVP. Koutarou had correctly guessed that she was the one to uncover all the additional information.

“I just used the Hazy Moon and some unmanned scouts. I was erring on the side of caution with only the safest methods of reconnaissance, however, so there are still plenty of unknowns.”

“Really? This looks pretty in-depth to me.”

“The most difficult part of the mission was locating the base itself. Once we had that, the Hazy Moon practically did the rest. Effectively, this is all thanks to Maki.”

The detailed information Clan had been able to provide was the work of extremely advanced instruments she had aboard the Hazy Moon. Her observational devices were superior to any other royal-class battleship. She even had equipment that allowed her to scan underground, so once she knew where the enemy base was, sizing it up was a piece of cake. She’d known they had a few days to wait before Nefilforan’s arrival, and she’d spent her time wisely. The result included the detailed maps and other data on display now—and none of it would have been possible without Maki.

“But, as you would expect, there’s a lot we can’t determine from the outside,” Clan said as she pointed to several places on the model.

They were grayed out as an indication that their function within the facility was uncertain. Forthorthian reconnaissance tech was extremely advanced, and so were methods to thwart it. Even on Earth, something as simple as a thick metal wall—or several—could make it difficult to scan a room from the outside. As such, Clan had been forced to guess the purpose of several areas based on size, placement, and other details. For example, a medium-sized room with

several small booths lined up was most likely a restroom. She'd only been able to get a detailed glance inside select locations.

"That being the case," she explained, "the areas we *can't* see inside of are the most suspect."

"And you composited this all into one big map, huh?" Koutarou remarked.

With more time and resources, Ralgwin very likely would have set up his base so that it was completely impenetrable even to Forthorthian technology. The construction of the facility, however, was essentially a rush job. He'd only been able to afford extra security for the most critical locations. His first line of defense was hoping that the base was never discovered at all... so Maki had singlehandedly jeopardized everything.

"By the way, how did you make it all that way, Aika-san?" Koutarou couldn't help wondering.

"I snuck into the storage bay of the combat ship they were using and laid low. It wasn't particularly big, so I encountered people from time to time, but I dealt with that using magic," she explained.

Koutarou and the girls had clashed with Ralgwin's men underground the other day, and Maki's objective for the fight was tailing the enemy forces after the fact. They were panicked by their sudden defeat in battle, so retreating posthaste was their top priority. Maki was able to take advantage of the confusion and climb aboard their ship without notice.

It was a risky move as she was stuck there once the ship departed, but she'd quietly kept her cool. She found an out-of-the-way hiding spot in the cargo hold, where there fortunately wasn't much traffic. The timing worked out in her favor in that regard; there weren't many people picking up or dropping off supplies after battle. All she had to do was sit tight and wait. She even had her indigo magic to fall back on when it was absolutely necessary. That much was a breeze.

"And what about after you got inside the base?" Koutarou asked.

"I hid inside a weapons crate that was transported straight to the base warehouse."

“That was bold.”

“It was convenient for slipping through security.”

“I guess that makes sense...”

Maki had successfully stowed away on the combat craft with very little magic, but sneaking through rigorous security checkpoints would have been a much bigger ordeal. As an expert in the field, Maki knew she needed to conserve her mana... meaning the most efficient way to get inside would be not to use any magic at all. Hiding away in a crate was perfect.

“But that was about as far as I got. I was worried about getting out safely, so I left after briefly investigating the warehouse and maintenance areas.”

“Yeah, leaving the rest to Clan was probably the right choice.”

Maki would’ve had to expend a great deal of mana to safely investigate more inside the base, so she’d instead prioritized safely getting out. At that point, her job—locating the base—was done. Her secondary objective was simply escaping without notice. Being discovered by the enemy at that juncture would have blown the whole mission. In the worst scenario, Ralgwin would abandon his base and move his entire operation elsewhere. There was also the matter of what he might do with Maki if he found her. She wasn’t personally interested in finding out, so she’d promptly wrapped up her mission and retreated to room 106 while covering her tracks.

“Wow, I don’t think me or Theia could’ve done that even *with* magic,” Sanae remarked in awe.

“Agreed,” Theia said with a nod.

“I’m sure I’d stand out too much. Teehee.”

“Agreed.”

“That’s not something you two should be proud of,” Koutarou quipped.

“We’re just talking about how amazing Maki is!”

Caution and subtlety were arts lost on both Sanae and Theia. Neither of them were cut out for stealth missions. Flashy battles were more their style. That discrepancy gave them a profound respect for Maki and the good work she did.

“They’re right. Thanks for a job well done, Aika-san.”

“No, this wasn’t anything special... I just happen to be good at this kind of thing.”

“And it would be terrible of me to take advantage of that. Thanks is the least I owe you. You should be proud, Aika-san.”

“R-Right...”

There, Maki smiled brightly. She could tell he was reflecting on both of their reserved natures right now. And if he was willing to reach out to her with thanks, then she would meet him in the middle and accept. Today, at the very least, she was smiling with pride.

“Now, moving on to the main topic...”

With the background info for their mission covered, Koutarou broached the real purpose of their meeting today: determining a strategy for the raid on Ralgwin’s base. Time was of the essence, so they needed to act swiftly.

“Does anyone have any ideas?” he asked the group.

“I’m sure Theia-chan wants to beat down their front door,” Shizuka volunteered.

“Indeed, I do,” Theia agreed with a nod. “A true sovereign grabs their enemies by the horns and makes a splendid display of crushing them.”

“I agree, Princess Theiamillis!”

“I knew you would understand, Alunaya-dono!”

“Indeed! You’re a born ruler, no different from me!”

Alunaya was presently in his stuffed animal form, perched atop Shizuka’s shoulder. He excitedly agreed with Theia, as the two of them shared similar ideals about royalty and the “royal” way to handle such situations. Their plans, however, were dashed by the cautious Kiriha, who had a different idea after looking at the model of Ralgwin’s base.

“But their front door is underwater, and the gate itself is pretty thick,” she said. “I believe it would be smarter to go after the exhaust ducts instead.”

Kiriha generally took point in strategy meetings like this, so if she said they should go for an exhaust duct instead of the front door... that would likely end up being what the team did. It was an extremely practical suggestion, after all. Sanae, however, seemed to have some doubts about this plan.

“Say, Kiriha, aren’t exhaust ducts something you’d want to hide?” she asked.

“Certainly.”

“So why are there this many of them on this base? Isn’t that, like, a bad idea?”

Since ducts were potential points of infiltration, Sanae figured the enemy would want as few of them as possible on their base. She couldn’t help wondering, then, why Ralgwin’s seemed to have so many. It was an astute observation on her part.

“It’s actually the other way around, Sanae,” Clan answered on Kiriha’s behalf. “If there were only one duct, it would produce a considerable amount of heat exhaust. But by splitting the load between several of them, the emissions are cut down to negligible levels.”

Whether in space or in an atmosphere, heat signatures were an easy way to discover enemy bases. Ralgwin and his men were also trying to manufacture spiritual energy weaponry, so the heat waste from their facility in particular would be considerable. If they were stationed anywhere away from civilization, they would stick out like a sore thumb. That was why they’d strategically mitigated their signature by dispersing their exhaust among as many ducts as possible. As long as each one only generated as much as a car, boiler, or other commonplace heat source, their base could blend in even in a rural or remote area.

“And that’s gonna backfire on them now, huh?” Sanae said with an impish grin.

“We can take advantage of it, yes,” replied Kiriha. “Ralgwin clearly knew what he was doing when he designed the base this way, but it gives us plenty of options for entry.”

“So we’ll just use one of these to pop in and say hi, right?”

“That’s the idea,” answered Clan. “But since there are so many, this may very well be a trap.”

She was wary of the plan. It was sound in theory, but they didn’t know everything about the enemy’s base. There were still unknowns.

“That’s true,” Koutarou agreed. “I wouldn’t be surprised if they’ve set up traps.”

Considering Ralgwin’s cunning, it was very likely he’d taken extra precautions—especially with the exhaust ducts, which would be connected to the base’s generator and factory. Those were important assets, and Ralgwin was sure to protect them.

“That said, incorporating traps into the ducts themselves would inhibit the flow of exhaust... It’s more likely he has soldiers stationed at key points,” Clan postulated.

“Hmm, yeah. That sounds like him,” Koutarou said with a sage nod.

“Pardon me, Veltlion... why are you patting my head, exactly?”

“Consider it a crime of opportunity.”

That settled the matter of Sanae’s original question about the ducts, which brought the group to their next point of discussion.

“May I ask something?” said Harumi, raising her hand.

“Go ahead.”

“Thank you, Clan-san. I was curious about why, if the base is underwater, the exhaust vents are on the surface.”

In terms of dissipating heat, water was a better option. Yet by all appearances, Ralgwin was entirely relying on venting heat through the air to the surface. Harumi thought it was strange.

“Another possible trap. Of course, they might be discreetly venting some heat underwater as well. But with a factory in their base, the heat they’re producing is immense. They can’t afford to risk raising the temperature of the lake by venting it all that way.”

“Oh, I see... so they might be using multiple cooling systems.”

An unnaturally heated lake was easily detectable even with Earth’s current technology. A body of water just a few degrees warmer than the air temperature could be picked up by satellite. It was safer and more practical to diffuse the heat via multiple points on land.

“Veltlion, why are you patting my head again?”

“Like I said before, it’s a crime of opportunity.”

“Is this your way of thanking me...?”

“Hardly.”



With that, Koutarou gripped his fingers tightly in a move he liked to call “the iron claw.”

“Ow! Jeez, you really are... heh...”

He considered Clan’s extensive knowledge of traps and trickery a strike against her. He couldn’t bring himself to outright scold her for it under the circumstances. He knew it would bother her and, moreover, that her craftiness was actually a boon right now. But he couldn’t just let it slide, either. His compromise was a congratulatory pat on the head followed by the iron claw.

“Do you think Satomi-kun has any idea he’s acting like her boyfriend right now?” Shizuka whispered to Kiriha.

Kiriha smiled and whispered back, “I wouldn’t have said so before... But now I’m not so sure. It does seem he’s a little more conscious of it now.”

“Heehee. I was thinking the same thing.”

Ever since they’d become third-years, Shizuka felt that Koutarou’s attitude toward the girls had started to change. She felt it even more strongly now as she watched Koutarou lovingly tease Clan.

“Yes, there’s no doubt about it...”

Kiriha felt the same way. It was something all of the girls had been feeling in one way or another. They’d realized that a change was happening within Koutarou. And rather than saying anything to him about it, they simply watched over him as the transformation took place. They would be patient for now. After all, they understood just how much they were asking from him.

After that, Koutarou and the girls spent some time discussing a more detailed plan for the raid. They ultimately decided on using a diversion: Koutarou would approach the front gate and distract the enemy while the real offensive was launched elsewhere.

“And I shall attack from this service tunnel in the back,” Nefilforan volunteered.

The exhaust ducts were tight quarters, making them unsuitable for a large force. She and her unit would need a much larger entrance. But she had

another objective in mind as well...

“That means *we’ll* be the real strike force,” Theia proclaimed.

Theia, a natural-born fighter, had immediately realized that Nefilforan’s intention was a twofold diversion. With her at the rear gate and Koutarou at the front, Ralgwin would surely think he was being pincerred. Thus, while the enemy was distracted, Theia and the other girls could infiltrate from yet another location. Nefilforan’s forces would hopefully be able to keep the heat off of them by drawing guards away from key security locations along the ducts.

“Doesn’t this plan put Princess Nefilforan and her regiment at too much risk?”

Koutarou was worried that Nefilforan would be endangering herself. Kiriha had advocated infiltration via the ducts because the service tunnel was too heavily guarded. It wasn’t quite large enough for a combat craft to travel through, but it had tracks for the transport of goods in and out of the base. There was a checkpoint at its entrance, and preliminary scans indicated weapons were stationed along it at regular intervals. It doubled as an emergency escape route out of the base, so it was as well defended as the front gate. Diversion or not, anyone attacking it would indeed be at serious risk.

“Please don’t worry, Lord Veltlion. This is what I’m here for.”

Despite Koutarou’s worries, Nefilforan confidently accepted the mission. She’d overcome many a dangerous mission in the past. They still didn’t know the full extent of the enemy’s power, but she was prepared for this. Nefilforan and her regiment had come to fight. They were ready to sacrifice whatever they needed to for the sake of victory.

The Raid

Saturday, June 18th

In the dead of night, Koutarou stood at the edge of a lake in the forest waiting for his allies to finish their preparations. His job during the raid would be to attack the base from the front as a diversion... but he wasn't alone.

"Sorry about this, Sun Rangers. You really got the short end of the stick this time."

Koutarou apologized to the five Sun Rangers, who were all in full gear. Even in the dark of the night, their colorful suits were quite vibrant. They were assisting Koutarou's assault on the enemy base alongside imperial troops under Theia's command sent from the delegation. The latter made sense, but in truth, the Sun Rangers had no reason to be involved in this mission. It was Forthorthe's problem... which was precisely why Koutarou and company had requested their help.

"Oh, don't worry. I know it's politics," said Red Shine Kenichi, smiling underneath his mask.

Indeed, the Sun Rangers had agreed to participate in order to legitimize the mission. On paper, the Japanese government had dispatched the Sun Rangers here to investigate a mysterious enemy that was using spiritual energy technology, and they'd requested the Holy Forthorthe Galactic Empire's aid in doing so. It would've been virtually impossible to authorize the other way around given Japan's constitution and laws—there was no way Forthorthe could legally initiate a military movement of their own under the circumstances.

"Don't sweat it. You scratch our backs and we scratch yours, you know?" added Blue Shine Hayato.

The established cooperation between the Sun Rangers and Forthorthe was mutually beneficial for everyone. Forthorthe needed their help for operations like this, and the Sun Rangers needed Forthorthe's help against space-age

forces and large-scale terrorist organizations trying to steal their technology—which was still an ongoing problem.

“That’s true. Even without Ralgwin, I’m sure we have a long battle ahead of us,” conceded Koutarou.

Attempts to purloin Forthorthian technology were still on the rise on Earth. There were entire crime rings trying to break into the trade, and that would continue to be a long-term problem on Earth until cultural exchange reached the point where technology was freely traded without restriction.

“Yeah, it’s a big help to us that you’re so well connected with Forthorthe. Keep it up, okay, Baron-san?” Green Shine Kotaro said half jokingly.

Forthorthe wanted to establish diplomatic relations with Earth because they feared magic and spiritual energy technology being leaked, but first and foremost, their interest in the tiny blue planet stemmed from the fact that it was Koutarou’s homeland. In other words, Earth’s relationship with Forthorthe depended entirely on Koutarou’s relationship with the royal families.

“Please don’t put too much pressure on me,” he said with a bitter smile.

He’d never had any intention of entrenching himself with the royal families of Forthorthe. It was just something that had happened along the way while he was trying to help out his friends. He felt like he was in over his head as far as maintaining political relationships was concerned.

“I’m sure you’ll do just fine, Baron-san. You’ll always get along as long as you remember to be honest with each other,” said Yellow Shine Daisaku.

“You mean like us?” asked Pink Shine Megumi.

“That’s right. You don’t have to do anything special.”

“That’s true. Heehee...”

Daisaku and Megumi had started dating a while back. At first, the other three Shines couldn’t figure out what Daisaku saw in her... but after they started dating, a change came over Megumi. She became less aggressive and unpredictable. Now, there was a calm kindness about her the others had never seen before.

“In that case, I’d be happy if you went on a little bit of a diet. I want you to live a long, healthy life.”

“I’ve never thought about it like that before... All right, I’ll give it a try.”

“Thank you, Daisaku-san.”

“Aww, how nice,” Kenichi cooed.

“Bleh. I can’t take this,” Hayato groaned.

“That’s enough, you two,” Kotaro scolded. “We’ll just have to find that special someone for ourselves.”

Unlike the other Shines, Daisaku had always known that Megumi was a sweet girl underneath all her quirks. He’d just never seen a reason to try to change who she was. As long as she was nice at heart, that was all he cared about. There was an open honesty in their relationship because of it, and Daisaku felt Koutarou would be just fine as long as he could manage the same thing with the princesses.

When Koutarou was done discussing things with the Sun Rangers, the captain of the Imperial Army forces assigned to the mission approached him. It was Orion, who would be acting as Koutarou’s second in command in the battle to come.

“May I say something, Lord Veltlion?”

“What is it, Orion?”

Orion was several years older than Koutarou, but they’d served together during the civil war in Forthorthe. They spoke to one another as old comrades rather than commander and vice commander.

“The people of Forthorthe have never asked anything special of Your Excellency...”

“That’s what makes it so hard. I mean, what’s even normal anymore? Remember when I went to buy ice cream that one time and it caused a huge fuss?”

Upon Vandarion’s defeat, the nation began its restoration efforts. Koutarou

was still in Forthorthe at the time and was once caught sneaking out to an ice cream shop, which then became an overnight tourist destination. There were several other examples of similar things happening while he was there, too.

“That’s just how much Forthorthe adores you, Your Excellency.”

“But imagine how hard that must have been for that shop’s competitors...”

“I heard the CEO of a rival company came to get ice cream there himself.”

“Come on...”

When Koutarou came to understand how much influence he had over the people of Forthorthe, he’d decided to leave before things got out of hand. Little did he realize at the time, however, that his plan would ultimately backfire by endearing him to the citizens even more.

“I’m just not cut out to be a hero. I don’t have it in me to keep up the facade.”

“Then why not just become emperor?”

“Save the jokes, Orion.”

“...I wasn’t really joking, sir...”

“Hmm? Did you say something?”

“I said that no matter what Your Excellency plans to do in the future, we must first win today’s battle.”

“That’s true. It would be catastrophic if we failed here. Let’s do our best.”

“Yes, Your Excellency.”

Theia and Clan had announced to the people of Forthorthe that they would bring back Koutarou as their groom, which raised an important question about who the next emperor of the nation would be. Koutarou technically had a right to the throne, and marrying a princess would only solidify his claim to it. Even if he felt like he’d abdicated all his responsibilities to Theia upon his departure, Forthorthe would never forget the debt it owed him. The citizens, the royal families, and Elfaria especially wouldn’t let the Blue Knight and the sword of kingship get away a second time.

“That’s an awful lot of responsibility, Satomi-kun,” Harumi said with a smile.

She'd been standing off to the side so as not to get in anyone's way, so all eyes fell on her when she spoke up.

"That's why I'm counting on you today, Sakuraba-senpai."

"Let's all do our best together."

Harumi was the final member of Koutarou's team, and the soldiers present were just as fascinated with her. A silver-haired girl wielding the power of Signaltin reminded them of another important figure in Forthorthe's history... particularly when she stood at the Blue Knight's side.

Ralgwin had prudently constructed his base with its entrance in the southern side of a lake, lying in the shadow of the mountain. Koutarou and his team were stationed nearby, and the second team was to the southeast.

"So these are the ducts, huh?" remarked Theia.

"Your Highness, you'll be caught on their sensors if you get any closer," admonished Ruth.

"I'm currently picking up signs of a spiritual energy sensor," added Kiriha. "It seems they're well aware of their weak point now."

"Should we use my magic and the haniwas' stealth mode to get past their surveillance?" asked Maki.

"It's our time to shine again, ho!"

"We've been doing great since becoming knights, ho!"

The girls of room 106 had strategically been divided into two teams that allowed them to cover all their bases: brawn, technology, magic, and spiritual energy. Theia, Ruth, Maki, and Kiriha fulfilled those roles here respectively, while Shizuka, Clan, Yurika, and Sanae did the same for the other team.

"It would be best to neutralize their sensors while leaving their cameras and microphones online," explained Kiriha.

"Understood, ho! Leave this to Flame Knight Karama!"

"And Cat Knight Korama, ho!"

“I’ll send a small drone with you to take care of any hacking,” offered Ruth.

With that, Theia and the girls approached one of the exhaust ducts on the east side of Ralgwin’s base. They were planning on infiltrating from there and launching a surprise attack from within. Step one, of course, was getting inside undetected—and that meant bypassing security.

“I’ll be off, then.”

“Flame Knight Karama will protect you, Maki-chan! Ho!”

“Don’t forget Cat Knight Korama, ho!”

“Heehee, thanks. I’m counting on you two.”

Maki set out with the haniwas and a small rabbit drone. Protected by both magic and spiritual energy technology, she had nothing to fear from the base’s sensors. She also moved carefully so as to avoid notice by the audiovisual surveillance equipment.

“Why does this look like a scene out of some fairy tale?” Theia muttered as she watched Maki go.

A magician with a staff in hand was walking through the forest, attended by two haniwas and a mechanical rabbit. It really did look like something straight out of a fantasy story.



“They do look a little like Maki’s familiars. How amusing,” Kiriha agreed.

The scouting rabbit led the pack, and the haniwas hovered on either side of Maki. They looked like a retinue of animal companions protecting her.

“I-I’m sorry. That wasn’t on purpose...” Ruth said with red cheeks. She’d been the one to choose the drone’s whimsical-looking design.

“I’m not saying it’s a bad thing, Ruth,” replied Theia. “Everyone needs *something*. I don’t hate it, you know?”

Given Theia’s obsession with the Blue Knight’s armor, she couldn’t fault Maki’s magical girl aesthetic. Koutarou’s personal band of knights becoming a non-combat unit was a problem in her eyes, but she had no need to worry about Maki in particular.

“I understand completely. Without it, I wouldn’t have been able to wait for over ten years,” Kiriha said as she pulled something from her bosom and showed it to Ruth.

It was a well-worn hero trading card. Kiriha was obsessed with it, for she’d poured her love and her hope into it for more than a decade. After that, how could she blame Ruth for her whimsy? There was something she was curious about, however, so she approached Ruth and quietly asked...

“You haven’t let Koutarou see it, have you?”

Ruth’s cheeks instantly turned a brighter shade of crimson. She cast her eyes downward, as if to escape Kiriha’s gaze. She’d hit the nail on the head, you see.

“I-I-I haven’t had the chance yet... A-And if Master is going to use it, I’d like it to be more impressive...”

“That’s too bad. I hope you get the chance soon.”

From Kiriha’s perspective, Ruth was the most level-headed member of their group—and by far the most serious. She’d had her suspicions about the rabbit after seeing it, and Ruth had all but confirmed them just now. Ruth was having a hard time sending her rabbit drone into battle with the mighty, legendary Blue Knight. She was hoping for a chance to show it off outside of combat.

“Maki’s signaling us, you two! Seems she’s managed to neutralize the

observation equipment. Let's go!"

"Let's."

"R-Right!"

Putting her girlish fancies aside, Ruth steeled her heart. For the time being, at least, she would put herself forward as a stalwart member of the Satomi knights.

Theia's team was southeast of Koutarou's position, and stationed across from them on the southwest side of the lake were Shizuka, Clan, Sanae, and Yurika. They were preparing to infiltrate from another vent, and they'd stumbled across the same problem: neutralizing the observation equipment. Clan, however, took point for their team on that front.

"All right, that should do it. Let's make our way there while avoiding the surveillance cameras and microphones," she said as she shut down the feed being projected to her glasses.

Dealing with the surveillance was right up her alley. She had drones like Ruth, but hers were specially outfitted with proprietary technology and controllable arms. She'd had Yurika cast several spells on them to cloak them, then sent them in to disable the base's sensors remotely.

The plan had gone off without a hitch, too. Without hesitation, she'd connected a bypass circuit to the sensors' data cables and then begun sending false information through them. The job was done in a matter of minutes. The three girls watching her work found themselves applauding as she wrapped up, but there was one thing bothering Sanae.

"Hey, Glasses, why didn't you take out the mics and cameras too?"

With all the technology at Clan's disposal, Sanae felt that should have been a cakewalk.

"Because people can verify the information from those with their own senses. We're totally reliant on the data from other types of sensors, however."

For example, human beings had no way of detecting electromagnetism.

Devices designed to do so forwarded pure data to their operators, whereas devices like cameras and microphones relayed pictures and sounds that had to be interpreted. They could be analyzed by AI as well, but generally speaking, there was a human operator monitoring security feeds.

And that was precisely why they couldn't be messed with carelessly. If a video or audio feed suddenly cut off or changed abruptly, it would raise all kinds of alarms. Moreover, it was a lot of work to replace them with false feeds since they relayed more than just raw data.

"Huh? I don't get it..."

"Think of it this way, Sanae-chan. Most sensors churn out numbers, but cameras send videos and microphones send sound, right? Since people watch and listen to those closely, you can't just mess with them... right, Clan-san?"

"Yes, precisely."

"Jeez, Glasses, why didn't you just say that from the start?"

"I thought I was explaining it simply enough... Regardless, thank you, Shizuka."

"Sure. You and Yurika-chan have done all the work so far, so it's the least I can do."

"Say, Yurika," called Sanae. "Did *you* get why we didn't stop the cameras and mics?"

"Nuh-uh. Not until Shizuka-san explained it just now."

"Hey, that's my girl!"

Once surveillance was under control, Shizuka and the girls stealthily approached the duct. They stayed in the cameras' blind spots and moved slowly so they wouldn't be heard.

"What do we do now?" asked Sanae.

"Open the vent so we can get inside," answered Clan.

"How? Get Shizuka-san to yank it off?" asked Yurika.

“I suppose so...”

“So it’s finally my turn, huh? Here goes nothing!”

Shizuka seemed overly excited—and overly loud—for the situation, but the girls had little to worry about thanks to Yurika’s magic. She’d now cast a spell to hush the sounds they made, meaning they could actually move and talk normally.

“Gee, this thing sure is hot,” remarked Yurika.

“It *is* an exhaust vent,” Clan said plainly.

“Glasses, if it’s this hot on the outside, are we gonna be okay inside?”

“You don’t have to worry. We have technology on our side. Do you recall how Theiamillis-san went through reentry with a distortion field?”

“Oh, yeah, back in space? If she was okay then, surely we’ll be just fine here too.”

During the coup, Theia, Koutarou, and Yurika had accidentally entered Planet Alaia’s atmosphere without any protection. They were subjected to temperatures thousands of degrees high, and they’d managed to survive between Koutarou and Theia’s barriers with the help of Yurika’s magic. And surely, Sanae thought, crawling through an exhaust duct wouldn’t be anywhere near as bad as that.

“I don’t ever want to go through that again...” moaned Yurika.

“Yeah, you almost got burned to a crisp, didn’t you?” giggled Sanae.

“Clan-san, are you sure we’ll be okay?!”

“Yes, we’ll be fine with just a barrier! Now pipe down unless you want the microphones to hear you.”

“Augh...”

Yurika was the only one skeptical of their safety. She stared at the vent with tears in her eyes.

I-I’ll use cooling magic too just in case! Yeah!

It wasn’t that Yurika didn’t trust Clan; she simply knew from experience that

bad luck was always around the corner. And since Koutarou wasn't here, she was being extremely cautious. In stark contrast, the bold Shizuka wasn't worried at all. Unlike the other girls, she didn't feel the slightest bit hot—and she had an inkling as to why.

“Uncle, are you protecting me from the heat?” she asked, looking at the stuffed dragon on her shoulder.

“Indeed. I could fall straight into lava without breaking a sweat. This is nothing!”

Alunaya flashed his fangs with a proud laugh. As expected of the Fire Dragon Emperor, his natural resistance to heat and flame was peerless. He belched superheated plasma, after all.

“Yeah, it would be pretty funny if the Fire Dragon Emperor burned to death, huh? Talk about a blow to your pride.”

Shizuka saw a certain humor to the situation and couldn't help joking around a little. Alunaya found it amusing as well and smiled back at her.

“You could say that again! If that ever happens to me, please keep the cause of my death a secret.”

His grin was one of absolute confidence. He was quite certain no flame would ever be his demise. Of course, given his current appearance, it certainly didn't *look* that way to Shizuka.

“If that happens, I'll be a goner too, you know?”

Under Alunaya's influence, Shizuka had become quite resistant to heat and fire herself. Thanks to that, she volunteered to be the first one to venture inside the duct. It expelled heat through an iron grate fitted onto the end, but Shizuka would have no problem getting that off with her draconic strength. There was one last thing to do, however, before the operation began... and that was to wait for Nefilforan and her troops to get into position at the rear service tunnel.

“Again, I want all of you to proceed carefully. If we're discovered here, the entire mission will be jeopardized,” Nefilforan pronounced.

She and her forces were currently cloaked within the dark forest as they

approached the tunnel. With three companies of infantry, she had a total of 480 men under her command. Kiriha and Nefilforan had carefully calculated that number, believing it was all they'd need to succeed here.

It wasn't, strictly speaking, the best possible force. But had they used more troops, they would have significantly increased the odds of them being discovered in their approach—and that was *with* science, spiritual energy, and magic on their side. They were toeing the line even now as they advanced, moving oh-so cautiously as to avoid notice.

“Your Highness, we’re about to reach the E line,” announced Nana.

She was a special unit on this team. She’d come to Earth as Nefilforan’s guide, and was now doubling as her adjutant in battle.

“Please don’t call me ‘Your Highness’ during a mission, Nana-san.”

“Heh, pardon me... We’ve now crossed the E line, commander.”

Despite serving Nefilforan, Nana was older and had seen far more in the way of battle. It was her intent to use her experience to support Nefilforan where necessary. She was actually worried her young commander was a little *too* straitlaced—the exact opposite reason she worried about Yurika.

“I see. Then we’ll commence the attack as planned.”

If all went according to plan, they would begin their assault once they were in position. And if they were discovered prematurely, they would begin by launching a charge. The deciding factor between the two was what Nana had referred to as the E line. Now that they’d crossed it without being spotted, chances of their assault succeeding were high even if they were spotted from here. Nefilforan still wanted the surprise initiative, however, so she continued to proceed cautiously. Lives were at stake here.

“You look pleased, commander.”

Now that their attack was imminent, a change came over Nefilforan’s face. It was subtle. Something most anyone would miss. Nana had only picked up on it because she was remarkably observant.

“Er, th-that’s not...”

“You don’t have to hide it. Satomi-san holds a special place in the hearts of all Forthorthians, you know?”

“Y-Yes, I suppose there’s a lot on my mind because of it... I want to make sure I show off my good side, be of use to him, and leave my own little mark in future history books...”

The Glendads were adamant about making up for what they hadn’t been able to contribute during the civil war, but Nefilforan was personally interested in making a good impression on Koutarou. She wanted to be a footnote in the long chapter of the Blue Knight’s success in the annals of history.

“I see... So you admire Satomi-san, do you?” Nana mused.

Nefilforan knew she wouldn’t be by Koutarou’s side for very long, so she wanted to stand tall while she could. The Blue Knight was like the walking pinnacle of chivalry, a role model for all. And because of that, Nefilforan saw him as something akin to an older brother or mentor.

“Please, that’s enough...” she begged.

“Oh, I understand how you feel. I’m no stranger to it myself,” Nana assured her.

Nana’s first meeting with Koutarou had left a big impression on her over ten years ago. She’d detected someone using necromancy—a notoriously evil magic—in the mountains and rushed to the scene. She had feared the worst, but arrived to find Koutarou channeling the young Kiriha’s late mother for one last goodbye. That was a profound encounter for Nana. Seeing that even necromancy could be used for good, she’d wondered ever since if perhaps there were exceptions to Rainbow Heart’s stricture on the personal use of magic as well.

“Spare me, Nana-san. We’re in the middle of a mission.”

“Right. I’m sorry, commander.”

“Any more will affect morale, so try to focus from here on.”

“Of course. Let’s talk more when this is over.”

A personal conversation between Nefilforan and Nana was one thing, but

they couldn't afford to distract the soldiers that overheard them. Nana was a veteran and understood that well, so she turned toward her objective with renewed seriousness. A stern look overtook both her face and Nefilforan's.

“As expected, this area is heavily guarded.”

The first to detect the enemy was Nana. Part of her prodigious talent was thanks to her excellent senses. She signaled her allies to stop, then crept behind a nearby tree to get a better look at the enemy. Up ahead were two soldiers in imperial uniforms... but they were far from allies. They were Ralgwin's men patrolling the outskirts of the base.



“What do you think is going to happen to us?” one asked.

“Who knows? But Ralgwin-sama is an outstanding leader, so no matter what he does, it won’t be anything half-hearted,” the other responded.

“Maybe we should’ve made a run for it when we heard about Vandarion-sama’s defeat...”

“And get hunted down like the others? Ralgwin-sama is really something.”

“Hahh... Seriously, what’s going to happen to us?”

“Dunno...”

The two patrolmen surveyed their surroundings as they went. But fortunately, thanks to Nana’s early warning, Nefilforan’s forces quietly held back in the distance. The patrolmen thus continued on their way without ever noticing them.

“Phew... We should be fine now. The next patrol won’t be here for another fifteen minutes, so we have until then.”

After the patrol passed by, Nana left the tree and returned to Nefilforan. When she did, Nefilforan silently signaled her troops to begin their advance again.

“I honestly thought that would be it for us. No wonder Ralgwin would want magic...”

All was well, but Nefilforan still looked stern. The two-man patrol was small, but they were monitoring the area with Forthorthian and spiritual energy technology. Nefilforan had nearly five hundred men with her—making them a rather large target, so to speak. Yet even so, they’d eluded the patrolmen with a combination of science, spiritual energy, and magic. Magic was what had made the difference, however, as it was the only advantage they had over Ralgwin. Nefilforan shuddered to think what would happen if he managed to get his hands on it.

“What magic can achieve when combined with other technology is truly impressive. To fool a thermal sensor, you only need a spell to reduce the heat you radiate by a few degrees. It was the perfect complement to the camouflage

suits everyone is using.”

As Nana said, magic worked well in tandem with Forthorthian and spiritual energy technology. Forthorthe had developed specialized camouflage suits used for stealth missions, which allowed their users to blend in with their surroundings. They had two weaknesses, however: they weren’t entirely silent, and they couldn’t conceal their user’s body temperature. That was where Nana’s magic had come in handy—the proof being that nearly five hundred men had escaped the patrol’s survey.

“It’s almost scary... Just another reason we must succeed here. We cannot allow it to fall into the wrong hands,” Nefilforan agreed, her expression even more stern than before.

Who knew what Ralgwin could do to Forthorthe with spiritual energy technology *and* magic on his side? Magic in particular wasn’t conducive to any means of mass production, so quick surprise offensives were the hallmark of magical battles. The mere thought sent chills down Nefilforan’s spine.

This was no longer a matter of the Glendad family’s pride or Nefilforan’s personal desire to impress Koutarou. Ralgwin had to be defeated at all costs. That grim determination was evident on Nefilforan’s face. She no longer looked like a young woman, but a resolute soldier.

Nefilforan split her troops into three groups. The first was the assault force, focused on elite units and firepower. This, of course, included both Nefilforan and Nana.

The second group was assigned the task of defending the tunnel entrance, as there was a risk that Ralgwin would retaliate by circling troops around the base to pincer them. This group was composed of stalwart soldiers with combat suits and large stationary weaponry to protect the assault force.

The third and final group was a commando unit that would adapt to the situation as it developed. Their initial objective was to support the assault force, but they were equipped with anti-air and anti-armor weaponry in the event that Ralgwin sent combat crafts or large mobile weapons after them. They were a specialty unit full of crafty fighters.

“Satomi-san, Nefilforan’s team is in position. We’ve finished setting up our weapons as well,” Nana reported to Koutarou, who was a little surprised to hear it.

“That was faster than expected,” he replied.

“Nefilforan-san and her men are quite skilled. They’ve got plenty of stamina, and it’s as if they know this area like the back of their hand.”

According to Kiriha’s itinerary, Nana wasn’t supposed to contact Koutarou for another ten minutes. This meant Nefilforan’s marching speed had exceeded Kiriha’s expectations. They’d been moving stealthily and carrying heavy weaponry along the way too, so it was quite clear that they outpaced your average imperial soldiers. They were in a league of their own.

“She really is something...”

“That’s right. You fought her yourself, didn’t you?”

“Indeed. Anyways, thank you for the report.”

“I’ll be in touch.”

After hearing from Nana, Koutarou switched channels to contact everyone.

“This is Veltlion from the Blue Knight’s squad. In two minutes, precisely at 22:30, we will begin the attack. All men prepare for battle and wait for the signal.”

While speaking over comms, Koutarou referred to himself as Veltlion. It was a matter of formality and morale, as the vast majority of the soldiers present were Forthorthians. He wanted them to know the Blue Knight was on their side. It had an immediate impact on the soldiers around him, whose expressions brightened as they silently kept a careful watch on their surroundings.

“That should do it...”

Once he was done on the comms, Koutarou let out a sigh. At that, his second in command called out to him with a smile. He made sure to keep his voice down so that the other soldiers wouldn’t overhear.

“I suppose you’re still not used to being a commander.”

This was Orion, who Koutarou had met during the Forthorthian civil war. They'd talked quite a bit over the various battles they'd fought together, so he had a good feel for what kind of person Koutarou was. That was why he wanted to step in and give him a word of sympathetic encouragement.

"Orion, one wrong word from me means lives lost... So it's more like I don't *want* to get used to it."

Koutarou felt similarly about Orion. The words he exchanged with his vice commander he would never utter to any of the girls of room 106 for fear of making them worry. He could only talk like this with a fellow soldier.

"Regardless, Your Excellency, I am honored to serve under your command."

Orion knew that Koutarou kept a record of soldiers that had fallen under his leadership in his armor's onboard computer. The list didn't differentiate allies and enemies. He saw Koutarou staring at it from time to time. He could only imagine why, and the thought that his own name might adorn the list after this battle struck fear in him... but he was truly happy to know that the man behind the legendary Blue Knight was so kind at heart.

"I'm glad there's at least one person that would say that... But we should say no more on the matter."

"Of course, Your Excellency."

Koutarou had noticed Harumi approaching and didn't wish her to overhear any of their conversation, so he brought it to a swift halt.

"Sorry to keep you two waiting," she said, showing the bag over her shoulder to Koutarou and Orion.

On it were two symbols, a red cross and a green tree, that were used to identify rescue workers on Earth and Forthorthe respectively. She'd started with just the red cross, but when Orion asked her what it meant, she'd realized that Forthorthians weren't familiar with it. Thus she'd hurriedly gone to find a supplementary patch for her bag and brassard. For today, Harumi was doubling as a rescue worker.

"We're in your hands, Sakuraba-senpai," said Koutarou.

“I’ll do my best!” she enthusiastically replied.

Her job was ordinarily to support Koutarou specifically, but she couldn’t be with him all of the time. And since she could do more with her magic, including treating the injured, she figured she might as well help out on the rear lines while she was otherwise unengaged. Carrying a medic’s bag with first aid supplies would allow her to conserve her mana where possible as well.

“Your Excellency, Harumi-san... It’s nearly time.”

“Count us down, Orion.”

With that, Koutarou drew Signaltin from its sheath. He and his strike force would be launching the initial attack. Their goal was to destroy the underwater gate and make their way into the base from there. Koutarou stepped up onto a large mobile weapon, supporting himself with his left arm.

Forthorthe’s mobile weapons normally worked as tanks and helicopters, but this one additionally functioned as a submarine. Its performance was somewhat compromised for the extra functionality, but Koutarou and his team were reliant on it for the underwater portion of their mission.

“Be careful, Satomi-kun.”

“You too, Sakuraba-senpai.”

Harumi wasn’t attending Koutarou for now. The opening fight was bound to be a wild fray where her slow-to-chant magic would be less effective than usual, so she would hang back until Koutarou and the others breached the base. It was a precaution for safety’s sake. Since Harumi could control Signaltin, losing her would be an extraordinarily heavy blow. That was why she’d agreed to this plan, no matter how restless it made her.

“T-minus ten seconds,” Orion announced, beginning the requested countdown.

As if responding to his voice, the mobile weapon’s generator began whirring and brought the machine to a slight hover in the air.

“Five, four, three, two, one... Commence the operation!”

There, the generator let out a roar and the mobile weapon Koutarou was

holding onto took off. It accelerated rapidly in order to break through the base's gate in the shortest amount of time possible. If not for his armor's increased grip strength, Koutarou would have been blown right off.

The mobile weapon shot out of the forest and dove underwater with Koutarou still on it. It was a violent ride, but thanks to the machine's distortion field, he wasn't ripped away from it by the water resistance. This was a feature unique to submersible mobile weapons.

"Is everyone with me?!" he called out over the comms.

"As planned, Your Excellency! We're following on your eight!" radioed Orion.

"The Sun Diver is also cruising in from your four o'clock!" Kenichi likewise replied.

Koutarou's escorts on his charge were a group of Theia's imperial soldiers and the Sun Rangers. The Forthorthians were aboard a similar mobile weapon, and the Sun Rangers were using their own submarine. As they'd decided in their strategy meeting, the Sun Rangers would come in diagonally for the rendezvous.

I should have brought Sanae with me...

A smile appeared on Koutarou's face when he glanced over at the Sun Rangers' craft. It was essentially a prototype, but its combat functionality was almost fully implemented. The part that could still use some work was its combination ability. Even with the People of the Earth secretly lending a hand, getting five machines to seamlessly combine was a difficult endeavor.

"Your Excellency, there's a ping on the sonar! It appears to be the enemy's underwater weaponry!"

"We expected as much! Everyone, continue as planned!"

"Understood! Commencing the attack!"

"Sun Diver's torpedo ports open! Spiritual energy torpedoes loaded!"

"Let's do this!"

Koutarou would lead the charge to break through the metal gate. It would be up to the other two crafts to cover him. It seemed a reckless plan at first, but

Kiriha believed it would succeed. She'd postulated that because the enemy was essentially stranded on Earth, they likely didn't have a great deal of arms designed for use underwater—and it seemed she was right. The crafts the base sent out to intercept them were all general-purpose machines that moved slowly in the water. There wasn't much in the way of underwater weaponry, either. Kiriha's plan here was for Koutarou's assault to threaten the enemy, additionally frustrating them with how difficult it would be to fight back.

Ralgwin's forces were alerted to the incoming attack the moment Koutarou's mobile weapon first activated its generator and lifted into the air. Mobile weapons that flew using space distortion technology were easy to detect. And when Ralgwin's men turned their cameras in the direction of the reaction they'd picked up... the first thing they saw was a bright blue set of armor.

"We're under attack! At the front gate! I-It's the Blue Knight!"

"Wh-Why is he here?!"

"It's all over for us!"

The soldiers in the command room immediately realized the significance of that blue armor and fell into a panic. The legendary Blue Knight was upon them. Not only had he found their secret base, he was now attacking. They'd been hoping to get the better of the Blue Knight in their next attack, but now the tables had turned.

It was understandable for even the best-trained troops to panic under the circumstances. They'd all seen footage of the final showdown between the Blue Knight and Vandarion, and the sight of a giant blade of light cutting through the Type Two made quite an impression even on the most experienced soldiers. While she didn't say a word, Fasta inwardly steeled herself for defeat.

"We're gonna die! The Blue Knight's gonna kill us all!"

"Ralgwin-sama, we need to retreat!"

"Calm down, you idiots! The Blue Knight will do no such thing!"

The only calm soul in the command room was Ralgwin himself. He was initially surprised that their base had been discovered, but he knew that the

Blue Knight wasn't there for blood.

"How do you know that?! He could cut this entire base in half at any—"

"Like I said, he'll do no such thing! He's the Blue Knight! He only cut down my uncle, Lord Vandarion, because he had no other choice! Have you ever heard of the Blue Knight slaying anyone else?!"

"Er..."

"Rather than kill us, he's here to detain us all! So we win if we can get away!"

Because Koutarou was the Blue Knight, Ralgwin knew good and well he hadn't shown up to settle things in a demonstration of his strength. No, the Blue Knight was known for showing mercy to his enemies. If men died here today, it wouldn't be because the Blue Knight wanted it to happen. He never killed if he could help it. The only exception was Vandarion, who had forced his hand with the enlarged Type Two.

But there was another reason the Blue Knight would never outright destroy Ralgwin's base. Simply put, it was uncertain such an attack would do the job. Ralgwin could still have another holdout somewhere else, for example. So if Koutarou wanted to rout his faction entirely, he needed to do so methodically. He couldn't carelessly risk a devastating offensive that might let men and valuable evidence sneak away.

Moreover, he couldn't commit the kind of attack that would alter terrain and violate the sovereignty of another country. Not only was that forbidden by galactic convention, but it would be a bad look for Forthorthe while attempting to establish friendly relations with Japan. The Blue Knight himself was exempt from the laws of Forthorthe, but he respected the peace of his homeland.

"The Blue Knight on the front gate is merely a diversion! It couldn't be more obvious! Just look at the state of this command room!" Ralgwin railed.

The Blue Knight was an incredible fighter, but if he was personally leading the assault on the base, he was using his real strength—his influence. It just smelled like a distraction to Ralgwin. The Blue Knight was attempting to use his name, reputation, and figure to get all eyes on him while something happened elsewhere... The panicked command room was all the proof Ralgwin needed.

“The Blue Knight is *trying* to fluster you all while he sends his main force to attack elsewhere! If we can push that force back, we can stop him cold! So cool your heads and get to work!” he continued.

For Ralgwin, victory now meant withstanding Koutarou’s assault long enough to get away. He had no choice but to abandon the base at this point. Staying would only mean siege and defeat. Now that its location was known, it would have to be abandoned anyway, so it was easy enough for Ralgwin to cut his losses. But in order to flee successfully, he and his men would have to push Koutarou’s forces back. If not, they’d mercilessly be chased down as they retreated.

“Can we really win against the Blue Knight?!” one soldier cried.

“Thinking you can’t is exactly what he wants!” Ralgwin shouted. “If he had enough troops on his side, he wouldn’t dare play decoy himself! We have them outnumbered!”

Ralgwin’s claims seemed to make sense at first, but that was mostly the work of his silver tongue. In truth, he believed Koutarou was personally on point at the front gate to keep any of Ralgwin’s men from escaping that way. Saying so out loud, however, would only cause further panic. Instead, Ralgwin would do anything he could to calm his troops down—including lying to them.

“Listen, men! We also have spiritual energy weapons on our side! They don’t know we’ve managed to produce them yet, so we have an advantage here!”

Ralgwin’s smooth-talking ways paid off, as his powerful words calmed the command room. Unrest still lingered in his men’s hearts, but their delirious panic from before was gone. They were now fit to put up a fight.

“Nicely done, Ralgwin-sama.”

Fasta, who happened to be in the command room at the time, thought highly of Ralgwin. If he hadn’t been there to keep the men together, the fight would’ve been over before it even started.

“I’d anticipated such a situation and knew what I had to do to get them back on their feet... not that I wanted it to come to this.”

“To be honest, I was a little shaken myself.”

“Anyone would be when faced with a living legend. It’s nothing to be ashamed of. The real work starts here, however.”

Ralgwin wasn’t as optimistic as he’d made it sound. One wrong move now and the enemy would be at their throats.

“What’s our plan of attack?” Fasta asked.

“For the time being, send the minimum force to meet the Blue Knight. Like I said before, he’s a decoy. Their main force will be elsewhere, so we don’t have the resources to waste on a diversion.”

“There are the exhaust ducts we’ve been worried about... But a larger force would go for the service tunnel, I suppose?”

“Indeed they would, Fasta. I’d like you to head there yourself.”

“Understood.”

Ralgwin wanted maximum use out of his star sniper on the biggest battlefield possible, and the service tunnel was more conducive to her attacks than the narrow ventilation system.

“Don’t bottleneck troops around each duct! They’ll be coming in in small numbers, so intercept them in larger areas!”

Ralgwin rapidly issued orders to his subordinates. He’d always been prepared for the possibility of an attack on the base, so he modified his plans to accommodate the Blue Knight’s presence and proceeded accordingly. The ideal scenario was defeating him, of course, but Ralgwin would be satisfied with pushing him back enough to escape. As such, he coldly began calculating what exactly he’d need in order to pull it off.

Immediately following the start of the battle, the service tunnel was a hotly contested area. Bullets and beams were flying between the sides as injured soldiers were dragged away by their comrades. The 240 men on Nefilforan’s assault team were forcing their way through the tunnel, and their current skirmish was taking place in the haulers’ parking lot.

It was the kind of fierce offensive expected of Nefilforan’s elite forces. Her

ability to push forward and break through regardless of the circumstances had won her many a battle in the past. In truth, Ralgwin's forces had done admirably well not to cave thus far. Surprisingly enough, they even slowly seemed to be getting the upper hand.

"They recovered faster than expected..." Nefilforan grumbled to herself.

She was displeased with the current situation, but she didn't let it show. She'd been hoping to push farther into the tunnel while the enemy was still caught off guard. Ideally, she would have liked to make it all the way through the gate at the end. The enemy, however, had organized a counteroffensive much more quickly than anticipated. It was evidence of Ralgwin's firm command, but that wasn't all.

"It's just like we heard... Their trajectory bends and they can't be stopped by distortion fields. These weapons are really slowing our momentum."

Nefilforan was concerned about the spiritual energy weapons Ralgwin had put in the hands of his troops. They came in plenty of variations, including pistols, rifles, grenades, and clay doll automatons. But they all shared one extraordinary feature: they could fire rounds that slipped right through conventional distortion fields.

Shootouts were simple in terms of strategy. The idea was to take cover and fire, even in technologically advanced Forthorthe. There existed weapons big and powerful enough to fire clean through cover, but they weren't common. Spiritual energy technology, however, was changing up the game.

Nefilforan was receiving reports of troops being shot behind comprehensive cover... and even behind barriers. As a result, while spiritual energy weapons lacked the firepower of Forthorthian firearms, they were even more lethal. She was lucky that Kiriha had supplied her force with a large spiritual energy field to dampen incoming fire. Thanks to that, the greatest threat was really their bending trajectories.

Yet on the other hand, Nefilforan and her troops now had to stay within the range of the spiritual energy field. Not being able to move freely was inhibiting the speed of their advance and subsequently their offensive power.

"What should we do, Your Highness?" Nana asked even as several beams flew

over her head.

Nana was equally concerned. Her mechanical body was largely powered by spiritual energy, so she knew better than most just how powerful it was. It wasn't the incoming fire that alarmed her, but the prospects of how this situation might play out against them.

"I thought I told you not to call me that."

"I'm sorry, but—"

"Our mission hasn't changed! Let's charge in!"

Nefilforan leaped out from cover and made a beeline for the enemy's forward line some dozen meters ahead. They'd constructed a makeshift barricade by overturning maintenance vehicles, and about a dozen enemies or so were lined behind it. They were who had effectively put a stop to Nefilforan's advance, and if they received backup now... this could be the end of the line. Nefilforan had realized as much and decided to prevent it personally.

"Get moving, everyone!" Nana called out to their forces as she chased after the princess.

Nefilforan had acted on the assumption that Nana and the others would follow. If they fell behind, Nefilforan would be in great danger alone. They couldn't let that happen.

"Don't forget your anti-flash protection!" Nana cautioned the troops as they moved.

"She's gonna do a magic trick!" one of them hollered.

"You want us to charge without looking where we're going?!" another clamored.

"You'll just have to show some guts and power through!" she called back.

Not a moment later, a blinding white light filled the entire parking lot. Nana had thrown a flashbang up ahead and to the right, between her and Nefilforan. The enemy soldiers who were preparing to fire at the charging princess were staring right where it landed when it went off. Thus blinded, they had no choice but to fire at random.

As such, the homing function of their spiritual energy weapons was essentially incapacitated. When the soldiers couldn't see their targets, it was nearly impossible to project their will to attack into their weapons. Nefilforan's forces kept low as they charged, with most of the wild, straight-line fire flying clear overhead.

Thanks to Nana's surprise attack, they were able to close half the distance to the makeshift barricade. But a single flashbang could only buy them so much time. The enemy soldiers were all too soon rubbing their eyes and taking aim again.

"Have another!" Nana shouted in a cutesy voice as she tossed something just like she had before.

The enemy soldiers who saw it all had the same response...

"It's another flashbang!"

They swiftly shut and covered their eyes. Staring at a flashbang at this range would be a fatal mistake, so their recoil was perfectly understandable. Nana's second attack looked like it would be completely ineffective...

"That's where you're wrong," Nana said, quieter than before.

In reality, she'd outsmarted the enemy troops a second time by throwing an ordinary grenade. It cut a beautiful arc through the air and landed just on the other side of the barricade. With their eyes closed, the soldiers didn't even see it coming.

Boom!

They had no time to respond to it and thus took the full brunt of the blast head on.

"Gaaaaah!"

"Waaaaah!"

They were spared fatal damage thanks to their distortion fields, but the impact still sent them flying. The attack was so unexpected that they couldn't even brace themselves for it. And then...

Nefilforan, brandishing her greatspear, and her rowdy assault force fell upon

them. The barricade had shielded them from the grenade, so they were unscathed by Nana's clever attack. She'd secured them an advantageous opportunity, and Nefilforan was ready to make full use of it.

"Let's clean them up! Follow me!" she ordered with a slash of her spear.

"Understood!" her troops rallied.

Nefilforan wore a powered suit of armor like Koutarou, making her more than a match for any wild beast. Her greatspear roared through the air when she swung it, sweeping up the enemies that had managed to escape the worst of the grenade's blast. She knocked them unconscious and sent them flying backward with their collapsed comrades. Her troops followed her lead and moved in on the rest of the remaining enemies.

"Bring the riflemen in the rear up to here!"

Nefilforan moved right up against the barricade and peered over it. Having lost their forward line, the enemy soldiers were now gathering behind containers farther back—their new barricade. Nefilforan's plan was to station her riflemen at the old one and use it as a defensive position while she and the rest of her troops continued to move forward.

"What's the situation?" Nana asked as soon as she caught up.

As the outsider here, Nana was largely staying in the back to provide cover and make sure she didn't get in the way of Nefilforan's troops. She was a full head shorter than most of them, but they readily made way for her as she approached the princess now. She'd earned their trust and respect in the short time they'd been fighting together.

"Thanks to you, we were able to make it this far unharmed. It seems the enemy is fully prepared for us now, however."

"Which means things will only get trickier from here..."

So far Nana had been using her talents to support Nefilforan as her adjutant. For example, she'd concocted the flashbang-grenade switch-up when she realized most of the enemy units weren't wearing helmets. Now that they'd seen the trick, however, they were arming and equipping themselves more thoroughly. It wouldn't work a second time, so Nana would have to get even

more creative.

“It’ll be fine. You’re a magician, after all,” one soldier said.

“Yeah, show us another magic trick!” called another.

The soldiers were quite enamored with the idea of Nana the magician and her magic tricks, despite the fact that she’d yet to cast a single spell for them. They’d simply taken to calling her and her tactics that because they worked like magic.

“Don’t slack off now, men!” Nefilforan roared. “We all need to do our best to see this through!”

“Jeez, no mercy from the commander...” the soldiers grumbled.

“I would love to see what all of you can do,” Nana cooed.

“All right, guys! Let’s show the adjutant what we’re made of!” one of the men shouted.

“Raaaaah!” the rest cheered in agreement.

“Seriously...?” Nefilforan stammered.

Nana was petite, adorable, and certainly didn’t look like an experienced soldier. Yet she still delivered results without fail. Thanks to her, morale was soaring.

“I think this is just because your men trust you so much, Nefilforan-san. You’re like their bastion.”

“Nana-san... You really do have a way with people, friend and foe alike.”

“Heehee, I *am* a magician after all.”

Nefilforan’s team was making good progress between Nefilforan’s brawn and Nana’s brains. The two girls, however, were careful to stay on their toes. They both knew the fight was only just now getting serious.

The first team to encounter the problem Nana and Nefilforan were concerned about was Theia’s to the east.

Theia and Shizuka’s teams were stationed on either side of the base, waiting in position until Nefilforan launched her attack. The idea was to use that

distraction to infiltrate stealthily. Theia, however, had an impatient streak and ended up sneaking inside before Shizuka's group made their move. Because of that, the enemy troops were now more concentrated on the east than they were the west.

"Enemy resistance is gradually getting fiercer," Theia said as she fiddled with her singed hair. That was her honest impression after pushing back the enemy several times.

She and the other girls had destroyed the grate over the exhaust vent and crept their way through the broiling duct to get inside the base. There had been a few hiccups in the operation, namely that Theia herself had walked into an explosive trap set up in the ductwork. Luckily, her hair had taken most of the damage. Several minutes had elapsed now since the girls had made it into the base proper, however, and Theia was certain the enemy was only getting stronger.

"They must be recovering from the surprise attack. The performance of their spiritual energy weaponry is improving, so there's no doubt about it," Kiriha remarked in response to her observation.

She had a hunch that was the root cause behind the rally. With Koutarou and Nefilforan pincering the base from the north and south, the enemy chain of command was initially thrown into disarray. Thanks to that, the best they could manage at first were sporadic counterattacks... but the enemy seemed to be getting a hold of themselves now. Rebels or not, they were still trained Forthorthian soldiers. They knew how to carry themselves in a crisis.

There was a secondary effect to the soldiers regaining their composure, however, which in turn increased the ferocity of their attacks even more. The spiritual energy weapons they were using operated under the influence of their user's spiritual energy. The clearer the mind of the wielder, the more powerful the weapon became. Conversely, shock and confusion (from a surprise raid, for example) compromised the performance of the weapons.

So as the soldiers collected themselves and focused their attacks, they really were getting stronger. That compounding effect was what Theia had sensed.

"We only have a squad of forty. If we don't move on the offensive, we'll be

crushed,” Ruth put forward.

She normally focused on safety first by prioritizing defense in combat, but today was different. They’d only been able to bring minimal troops with them through the exhaust ducts, and the game plan was to wreak havoc in the base to draw heat away from the other teams—especially Nefilforan’s, which was likely in the most danger right now.

“I know, I know,” said Theia.

When she sensed that the counterattacks were picking up in strength, she’d abandoned her rifle and changed her Combat Dress accessory. She’d equipped Melee Black, meaning she was now primed and ready for close combat. It was essentially a five-meter tall exoskeleton, so it looked a little like Theia was strapped to the front of a robot. Melee Black read her movements and replicated them perfectly—it was the same idea behind Koutarou’s armor, but Theia’s suit was completely external and much larger. In terms of sheer power, she far outstripped him.

“Don’t worry. Offense is my specialty, and I’ll be going all out this time,” she declared, knocking her fists together.

Clang!

Melee Black imitated the gesture, and its massive metal fists made it all the more intimidating. One blow from those would mean lights out for any enemy soldier. *That* was the kind of fighting Melee Black was all about. Unlike the last battle where Theia had to keep herself in check, she had free reign to go wild here.

“Theia-chan, let’s show these guys what we’re made of, ho!”

“We’ll protect you from spiritual energy weapons, ho! That’s *our* specialty, ho!”

“Then let’s move out.”

The haniwas hovered in the air on either side of Theia, ready to shield her with their spiritual energy field and keep an eye on her blind spots. Melee Black’s generator created a powerful barrier, making her almost invincible against physical attacks. The haniwas were there to enhance her defenses

further; with them at her side, she was nearly like a mobile fortress. Ruth, Kiriha, and the allied soldiers on their team all fell into line and took cover behind her as they continued firing.

“We’re going, Maki!”

The only person out in front of Theia was Maki, although it was difficult to tell. She was using her magic to conceal herself, whether via invisibility or a disguise as an enemy soldier. She was essentially taking a stealthy ambush role, attacking the enemy wherever the best opportunities presented themselves.

“As you wish, Your Highness,” Maki said with a reserved smile as she disappeared once more.

She wouldn’t appear again until the next attack was initiated. But with her invisibly in tow, Theia rolled out with a now-serious look on her previously smiling face.

Thoom... Thoom...

She strode gracefully forward, but the giant Melee Black was a heavy machine. It thundered with each step it took, sending small tremors through the ground.

“Your Highness, an enemy force of twenty men is approaching—contact in fifteen seconds! They’ll be around the corner at your ten o’clock! Their vanguard is a land-based mobile weapon!” Ruth called.

The small drone she’d sent out ahead of Theia and Maki had alerted her of the incoming force. They’d all expected resistance since they were raiding the enemy’s base, and sure enough, soldiers were pouring in to defend the place. Theia flashed a grin and made a beeline for the engagement point.

“Follow after me, men! But stay behind me!”

“You can’t take point, Your Highness! The plan will fall apart!”

“You’d better keep up, Ruth!”

“Wait, Your Highness?! E-Everyone, follow the princess’s lead!”

“As you wish, my lady!”

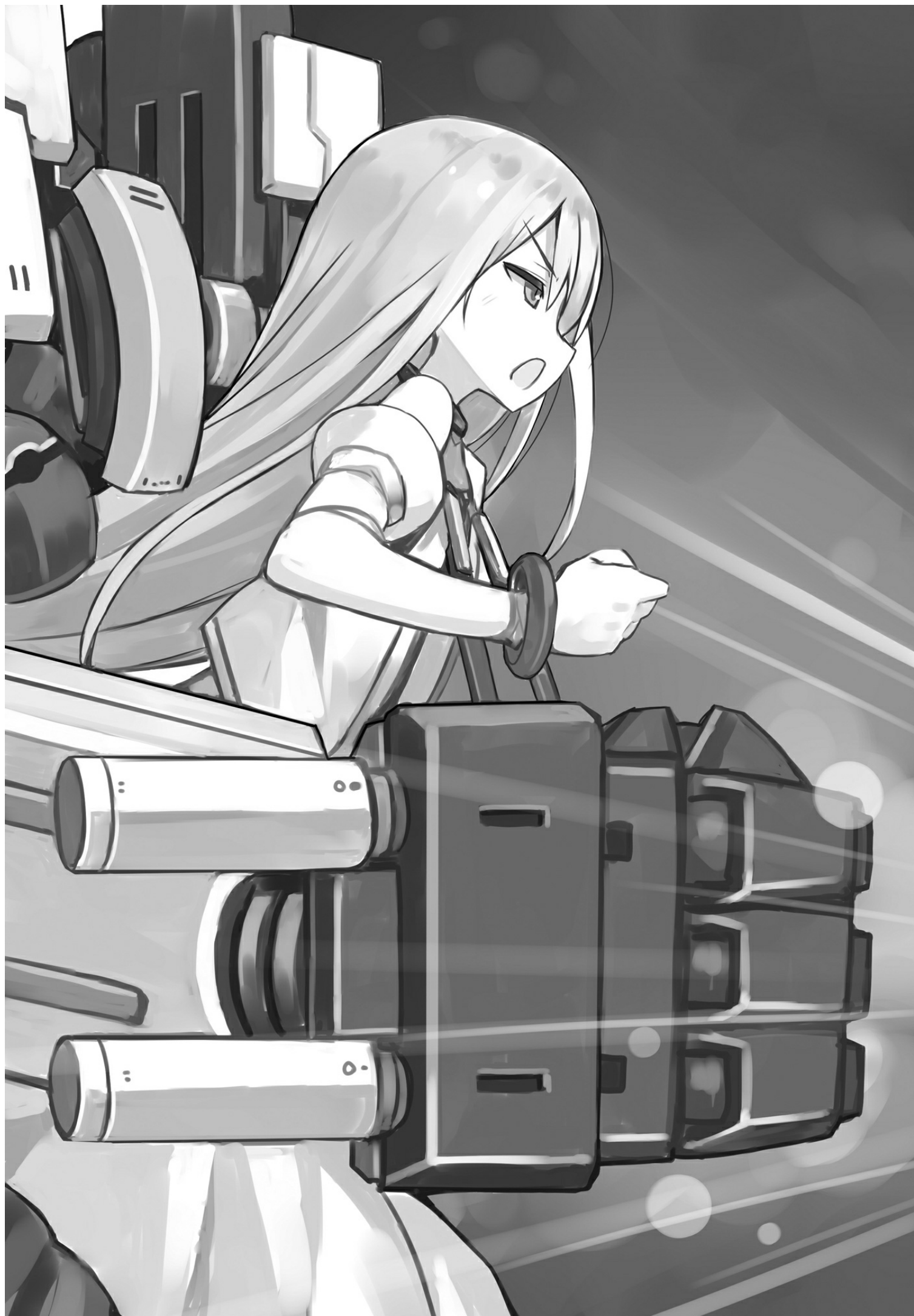
Ruth was technically the commanding officer for the Forthorthian soldiers on this raid, so they obediently followed her orders and chased after Theia. As for Ruth, she stayed behind and tapped away at her computer, summoning six small unmanned fighters that she would use to protect her allies—a strategy befitting her title as Guardian Knight.

“Behold! You should all know who exactly it is you’re dealing with!” Theia cried as the enemy turned the corner, excitedly heaving one fist upward.

In front of her was an eight-legged mobile weapon skittering along. Ruth had given Theia a fifteen second warning, but the battle-hardy princess simply used her intuition to time her attack... and the enemy had appeared exactly when she expected.

“Enemy detected. Beginning automatic counter—”

“Too slow!”



Wham!

Theia slammed her right fist down upon the spiderlike robot's head, where its composite sensor unit was located. The overwhelming force of the blow collapsed the distortion field around the mobile weapon in an instant, continuing unimpeded into the unit's head. It would have ordinarily stood a chance of surviving an attack like that... but Theia's assault wasn't over yet.

Bwoooooom!

A loud explosive sound shook the ground, and a large shell casing ejected from Melee Black's right arm. Theia had triggered a mechanism that gave her punches a little extra firepower, you could say, by detonating a shell full of powder behind them for increased momentum. Effectively, it was a rocket punch.

The arachnid mobile weapon was unable to withstand the extra force. The impact of Theia's artful swing not only collapsed the spider's head, but continued to punch through the body and destroy its generator. Melee Black followed up by kicking the mobile weapon away, sending it crashing into the wall before it stopped moving altogether.

"That went just like I imagined it! I'm in top form today!"

Theia was quite pleased with the results of her attack. Unlike with Nefilforan who was dedicated to practical strategy, these kinds of wild attacks came naturally to Theia. Her improvised assault, however, had successfully managed to make short work of the mobile weapon. It was a reckless move, but her main goal was to end the encounter as quickly as possible—her allies were in danger, after all.

"Fire, fire! Don't let that thing get closer!" the enemy soldiers cried.

"Who are you calling 'that thing'?! I am your princess!" Theia railed.

This was the price she paid for her showy attack. She was now the enemy's main target, and she'd thrown herself right into their line of fire. They were also using spiritual energy weapons, which posed the greatest threat to her. Beams rained down on her one after another.

“Theia-chan, you’re being too reckless, ho!”

“We won’t be able to protect you by ourselves, ho!”

The two haniwas swiftly activated their spiritual energy field to block the beams. Thanks to the power of spiritual energy, the haniwas could, albeit faintly, sense the enemy’s attacks just like Koutarou. Thanks to that, they were able to skillfully block the shots at first...

But once the soldiers started to surround Melee Black, the situation turned grim. With shots coming from the front and both sides, the two haniwas couldn’t block them all alone. If Theia had stayed with her allies, the enemy never would have been able to flank her in such a fashion. She’d put herself in this precarious position by making such a reckless play.

“Your Highness, please fall back!”

“Roger that, Ruth!”

Luckily, she had backup in the form of Ruth’s six fighters. They were each only about a few dozen centimeters in size, but they were exceptionally powerful when they worked together. Ruth sent them in in formation, attacking the soldiers flanking Theia and sending them running.

“Allow me to lend you a hand as well!” called Maki’s voice from seemingly nowhere.

“Thanks!”

A moment later, the ceiling collapsed and buried Theia. Or rather, it simply looked that way. In truth, it was an illusion that Maki had conjured. It was effectively a decoy, allowing Theia to get away while the enemy soldiers were distracted with the illusory scene.

“Are you okay, Your Highness?”

“Just fine! Good work there!”

Between Ruth and Maki’s support, Theia safely made it back to the rest of the group. Once she was in position, the team began their united advance again.

“Thank goodness... Please don’t ever do that again, Your Highness.”

“I-It was for a good reason...”

Though Theia had returned in one piece, her subordinates were still worried. She believed she’d done the right thing, but the situation didn’t really allow her time to explain herself. As such, she had no choice but to suffer the admonishments of her subjects.

“Even if it was for our sake, that kind of reckless behavior is bad for our hearts.”

“Fine... I’ll be more careful in the future.”

“Oh, so that’s what she was doing...”

Fortunately, however, some of the soldiers had understood her intention. Thanks to that, the others held back their rebukes. The princess had acted bravely for them, after all. And now that she’d survived her scolding, Theia could get back to the battle at hand.

“There are more enemies than expected... We might not be able to handle them all at this rate...” Ruth muttered.

She was beginning to feel a restless sense of urgency. She was giving orders to both her drones and the soldiers, so the increase in enemy units put exponential strain on her as she tried to manage the situation. She was now paying more attention to her computer screen than the actual battle, and, seeing this, Kiriha decided to step in and lend a hand.

“Hmm, let’s try this.”

She focused on her forehead, and a green sword crest appeared in response. With that, she forwarded what she could see directly to Ruth’s mind.

“I’ll be your eyes, so you focus on the computer.”

“What a wonderful idea! Thank you very much, Kiriha-sama!”

Not only did Kiriha become Ruth’s eyes, she also warned her about potential dangerous situations as her quick-thinking mind perceived them. Ruth would then divvy up the drones and soldiers accordingly. With Kiriha’s assistance, she had a little more breathing room than before. Her response time was clearly improving.

She also had a yellow sword crest glowing on her forehead, conveying what she was seeing to Kiriha. Kiriha used that information to move around safely like a scout, leaving all of the strategy up to Ruth. Functionally, they were using the power of their crests to complement one another and accomplish even greater things than either one of them could alone.

“If we’re in this much of a bind, the others must not be faring much better. I hope they’re all okay...”

“Our only choice is to press on and believe in them. We have our own mission to accomplish, after all.”

The enemy was strong enough that the girls were forced to rely on the power of their crests, which didn’t bode well for how things were going with the other teams. But the fact of the matter was that Kiriha, Ruth, Theia, and Maki didn’t have time to be worried about anyone else. They had their own objective—to occupy either the enemy command room or the factory. If they couldn’t manage that, there was no end in sight for this battle. It was going to be hard on all of them, but Kiriha was right. There was nothing they could do but press on and believe in their friends.

As the scope of the battle expanded and Ralgwin’s forces rallied their counterattacks, one team still had it relatively easy. That was Clan’s squad, although they were more accurately being led by Shizuka and Alunaya at the moment.

“It seems they still haven’t managed to mass produce spiritual energy sensors. Just some thermo-optical camouflage was enough to get by,” remarked Clan.

Surprisingly enough, their group had yet to be discovered—a feat possible thanks to Clan’s proprietary technology and Sanae’s psychic powers. Clan worked to keep the group cloaked, while Sanae kept careful track of and avoided the enemies around them. They’d accidentally tripped a few sensors along the way, but the soldiers who’d come to investigate left scratching their heads.

So far, their stealthy success was a glorious testament to their teamwork. But

there was a third party playing a big part in it too...

“Don’t those guys over there look tough? They got fancy stuff on their heads.”

“In that case, it’s time for our chemical warfare expert to shine again.”

“Auuuuugh... I’m not a chemical warfare expert...”

That’s right; the third MVP was the chemist of love and courage, Miracle Yurika. Yurika’s “chemistry,” which was what the group was calling her magic around allied soldiers so as to conceal her identity as a magical girl, was extremely well suited for this battle. The first reason was the lack of wind indoors. The second was the abundance of small rooms and confined spaces in the base. Between the two, Yurika’s clouds of poison and acid took longer to diffuse and neutralized enemies faster.

Since Yurika had perfect control over her conjured clouds as well, her allies didn’t need to use gasmasks or similar equipment. She could precisely target any enemy that approached them, which had led to an interesting strategy: Sanae would locate soldiers, Clan would keep the group concealed, and Yurika would incapacitate anyone who got near. Progressing this way, they’d so far evaded detection entirely.

“But it seems they’re finally onto our tricks. That thing those soldiers are wearing on their faces... What was it called again?”

Even in his stuffed animal form atop Shizuka’s shoulder, Alunaya had very sharp eyes. The emperor of dragons could spot prey from great distances, so scrutinizing some soldiers from just a few dozen meters away was child’s play. The greater difficulty was explaining what he saw in Japanese. Fortunately, he managed to remember the word he was looking for...

“That’s right! Those gasmask things.”

Up ahead was an intersection that led to several important areas of the base. It was being watched by soldiers, who appeared to be wearing gasmasks and hazmat suits that could easily withstand a little poison and acid. After finding several men collapsed without any sign of external injuries, Ralgwin’s forces had figured that some kind of chemical weapon was being used inside the base and outfitted soldiers protecting key locations with specialized gear accordingly.

“Yay!”

Yurika was elated at this development. If acid and poison wouldn't work anymore, she would no longer have to play the part of a chemical weapons expert. She much preferred being a magical girl of love and courage, and she wanted to prevent any further damage to her reputation.

“What are you cheering for, Yurika? Well, I suppose it's not as though I don't understand why you're happy...” Clan muttered, both exasperated and sheepish.

In her case, she scorned her reputation as a crafty schemer who relied on traps to trick and deceive her enemies. She actively avoided those tactics now as a result, but sometimes a situation simply called for such measures. She suffered the indignity and did what she had to for the sake of the group, so in truth, she knew exactly how Yurika felt.

As the two of them were fretting, however, Sanae and Alunaya were getting excited.

“I guess it's me and Shizuka's turn!”

“No objections from me!”

Sanae was eager to make a contribution that would earn her Koutarou's praise, and Alunaya simply wanted to fight.

“Come, Saguratin!” Sanae said dramatically, extending an empty hand and summoning the sword from thin air.

Saguratin had originally belonged to Theia. She'd given it to Koutarou, and it had gradually become ingrained with his spiritual energy over time. That made it a good match for Sanae, but most importantly, she liked fighting with it because it looked cool.

“Let us go, Shizuka!”

“Don't get too worked up, Uncle.”

“There are twenty soldiers ahead,” Clan informed them. “That's only half the size of our force, but they're spread out in such a fashion that it will be difficult to defeat them all at once. Chemical weapons won't work either because of

their gear.”

The best case scenario was taking out all of the soldiers simultaneously in order to prevent them from alerting their allies of the situation, but that seemed like it would be next to impossible here. They’d have to find another way.

“I don’t *use* chemical weapons...” whined Yurika.

“Now, now, don’t sulk... Anyways, what’re we going to do?” Shizuka inquired.

“I think we should take our time defeating the soldiers one by one,” suggested Clan. “Everything’s gone smoothly so far, so there’s no need to rush.”

“So we just charge in and attack like usual, yeah?” Sanae confirmed.

“Understood!”

“Yes, but take four soldiers apiece with you,” Clan added. “I want to supplement your firepower with numbers.”

“What should I do, then?” Yurika asked.

“Please help me on the rear line.”

“Okaaaay!”

Shizuka and Sanae advanced, each with four soldiers in tow. Clan and Yurika stayed behind to offer support from the rear, each with four soldiers of their own. They were especially vulnerable in close combat, so the soldiers staying with them were essentially a security detail.

The remaining twenty soldiers on their team would take up the middle ground between the forward and rear groups, offering covering and supplementary fire for Shizuka and Sanae. They’d also serve as a barrier that would keep any enemies or attacks from reaching Clan and Yurika. As such, it was a multipurpose position where veteran soldiers would really be putting their experience to use.

“Now, just to repeat myself, the enemy might be strong against spiritual energy, so take care out there.”

“Thanks, Glasses. Got it.”

“Do you really...?”

Unlike Koutarou, Sanae had no proper training in swordsmanship. Clan was a little nervous about her just swinging a sword around. Her form only looked good when she struck the signature pose of a character from a certain anime... which made Clan all the more uneasy, perhaps with good reason.

“I shall keep an eye on her, so be at ease, Princess Clan.”

“Yeah, you just focus on the enemy, Clan-san. I think that will help everyone more,” Shizuka said before quickly chasing after Sanae.

In Shizuka’s case, no matter what weapons her enemies might use, there was no way they were going to get through Alunaya’s defenses. That allowed her to worry less about her own safety and more about her allies’, making her the perfect babysitter for Sanae. However, when she looked over at her, Shizuka couldn’t help smiling wryly.

“I’m sure she’ll be fine on her own... Sanae-chan defies all logic, after all.”

Sanae had far stronger psychic powers than Koutarou, so she could easily foresee incoming attacks. Yet without any training, her movements were erratic and inefficient. She’d take a beam from time to time because of it, but with the overwhelming spiritual energy coursing through her body, the damage was completely nullified.

Once she learned that and got tired of dodging, she simply charged the enemy in a straight line. If Ralgwin’s men hadn’t been using spiritual energy weapons, she likely would’ve been in grave danger. But their perceived advantage was actually a great weakness against the likes of Sanae.

“That’s true,” conceded Clan. *“I guess she is strong against spiritual energy.”*

“In Sanae-chan’s case, normal spiritual energy weapons probably won’t work on her at all. Also, I don’t think the enemy soldiers will be able to run away from her in that gear they’re wearing,” Yurika observed.

As soon as Sanae was close enough, she began wildly swinging her sword. And, as Yurika had predicted, the soldiers clad in hazmat suits couldn’t get away from her. They were falling one after the other at her hands while Shizuka made similar progress on the other side of the line. She had the firepower and

defenses of an entire fortress, so no single soldier was capable of standing against her. Yurika had started to cast a supporting spell or two, but lowered her staff when she realized her help wasn't needed.

"Of course," Clan sighed. "Kii must have taken all of this into account when forming the teams."

Shizuka, Yurika, and Sanae were a near peerless trifecta in battle. Their greatest weakness was Yurika, who couldn't hold her own in close combat. But with the addition of a strategist like Clan, the group of them could move freely and safely around the base with the cover they needed. Moreover, since their goal was to seize the command room and weapon factory, the group would need her to navigate and locate them. As such, Clan left the fighting to the other girls while she began work on her own special job.

After Maki initially uncovered Ralgwin's base, Ruth and Clan had used satellites and the Hazy Moon in orbit to scope it out. With Forthorthian technology, it was possible to investigate even structures underground—but that was a two-way street. Defenses against such technology also existed, so even with time and detailed scans, the best the girls had been able to pinpoint was the size and general structure of the base. From that, they were only successfully able to identify the purpose of a few rooms.

As such, Koutarou and the girls had decided to go through the unknown rooms one by one until they discovered the command room and the factory. That was another facet of their multidirectional siege of the base. Ideally they could have invaded straight from the service tunnel, presumably into the warehouse and factory, but Nefilforan was under the heaviest fire right now. That left the other three teams to investigate the north, east, and west wings of the base respectively.

"Not this room either, huh? Jeez, it's just like Kiriha-san predicted..." Koutarou sighed.

Unfortunately, even now that they were well into their assault, they still hadn't located the command room or factory. Ralgwin had apparently built several dummies in anticipation of an attack, and the one Koutarou's team

currently found themselves in served as food storage. The room itself wouldn't be a particularly useful location in a fight, and it was built in a way that made it difficult to see its center.

"Don't let it get to you, Satomi-kun," Harumi said in a calm voice.

While their allied soldiers were investigating the room, she opened her bag to treat Koutarou. He wasn't seriously injured, but he was covered in small cuts and scrapes from all the earlier fighting.

"The enemy is trying to fluster you. Besides, if you get worked up, the soldiers will as well."

"I know that, but..."

"Moreover, there's no reason we have to be the ones to find it. Theiamillis-san's team or Clan-san's team could find it too, you know?"

"Yeah. If we can't find it, we'll just have to wait on good news from them. Hahh..."

Koutarou let out a heavy sigh as Harumi admonished him. It was tough to accept, but he knew she was right. There was no need for him to shoulder the burden of this mission alone. He needed to have more faith in the girls and the soldiers with them.

"...We also don't mind monopolizing your weaknesses for ourselves."

Harumi whispered that last bit into Koutarou's ear as she put a bandage on his cheek after disinfecting a scratch. With that, she was finished treating him—both mentally and physically.



“Harumi-san, could you take care of this too?”

“Yes, I’ll be right there!”

With a smile, Harumi ran over to another injured soldier. She was quickly gaining popularity with the Forthorthian soldiers. Between her magic and first aid kit, she could bring a soldier back from the brink of incapacitation. And by working with a medic, they could make extremely accurate diagnoses. As a result, she could use her powers with maximum efficiency. She was keeping Koutarou’s squad in tip-top shape; not a single man was out of commission.

“It’ll hurt a little as the wound closes up, but please bear with me,” Harumi informed her next patient.

“O-Okay...” he stammered.

“What’s the matter?” she asked.

“I-It’s nothing...”

“Oh?”

Harumi had yet to realize it herself, but there was actually a second reason she was so popular with the troops: her hair. Whenever she used magic, it shone silver.

“Your Excellency, just who is that girl?” Orion asked as Harumi healed her next patient. It was something all the soldiers had been dying to know.

“As I’ve said before, she’s just a normal girl who inherited Signaltin’s power from Empress Alaia.”

“I find it oh-so hard to believe that’s all she inherited...”

The soldiers under Theia’s command knew that Harumi controlled Signaltin’s mana to cast magic. They’d been fighting alongside Koutarou and the others since the Forthorthian civil war broke out, after all. As such, there was another question lingering in the back of Orion’s—of everyone’s—mind...

“Is she truly not Empress Alaia herself?”

She possessed composure and worldliness far beyond her years. She had the mind and mannerisms of a leader, evident in how she’d gently admonished

Koutarou just earlier. Still, her radiant silver hair was the most compelling evidence of all. That was the cause of the rumors whispered among Theia's troops—that Harumi was actually Alaia herself.

"I don't really understand it all that well myself," Koutarou confessed. "She's supposed to be another person, but at times, she doesn't feel like it."

After the battle against Vandarion, Alaia had bid her final farewell and supposedly departed this world for good. Thus released from her contract with Signaltin, her life and soul were forfeit to the reincarnated Harumi. Yet at times, Koutarou could still see an uncanny resemblance. He occasionally wondered just who, really, was inside of her. It would always be a mystery to him.

"There's one thing I know for sure, however," he continued.

"And what's that?" Orion asked.

"I want her to live as a normal girl, whether she's Sakuraba-senpai or Empress Alaia. If she really is Alaia, then I don't want her sacrificing her life for Forthorthe again."

Harumi was born constricted by her poor health, and Alaia had lived under the constraints of her obligations as princess. Neither one of them had been granted the chance to live their life as they pleased... until now, that is. So to Koutarou, it didn't really matter which girl it was. His resolve was the same.

"That's very much like you, Your Excellency. I applaud you for that, and I believe you're right. I... We will all try to think that way as well."

"I'm sorry to bother you over such things."

"Hardly, Your Excellency. This is a first for all of us, I'm sure."

It was a curious scenario that arose because of Koutarou's identity as Blue Knight, but it wasn't like he had all the answers. Indeed, some things would simply always be a mystery. Thus convinced that Koutarou had been honest with him, Orion was satisfied. Should a subordinate ask him the same question in the future, he would answer the same way.

"Sorry to keep you waiting, Satomi-kun. I've finished treating the injured. Let's move out," Harumi said when she returned. She then copied the other soldiers

in a salute.

“Heh heh...”

Seeing this, Koutarou couldn't help the small chuckle that escaped his lips. Harumi looked up at him in puzzlement.

“What is it, Satomi-kun?”

“I was just thinking that saluting doesn't suit you at all.”

“Satomi-kun! If this were the palace, you'd be detained for *lèse majesté*!”

“Would you like us to arrest him, princess?”

“Orion! Aren't you supposed to look out for your superior?!”

“I'm afraid I just converted to Team Harumi, Your Excellency.”

In the end, Orion felt the true identity of the girl in front of him wasn't all that important. She was a kind, caring soul worthy of his respect. Someone he would protect no matter what.

Thirty minutes had now elapsed since Koutarou and company first began their assault. At the start, Vandarion's faction was scrambled in disoriented surprise, but they began to push back as they recollected themselves. They had a serious advantage here, after all. This was their base, and they were prepared for just such an attack.

“I think it's high time we do something a little bolder...”

Ralgwin sat watching a three-dimensional screen in the command room that displayed the status of the ongoing battle. He felt, however, that the current situation couldn't go on for much longer.

“Is that truly necessary?” his adjutant questioned. “We're still being pushed back a little, but...”

In his eyes, things didn't seem all that bad. Koutarou's forces were edging them out little by little, but it certainly wasn't like defeat was imminent. If anything, he thought that the longer they held out, the more their home turf advantage would come into play.

“The problem here isn’t about winning or losing. Even if we’re victorious today, it will be meaningless if we cannot proceed with our plans,” Ralgwin explained.

He’d remained perfectly calm all this time, and he saw the strategic value of this battle. Like his adjutant had suggested, they still had a fighting chance of winning. But in the grand scheme of things, such a fight might cost them their true goal—quite literally winning the battle but losing the war.

The remnants of Vandarion’s faction had two primary aims. The first was to kill the Blue Knight and avenge Vandarion. The other was to conquer Forthorthe. And since they were now isolated on Earth, their operation would effectively be dead in the water if they lost but so much manpower. Ralgwin also believed they’d need to fully unravel the Blue Knight’s mysterious powers in order to dominate Forthorthe. They’d already gotten their hands on spiritual energy technology, and he wasn’t willing to stop there.

In other words, the most important objective right now wasn’t defeating the Blue Knight and his forces, but instead evacuating their spiritual energy technology and its engineers to another base. The hitch was that the Blue Knight specifically intended to keep them from doing just that—that much was evident in his thorough investigation of each room that had been blocked from orbital scans.

“I understand what you mean... But what should we do then, my lord?”

The adjutant’s expression turned every bit as stern as Ralgwin’s. He’d finally come to understand what his commander was seeing.

“Listen up. First, we need to...”

Ralgwin proceeded to issue order after order, each more shocking than the last. Yet the adjutant obeyed without question, for he understood the necessity of what Ralgwin was asking him to do.

Ralgwin's Gamble

Saturday, June 18th

Kiriha was the first to notice something was amiss. She was fighting alongside Theia, Ruth, and Maki on the eastern side of the base as they continued to search out the command room and spiritual energy facilities. They'd had an overwhelming advantage at first thanks to their surprise raid, but that advantage dwindled over time as Ralgwin's men started to get their wits about them. How deep the girls could get into the base before the soldiers fully recovered would be key to their victory...

Or so Kiriha had thought, but at some point, the situation took a peculiar turn.

"Strange... I doubt they've exhausted their forces already..." she mused, folding her arms pensively as she surveyed the fight.

Theia was in top form as usual, throwing around enemies with Melee Black. Foes who dared to attack her from her blind spots were met and chased away with Ruth's fighters. Maki was working from the shadows, assisting both Theia and Ruth based on how the battle developed. The girls also had a supporting unit of soldiers with them, who were all doing a heroic job.

"Kiriha-sama, is something the matter?" Ruth asked. Since she was currently connected to Kiriha by the crest on her forehead, she knew immediately that concern had come over her.

"I was just thinking that things are proceeding a little too smoothly," Kiriha replied.

By all accounts, she thought, the enemy had recovered from the initial shock of the raid by now. The overall strength of each unit had increased as they organized themselves, moving and attacking efficiently. Yet, in spite of that all, Kiriha and the girls weren't struggling any more than they had at first. The reason to her seemed clear.

“It looks like there are fewer enemies,” she explained.

“Are you sure that’s not just your imagination?” Theia countered as she continued to swing her fists. “I think we’re having an easy go of it thanks to our overwhelming strength.”

“Wait a moment please, Your Highness...”

Where Theia was confident, Ruth was careful. She quickly pulled up combat data and initiated a facial recognition program to get a proper headcount on the enemy forces.

“What is this?! Kiriha-sama is absolutely right! A few minutes ago, there were more reinforcements!”

The enemy had rallied, and neither their equipment nor their teamwork were lacking. Yet Kiriha and the girls still firmly had the upper hand against them—and the reason was now evident. The enemy forces were diminishing. And to disguise it, they’d slowly been tapping their reinforcements while keeping their main force intact. They’d also been keeping the fight confined to narrow spaces like hallways that restricted their numbers. As a result, it was incredibly difficult to notice the change without paying extremely close attention. Only the vigilant, observant Kiriha would have noticed so soon. It would have taken anyone else much longer.

“I thought as much...” she replied with a somber nod when she heard Ruth’s assessment.

There, she sunk deep into thought once more. The exact numbers didn’t matter here. No, the far more important question was *why*. What did Ralgwin stand to gain by reducing his forces so?

“Should I capture one of the soldiers and find out from them?” Maki, still hidden from sight, suggested over the radio.

As a specialist in indigo magic, she could read other people’s minds. However, unlike reading what someone was thinking in real time, digging up past memories took time. Moreover, Koutarou and the other girls didn’t want Maki resorting to such tactics unless absolutely necessary. Like with timeslips, they should only be considered a last resort when there was no other alternative.

Maki felt the same way, of course, but she saw no recourse under the circumstances.

“No, there’s no need for that. This is probably...” Kiriha said, leaving her answer to Maki as she switched radio channels. She connected to Koutarou, Clan, and Nefilforan on a frequency reserved for the commanders. “Sorry for the sudden call. Have the forces you’re up against noticeably gotten stronger or weaker in the past few minutes?”

“No change over here,” Nefilforan replied.

“Things have perhaps gotten a little easier over here for us,” Clan answered in kind.

“Things are still plenty busy over here,” Koutarou chimed in. “Actually, they might be getting even busier.”

“Hmm... It appears he’s over by you then, Koutarou,” Kiriha mused.

“Huh? What are you talking about?” he asked over the sounds of gunfire and clanging swords in the background.

“Ralgwin has given up on defending the base. He’s probably pooling his forces somewhere near you. I believe they’re planning to make an escape.”

That was Kiriha’s conclusion. Ralgwin was drafting forces from the eastern, western, and southern sides of the base and sending them to the northern wing. Clan and Nefilforan likely hadn’t realized it because they were up against larger forces to begin with. Percentage-wise, subtracting twenty men from a force of fifty was a much more noticeable decrease than subtracting twenty men from a force of two hundred. And in Nefilforan’s case specifically, Ralgwin couldn’t risk diminishing his forces too greatly lest she roll right into the base. He may not have even withdrawn any men from the service tunnel at all.

But why, then, concentrate those troops in the northern wing near Koutarou? And why go to the trouble of trying to do it discreetly? Kiriha believed the answer to those questions was the intent behind the maneuver—Ralgwin was pooling his men to make an escape. In order to break through the siege, they’d have to make a concerted push, and they’d need numbers to do that. All the better, even, if they could catch the raiders off guard when they made a break

for it.

As for the location, Kiriha believed Ralgwin had decided on the northern wing to stage the escape for three reasons. The first two were simple: he wanted to escape by ship through the underwater gate, and he might even have a chance to get his revenge by taking out Koutarou in the process. Thirdly—and, Kiriha believed, most importantly—the northern wing probably housed the spiritual energy laboratory and factory. It was simple logistics. Ralgwin would naturally choose the closest exit to the cargo he was trying to extract.

Regardless, it was going to be a dangerous operation. The enemy would lose men in the process, but it seemed they were resolved to protect their new technology with their lives. Kiriha believed that was the decision Ralgwin had made as commander, and she believed it was the right one. It wasn't the heated rashness of a man obsessed with victory, but the cool thinking of a levelheaded commander. She respected that.

Moreover, the way he'd chosen to concentrate his forces on Koutarou was smart. A normal Forthorthian would shudder at the thought of raising arms against the legendary Blue Knight, but Ralgwin was indeed extraordinary in that sense... Extraordinarily calculating and extraordinarily dangerous. He'd realized that not even the Blue Knight could take on an entire army by himself.

After neutralizing their immediate enemies, Koutarou and his team moved out. They were now making their way to the military vessels docked at the front gate. If Kiriha's prediction was correct, then Ralgwin was headed there to make an escape. They laid defensive measures in the hallway behind them as they went in hopes of slowing or stopping Ralgwin and his men as they approached—a tactic Koutarou hadn't picked up from Kiriha, but from his experience two thousand years ago.

“Hurry up, everyone! If the enemy gets there first, they'll do the same to us!”

His only concern was that Ralgwin's men might have already reached the dock. It wouldn't be a big deal if there were only a few of them, but if it was a full unit, they'd have the defensive advantage Koutarou was hoping to secure. Even though Kiriha had sniffed Ralgwin's plan out in the early stages, he and his

forces still had the initiative here. They'd likely already sent units to scout and secure the dock, meaning Koutarou and his troops needed to hurry before it was too late.

"Satomi-kun, over there!" Harumi shouted as they neared the docks.

She'd spotted the enemy first. It was a unit of fifty or sixty troops, not too different from Koutarou's own numbers. Both teams were fast approaching a T-junction that led to the dock, and both were anxious to get around the corner. Given the situation, however, a fight was inevitable. Whoever took the corner first would simply be shot in the back as they went.

"We don't have a choice here! Everyone, prepare for battle!" Koutarou declared, boldly drawing Signaltin from his waist.

With neither side able to secure an advantageous defensive position at the dock, they were forced to meet on equal terms here in a fairly narrow hallway. The clash could be a tricky one.

"Baron-san, leave the right flank to us!" Red Shine, who'd been slightly behind Koutarou, called as he moved forward with his sword and pistol in hand.

"Can you handle this, Sun Rangers?!"

"This is exactly our kind of fight!"

Koutarou was leading a unit just shy of fifty men in total, including himself, Harumi, forty Forthorthian soldiers, and the Sun Rangers. The Sun Rangers, however, had so far been largely sidelined by the scope of the battle. It was difficult for a squad of five to make a contribution in fights against ten times their numbers, after all. But this fight would be different. Even though they were up against a force that large, the narrow hallway would only allow about a dozen soldiers to fight at one time—the ideal setup for the Sun Rangers. This was what they'd trained for.

"Daisaku!"

"On it!"

Yellow Shine at the front took off running. He was a big guy, and muscular to boot. He closed the distance to Ralgwin's men in mere seconds. In doing so, of

course, he drew most of the enemy fire.

“Whoa!”

“Are you okay, Daisaku-san?!”

“You just watch, Baron-san!”

Ping, ping, ping!

None of the incoming fire ever made contact. Kiriha had supplied the Sun Rangers with personal spiritual energy fields, and Daisaku was fully equipped. Between the barrier, his own strength, and his enhanced suit—which was equipped with a mobile weapon’s defenses—he was virtually unstoppable. A few bullets and beams weren’t going to hurt him.

“Take this!”

Crack!

He charged straight into the enemy line, forcefully colliding his barrier with theirs. His—which was wide and strong enough to protect his entire team—was superior in every way to the weak individual barriers Ralgwin had only just begun producing. It was hardly a fair fight, really. If all of Ralgwin’s men had combined their barriers, they might have stood a chance against Daisaku... but that was out of the question. Instead, their fields collapsed one by one as he made contact with them.

“Your turn, Hayato!”

“You got it!”

Next up was Blue Shine, who was holding a spiritual submachine gun rather than his usual rifle as he opened fire.

Rata-tat-tat-tat!

Since it didn’t shoot physical bullets, there was little recoil. That allowed a sharpshooter like Hayato to go wild on full auto as he swept the front line of approaching soldiers off their feet.

“Kotaro!” Kenichi called before even waiting to see the results of Hayato’s attack.

“Just what I’ve been waiting for!” Green Shine called in return.

Kotaro then threw a small sphere toward Hayato’s victims as they collapsed to the ground. The men behind them were tripping over their bodies, and Kotaro’s sphere landed right in front of them all.

Bang!

It exploded without fire or smoke. It was a small blast, but a serious one nevertheless when taken head-on. The enemies now at the front of the line collapsed, slowing the men behind them even more. Kenichi then made his move, charging the obstructed soldiers with his sword and pistol.

“Haaah!”

Bang! Wham! Bang, bang!

“You little...!”

“Get him!”

Two soldiers had managed to withstand Kotaro’s bomb, and they leveled their guns at Red Shine. However...

Pew, pew!

“Wah?!”

“Wh-Where did that come from?!”

“Right over here, gentlemen!”

Kenichi remained safe. The Sun Rangers’ flashy attack had distracted the enemy, buying Pink Shine enough time to get into position with a spiritual energy beam rifle. Megumi was actually the best shot after Hayato. She usually worked as a medic and tended to keep her distance from the enemy, but she was still trained and combat ready.

“Kenichi-kun!”

“I know!”

Daisaku offered cover for Kenichi to retreat. They’d collectively defeated a good number of enemies, but their bold play wasn’t sustainable. Kenichi would be in trouble if he didn’t get back. With covering fire from the other members,

Daisaku was able to safely withdraw as well.

“That’s the Sun Rangers for you... They’re so strong,” Harumi remarked after casting a spell and defeating an enemy herself.

The Sun Rangers moved in perfect sync with each other like a well-oiled machine. She felt like she could win against any one of them individually, but together, they might be unbeatable. Moreover, they fought like true heroes. While there was always the risk of collateral damage, the Sun Rangers relied on nonlethal attacks even now. They had to be good examples for the children, after all.

“Let’s show them what we can do too!” Koutarou rallied.

GoL’s beam cannon on his right shoulder kept Koutarou’s current foe in place as he defeated them with his sword. He and Harumi were just as confident as the Sun Rangers in their teamwork, so Koutarou felt they should contribute as well.

“Yes, let’s do our best!” Harumi likewise rallied.

She had no objections to this plan. Since she was ordinarily so reserved, combat was a good opportunity to show off her bond with Koutarou. And, as if responding to that wish in her heart, the sword crest on her forehead began to glow. The light spread to her hair in the form of a silver sheen, then overflowed and poured forth from the sword in Koutarou’s hands.

“Looks like our princess is all fired up, Signaltin!”

Koutarou boldly held the blade aloft, striking fear into the hearts of his enemies. A knight in bright blue armor brandishing a shining silver sword... Any Forthorthian who saw it would’ve done a doubletake.

“Flow, spirits of water! Whirl, spirits of wind! Become a foundation for the dancing spirits of ice! Let your shimmering water dazzle and your freezing wind blow! Turn this serene surface into a silver reflector of the sun! Shine forth, Mirror Lake!”

With that, Harumi incanted a spell that coated the floor with ice. It was a simple trick, but an effective one against the soldiers who were focused on Koutarou.

“Whoa!”

“Wh-What in the world?!”

Since Harumi had rushed to cast the spell, she was only able to catch ten or so men in its range. They all, however, slipped and lost their balance. A few even fell over. And nary a one was able to escape the next swings of Koutarou’s blade.

“Well done, my princess!”

Koutarou fell upon the immobile soldiers without hesitation. He’d gotten Harumi to cast a shockwave spell on Signaltin ahead of time, which now blew the men away one after the other. Each lost consciousness as they hit the floor.

“All right, who’s next?!”

His sword still raised high, Koutarou intimidated his opponents. It was out of character, but it was a trick he knew worked well in the heat of battle—doubly so after the impressive show of force he and the Sun Rangers had just put on. It was a wise tactic to employ here, and the threat paid off. The remaining enemy units were unable to put up any organized opposition, instead just firing at random as they began to retreat down the hall.

The appearance of a single man, however, stopped them all in their tracks. It was the young commander of their faction, Ralgwin Vester Vandarion.

“Do try not to bully my soldiers too much, Lord Veltlion.”

“So you finally show yourself, Ralgwin...”

He had a ferocity reminiscent of his uncle Vandarion, and a similarly ruthless mind. His soldiers respected him for that, which was what had stopped them cold. They believed both that they could win now that Ralgwin was here, and that he would punish them severely if they fled. He inspired hope and fear in them at the same time.

“You should understand the situation you’re in. So go ahead and surrender, Ralgwin.”

Under the circumstances, Ralgwin’s only chance at victory had been getting to the dock with his men and supplies before Koutarou... and he’d failed. And if he

clashed with Koutarou here, Theia and the others would eventually arrive and the situation would only deteriorate from there. In the worst case, even Nefilforan's forces might show up. That would lead to a battle of attrition where, even if Ralgwin ended up winning, he wouldn't have the manpower left to accomplish his true objectives.

"That's not going to happen," he declared.

"Do you *want* to be wiped out?" Koutarou asked flatly.

"No—I still have a card left to play." There was light in Ralgwin's eyes yet. He remained intent on winning this battle. "Do it!"

Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang!

Small blasts echoed down the hallway, besieging friend and foe alike. It was like the hall itself was exploding. The entire base was built upon a sturdy metal frame fitted into the walls and ceilings, which was a structural necessity underwater—and the blasts were erupting at key bolts securing the frame in place. The base was equipped with a self-destruct function as a means of destroying any evidence in the event it was compromised, and Ralgwin had selectively activated part of the system to destroy the walls in the immediate area.

"I didn't think you'd do that..." Koutarou muttered in surprise as he looked around.

The blasts had been small and everyone present was outfitted with spiritual energy and distortion fields, so no one was hurt. It also helped that the walls were designed to fall straight down when the bolts were destroyed—a feature included to ensure the base collapsed when the self-destruct function was activated.

"I didn't want to. I would have preferred to win without resorting to such a tactic. This was extreme, but it does allow us a shot at victory."

Ralgwin had blown out the surrounding walls to widen the battlefield. They'd been standing at a T-junction, but there was now no evidence there had ever been a hallway short of a few remaining pillars standing here and there. He'd effectively created one giant room. It was full of obstacles and debris, but he

could safely deploy far more soldiers this way. And with that, he would have the numerical advantage he'd been hoping for by gathering his troops.

"But now that I know what you're capable of, I absolutely cannot let you escape," Koutarou declared, leveling his sword at Ralgwin.

Ralgwin had exceeded their expectations, meaning he was even more dangerous than they'd previously believed. If they let him escape now, there was no telling what he might do next. Koutarou was determined to stop him—to win.

With the walls gone, Koutarou and the others found themselves in a wide open space. The dock was in plain sight now, which was part of Ralgwin's strategy. His men could continue to load cargo into the crafts while Ralgwin held Koutarou and his troops back. Ships loaded with soldiers, engineers, and precious spiritual energy tech would make their escape one after another.

"I figured you'd escape right away," remarked Koutarou.

"I wasn't lying when I said I mean to avenge my uncle," replied Ralgwin.

Even with his allies retreating behind him, Ralgwin stood facing Koutarou. He planned on personally serving as the rearguard until it was time to flee himself. Though he spoke of revenge, it was hard to believe that was the only thing on his mind. If a commander retreated first, it was a serious blow to morale—which could cost Ralgwin everything right now, and he knew it.

"Ralgwin, I have no intention of letting you leave here. If you want to stay and fight, that's all the better for me."

"How the tables have turned, Lord Veltlion. If it's a fight you want, then come and get it."

Time was on Ralgwin's side. The longer he delayed Koutarou and his allies now, the more of his men and cargo could escape while they tangled. Ralgwin's objective, essentially, was thus stalling Koutarou. Going out of his way to defeat the Blue Knight would be risky; all he really needed to do was take up a defensive position and attack from safety.

"I'd be happy to!"

Koutarou and the others, however, had no choice but to fight. Overwhelmed in terms of numbers, their only shot at victory was concentrating their efforts to break through and defeat Ralgwin. That should force the rest of the soldiers to surrender.

“I could ask for nothing more.”

Even in the heat of the moment, Ralgwin remained calm. He signaled to his forces, who then split into three groups before beginning their attack. Ralgwin’s personal squad would face Koutarou’s head-on while the other two attacked from the flanks. The idea was to surround Koutarou and crush him.

“This is all over when you fall, Ralgwin!”

“Only if your soldiers can hold out that long.”

“Tch!”

Suddenly realizing how bad the situation was, Koutarou came to a near halt. The biggest problem was the discrepancy between his ability and that of his allies. Koutarou could move forward to handle Ralgwin, but he would be leaving his comrades defenseless that way. And if he lost them, he would find himself completely surrounded. Not even the Blue Knight could win in such a hopeless situation. Yet if he *didn’t* move forward now, Ralgwin and his men would have the perfect opportunity to escape.

“Baron-san, please go on! We’ll handle things here!”

“Red Shine?!”

“There’s no time to hesitate! Time is of the essence!”

“Right! Then I’m leaving this to you, Sun Rangers!”

Kenichi’s brave words gave Koutarou the motivation he needed, but in truth, the Sun Rangers weren’t certain they were up to the task. There was no time to question themselves, however. This was do or die, and the Sun Rangers never gave up without trying.

“Good luck, Sakuraba-senpai!”

“You too!”

Koutarou chose to put his faith in his allies and sprinted out ahead of the group. Harumi would support him from safety. This was it—the strongest play they could muster under the circumstances and their best shot at victory. A high risk, high reward gamble.

“So the Blue Knight counters with a bold move of his own! How interesting!” Ralgwin remarked with a grin, drawing his sword.

Of course, it was no ordinary blade. It was shrouded with spiritual energy, much like the swords the haniwas sometimes used in close combat. Objectively, Ralgwin had every advantage here... but he was up against the Blue Knight. Confident or not, there was no guarantee he would win. If it was possible at all, it would take everything he had.

“You lot won’t be of any use! Clear the way!”

“But Ralgwin-sama—”

“Don’t make me repeat myself! This is the Blue Knight we’re talking about!”

“U-Understood, sir!”

At Ralgwin’s orders, the soldiers in front of him made way for Koutarou. As far as Ralgwin was concerned, throwing men at the Blue Knight was simply a waste of manpower—he’d learned that the hard way. The only use for his soldiers here would be surrounding the Blue Knight once his team had been decimated.

“You must be quite confident to fight me with a sword, Ralgwin... Or do you have some other trick up your sleeve?”

Signal in hand, Koutarou approached Ralgwin via the path between the parting soldiers. He could sense their hostility and willingness to attack, but no one showed any sign of making a move. It seemed they were trusting this fight to Ralgwin.

“That’s correct, Blue Knight. I’m impressed.”

“I can’t imagine a smart guy like you being stupid enough to challenge me with a blade otherwise.”

“I’m pretty confident in my swordplay, I’ll have you know.”

Encircled by onlookers, Koutarou and Ralgwin squared off. Anticipating some

trick, Koutarou paid especially close attention to his opponent and his surroundings. There had to be a reason Ralgwin had challenged him to a swordfight.

I guess I should try him...

Nevertheless, Koutarou couldn't sense anything strange about the situation. Ralgwin was merely holding his sword, prepared for a fight. As such, Koutarou decided to test the waters with an attack.

"Are you sure about this? Isn't he planning something?" Harumi worriedly asked through Signaltin.

"I'm pretty sure, so stay on your toes."

"You can count on me."

After their brief conference, Koutarou charged Ralgwin at less than full force. He was holding back in case something happened.

"Let's do this, Ralgwin!"

"So he comes! Let this work!"

Ralgwin stepped forward to intercept Koutarou, the sword in his hand now emitting a suspicious glow. Ralgwin was wearing powered armor like Koutarou, and the two men met with superhuman speed and strength.

Clang!

Ralgwin's glowing sword clashed with Signaltin, sending sparks flying. He was ecstatic at this result.

"Ha, it worked! I can do this!"

Based on the data he'd gathered on Signaltin, he'd theorized that he should be able to block it. There was no way to know for sure until he tested it, however, and now he had every assurance he needed.

What? How did he block me?

Koutarou was taken aback, less by Ralgwin's sword and more by his movements. Koutarou's reflexes were enhanced by Sanae's psychic powers—but Ralgwin's weren't. Moreover, he'd read Ralgwin's intent to attack and

swung his sword so as to avoid it... yet Ralgwin had caught him all the same. If he hadn't seen it happen with his own two eyes, Koutarou would've thought such a thing impossible.

"Now it's my turn!"

With that, Ralgwin launched a counterattack. Pouring his strength into his sword, he pushed Koutarou away and held out his left arm.

Bang, bang, bang!

The vambrace of his armor opened up to reveal a gun barrel that fired three spiritual energy bullets. Koutarou read his aura and dodged the attack... Or, rather, he *should* have.

Wham!

"Guh?!"

The last bullet, however, struck true and slammed into Koutarou's right pauldron where GoL's beam cannon sat. Koutarou thankfully wasn't hurt, but the cannon was destroyed in spectacular fashion.

"As I expected, this method works on you. I suppose, to use one of your Earthling expressions, it's something of an egg of Columbus."

"I see... You're leaving part of your attacks up to machines."

"Oh, so you already caught on? That's right. With this armor, my AI can take over whenever."

Ralgwin wasn't wearing his suit for the physical enhancement alone; he'd programmed it to act independently, overriding his actions when necessary. That was where Koutarou's psychic senses had failed him. He could read Ralgwin's attacks, but not the armor's—including that last bullet.

If I hadn't had that practice match with Princess Nefilforan, I might be in serious trouble right now...

Koutarou had only caught on to the trick thanks to his experience fighting Nefilforan, whose unconscious attacks were nearly impossible to detect. It had taught him not to rely entirely on his spirit sight, even against a human opponent.

“So it was the armor that blocked my earlier attack too, then.”

“That’s right. This armor will automatically intervene to block attacks I can’t in time. Surely it’s no surprise the machine moves faster than a man.”

Thanks to the characteristics of spiritual energy, Ralgwin’s armor could anticipate his needs by reading him. If it sensed an incoming attack and no will to block it, the armor would intercede and do so by moving his arms for him—a telltale sign that Ralgwin’s men had managed to incorporate spiritual energy tech into more than just weapons.

“Are you sure you should be spilling your secrets to me, Ralgwin?”

“There are two types of secrets, Lord Veltlion: the kind you can counteract, and the kind that you can’t. This is the latter.”

“You think this is going to win you the battle?”

“No... but I do believe it will force us into a battle of attrition, and that’s more than enough under the circumstances.”

Ralgwin was being brutally honest. Koutarou couldn’t extend himself too far in this situation, or else he’d be giving Ralgwin the chance to attack his allies. And if his team fell, Koutarou would be a sitting duck. As strong as he was, not even he could survive an attack from all sides. Ralgwin’s victory would be all but won at that point.

“Besides—”

“Kuh!”

In the middle of Ralgwin speaking, Koutarou sensed a clear line of attack emanating the will to kill. He reflexively moved to get out of the way...

Crack!

But he didn’t quite make it in time. The attack—a spiritual energy beam from out of nowhere—pierced GoL’s barrier generator on his left shoulder.

“Oh, so you could dodge even that? It seems the legends are no mere legends at all.”

“Right, I forgot you had a sniper...”

The near instantaneous beam attack was the doing of Fasta, Ralgwin's ace sniper. The rifle she was now using worked like Ralgwin's armor. The moment she lined up her target and manifested the will to pull the trigger, the beam fired. It took muscles between 0.2 and 0.3 seconds to respond to signals from the brain, but this weapon reduced that lag to zero. That was the reason Koutarou hadn't been able to evade it cleanly.

"Keep it up, Fasta. Aim for when we cross blades."

"Understood."

"Well, this is going to be rough..." Koutarou mumbled as he readied his sword once more.

He'd narrowly avoided a fatal shot just now because he was in the middle of talking with Ralgwin, but would he be able to do the same mid-fight? Koutarou had a bad feeling about the answer, so he decided to stop thinking about it. He no longer had the time for that.

It was no exaggeration to say the outcome of this battle would be determined by Ralgwin's and Koutarou's subordinates. In simple terms, Ralgwin's men had the advantage. They had twice the numbers and the room to make use of them. Moreover, they had reinforcements on the way now that they'd called for the soldiers stationed in other parts of the base.

"I'm sorry about this, Instructor Sakuraba. I'm sure you would prefer supporting Baron-san."

"Don't think of it that way. All of us, including Satomi-kun, will be in danger if we fail here. Besides, I can still support him from here."

On the other hand, Koutarou's team had Harumi and the Sun Rangers on their side. The Sun Rangers were a special asset given the strength of their teamwork, a byproduct of experience. It had a certain refined beauty to it.

"If anything, it's reassuring to have you with us, Instructor."

"Kotaro-san, I'm not your instructor anymore."

"To us, you will always be our instructor."

Meanwhile, Harumi's presence was a boon to morale—both for the Forthorthian soldiers and for the Sun Rangers. She'd introduced them all to magic, so they knew just how capable she was.

"Harumi-dono, take command if you please," implored Orion.

"But I..." trailed Harumi.

"I will assist you in any way I can, but you must understand there's special meaning in you leading us."

"Yes, of course... Then I'll try it!"

Harumi could control Signaltin's power, and when she did, her hair shone silver. She was the spitting image of a certain someone near and dear to the hearts of all Forthorthians... It only felt right that she take command in the absence of the Blue Knight. In truth she was the only logical candidate given that she was the only other member of the Satomi knights present, but the appointment still made the soldiers' hearts soar.

First the Blue Knight had returned, and now it felt like the Silver Princess had as well. Harumi had a bone to pick with that notion, but if taking up the role would inspire the soldiers risking their lives, she would gladly accept it. She could think of no other way to give them such courage.

"Ahem... Attention, everyone! Though we may be few in number, we fight to protect Forthorthe from an enemy that seeks to divide her with civil war once more!"



If Harumi was good at one thing after all this time, it was acting like a legendary princess. She played the part beautifully, lighting a fire under each and every soldier.

“Defend Layous-sama! Attack!”

“Raaaaaaaaah!”

They were a mere forty men, but their mighty, united roar was enough to shake the ground. They channeled their soaring morale into willpower and pressed their attack at Harumi’s behest.

“Kenichi-niichan, I don’t really get what just happened, but these guys are really fired up now!”

“I’ll take anything we can get! We should be able to put up a good fight like this! Hayato, keep the soldiers in check and make sure they don’t push too far out! Daisaku, move with them to make sure they’re protected by the spiritual energy field!”

“What about me?!”

“Kotaro, I want you and Megumi to protect Instructor Sakuraba! She’s the key to this fight!”

“Got it!”

“Leave her to us, Kenichi-kun!”

The battle had started with both sides evenly matched, but Ralgwin’s force had swollen to twice Koutarou’s. Yet even outnumbered two to one, the soldiers were ready and raring for a fight now. There was no way they were about to let Ralgwin’s troops bowl them over—which was great news for Koutarou, who was still facing Ralgwin alone.

“Flare, spirits of fire! Whirl, spirits of wind! Unite to scorch heaven and earth with a crimson tempest! Incinerate all to ash, Flame Storm!”

Harumi summoned a cyclone of fire that moved according to her will and sicced it on Ralgwin’s men. It grew even larger as it fell over the enemy’s front line, but its size severely compromised the damage it dealt. It only managed to take out a few soldiers, although it effectively slowed their entire unit down.

People were instinctively afraid of that much fire, after all.

“Now! Bring up the line!”

Orion seized the opportunity to have their soldiers advance, firing all the while. The enemy, still scattered by Harumi’s spell, was moving back from cover to cover. Koutarou’s team had expected them to hold the line in a defensive fight like this, but there was more going on here...

“They’re retreating faster than expected! Sun Rangers, can you do something?!” Harumi cried, her hair glowing silver and her face stricken with panic.

She was watching the soldiers beyond even Koutarou and Ralgwin as they loaded up personnel and cargo into the escape crafts. If they managed to get away, this fight would be for naught. Even if it were smaller in scale, Ralgwin would simply take his men elsewhere and set up shop all over again.

“I’m sorry, Instructor! We have our hands full already!”

“Kenichi-niichan, should we go?!”

“No, Kotaro! You and Megumi stay there no matter what!”

Harumi wanted the Sun Rangers to stop the fleeing enemy soldiers, but they were occupied with the current fighting at hand. In spite of high morale, they simply didn’t have the manpower to overcome the numbers against them. If the Sun Rangers left the imperial soldiers on their own, the team might fully collapse.

I can’t even go myself... What should I do?!

She didn’t let it show, but Harumi was anguished over the situation. She knew her magic could stop the soldiers, but she had no formal combat training and would put herself in grave danger if she went alone. She was also the team’s current pillar of support. Losing her would spell a damning defeat, and she knew it, leaving her to rue her own weakness. She burned with envy for Theia, who could fight boldly on her own without worry.

“This is bad, Kenichi! We’ll be too late at this rate, even if we manage to hold out!” Blue Shine saw the grim reality of their current situation. They’d need a

daring move to turn the tables. “I might be able to pull it off!”

“Don’t, Hayato! That would be suicide!”

“But if we don’t do *something*, this will all be for nothing!”

Hayato knew good and well that going in alone would be suicide, but he saw no alternative. There was just too much at stake here. Come fall, there would be an influx of Forthorthians on Earth, and the thought of the terror that might befall them if Ralgwin escaped spurred him on.

“I’ll go instead! You’re not suited for close combat, Hayato!”

“But you’re our leader!”

“You can find a new leader later, but you can’t handle close combat *right now*! You follow me?!”

“Tch...”

If they were going to do this, they needed to make sure it would succeed. A lone fighter would inevitably be surrounded, and Hayato would be at a serious disadvantage with just his guns. Moreover, Kenichi thought he’d make a fine replacement leader. That was why he was willing to run the attack himself—with his pistol and sword, he was ideal for the job.

“Kotaro, give me some of your bombs!”

“Kenichi-niichan, are you serious?!”

“Hayato is right! If someone doesn’t go, it will be too late!”

“Calm down, Kenichi-kun!” Daisaku shouted as he swept an enemy away with his arm.

“Daisaku?!” Kenichi froze for a moment, but quickly recovered. He knew he couldn’t afford to hesitate. “There’s no time to mess around! I have to go now!”

“No one has to go. Just use this.”

There, Daisaku tossed Kenichi a small, oblong device covered by a transparent case. Seeing it, Kenichi’s eyes shot open wide.

“Isn’t this—”

“You said yourself there’s no time to mess around, didn’t you?” Daisaku said in a strikingly quiet voice.

“You’re absolutely right, Daisaku,” Kenichi replied with a nod and a bitter smile.

He then removed the transparent case and glanced back toward the gate.

“I’m sorry. This was your first battle and everything...” he whispered, apologizing to someone as he pressed the button.

Now that he was in Fasta’s sight, Koutarou couldn’t afford to stop moving. He decided to channel all his strength—bolstered by his armor, magic, and spiritual energy—into one definitive blow. The idea was to overpower Ralgwin and push him back, even if he blocked the blow, allowing Koutarou to keep moving.

“You really think I’ll answer you in a test of pure strength, Blue Knight?!”

“I bet you won’t! That’s why I’ll use this—”

There, Koutarou routed some of his energy into Kiriha’s gauntlet and unleashed a fireball.

“Shit! That thing!”

Ralgwin repelled it on reflex, which was only possible thanks to his spiritual energy blade. The big surprise, however, was what came next.

“Haaaaaaaah!”

Koutarou brought his sword down with a fierce battle cry. Having just used his sword to deflect the fireball, Ralgwin was in a poor position to defend himself a second time. It seemed he’d be knocked backward just as Koutarou had hoped, but...

Kaboom!

That was when something unexpected happened.

A sudden explosion rocked the entire base. When the shockwave hit the large open room where Koutarou and Ralgwin were fighting, Koutarou abandoned his attack and jumped back to safety. Ralgwin similarly sensed something amiss

and activated his barrier before hurriedly turning to his subordinates for details.

“Fasta! What was that?! What happened?!” he shouted.

“I saw a large pillar of water!” she answered. “It appears something exploded in the waterway!”

“In the waterway?!”

While Ralgwin was thrown for a loop, Harumi contacted Koutarou via Signaltin to apprise him of the situation.

“Satomi-kun, the Sun Rangers used their submersible to take out the waterway leading outside. No one should be able to escape that way now.”

“So that’s what that was!”

This was the first bit of good news Koutarou had gotten in a while, and his voice and expression both brightened when he heard it. The waterway the Sun Rangers had just blown up was the only way to reach the front gate of the base from the dock.

“The enemy was preparing to escape much faster than we expected, so there was no time... The Sun Rangers made a hard decision.”

“It was definitely a daring move...”

Destroying their brand new Sun Diver was indeed a high price to pay for the Sun Rangers. Self-destructing it on its first mission would hamstring them for the foreseeable future, especially seeing as it was meant to be the legs of their combined craft. Sacrificing it was a costly loss for the Sun Rangers, but a necessary one—a testament to how dangerous they believed the situation to be.

Ralgwin learned of the situation from his subordinates not long after Koutarou. They’d sent an unmanned scout to investigate, and it had relayed dire news.

“Now you’ve done it, Blue Knight...” Ralgwin hissed.

“I didn’t tell them to do that,” Koutarou replied.

“Then you have some very crafty subordinates. And now you’ve got me with

my back against the wall...”

According to the scout, the explosion had collapsed the waterway and made it impassable. A fish might be able to squeeze its way through if it was lucky, but retreat for Ralgwin and his men was now impossible.

“Nevertheless, you may have just wrung your own neck, Blue Knight.”

“If it puts a stop to your plots here and now, I’ll still call it a victory.”

Now that retreat was out of the question, Ralgwin decided to pour all of the soldiers and resources he had into this battle. Making a break for the service tunnel would be just as risky, so he chose to stay and fight it out with Koutarou instead.

“I’ll at least avenge my uncle.”

“Can’t you just surrender, Ralgwin?”

“If I kill you here, there may still be a way.”

The death of the Blue Knight would shake all of Forthorthe. The instability it would cause would be a heyday for insurgents seeking to overthrow the nation. If Ralgwin and the secrets of spiritual energy technology died here, future generations of rebels were unlikely to succeed... but there was still a chance, and Ralgwin clung to that.

“Think again, Ralgwin! I’ll crush you with all of my might, the same way I did your uncle!”

“Try it if you think you can win against these numbers!”

In terms of the fight at hand, Ralgwin still had an advantage. With all of his men now tapped for combat, they dramatically outmanned Koutarou’s side. He believed they may yet be able to overwhelm and kill the Blue Knight.

“You’ll regret underestimating me, Ralgwin. I’m warning you.”

“You won’t live long enough to make me regret anything!”

Ralgwin made the first move. Or rather, Fasta did. Koutarou knew her beam would come flying the instant he saw her intent to attack, but as long as he knew it was coming, there were still ways to block it. He focused on his left

hand and gathered his spiritual energy in the form of a shield. Kiriha's gauntlet was originally a weapon designed to conjure fireballs and lightning bolts, but they were still made out of spiritual energy. By holding it instead of releasing it, he could easily channel a shield instead.

Thwack!

A heavy impact struck Koutarou's left arm, but that was all. The spiritual shield protected him from any real damage otherwise.

"Well played, Blue Knight!" Ralgwin shouted, pressing forward. "Too bad you're already maxing yourself out!"

Since Koutarou had just stopped Fasta's shot with his left arm, he only had his right to stop Ralgwin's slash. He swiftly pulled back and deflected it with his sword. But...

Damn, he's still coming?!

As his swing was counter to his movement backward, it didn't bear Koutarou's full strength. It pushed Ralgwin's blade away, but not Ralgwin himself. This would have been a golden opportunity for GoL's shoulder-mounted cannon, but alas, it had already been silenced. Koutarou would have to think of something else—and fast.

"Die, Blue Knight!"

Ralgwin was already upon him again, and if he stepped any farther back, he would just be lining up a shot for Fasta. The situation was grim.

"Put everything you've got into the distortion field!"

"As you wish, my lord."

"And then..."

Boom!

Koutarou poured spiritual energy into his gauntlet and created a fireball that he detonated before releasing it. The explosion sent him flying to the right. Effectively, he'd used the blast like a gust of wind and his distortion field like a sail.

“Urgh, that smarts...”

“Alert: Eight motors have malfunctioned, reducing mobility by 8 percent.”

Koutarou heeded his armor’s warning as he leaned on his sword and used it to keep himself upright. The stunt he’d just pulled wasn’t without cost. Not only was his armor somewhat compromised, his whole body was racked with pain and his vision was a little narrower. But even so, there was no time to lose. The billowing flames of the explosion provided a certain amount of cover from ranged attacks, but he knew he needed to keep moving.

“So you’d rather taste your own explosion than my blade? Clearly the better choice, but not one easily made. I’m starting to see how it was you managed to defeat my uncle...”

Even while Koutarou was momentarily stunned, Ralgwin didn’t make a move. He’d been hit by the explosion too, and he knew Fasta had lost line of sight on Koutarou through the flames.

That’s the Blue Knight, all right. Even though I have every advantage, he’s still making this difficult...

Ralgwin had no intention of underestimating Koutarou. That was the fundamental difference between him and Vandarion. He knew if he charged Koutarou now, he’d be throwing himself in harm’s way. The Blue Knight had both hands back on his sword and was just waiting for a chance to attack.

“Nevertheless, you’ve managed to put yourself in a worse situation. I doubt even the Blue Knight has an inexhaustible supply of spiritual energy. How many more times can you use that trick, hmm? And it seems your armor is slowing down as well. I doubt you’ll be able to pull such a stunt again! What will you do now, Blue Knight?!”

“Oh, not much. Just keep believing and fighting.”

“Keep believing? In what?! Those soldiers on the verge of death over there?!”

There, Ralgwin finally moved to attack again. The flames had now died down, and Fasta had lined up another shot.

“I believe in something even bigger!” Koutarou rallied, stepping forward to

meet him.

As if in support, Signaltin began glowing brighter as Koutarou moved. Suddenly, two new voices came to him through the sword: Yurika and Maki.

“Okay, Satomi-san!”

“Preparations are ready!”

This was it—the sign Koutarou was waiting for.

“Do it, you two!” he cried.

“Right!”

“Release Delay!”

The magicians were both holding spells on standby, and on Koutarou’s orders, they released their magic simultaneously.

“What are you planning at this stage of the game, Blue Knight?!”

“Just a little something. But it’ll be enough now.”

“Urgh!”

Instantly, two abnormalities seized Ralgwin. The first was a strange numbness through his body, although it wasn’t strong enough to incapacitate him. The second was a peculiar sensation in his right arm. Something just felt wrong, like there was sand in his gears. Combined, both anomalies threw him off.

“Haaaaaaaah!”

Koutarou took the opportunity to attack, charging the sluggish Ralgwin with Signaltin raised high. As he closed in, however, he sensed murderous hostility ready to pierce right through him.

“The sniper?! Oh well!”

Koutarou ignored it and swung his sword anyway. A rifle beam came hurtling toward him in that instant, but...

Cling!

The only thing it hit was Signaltin, deflecting off of it and burying itself in the floor.

“Gragh!”

Koutarou then landed a direct hit with his sword, electrified with Harumi’s magic, which left smoke rising from Ralgwin’s armor and sent him flying. Ralgwin took considerable damage in the process and found himself unable to move.

“J-Just what...”

He was struggling to understand what had happened. He knew it was the fault of the numbness and the strange feeling in his arm, but he still didn’t understand what had caused them.

“Did you forget?” said Koutarou. “We have a specialist in such attacks.”

“I see... So you spread some kind of weak chemical agent... through this sealed facility... and you’re using some means to counteract the effects yourselves... Damn it...”

Koutarou was alluding to the mistaken belief that he had a chemical weapons expert on his team, but the real specialists here were none other than magicians. Yurika and Maki had both cast wide-range spells. Yurika’s invoked numbness, while Maki’s manipulated targets’ minds so that they perceived a strange feeling in their right arms.

Both took some time to incant, and both girls had taken care to lower the potency of their spells since they would affect their allies as well as their enemies over such a large area. Thanks to that, the talismans Koutarou’s men had kept them safe. In fact, the majority of Ralgwin’s soldiers were able to withstand the spells’ effects as well. Only about one in three were completely immobilized or had dropped their weapons. Most were only partially affected.

Yet in a battle between skilled soldiers, that partial effect was fatal. Numbness and discomfort in one’s shooting arm were especially dangerous in such a close, heated battle. There was also the added panic of watching their fellow soldiers immobilized by the mysterious phenomenon. Moreover, Fasta had just missed a shot and Ralgwin had been sent flying. The soldiers of Vandarion’s faction were now rightfully quite rattled.

Yurika and Maki’s spells only lasted for thirty seconds or so, but it was a

devastating thirty seconds. It was a well executed attack—and part of a well calculated plan.

“In truth, they were just making way for us!”

“Even given how strong Theia-dono and Shizuka are, we couldn’t risk concentrated fire on them as we entered such a wide area from the hallway. This was a necessary defensive measure.”

“Yeah, getting shot at is honestly terrifying, so I think it was a great plan.”

It was Kiriha’s plan, of course, and her real goal was to allow reinforcements a safe opportunity to reach Koutarou. Once she’d realized Ralgwin was trying to escape, she’d instructed everyone to head for his location. They thus wrapped up their immediate fights and made a beeline for him. They’d run into a few hiccups and smaller fights along the way, but they’d plowed through each one without a problem.

Yet still, even with such momentum, they couldn’t afford to rush right into the docks. The space had been blown wide open, so there was no cover upon entering from the hallway. They had to do *something* to stymie Ralgwin’s forces and make an opening for themselves. And the combination of spells they’d chosen for the job just happened to benefit Koutarou in the moment—or rather, hamper Ralgwin.

“Don’t you worry, Koutarou! Sanae-chan is here now!”

“Sanae, it’s dangerous to go in alone like that! Pardomshiha!”

“Right! I’ll send the fighters with her!”

Kiriha had thought to outfit all of their soldiers with talismans in case Ralgwin already had magic at his disposal, and they’d proved especially useful here by protecting them from friendly fire. Thus Kiriha’s plan was a great success. Not only did she manage to reunite her team and Clan’s with Koutarou, but she also managed to take Ralgwin and his men by surprise. The tables had turned almost instantly.

“Lord Veltlion, this is Nefilforan. We just took care of the sniper unit.”

“That’s great news. Thanks.”

“Just doing my job.”

The one who'd made all this possible, however, was Princess Nefilforan. She'd seized a narrow victory in the service tunnel and then sent her spare forces into the base as reinforcements. She got them to watch Kiriha and the others' backs as they rushed the dock. She'd also covered Yurika and Maki while they were casting their spells.

And she didn't stop there. She took her most elite soldiers farther in and challenged Fasta's squad. They were still locked in combat even now, but Nefilforan had forced them to retreat and driven them out of the dock. Thanks to that, Koutarou wouldn't have to worry about being sniped anymore.

“It's over, Ralgwin.”

“It appears I have no choice but to accept that. And I haven't even avenged my uncle...”

Ralgwin readily admitted defeat. His armor wasn't functioning and Fasta had retreated. Even if he continued to fight, the outcome was clear. He no longer had any chance of winning, and he recognized that. So, in spite of his frustration, he resigned himself to his fate. Ralgwin always kept his cool, even now.

“This is a message to all forces. Cease all combat and—”

But just as he was issuing the order to surrender, something unexpected happened in the dock once more. A misty gray smoke suddenly filled the entire room, robbing Koutarou and the others of their ability to see.

“What?! Clan, what's happening?!”

“I don't know either! My sensors and radar are being jammed!”

“Koutarou, it's that thing! It's coming! The creepy gray spinning thing!”

“What?!”

Sanae was referring to the whirlpool of chaos—the very same one that had preyed on the likes of Dark Purple and Vandarion. It fed off of malice in exchange for power, making it an exceedingly dangerous force of evil. Sanae had sensed it amidst the mist that was blocking their sight and sensors. She

feared what might happen if this was some kind of attack, and Koutarou was now similarly worried.

“Be careful, everyone! If that whirlpool is around, danger’s imminent!”

He couldn’t see anything, but Koutarou was ready to move at a moment’s notice. He could sense a presence in the mist... but he couldn’t tell if it was the mist itself or simply the enemy soldiers. Either way, he was on his guard.

“What’s going on...?”

About a minute had passed since the gray mist first appeared, and it was now gradually beginning to subside.

“Koutarou, it’s dissipating!”

“Don’t get impatient, Theia! Haste will only endanger you here!”

“I know that! Not even I would try something reckless under the circumstances!”

There was no discernible movement among the enemy, and the mist didn’t seem to be harming Koutarou and the girls. The whirlpool of chaos kept its distance. But when the mist faded completely, they saw what had happened...

“What in the world?!” Koutarou shouted. “Ralgwin and his men are gone?!”

“Impossible! Where could that many people have disappeared to?!” Theia likewise exclaimed.

Yet as hard as it was to believe, Koutarou, the girls, and their soldiers were the only ones at the dock now. Koutarou doubted his eyes at first, but the girls’ confusion rivaled his. He clearly wasn’t imagining things... Ralgwin and his soldiers really had vanished.

The Gamble's Winner

Sunday, June 19th

Koutarou and the girls investigated the rest of the base after Ralgwin's disappearance and discovered several things. First was that only the soldiers at the dock had disappeared with Ralgwin. Fasta's sniping team as well as the men moving supplies and research material were still there—about two or three hundred soldiers in all. Once Ralgwin was gone, they readily surrendered. They couldn't keep fighting without their commander. Moreover, all of their supplies and research materials at the dock had disappeared with him.

Based on this, Koutarou and the girls surmised that Ralgwin had managed to retreat somehow. The waterway had been destroyed, but Ralgwin clearly had something else up his sleeve... Something clever enough that he could extract his men along with his cargo. It was hard to imagine that was just an accident.

"The question is *how* they escaped..."

Once all was said and done, Koutarou and the girls returned to room 106 with a puzzled feeling. Some time later, Nefilforan contacted them after conducting a thorough investigation. Kiriha reported her findings to the rest of the group, but she still didn't know how Ralgwin had disappeared. She was deep in thought with a serious expression on her face.

"It's gotta be magic, right?" asked Shizuka as she served everyone tea.

The soldiers and supplies had up and vanished while everyone's vision and radar was useless. To her untrained eyes, that *was* magic.

"But if someone had used a spell, I should have been able to sense it. Yet the only traces of magic there were from the spells we cast," Maki countered.

The group had swept the base methodically after Ralgwin disappeared, Maki and Yurika with magic, Clan and Ruth with technology, and Sanae and Kiriha with spiritual energy. Yet no matter the methods they used, the girls were

unable to turn up any clues about how Ralgwin had escaped. Like Maki said, there wasn't a trace.

"Yeah, it would be super hard to conceal magic from me and Maki-chan," volunteered Yurika.

Casting spells normally produced residual mana, which could be analyzed to determine what kind of magic had been used. There were spells to camouflage such traces, but they too left residual mana of their own. An archwizard like Yurika would've had no trouble detecting even something that subtle... yet there was nothing at all. That should have been impossible if they'd used magic to make their escape.

"If it wasn't magic, then maybe it's just like Sanae said. It was that gray spinning thing. The, uh, whirlpool of chaos, right?" Koutarou asked.

He and the girls had encountered it several times before. In Dark Purple's case it had been summoned by magic, but in Tayuma's case it was attracted by spiritual energy technology. And in Vandarion's, it had overlapped with the Elder Dragon Type Two. There seemed to be no rhyme or reason to how it manifested, but one thing was clear: it fed not on science, spiritual energy, or mana, but rather on the human mind. Koutarou and the girls still didn't fully understand it.

"I think so too. It didn't feel like spiritual energy, but it was a really bad feeling," Sanae agreed, nodding.

After the battle was over and the group examined the base, Sanae couldn't sense any sign spiritual energy had been used either... but something felt strange about the dock itself. Uncertain exactly what it was, the only way Sanae could describe it was to say that it gave her a bad feeling. It was potentially a sign of the whirlpool of chaos.

"Also... Hmm..."

There, Sanae stopped to think. Something else was bothering her, but she wasn't sure she should say it when she wasn't quite sure *how* to say it. It was a testament to how much she'd matured, as she no longer said anything and everything that came to mind.

“What is it, Sanae? Don’t hold back,” Koutarou encouraged her.

“I’ve felt it before... but there’s a presence similar to yours inside the spinning thing.”

“Similar to me?”

“Yeah. But after sensing it this time, it’s similar... but, like, it’s someone different. You’re softer and not as harsh.”

She’d felt an aura similar to Koutarou’s within the whirlpool before. When she felt it this time, however, she became certain it was different. She’d been paying extra attention to it.

“Harsh? What are you talking about? Besides, you know I’m me.”

“I know, I know. I just said it was someone different.”

“I guess people can look alike when it comes to auras too, huh?”

“Huh, yeah... I guess you’re right.”

Once she started thinking of it as another person, Sanae quickly lost interest. Her only fascination with it was its resemblance to Koutarou. If it was someone else entirely, it was no different from any other stranger to her.

“Still, that might be significant,” Harumi added as all eyes fell on her. Everyone knew from experience that whenever she opened her mouth, it was something important. “Perhaps they’re using the whirlpool for something...”

Whether their aura was similar to Koutarou’s or not, it was now clear that there was someone behind the whirlpool. Sanae had sensed them several times, so writing off their existence would have been a careless mistake.

“Ah, of course! So *that’s* why we keep encountering it!” Kiriha suddenly exclaimed.

She’d wondered all this time why the whirlpool of chaos seemed to follow them. Thinking about it categorically, the whirlpool was a truly paranormal phenomenon. It wasn’t magical or spiritual; it seemed to appear out of thin air. But, realistically speaking, how could such a paranormal phenomenon be so common? That question had dogged Kiriha, but if someone was guiding it, then it all made sense. That was much more likely than it appearing before them by

chance.

“Which means... this person is the one who took Ralgwin and his men away. It was more convenient for them that way,” mused Theia.

“I can’t say for certain since this is pure speculation... but it’s possible,” said Kiriha with a nod.

With that, room 106 fell silent. If Sanae, Harumi, Theia, and Kiriha were all right, then there was a powerful player about with an unknown agenda. All Koutarou and the girls knew for certain was that they were involved with the whirlpool of chaos somehow. Their imaginations were running wild with all kinds of uncanny conjecture.

“All right, that’s enough shop talk!” Koutarou suddenly declared, clapping his hands together loudly.

He gave Clan, who was sitting next to him, quite a start. But she wasn’t the only one surprised—all the girls were.

“Veltlion?”

“I’m hungry, so let’s eat. What’s for dinner tonight, Ruth-san?”

Forcefully bringing the conversation to an end, Koutarou turned to the subject of food. The girls weren’t sure what to make of it at first, but came to understand his angle after they gave it some thought.

Thus Ruth replied with a smile, “Anything you wish, Master.”

It was essentially a non-answer, but Ruth believed it was exactly what he wanted to hear—or rather, what he wanted to see. The other girls caught on and smiled at him in turn.

“...”

When he bashfully turned away from them all, they knew it had been the right answer.

“Actually, now that you mention it, I’m hungry too,” Yurika eventually piped up.

“The only thing I could make quickly would be yakisoba or something similar,”

Ruth offered.

“I’m pro-yakisoba! And anti-green pepper!” shouted Sanae.

“And I’m anti-carrot!” added Theia.

“Then it would only be meat and cabbage...” Ruth mumbled.

“They say simple yakisoba with nothing but meat and cabbage is the ultimate test of a chef’s skill,” Shizuka commented.

“Really? I remember making that a lot back in my Darkness Rainbow days...” Maki hummed.

“Then how about you make dinner tonight, Maki-san?” asked Shizuka. “I’ll help.”

Thus the girls began discussing the evening’s menu, and the gloomy air that hung over the room was dispelled just like that.

“Satomi Koutarou, it seems Maki will be making yakisoba... Does that suit you?”

“You already know the answer to that.”

“Of course. Then allow me to say on behalf of all of us... we love you.”

“Th-That’s not what we were talking about...”

“If you say so. Heehee.”

“A-Anyway! Nalfa-san, we’ll be having dinner soon!”

“Okay!”

“Ran away, did he?” scoffed Theia.

“Let’s let him be. A good woman is always understanding of a man’s feelings.”

“We’ll get him back with Maki-chan’s lovingly cooked dinner!” shouted Yurika.

“I’ll do my best!” Maki agreed.

What happened to Vandarion’s faction didn’t come up again in room 106 that day. Continuing to stew over it wouldn’t be of help to any of them. For now, it was more important for them to get their minds off of such things while they rested and recovered.

Koutarou happily watched over the girls as they chatted away like everything was normal. Though he would never admit it, he'd lately come to feel most at ease at times like this. The girls had more or less caught on, but they chose not to say anything. There was no need to ruin such a perfect moment, as they too felt most at ease like this.

After being surrounded by the gray mist, Ralgwin and his unit were whisked away to a different location. No one was more surprised than Ralgwin himself at this development. He would've been far less shocked if this were some trick of the Blue Knight's, but that couldn't be it. He'd already lost the battle, then the gray mist came suddenly... And the next thing Ralgwin knew, he was somewhere else entirely. It was so disorienting that his first suspicion was that he'd passed on to the afterlife.

"Where am I?!" he asked, looking around.

The only source of light was from the display screen of his armor, but it appeared as though he was now in some kind of cave.

"Ralgwin-sama, just what happened to us?!" Fasta asked in turn.

Because of her line of work, Fasta was equipped with a night vision scope that she'd used to locate Ralgwin. She seemed to be equally confused, however. Her ordinarily cool expression was riddled with panic.

"That's what I'd like to know! Did you do something?!"

"No, nothing!"

"Then what's the meaning of this?! Where are we?!"

By now, Ralgwin had abandoned the afterlife theory. It was clear that *something* had happened; he just had no idea what. It was hard to imagine the Blue Knight would pull such a stunt after he'd agreed to surrender. The idea that someone on his side had used an emergency transport gate to flee crossed Ralgwin's mind, but that would've transferred everyone on the dock regardless of their affiliation. It was almost like they'd been saved... It was just too unreal to believe.

"Calm down, Ralgwin," a calm, quiet voice called from the darkness.

That only agitated Ralgwin further, however. He whipped around and stared in the direction the voice had come from with stern eyes... but the figure he spotted there was unfamiliar.

“Who the hell are you?!”

Only members of Vandarion’s faction were present, most of whom wore standard army uniforms. Special units like Fasta were exceptions, but they still bore either imperial insignias or the crest of Vandarion’s knights. Yet this hooded figure donned an unmarked cloak that hid his face and most of what he was wearing. The clanking of metal when he walked, however, sounded like armor.

“That’s pretty complicated. I’ll tell you over time. Besides, it’s not all that important.”

“Then let me change my question. Are you the one who saved us? What are you after?!”

“That’s more like it, Ralgwin.”

The hooded figure seemed to be smiling, which grated on Ralgwin’s nerves even more. Should Vandarion have been in this same situation, he would’ve cut the hooded figure down in a furious rage already.

“Enough nonsense! Answer me!”

“I am indeed the one who saved you. And I did it for my own goals, hoping that you and I could cooperate for a while. In short, I’m after your strength.”

“That’s unfortunate. As we are now, I have no strength to spare you.”

Ralgwin had lost his base and factory, not to mention over half of his forces. He’d avoided the worst case scenario by escaping with at least minimal supplies and personnel, but recovering from this would be no mean feat. It was an incredible setback that undoubtedly put him beneath the mysterious hooded figure’s expectations.

“You lost because you’ve only uncovered half of the mysteries shrouding the Blue Knight. It wasn’t a failing of military strength.”

“Like I don’t know that already! It was a terrible gamble, but one I had to

take!”

Ralgwin was enraged at having the obvious thrown in his face after such a bitter defeat, but the hooded figure raised an assuring hand. When he did, Ralgwin caught a glimpse of what was underneath the cloak—a dull gray gauntlet. As he’d suspected, the mysterious figure was wearing armor.

“Like I said, Ralgwin, calm down. That’s why I came to you.”

“What is that supposed to mean...?”

“Come with me and I’ll give you the other half of the answers you seek.”

“What?!”

“I’ll tell you what you need to close the gap in strength, and the rest will be up to you.”

“...Just who the hell are you?”

He knew what Ralgwin was after—moreover, he had it in his possession. Ralgwin was desperate. He knew this path was treacherous. That he would likely be used and cast aside. There was also the nagging aggravation he’d felt since this mysterious figure had appeared... It felt like a warning. Like his instincts were telling him this figure was dangerous.

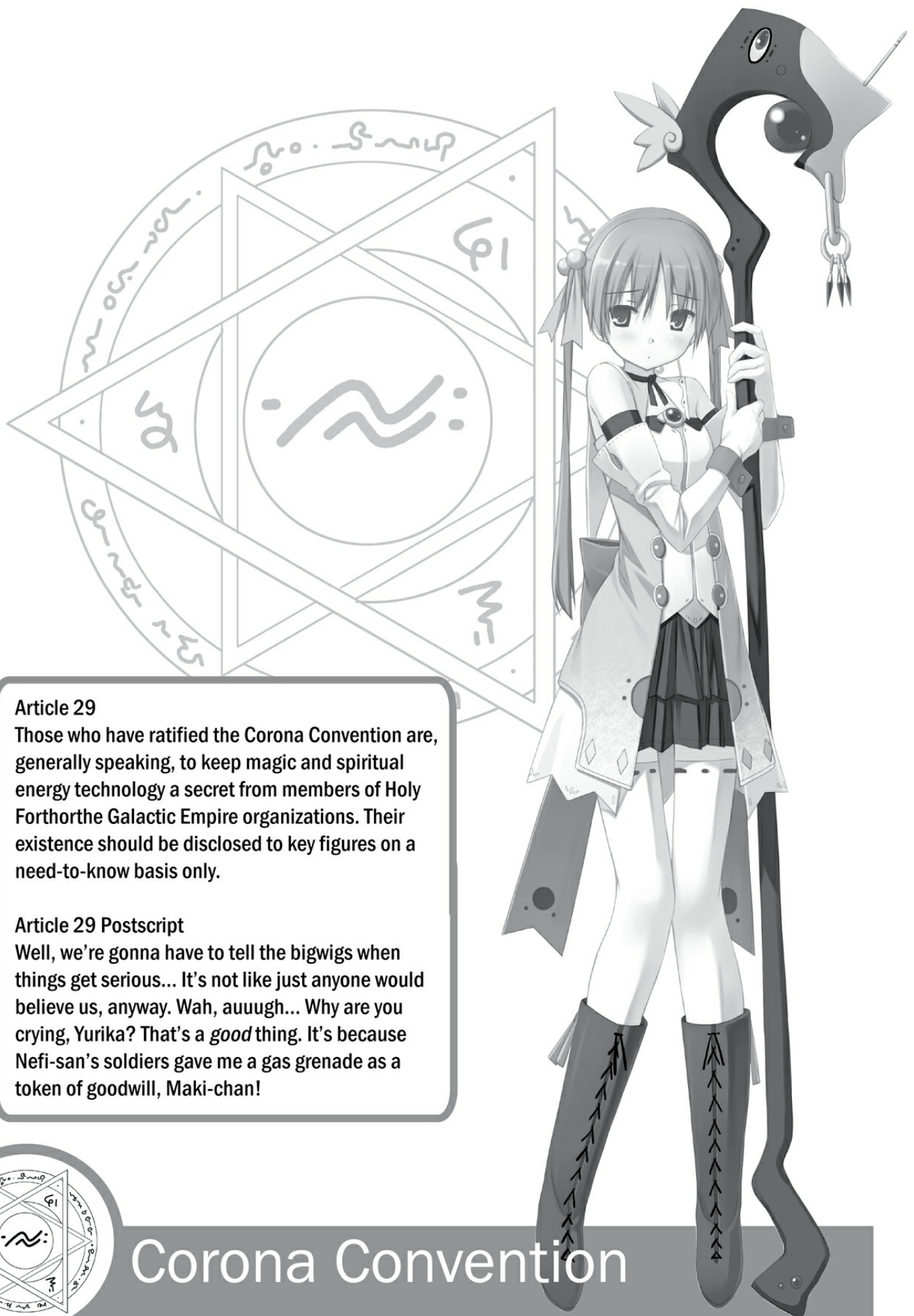
“What’s there to think about? If you continue fighting like this, it’ll be the end of you. But if that’s not what you want, you’re free to follow me.”

As much as it vexed him, Ralgwin knew this man was telling the truth. The Blue Knight had an overwhelming advantage now that Ralgwin was so weakened. He might very well meet his end before he fully recovered—and to avoid that, he’d need the resolve to press onward, however perilous the way might be.

“Very well,” he said. “Lead us wherever you may.”

And so Ralgwin took a dangerous step forward, agreeing to work with this mysterious figure in order to kill the Blue Knight and overthrow the royal families. It wasn’t yet clear whether what he’d get in return was worth the risk, but he simply couldn’t bring himself to give up everything he’d worked for all this time.





Article 29

Those who have ratified the Corona Convention are, generally speaking, to keep magic and spiritual energy technology a secret from members of Holy Forthorthe Galactic Empire organizations. Their existence should be disclosed to key figures on a need-to-know basis only.

Article 29 Postscript

Well, we're gonna have to tell the bigwigs when things get serious... It's not like just anyone would believe us, anyway. Wah, auuugh... Why are you crying, Yurika? That's a *good* thing. It's because Nefi-san's soldiers gave me a gas grenade as a token of goodwill, Maki-chan!



Corona Convention

New! June 19th, 2011

Afterword

It's been a while. Takehaya here with the release of volume 35. We're on our usual four-month schedule, but it's sure felt like a lot longer than that with the coronavirus going around.

Luckily, I suffered no major delays with the state of emergency as it fit perfectly between volumes 34 and 35. I tend to do most of my work from home anyway. There are still the editorial department as well as the printing and shipping companies involved, though, so I was anxiously watching over what happened. Had there been any serious issues, however, this book wouldn't have reached you by now, so I was relieved to hear the state of emergency had been lifted. Then again, it's still too early to let our guard down.

Now, to put the serious talk behind us, let's focus on the book instead. There were two major developments this volume. First was the introduction of our first new princess since Ceilēshu, and second was Koutarou and Nefilforan's joint attack on Ralgwin's base.

Nefilforan is the fifth princess of Forthorthe whose weapon of choice is a greatspear. She's battle-hardy like Theia, but rather than being a natural at warfare, her power and skill come from hard work. Thanks to that, she can do things that even Theia can't—like how she almost defeated Koutarou. She also prefers close combat, whereas Theia is a marksman. The fifth princess is a very serious girl, and that's reflected in her training. (Theia would likely get too bored to keep up with it.) She also gets along well with Ruth, who has a similarly serious personality. Nefi is two Forthorthian years older than Theia, which makes her about the same age as Koutarou. Incidentally, this actually means Theia and Ruth are somewhat younger than Koutarou, even if they're in the same grade.

When Nefilforan arrives with her regiment, Koutarou and the others are at last able to attack the remnants of Vandarion's faction. Raiding their base with just the security detail assigned to the delegation would have been too difficult,

though they can still only have a minimal amount of forces. This is to make sure they don't intimidate Earth or Japan—a bit of diplomatic consideration. They need all the strength they can get, however, as they can't let the enemy escape. If Ralgwin gets away, he'll just set up shop somewhere else. That's why the goal is to crush him for good in one fell swoop.

Then again, Ralgwin has no intention of going down that easily. He's finally outfitted his troops with spiritual energy weaponry. Moreover, he's a crafty one. As those of you who've already read the book know, Koutarou and the girls are in for a rough fight. Harumi and Theia in particular do a lot of heavy lifting. Harumi even got a color illustration!

Lastly, a certain someone makes his appearance. Sanae has sensed his presence before, but he finally shows up in this volume—which will only add to the chaos of the fight. In this 5,670,000,000th world where Koutarou made all the right choices, he was bound to show up eventually. Our main story might have come to an end in volume 29, but things won't truly be over until this is resolved. Some of you might already know who he is, but please keep it a secret for a little longer (lol).

Volume 36 will probably continue the story. There was quite a bit of *Hercules!* content for the tenth anniversary celebration, so the main story will carry on for a while longer to catch up. The mysterious figure said that he would give Ralgwin the rest of the answers in regards to the Blue Knight's power, so they will of course be heading *there*. Ralgwin also has a mountain of problems to overcome now that he's lost the majority of his soldiers and his base—not to mention that he's got Koutarou on his tail.

Ralgwin does have a spare base somewhere out there. He's the cautious type who always has a backup, but with things so dire, he may not get to use it. It's unlikely the mysterious figure made off with *all* of the soldiers who knew about it, so its location might be compromised. Ralgwin will have to come up with another card to play, so he's got his work cut out for him. Meanwhile, Koutarou and the others will have to chase him down after his sudden disappearance. We now have ourselves a little game of cat and mouse, so please stay tuned for the conclusion.

I have a little more room for the afterword this time, so this is a good

opportunity to talk a bit more about the book itself. Because of the format that Hobby Japan uses, book pages come in increments of sixteen. That means if 256 pages isn't enough, the next step up is 272. I believe this is determined by the specifications of the printing machine, the size of the cardboard boxes used for transport, the thickness of the paper, and other such factors. If not, there should be an editor's note after this, so please defer to that instead. [Editor's Note: The ultimate page count is largely determined by how the books are manufactured. Please look up offset printing and signature sizes if you're interested!]

Now, the afterword is fourteen pages long this time, meaning we have two extra pages to use. The excess space usually goes to the afterword and advertisements. Yes, the afterword is also meant to fill up space. It makes more sense to adjust the length of the afterword and advertisements than to take away from the main story. Again, if this is not the case, please refer to any following editor's note. Since I have fourteen pages to work with, I'm going a little nuts here. [Editor's Note: Depending on the circumstances, the volume might see adjustments to accommodate, but we try to avoid affecting the story because of production circumstances.]

I was asked to write at least five pages of material for the afterword, likely to avoid filling the back of the book with more than ten pages of ads. Since page count increases in increments of sixteen, that's what we'd be looking at. Ten pages of adverts is a lot, but it's difficult to ask an author to fill all that extra space themselves. I believe the numbers are what they are in order to strike some sort of balance. But again, please refer to the editor's note. I'm writing based on intuition. [Editor's Note: Since we have the space for it, we try to give the reader something to enjoy!]

That's my general understanding of things. I wonder how it's different in other countries. I'm sure the number of pages varies depending on the language. Sixteen might be unique to Japanese publishers. Maybe other countries work in multiples of twelve or something. Perhaps this afterword will even end up much longer in other languages! Although, perhaps there are other changes that offset that. Speaking of, I have copies of *Rokujouma* in other languages, so maybe I'll try counting. By comparing the versions, I might be able

to figure out the increments. That sounds like fun, so I'll give it a shot when I have time someday.

Oh? And just like that, I've gone over the necessary page count. This is a good place to call it, so I'll conclude the afterword here by thanking everyone at the editorial department for their work on this book, Poco-san for doing a great job when I asked if there could be a gradation on Harumi's hair on the cover, and all you readers worldwide.

Let us meet again in the afterword for volume 36.

June, 2020

Takehaya

Bonus Short Stories

Side: Theiamillis

When Koutarou returned to room 106, he found Theia alone in the apartment... huddled over the tea table and crying to herself.

“Theia? What’s wrong?”

“I’ve...”

“You’ve?”

“I’ve... gained weight...”

“What? Is that all?”

Koutarou couldn’t help his candor. He’d been worried about what serious concern had brought Theia to tears, so he was relieved to hear it was something so ordinary. Theia, however, was furious at his apparent indifference.

“What do you mean *is that all?*! Your woman’s gained weight! You should be devastated!”

She suddenly sat up from the table, sending tears scattering everywhere as she shouted. She was now glaring daggers at Koutarou.

“Well, you’ve been getting taller, so it’s perfectly normal for you to gain weight too.”

Forthorthe’s planetary revolution was actually shorter than Earth’s, so Forthorthian years were markedly shorter than the ones here on Earth. So while Koutarou and Theia were the same age on paper, Theia was actually a few hundred days younger. In other words, she was still a growing girl.

“You noticed... I’ve been getting taller?”

This news silenced Theia’s rage. She’d been angry that Koutarou seemed not to care about her situation, but if he’d been paying close enough attention to

know she'd grown, she had no reason to be mad. Moreover, he hadn't objected to her "your woman" comment. That pleased her.

"Of course," he replied. "I see you every day, after all."

In truth, Koutarou had noticed because he could feel more mass behind her blows in their training matches... but he had enough sense to know that saying so out loud wouldn't benefit anyone. He tactfully chose to keep his mouth shut instead.

"Then I shall forgive you," Theia announced.

"You have my deepest gratitude, my princess. Now, if you're really worried about your weight, it's your body fat percentage you should be concerned about."

As an athlete, that was always Koutarou's primary concern. Back when he played baseball in middle school, trying to control his was a daily battle.

"Wh-What kind of percentage is normal?" Theia asked sheepishly.

"For the average girl," Koutarou replied, "somewhere between 20 and 30 percent is normal."

Women in general often had 20 to 30 percent body fat, while female athletes usually fell under 20. Just by looking at Theia, Koutarou guessed she was somewhere in the low 20s.

"Haaahh..."

Theia let out a heavy sigh of relief upon hearing this. The scale she used also displayed body fat percentage, and she was now satisfied with the number she'd seen.

"How much was it?" Koutarou asked.

"That's impolite to ask a lady," Theia scolded.

"It's important. And it's not like I'm directly asking how much you weigh, so just tell me already."

"It was 18 percent."

"Then the only weight you've gained is from increased bone and muscle

mass.”

Theia’s body was exceptionally athletic, which was really no surprise considering her high-energy lifestyle. Playfighting with Koutarou, for example, did a lot to keep her fit and trim.

“I-Is that so? Still, I hope I don’t grow any more...”

“Why not? Your athletic figure really suits you.”

“...I don’t want a hard body when you pick me up...”

“Oh, um... right...”

“...”

With that, the room fell into silence. There was much brewing under the surface, however—namely the complex thoughts and feelings of a young girl and boy in love.

Side: Ruthkhania

More than two years had passed now since Ruth first came to Earth. She’d always loved cooking, and she’d become quite skilled with the local fare in her time here. It was no wonder, then, that she’d caught Nalfa’s eye.

“Please! I’m begging you!” she pleaded.

“I understand. I’ll help,” Ruth reservedly replied.

“Thank you so much, Ruth-sama!”

Nalfa’s videos were a smash hit back in Forthorthe. And for her most recent series, you see, she’d chosen to feature Earth-style cooking and cuisine.

“So, what would you like me to make?” Ruth asked.

“Something deep fried, please,” Nalfa answered enthusiastically.

“Are you sure you don’t want something easier to showcase for Forthorthians?”

“Koutarou-sama said deep-fried food was his favorite, so...”

The Blue Knight often appeared in Nalfa’s videos, which made them all the

more popular. This was in part thanks to the work of her assistant Kotori, who was a huge Koutarou fan herself.

“Master said that?” Ruth inquired, suddenly quite curious.

“Yes! And he said you were better at making it than Kiriha-sama.”

Hearing this, Ruth went wide-eyed for a moment. A calm smile then overtook her expression.

“If I recall, Master’s favorite of all is...”

Ruth swiftly searched through her mental recipe book. Now that Koutarou was involved, her interest was piqued.... which was exactly the kind of engagement Nalfa could capture with her viewers if she realized Koutarou’s influence. Her videos would be all the more successful for it.

Nalfa’s new series was centered on the cuisine of Earth, specifically Japan, so the girls started off with a quick introduction to deep frying in general. Koutarou would naturally come up as they got down to specifics. And so they began filming...

“We’re making deep-fried chicken, so the seasoning is critical.”

“What kind of seasonings do you use?”

“Normally we would use soy sauce, mirin, and sake. But since this is for Master, we’ll also be adding some grated onions.”

“So His Excellency Blue Knight likes onions, does he? For our viewers at home, onions are a vegetable similar to gask in taste.”

“In past Forthorthe, Master’s specialty was roasted fowl with herbs. He prefers dishes with rich aromas.”

“More on herb roasts soon!”

All in all, Ruth was quite lively during filming. She rarely let it show on the surface, but she was especially excited today.

Ruth-sama must really love Koutarou-sama...

Nalfa believed that Koutarou was the reason why. Any girl could understand how Ruth felt, really. There was something special about making food for the

boy you loved. Moreover, Koutarou had complimented Ruth's cooking. It was plain to see she was on cloud nine.

"Make sure the oil stays hot, and fry the chicken until it's crispy. It's easy to burn because of the fresh onion in there, so I suggest starting off at a lower temperature and then doing a flash fry at a hotter temp."

"I see! So there are tricks even to frying! Well, let's have His Excellency give the finished product a taste after this."

"Huh?! You're giving this to Master?!"

"Of course! His Excellency said he was looking forward to it."

"L-Let me redo it, then! I'll remake it!"

Ruth had intentionally picked a recipe that would be easy for Forthorthians to follow along with. It certainly wasn't what she would have chosen to make for Koutarou, so she hurriedly recooked the dish to his tastes. Nalfa filmed the whole thing, secretly pondering all the while if she should include this behind-the-scenes peek in her video.









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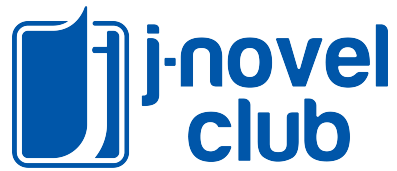
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Invaders of the Rokujouma!? Volume 35

by Takehaya

Translated by Warnis Edited by Morgan Dreher

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