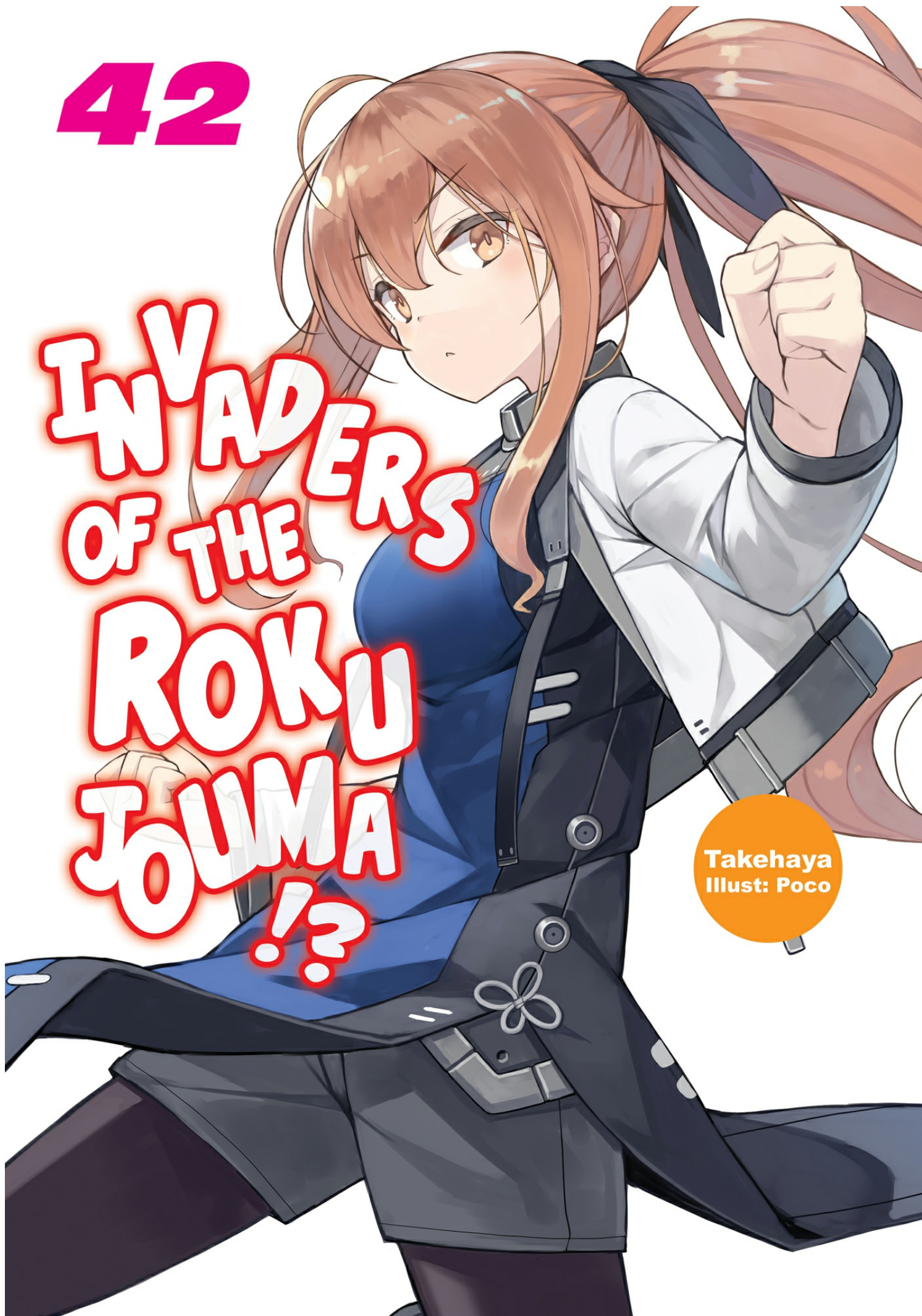


42

INVADERS
OF THE
ROKU
JUMA
!?

Takehaya
Illust: Poco





**INTRODUCING THE SPORTS OF
EARTH TO FORTHORTHE!**

**“OOOH,
KOU-NISAN!
NAL-CHAN
WANTS TO
TRY BATTING
TOO!”**





**"YOU GUYS
HAVEN'T
SEEN THIS
YET!"**

**"RADIANT
ANGEL
MAGICAL
GIRL
RAINBOW
NANA!"**

**"CODE
ACCEPTED.
RELEASING
FINAL
SAFETY."**

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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



RUTHKANIAN 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.



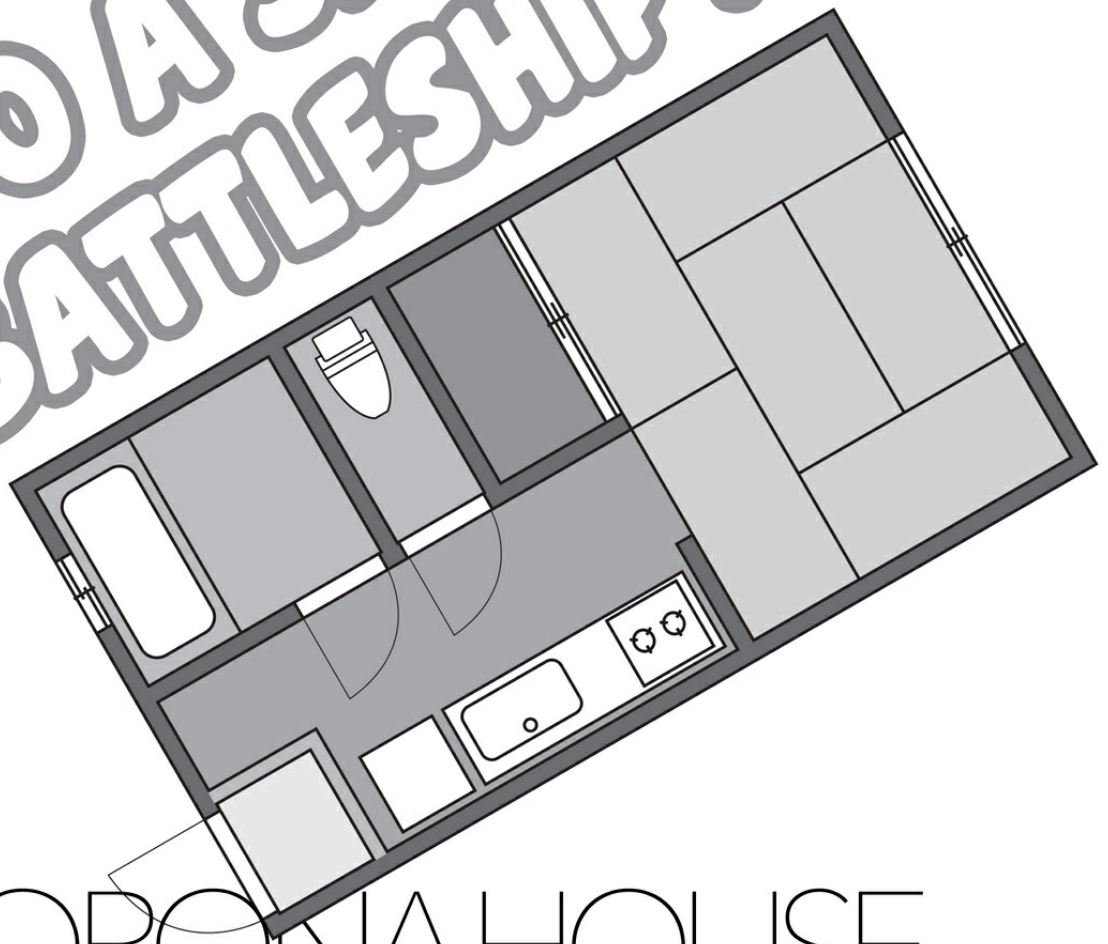
NALFA LAREN

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)

MOVING
TO A SPACE
BATTLESHIP?!



CORONA HOUSE
ROOM 106

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In the Moment

Tuesday, October 11th

Koutarou had brought very little with him to Forthorthe. Everything he had fit inside his rather large sports bag, with the exception of his bat. And to go with that bat, he'd naturally packed a ball and glove too. Kenji had done the same (although he had much more luggage with him to begin with), so they could play catch whenever they had time.

"Here it comes," called Koutarou.

"Bring it," replied Kenji.

The ball hit Kenji's glove with a sharp, firm sound. Koutarou's throw had appeared to be a gentle one, but it packed quite a punch. Koutarou was now in his final year of high school and more muscular than ever before, so when it came to playing ball, he could throw even faster and harder than when he'd been on the team in middle school.

"Nice throw," Kenji said, tossing the ball back.

It landed squarely in Koutarou's glove. While Kenji's strength was nothing like Koutarou's, his dexterity was exceptional. The ball had gone precisely where he'd intended it. But upon catching it, Koutarou furrowed his brow.

"Mackenzie, you've gotten rusty, haven't you?"

Koutarou felt Kenji's throw was weak. Kenji had excellent control of the ball, but his speed and impact were nothing like they'd once been. Confronted with this, Kenji put a hand on his wrist and grimaced.

"Hey, I'm a drama club member now. I'm not a musclehead like you, man."

From Kenji's point of view, Koutarou was the outlier for staying so active and athletic after quitting baseball. Now that Kenji was in the drama club, all he felt compelled to do was maintain his figure.

“That’s not a nice thing to say. I’ll show you I’m more than just muscle, Kenji.”

“By all means!”

“Here it comes!”

Koutarou’s next ball arced slightly to the left before descending. It was a tricky throw, but with Kenji’s experience, he was able to catch it. He’d played catcher for their middle school baseball team, and he knew every pitch in Koutarou’s repertoire.

As this was unfolding, a camera on the sidelines recorded Kenji and Koutarou’s game. Standing behind it were Matsudaira Kotori and Nalfa Laren, who were filming for their next video.

“This is part of a training regimen for a sport on Earth called baseball. Kou-niisan and my brother played it together in middle school,” Kotori explained.

“And here are the rules...” Nalfa continued.

This particular video would be part of the “Matsudaira Kotori’s Forthorthe Diary” series, which borrowed the concept of the travelogue Nalfa had filmed on Earth to showcase Kotori’s experiences in Forthorthe. The girls’ roles were accordingly reversed this time, with Kotori on camera and Nalfa doing most of the filming. Beyond that, however, the style, editing, and broadcasting were all largely the same.

“Nalfa-chan... are you sure this is okay?” Kotori asked hesitantly between takes.

“It’s fine!” Nalfa assured her. “Have a little more confidence, Kotori.”

“But is anyone really going to be interested in a normal Japanese girl like me...?”

Kotori was still uneasy about the project. The stiff expression on her face betrayed her doubts. She couldn’t imagine any great demand for videos starring her. In her mind she was just an unremarkable, average high school girl.

“Forthorthians *want* to know what normal is like. We’re curious about Earthlings.”

“I mean, you already know, don’t you, Nal-chan?”

“Yes, but please teach everyone else too.”

“Really...?”

“Besides, you’re the only one who could give us that kind of exposition on Koutarou-sama.”

“I guess that makes more sense.”

Kotori flashed a smile. She had no confidence in her own worth, but she was more than assured of Koutarou’s. In truth, Kotori loved him. She was far more at ease talking about him than herself. And as soon as Nalfa saw the smile return to Kotori’s lips, she turned the camera on her friend again.

“So let’s get right into it—tell us more about Layous-sama’s baseball career,” Nalfa encouraged her. During filming, Nalfa always referred to Koutarou as “Layous-sama” to avoid any confusion.

“Kou-niisan was first introduced to baseball before elementary school. He would avidly watch it on TV.” Despite Kotori’s shyness, she was now talking with a bright grin on her face. “He didn’t actually start playing until he was in school. He then joined a local team with my brother. Back then, body size was a big deal, so Kou-niisan didn’t become a regular until toward the end of elementary school... but after that, he was always part of their games. He and my brother were often the battery.”

While Koutarou was a hero to the people of Forthorthe, he was a close childhood friend to Kotori. As long as people wanted to hear about her experiences with him, she was happy to talk.

“What is a ‘battery’?” Nalfa asked.

“Ah, you know how we talked about pitchers and catchers in the rules earlier? Those two positions together are called a battery. The catcher faces the opposing players, so they have something of a tactical role, which allows the pitcher to focus on throwing the ball.”

“I see. So your brother would determine how Layous-sama should attack?”

“Yes, I think that’s the idea.”

“Then Mackenzie-sama was like Layous-sama’s lead strategist. Thank you for the valuable information.”

“Ahaha, it was nothing that grand.”

“Oh? It looks like they’re up to something now...”

“Based on those faces, they’re up to no good.”

Filming was going well so far. Nalfa’s intuition told her that the series would be great from the very first video. Introducing the culture of Earth while also covering the Blue Knight’s past was an inimitable combo feature. Nalfa was confident that Kotori’s Forthorthe Diary would be a success.

Kenji noticed something after tossing a few balls with Koutarou. Not feeling the need to be delicate, he decided to ask Koutarou about it directly.

“Kou, you look like you’re having a little trouble throwing. What’s wrong?”

Kenji had noticed a change in Koutarou’s pitching stance. Right now, Koutarou had taken a curiously proper form, contrary to the dynamic one he’d used before. It would have made sense if Koutarou were focusing on control and precision, but Kenji didn’t see the need for that right now. He knew there had to be something else behind it.

“I’m surprised you could tell,” Koutarou replied.

“Of course I could tell. How many of your pitches do you think I’ve caught in my life?”

“Wahahaha, yeah, I guess you’re right. I think it *looks* like I’m struggling because I’m suppressing my spiritual energy.”

“Your spiritual energy? Are you trying to say you could put that into the ball somehow?”

“Yeah, something like that. I’m trying *not* to extend my spiritual energy from my body, but keeping it in check is tricky.”

“Literally being able to put your soul into your throw is a helluva technique...”

Koutarou’s spiritual energy wasn’t constrained by his physical body, but

rather his conception of his physical form, which was more malleable and included anything he saw as an extension of his body. If he threw a serious pitch, he'd naturally pour spiritual energy into it, which would make fastballs fly faster than normal and curveballs curve even more. This was second nature, so practically anything Koutarou did had the power of spiritual energy behind it. Actively trying to turn that off meant willfully limiting his idea of his body and where his spiritual energy could go, which made throwing like he usually did difficult. There was often talk of "spirit" in sports, but Koutarou took that to a whole new level.

"Hmm... I'm curious about something, Kou."

"What is it?"

"You can use a bunch of powers other than spiritual energy, right?"

"Yeah, like magic and the armor I'm still borrowing from Theia."

"So why not try using all of those to pitch? I think I'd be able to tell how strong you've truly become if it's through baseball."

Kenji had no knowledge of battle. He'd been in a few fights here and there, but he'd never picked up martial arts or the like. He had no real way of appreciating the change that had come over Koutarou, so he was hoping that could be made clear to him through a familiar game like baseball. He and Koutarou had been playing together for most of their lives, so if something was different now, he was sure he'd be able to see it for himself.

"That sounds interesting... All right, let's give it a try," Koutarou replied eagerly. This would be a good chance to see for himself how he'd changed since the spring of his first year in high school.

That was when Shizuka appeared.

"What are you two talking about?" she asked. She'd been exercising nearby and only overheard the boys saying they'd give something a try, but she could see the mischief written on their faces.

"Hi, Kasagi-san," said Kenji. "I want to see how much Kou's powered up, so he's going to put everything he has into a pitch."

“Huh, that does sound interesting.”

“I am curious about this as well. Allow us to observe.”

Alunaya was perched on Shizuka’s shoulder in stuffed animal form. After everyone had explained the circumstances to Kenji, Alunaya became comfortable appearing around him from time to time. Thanks to that, Kenji had gotten used to his unusual presence.

“I want to see how much Kou-niisan has grown too.”

“This is a huge scoop, Kotori!”

Sensing something was up, the two-girl film crew had inched closer as well. They were keenly interested in the development at hand.

Beyond pure physical strength, Koutarou had spiritual energy, magic, and technology at his disposal. He intended to use them all to throw a pitch, but there was an issue with his armor in particular. It simply couldn’t keep up.

“Well, are you up to the job?” Koutarou asked.

“Your Excellency, please throw another three pitches to assist with calibration,” the AI responded.

“You got it. Here it comes, Landlord-san!”

“Ready and waiting, Satomi-kun!”

Koutarou’s body was already enhanced with spiritual energy and magic, granting him superhuman reflexes and speed. Although his armor was aware of how he usually moved, Koutarou had never worn it while playing baseball. The AI had blared one alert message at him after another, so Koutarou was now in the process of making adjustments to fix the various problems.

“Hey, that constrained feeling I was getting earlier is gone now!” he remarked.

“So are you ready?” Shizuka asked.

“Synchronization at 99.9 percent. There are still variables concerning control. Please be especially careful with reckless curveballs, Your Excellency.”

“Don’t worry about it. I’m just going to throw it straight, so I’m counting on you.”

“As you wish, my lord.”

Fortunately, the necessary adjustments were easy enough to make by Koutarou tossing a few practice pitches to Shizuka. Kenji intentionally wasn’t participating—or even watching. He wanted Koutarou’s full-force pitch to be a surprise, so Kotori and Nalfa were using the downtime to interview him. Lots of Forthorthians, Nalfa included, were dying to know more about Koutarou’s childhood friend.

“...But Nii-san was so stubborn about going.”

“I got the game-winning hit, didn’t I?!”

“And I would have praised you too—if you hadn’t collapsed the next day. You really worried Kou-niisan. I swear, you can be so stupid...”

“Ahahaha, it sounds like you really love baseball too, Mackenzie-sama!” Nalfa chimed in from behind the camera.

“It’s all we had as kids.”

“Okay, Mackenzie! We’re ready now!” Koutarou called.

“Ah, finally...”

Kenji tossed his left fist smack into the middle of the mitt on his right hand with a fearless smile as he approached Koutarou. Kenji had traded in his glove for a catcher’s mitt, presuming that a standard glove wouldn’t be enough to catch a serious pitch from Koutarou. It would also make it easier for him to compare it to Koutarou’s past pitches.

“You’re really getting into this if you need to calibrate your armor just to toss a ball, huh?” Kenji asked.

“I’ve never thrown a ball in armor, so there was no data,” Koutarou explained.

“I guess that makes sense. So, how much stronger are you now?”

“As strong as I am when I fight normally. That’s what you want to test, isn’t it?”

“Yeah. There’s no point in pulling out all the stops for something you can’t replicate or even maintain for a decent period of time.” Kenji couldn’t see any merit in bringing out a nuke to demonstrate firepower. He wanted to see what Koutarou’s new normal was—just adjusted for baseball. “Okay, let’s do this, Kou.”

“Don’t keel over in surprise, Mackenzie.”

“Talking a mighty big game there, pal! I’m looking forward to this.”

Kenji shoved the ball into Koutarou’s hand. Grinning, both boys turned away from each other and walked toward their positions. They seemed just like two kids about to get themselves into trouble.

“Do your worst, Kou.”

When Kenji reached his mark, he crouched down, lightly smacking his mitt. And just like that, the playful mood was gone. He fixed a sharp stare on Koutarou.

“It’s been a while since I’ve seen that look on your mug, Mackenzie.”

“Right back at you, man.”

Koutarou looked the same—he was exceptionally serious, albeit in a different way than the seriousness that overtook him in battle. It was also different from when he played sports with his friends. This was the face of a player determined to represent his team.

Shizuka stood there speechless, captivated by Koutarou. She’d never seen him this way, and the sight of it had her heart pounding. She looked on, forgetting herself.

“Here it comes!” Koutarou called, winding up his throw.

He was putting everything he had into this pitch and didn’t need to worry about opposing players stealing bases, so Koutarou was willing to sacrifice form for speed. He stepped forward with his left foot, shifting his center of gravity forward, and swung his right arm with the weight of his entire body behind it. As the ball in his hand reached its maximum potential energy, he released it. Kinetic energy from Koutarou’s lower half—stabilized by the weight of the

armor—traveled up to his moving right arm, which gave the ball formidable momentum and a fearsome spin.

Are you kidding me?!



Kenji couldn't see Koutarou's right hand when he threw the pitch. It was moving far too fast for normal human eyes to detect. Because of that, Kenji couldn't tell when Koutarou released the ball. Under ordinary circumstances, it would have been uncatchable.

What the hell?! What kind of a crazy pitch is that, man?!

However, Kenji knew Koutarou's pitching better than anyone. He predicted the ball's path and positioned his mitt accordingly. Based on the form Koutarou was using, Kenji knew Koutarou's straight pitches tended to land slightly low and on the inside. He had to shut out all thoughts aside from that. This wasn't the kind of ball he could catch by overthinking it.

"Whoaaaaa!"

The ball met Kenji's mitt with an audible impact. It had flown just where he'd thought it would... but the force of the throw was too much for him. It sent Kenji flying backward.

"Owowowow..."

Kenji ended up flat on his back, staring up at the blue Forthorthian sky. He'd managed to catch the ball, although it had knocked the wind out of him and his wrist was stinging. Still, now he understood.

I see... So this is the kind of world Kou's been living in.

That one pitch was all Kenji needed to understand how grueling a path Koutarou had set down two thousand years ago. Kenji had seen Koutarou fight before, but this was his first taste of Koutarou's strength. Only now did he *truly* understand it.

"Nice catch, Mackenzie."

Koutarou's smiling face entered Kenji's vista of the blue sky. And when Kenji saw that the smile on his face hadn't changed in the past two thousand years, he came to understand something else important too.

Those girls really are protecting Kou's heart. They're the reason he's been able to stay himself despite the path he's on... No wonder he can't pick just one of them. Jeez, and you have the gall to rib me about my trouble with women...

Koutarou wasn't a fighter by nature, and he'd managed to become a hero without losing himself. Kenji could easily imagine now everything the girls had done for Koutarou while he wasn't looking. A bitter smile crossed his lips.

"I didn't so much catch it as just put my mitt in the way..."

"You've got some real skill, man. You really should've continued with baseball," said Koutarou as he extended his right hand to his friend. He was shocked and thrilled that Kenji had managed to catch his full-power pitch.

"My childhood friend went and became a hero, so there was no way that was going to happen," replied Kenji, taking hold of Koutarou's hand and getting back on his feet.

"Then why don't you become a hero too? I'm sure you can pull it off faster than I did."

"Don't make it sound so easy... Do you not realize what you've pulled off?"

The boys exchanged smiles—the special kind shared between childhood friends. This was just another episode between them, but it helped Kenji understand what Koutarou had been through on a deeper level. Though at the same time, Kenji felt that Koutarou hadn't truly changed, and that was a relief.

With the pitch behind them, Koutarou and Kenji were now shooting the breeze. The serious atmosphere from before was gone, having given way to chipper chatter about baseball.

"Still, Kou, I can't believe you're throwing balls like something out of a manga..."

"Yeah, well, you went flying like something out of a manga too."

"That was your fault!"

"My bad, hahaha!"

Meanwhile, Kotori and Nalfa were bursting with excitement. They were totally caught up in the moment after witnessing Koutarou's incredible pitch and Kenji's incredible catch.

"Did you get that?! Nal-chan, tell me you caught that!"

“I did! We just filmed something amazing!”

Kotori enthusiastically shook Nalfa by the shoulders as she was watching the replay of the footage with sparkling eyes. The two demure girls were acting nothing like their usual selves.

“Show me too, Nal-chan! I couldn’t see Kou-niisan’s pitch!”

“Me neither! But don’t worry! I caught it on camera!”

“Great job!”

Right now, the girls were acting more like young children with a new toy. Their faces lit up as they rewatched their footage.

In stark contrast, Shizuka looked somewhat displeased as she watched Koutarou and Kenji. She felt like she was being left out.

“Hmm...”

“Shizuka, I think it’d be difficult to get between those two,” Alunaya whispered in a cheery tone from where he was seated on Shizuka’s shoulder. He understood the manly bond between Koutarou and Kenji, as he’d felt a similar brotherhood with his fellow dragons.

“I-It’s not like I’m trying to get between them. I just...”

“Just what?”

“It’s a shame that Satomi-kun doesn’t act like that around us too.”

Shizuka couldn’t recall a time Koutarou had treated any of the girls the same chummy way he did Kenji. He only acted that way around his childhood friend. It made Shizuka feel a little lonely.

“Don’t worry, Shizuka-san!” Kotori chimed in. She was normally more reserved, but she was still swept up in the moment.

“Huh?”

“He may seem different right now, but this is basically how Kou-niisan is with all of you,” Kotori explained. She didn’t share Shizuka’s concerns; she knew there was no need to worry.

“What do you mean, Kotori-chan?” Shizuka asked, tilting her head in

puzzlement.

“Heehee, Kou-niisan’s a guy, so he just acts differently around girls, you know?”

In a reversal of the norm, Kotori was the one consoling Shizuka. Shizuka was stalwart by nature, but she was just a normal teenage girl at heart when it came to Koutarou. Meanwhile, though Kotori was ordinarily shy, she was an excellent source of advice about Koutarou.

“Yeah... You’re right,” Shizuka admitted.

“So even though he *looks* different right now, he’s just unguarded around Nii-san because he trusts him,” Kotori explained further.

“That’s not how I saw it...”

Kotori was saying Koutarou was the same around Kenji and the girls, even if it came off differently. But Shizuka wasn’t convinced. She continued to watch Koutarou with a mystified look.

“Sure, Kou-niisan only makes that face when he’s with my brother, so I can understand why you might feel a little jealous. But when Kou-niisan is with you or the other girls, he makes faces he wouldn’t around my brother too. He only lets his guard down like that around you.”

As Kenji’s little sister and Koutarou’s fellow childhood friend, Kotori knew the way Koutarou acted around the Matsudaira siblings was special. She’d once been concerned about it herself. In fact, she was concerned about it all the way up until Koutarou entered middle school and she got to see him interact with girls more, at which point she finally came to realize that was simply how he was. So she understood perfectly well how hard it would be for Shizuka to get her head around it herself.

“R-Really?” Shizuka was beginning to take to the idea, if hesitantly. It gave her hope, which brightened her expression a little.

Seeing that, Kotori nodded. “Really. Truth be told, Nal-chan isn’t sure how to get between them either. So you’re in the same boat, Shizuka-san.”

“K-Kotori!” Nalfa exclaimed, bewildered by suddenly getting caught in the

cross fire. Kotori was right, of course, but Nalfa didn't exactly want to be outed like that. She was beyond flustered.

"I see, I see... Okay." Shizuka nodded repeatedly in relief and slapped her cheeks a few times. She was then back to her usual self.

"Shizuka-san?" Kotori wondered what she was up to.

"I'm going in there. If you're right, I'd sure feel silly just watching from the sidelines."

If Koutarou really felt the same way about Shizuka and the other girls, there was no need for her to be so timid. It would be much better to enjoy the moment with Koutarou.

"Oho! So you plan to steal the Blue Knight from Mackenzie? That's the spirit!" Alunaya, still perched atop Shizuka's shoulder, nodded with an approving look.

His comment put a sour look on Shizuka's face and had her puffing out her cheeks. "You're wrong! You don't know anything, Uncle!"

"On the path to rulership, you must conquer everything."

"That doesn't apply to anyone but you! I'm no emperor—just a normal girl!"

"Truly? Well, sorry for being a natural-born leader."

"Jeez..."

Shizuka walked over to Koutarou and Kenji while bickering with Alunaya.

Goodness. She should know better since the legendary Fire Dragon Emperor treats her like she's special too... Oh, Shizuka-san.

Kotori watched Shizuka go with a bittersweet smile. She saw Shizuka as a heroine in her own right, but when it came to romance, she was just a normal girl. The disparity was equally curious and charming.

"Heya, Satomi-kun, Mackenzie-kun! Can I try too?" Shizuka called out as she approached the boys.

"Indeed, this looks amusing. Let us join in as well."

"You catch her pitch, Kou. I've got a bad feeling about this..."

“All right. I’ll maximize my defenses and catch whatever you’ve got, Landlord-san.”

After solving Shizuka’s problem for now, Kotori focused on solving another. Namely Nalfa, who was also staring at Shizuka and the boys.

“Nal-chan, that’s the kind of confidence you need!”

“...I-I’ll try.”

“You’re not going to *try*! You’re going to do it! Now!”

“K-Kotori, don’t push me! I’m still not prepared!”

“Oooh, Kou-niisan! Nal-chan wants to try batting too!”

Kotori knew Koutarou well, so she knew that there was no point in Nalfa holding back. She may have felt differently about pushing her friend forward not long ago, but now Kotori had complete faith that Koutarou would catch Nalfa if she dove right in. That was why, contrary to the panicked Nalfa, Kotori was beaming.

Shizuka’s dynamic first pitch shot straight into Koutarou’s mitt. She’d assumed her half-dragon form that she used in battle, so even with the power of his armor, spiritual energy, and magic, Koutarou still slid back a full meter behind the force of the ball.

“Ouch!”

“Are you okay, Satomi-kun?!”

“I-I’m fine, but that smarts!”

The impact and ensuing pain made Koutarou shake his left hand and run around in a circle. Shizuka dashed over and was relieved to find that he was truly okay.

“The Blue Knight sure looks like he’s having fun...” Crimson muttered, collapsed over a desk as she watched the footage of Koutarou and the others. She was checking out Nalfa’s video to kill time. It was a few days old by now, but it had only just hit the reaches of deep space yesterday. Even with

Forthorthe's latest technology, the transmission of information across the universe wasn't instant.

"I'm not doing it, Crimson," said Green.

"I haven't even said anything yet."

"I'm still not doing it."

"Come on. Cut me a *little* slack, Green."

Watching Nalfa's video had gotten Crimson in the mood to play baseball, but Green shut the idea down before Crimson could even get it out. Now bored *and* pouting, Crimson slumped over her desk again.

"If you'd like, I'll play with you," Nana offered as she entered the room.

"Really?!" Crimson's expression brightened instantly.

"What Satomi-san and the others are doing looks fun."

"You really are a good guy, Nana! I've always known that about you!" Crimson jumped up, grabbed hold of Nana's small hand, and shook it vigorously. She was genuinely excited at the prospect of something to end her dire boredom.

"You are so simple... You've always said you didn't like her and that she has a nasty personality," Green muttered.

This development had her in a sour mood. In truth, she'd wanted to play along with Crimson too, but she knew her forte was brainpower. Her athletic abilities were horrible, so she was feeling a little spiteful that Nana could so easily do what she couldn't.

"But playtime will have to wait until we're done with work," said Nana.

"Did you find them?" A fearless grin crossed Crimson's lips and a sharp look flashed in her eyes. The prospect of a fight delighted her more than anything.

"Yes. The intel led us straight to them. Do you see that mountain in front of us? There's a cave in the middle of it that they're turning into a base," Nana explained.

"And what'd your boss say?" Crimson asked.

"We're going in," replied Nana.

“I love your boss!”

“The commander agrees with the call, and she’d personally like your support,” Nana continued.

“That’s just what I like to hear! The princess can count on me!” Crimson practically cheered. Her eyes were sparkling and her heart was pounding now that she knew battle was nigh.

“She’s just buttering you up, Crimson,” Green warned.

“I wouldn’t dare,” said Nana. “The commander thinks quite highly of Crimson.”

“I wonder about that. You really do have a nasty personality after all.”

“Oh my.”

Crimson and the court magicians had joined Nana and Nefilforan’s unit in deep space in pursuit of Ralgwin, and they were now preparing to raid a base they’d discovered.

The court magicians and Nefilforan’s unit were all seasoned veterans, so capturing a base was quick work for them. The initial charge was always the deadliest part of the assault, but with the assistance of magic, they could keep casualties to a minimum. The team had just demonstrated that with a near perfect operation, yet Nefilforan looked unhappy.

“Another bust, huh? Even if it was just a supply depot, we should’ve been able to find more information on other locations there...”

The goal of capturing the mountain base wasn’t just to strike a blow to the enemy, but also to obtain intelligence. In the vastness of space, there were countless places Ralgwin and his forces could hide. Information concerning their whereabouts would be key to tracking them down. And since outposts, depots, and other bases communicated with one another, the Forthorthians had hoped to uncover more of the enemy’s network by capturing location after location. They’d gotten as far as the mountain base they’d just captured, but the trail went cold there.

“It seems they’ve taken past blunders to heart and they’re being much more cautious with critical intelligence,” observed Nana. She was serving as Nefilforan’s adjutant and suspected that Ralgwin was now taking measures to defend himself against the kind of information warfare he’d just been a victim to in their last battle.

“Naturally, the enemy won’t take that kind of defeat lying down. This speaks volumes to the size of the force we’re up against, however,” remarked Nefilforan.

If Ralgwin only had a small army at his disposal, he wouldn’t need to take such pains to hide his network. Such precaution was only necessary with a considerable system of bases. This led Nefilforan to believe that Ralgwin’s remaining army was much larger than she’d previously suspected.

“Nana-chin, I’ve finished looking over the place with my magic,” Orange—formerly Dark Orange—reported via the tactical support terminal on Nana’s arm. Following the capture of the mountain base, she and the other court magicians had been assigned to investigate the facility and report back.

“Orange, don’t call me that during a mission,” Nana replied with a furrowed brow.

Lately, Orange had affectionately taken to using a nickname for Nana. It was proof that they’d come to see each other as allies, but Nana didn’t care for it in a work setting. It was distracting. Little did she know the soldiers in the unit had already taken to calling her “Nana-chin” too. Orange’s influence was spreading right under her nose.

“More importantly, listen to this, Nana-chin! They were stocking up on magic weapons and bullets here too, but they’ve been kept in a dormant state so that we can’t track any traces of magic.”

“Did Green find anything?” Nana asked. Green excelled in divination and could even use her magic to forecast the future, so she was a critical part of such investigations.

“I didn’t really get it, but she told me to report that they’re rolling the dice.”

“Got it. Thanks, Orange.”

Unfortunately, Green had come up empty-handed too. Grevanas was likely taking steps to thwart the magical girls. Not only had the enemy kept their magic weapons dormant, they'd also used magic to cover their tracks. Moreover, they were incorporating an element of randomness in their plans to muddle Green's clairvoyance. Given the uncertainty of the future, Green's future forecast spell was akin to reading probability based on many factors. Throwing in a random variable made it all the harder to predict. The magical girls' investigation had thus been stymied.

"Okay, that's all for now, Nana-chin!"

"Jeez, not on an open comms channel, Orange... Commander, their magic didn't turn up anything either," Nana reported back.

"Heehee," Nefilforan giggled.

"Not you too!"

"Sorry... Now, back to the matter at hand, I suspect the enemy is preparing for a large operation. This would be overkill for anything smaller."

Nefilforan had no proof, but she felt Ralgwin was planning something big. The part that bothered her the most was the weapons he'd been stockpiling. Moving them to the front lines was one thing, but he had no reason to amass them at supply depots elsewhere. They were too valuable simply to leave lying around unused, and he'd gone to great lengths to conceal them. Nefilforan could only assume that Ralgwin had something in mind for them.

"I'll contact Kiriha-san," said Nana.

"Please do. You have my permission to share all of our intelligence, but make sure the connection is encrypted."

"Understood!"

As soon as Nana heard Nefilforan's fear, she ran straight to the communications officer. It was nothing more than a hunch at this point, but Nana wanted to alert Kiriha and Elfaria as soon as possible. She, too, sensed something was afoot.

"I hope I'm just overthinking this..." Nefilforan mused, crossing her arms.

Nefilforan's unit had been taking base after base recently, but the result was always the same: they had nothing to show for it. Nefilforan desperately wanted to be wrong about what it all meant, but she couldn't shake the terrible feeling that had seized her.

Behind the Scenes

Tuesday, October 18th

Word that a base had been seized quickly reached Ralgwin. He'd been furious just the other day upon hearing that a factory was attacked, so the communications officer making the report now was trembling with fear... but Ralgwin took the news surprisingly well.

"Good work. That will be all," he said calmly.

"Y-Yes, sir! Pardon me!" the officer yelled with a salute. He then returned to his seat with a perplexed expression.

His fellow soldiers looked at him piteously, but they also looked a bit mystified to see him unharmed. Several bases had now been captured since the factory fell, and Ralgwin had been alarmingly quiet in response to it all. Was everything really all right...? They exchanged looks, each one of them wondering the same thing.

"Hmm, it seems that our outermost shell is under attack," Grevanas observed. He'd heard the report as well, but unlike the soldiers, he wasn't surprised by Ralgwin's reaction. He simply nodded as if it were a matter of course while looking up at the hologram projecting related data.

"Yes," Ralgwin agreed. "We can safely ignore any attempt to breach that shell."

After losing his factory, Ralgwin had instituted sweeping changes to logistics and information management in his army. The new structure of his network was like a multilayered eggshell, with people, supplies, and information traveling across the surfaces of their respective shells with limited access to the other layers. Any base that connected layers was moved regularly, and intel about any such connection was guarded with the utmost secrecy. This reduced the risk of losing critical locations and intel to the Imperial Army, whose latest conquests were limited to bases on the outermost shell and therefore posed no

real threat to Ralgwin and his men.

“Splendid planning, Ralgwin-dono,” Grevanas offered.

“After the crippling loss of the factory, it was necessary,” Ralgwin replied.

“Indeed.”

“That said, this latest attack did exact a cost. We’ve lost the stockpile of magic weapons we had stored at that base,” Ralgwin continued.

“It was meant to be a key outpost in our next offensive, after all.”

Nefilforan’s hunch had been right. The magic and spiritual energy weapons she’d recovered from the captured base were intended for an attack on the royal families and the Blue Knight. Losing them was a blow all its own to Ralgwin’s plans.

“Speaking of our future plans, I bear good tidings,” said Grevanas. He had an idea of how to make up for the lost weapons.

“Oh? Has there been a new development in your research?” Ralgwin inquired.

The fall of the factory had entailed a long list of losses for the rebels, but they’d come away from the devastation with one gain—a black goo known as spiritual energy waste, which could store negative spiritual energy and give rise to living corpses. Grevanas had devoted himself to studying the substance of late.

“I’m now on the verge of being able to control the waste,” he proclaimed.

When Grevanas had first harvested the waste, it was only capable of infecting victims and spreading, making it mostly useless as a weapon. It had potential as a diversion, but its deployment would be fully reliant on an enemy completely eradicating it. If they failed to do so, the waste would continue to spread and make any area it touched unlivable for humans. That was a critical flaw. Even in situations where that was the desired outcome, nuclear and biological weapons worked faster.

But everything changed if the waste could be controlled. It would have extraordinary potential as a weapon if its range, its speed, and the way it targeted its victims could all be commanded—and Grevanas had found a way to

do exactly that.

“In the process, I also discovered that the waste can be used to heal soldiers,” he said further.

Grevanas’s research had additionally yielded this rather unexpected finding—the spiritual energy waste had something of a regenerative power. In the process of propagation and infection, it could temporarily mimic the forms of organisms it absorbed, allowing it to substitute missing body parts and the like. This power could put severely injured soldiers back on the battlefield in no time, so Grevanas had been studying it in tandem with controlling the waste.

“‘Heal,’ you say? Wouldn’t it be more accurate to say ‘infect’?” Ralgwin questioned.

He had concerns about Grevanas’s supposed breakthrough. Subjecting soldiers to regeneration via the waste was as good as infecting them, and since living corpses only attacked on instinct, they had limited application as soldiers. Ralgwin felt it would be better simply to use Forthorthian technology and prosthetics to heal and treat the injured.

“That’s the case at present,” Grevanas conceded. “But I am on the verge of being able to control the waste *completely*.”

“Are you suggesting you could control it even during the regeneration process?” Ralgwin asked.

“I am,” Grevanas answered.

Indeed, Ralgwin’s concerns about infecting his own soldiers would be entirely mitigated by advanced control of the waste. If Grevanas could keep it from consuming patients, they would reap all of the benefits with none of the drawbacks.

“So if we get the waste under our control, we’ll have the capacity for instant healing and more... Not bad. I imagine we could make a tidy profit off of this too,” Ralgwin mused.

“Haha! Will you be entering the medical industry like the Blue Knight, Ralgwin-dono?”

“Instant muscle gain, changing appearances or fingerprints... A whole host of activities illegal under the current system could be achieved in the blink of an eye. It would be a shame not to cash in on that. That said, it’s best to keep our secret weapon to ourselves for now.”

“Indeed. It can supplement our lost weapon cache, so it would be unwise to show our hand too soon.”

“Carry on with your research, then,” ordered Ralgwin. He was pleased with Grevanas’s report.

“I shall right away,” Grevanas said with a nod before turning to leave.

With control and regeneration within my grasp, I’ll soon be able to bring back Maxfern-sama...

Once Ralgwin could no longer see Grevanas, the lich’s wrinkly face twisted into a horribly evil grin. Only the Gray Knight, who happened to be entering the command room just then, witnessed it.

“Oh, Gray Knight-dono...”

“Going back to your research, Grevanas?”

“Yes. I expect to be quite busy.”

“I can imagine.”

“If you’ll excuse me...”

After giving the Gray Knight a bow, Grevanas exited the room. The Gray Knight watched him go but ultimately said nothing. Instead, he turned his attention to Ralgwin.

“You called?” he said as he approached.

“I’m glad you could make it, Gray Knight,” Ralgwin replied, glancing at him and then pointing to the informational hologram. “One of our bases was attacked, you see.”

“It doesn’t look like there were any serious losses,” the Gray Knight commented.

“True, but I’m not fond of taking things lying down. So I was thinking of

striking back, and I'd like to request your cooperation."

"What are you planning, Ralgwin?"

"I want to avoid a situation where we're just whittling each other down when we're already outnumbered. I was thinking of crushing the enemy's vanguard to make it harder for them to gain ground."

The difference in numbers between Ralgwin's troops and the Imperial Army was all too apparent. Even if Ralgwin chose to ally with other antigovernment factions, they'd still be no match for Forthorthe's full forces. Hampering Elfaria's conquest would take a different approach.

"To that end, I'm after a certain something. And I would like you to join the attack," Ralgwin explained.

"I've agreed to cooperate, so let's see what you've got."

"Thank you."

When Ralgwin received assurance of the Gray Knight's aid, a small smile crossed his lips. He'd been forced to stay on the defensive thus far, but as long last, it was time to counterattack. Ralgwin was thrilled.

"Is that all you wanted to talk about?" the Gray Knight asked.

"Yes. Sorry for calling you just for that," Ralgwin replied.

"Send me the attack plans later."

"Of course. I'll make the arrangements."

Not one for conversation, the Gray Knight left the room as soon as the pertinent discussion was over.

"Good grief, he could stand to be more sociable," Ralgwin muttered to himself once the Gray Knight had departed. He quickly pulled himself together, refocusing his attention on a holographic photo frame atop his desk displaying a picture of Vandarion with a young boy. "It's finally time to fight back..."

Vandarion was a ruthless man, both harsh and wicked. He'd never once hesitated to do what was necessary for the sake of his ambitions. But Ralgwin was family. Vandarion had cherished him in his boyhood and trained him

strictly, laying the groundwork for Ralgwin to learn to care for his subordinates—a trait Vandarion had sadly never developed himself.

“Just watch how far your nephew will go...”

Ralgwin had a gentle look on his face as he stared at the photo frame. He’d shared a special bond with his uncle, which had blossomed into a desire to avenge him. He’d also inherited Vandarion’s mission to overthrow the royal families and the Blue Knight.

The serendipitous acquisition of the spiritual energy waste in the factory fall had significantly advanced Grevanas’s research toward his ultimate goal—resurrecting Maxfern. He needed a way to bring back the dead, and the waste was his gateway to making that happen.

“How is progress?” Grevanas asked upon returning to his lab.

“Brain waves stabilized four minutes and forty-two seconds after the heart started beating. His current brain activity is close to that of sleep, but I think we’re nearing consciousness,” his new assistant reported. This new assistant was none other than the officer who’d served as Grevanas’s tour guide at the factory. He’d been demoted after the incident there, but Grevanas thought highly of his knowledge of spiritual energy and had taken him in.

“Grevanas-sama, will this really bring Dagbaran back?” asked a female soldier present for the experiment. Her name was Sansara, and she was the leader of the squad the fallen man belonged to. They’d just returned from a fatal reconnaissance mission.

“That is the purpose of this experiment, yes,” Grevanas assured her. “I cannot guarantee the outcome, but we are working to bring him back to life. So continue calling out to him, Sansara.”

“Does my presence here really change anything...?” she asked uncertainly.

“Resurrecting the dead is a delicate procedure. Surely you understand that, do you not?”

“Y-Yes, even I can appreciate that.”

“Your memories of him are critical to reconstituting and grafting his soul. Have a little more faith, Sansara. You are what will stimulate him and call him back from the dead.”

“Okay... I’ll do my best.”

Sansara nodded, took Dagbaran’s hand, and called for him. The electrodes and other devices attached to her head were channeling her brain waves and spiritual waves to resuscitate the subject.

“Wake up, Dagbaran... You never paid me back for that one time.”

The soul naturally began to deteriorate upon death. Because the body served to maintain the soul, once it expired, the soul gradually lost its ability to remain in the mortal world and would move on to the afterlife. This meant two techniques were required to revive the dead. The first was to resurrect the body, and the second was to reconstruct the soul. Resurrecting the body was the easier half of the equation. Grevanas could simply use his magic to mend wounds and force the heart to beat again. The real crux was recovering the soul.

A deteriorated soul needed to be reconstituted and then grafted to its host body. This was an exceedingly tricky task, almost guaranteed to fail under anything other than ideal conditions. But Grevanas now had the advantage of spiritual energy technology and the latest technology from Forthorthe. Both greatly improved his resurrection technique, and the waste he’d acquired from the flaming factory helped even further. While studying it, Grevanas had learned that the waste’s ability to absorb and fuse souls could be used to reconstitute them. The experiment on Dagbaran now was to see how well it worked.

“Grevanas-sama, his brain waves are increasing!” his assistant reported.

“Good!” Grevanas called. “Sansara, focus your mind on him!”

“Dagbaran, wake up! I’ll never forgive you for sacrificing yourself to protect me! Wake up this instant so I can see your stupid face again!” Sansara shouted desperately. Dagbaran was a comrade from her hometown and much, much more to her.

“Brain activity is rising! He’s waking up!”

“Dagbaran-kun, please! There’s so much more at stake here than your own life!” Grevanas implored the lifeless man. Even the old lich was desperate, although he was only thinking of his former master. Grevanas was using everything at his disposal to revive Dagbaran, so if the resurrection were to fail, it would mean he was that much further away from bringing back Maxfern. In his eyes, everything was on the line with this experiment.

“Hngh... ah... Huh?”

“Dagbaran!!!”

“The test subject has awoken!”

“How is he?!”

As Grevanas, his assistant, and Sansara watched on, Dagbaran finally woke up. His eyes opened and he stared at the ceiling blinking before slowly looking down at his right hand. When he saw Sansara was firmly holding it, he looked up at her.

“Captain...? Huh? Where...”

“Do you recognize me, Dagbaran?!”

“Of course I do, Captain Sansara. But what in the world happened to me? I was sure I was dead...”

The now conscious Dagbaran was confused. He had no spiritual powers and he had died without regrets, so rather than becoming a ghost, his soul had patiently been waiting to pass on to the afterlife. That being the case, his memory of what happened to him cut off at the moment of his physical death.

“You *were* dead, Dagbaran! But Grevanas-sama brought you back to life!” Sansara instinctively squeezed Dagbaran’s hand harder. Large tears were spilling out of her eyes. The joy of having Dagbaran back was too much for her to bear.

“C-Captain...?” Meanwhile, Dagbaran was still confused. He didn’t know anything about coming back from the dead, but Sansara was crying over him. He felt like he was dreaming.

Captain Sansara recognizes him as Dagbaran-kun. That's a good sign.
Grevanas glanced over at his assistant, who instantly understood what he was asking for and promptly sent him the data. *The spiritual wave is a 99.98 percent match... This is a massive success.*

Grevanas felt relief wash over him as he reviewed the numbers. The spiritual waves of the resurrected subject were a near perfect match for his spiritual signature prior to his death. There was variation, but it was an acceptable margin of error. Before Grevanas had gotten his hands on the spiritual energy waste, he'd never been able to achieve results like this. He'd only been able to manage partial matches, where someone close to the subject would easily be able to tell something wasn't right about them. So given Dagbaran's awakening and Sansara's response to him, Grevanas was prepared to say he'd perfected his resurrection technique.

"Ohoho, how are you feeling, Dagbaran-kun? Is anything peculiar, or do you feel unwell?" Grevanas asked. The success of the experiment had him in high spirits. His own resurrection had twisted his personality. He was normally far more stoic, so this was a rare glimpse of his original self.

"Thank you so much, Grevanas-sama! U-Um, I think my left hand feels a little numb..." Dagbaran was taken aback by Grevanas's hideous countenance, but he quickly collected himself and expressed his gratitude. Grevanas had saved his life, after all—albeit not in the traditional sense.

"Hmm, your left hand was severely injured, so it was regenerated in the resurrection process. The new nerves will lack sensation and be difficult to use at first. Let me know if it lasts too long."

In truth, Grevanas's experiment was a test for more than just his resurrection technique. He had also wanted to see the spiritual energy waste's capacity for regenerating the human body. Forthorthe had technology that could accomplish the same thing, but it was time-consuming to use. The waste's ability to do it instantaneously was extremely attractive, especially in a military setting where wounded soldiers meant a weaker army.

"Grevanas-sama, I don't know how to thank you..." Sansara wiped away her tears and bowed to Grevanas. She was truly grateful for what the old lich had

done. She'd only realized what Dagbaran meant to her upon his passing, so she revered Grevanas like a god for being able to bring her love back to her.

"Dagbaran! You lower your head too!"

"Ow..."

"This was just a part of my research. Thank your stars for being blessed with the opportunity to be a part of it," Grevanas replied to Sansara.

"Th-Thank you very much, Grevanas-sama!" echoed Dagbaran. He was equally grateful. He'd died protecting Sansara, so being able to return to her meant the world to him.

Even though he'd just been resurrected, Dagbaran was well enough to stand on his own immediately. He needed an IV drip to replenish key nutrients in his body, but there were no other complications—yet another advantage of using the spiritual energy waste.

"We'll take our leave now, Grevanas-sama," said Sansara.

"Thank you for everything," said Dagbaran.

With that, Sansara took the handles of Dagbaran's wheelchair, and the couple left the laboratory. After a thorough checkup, Dagbaran was being released to the barracks to recuperate. Although he could stand and walk already, Grevanas suggested that he err on the side of caution and focus on recovering for now.

"Grevanas-sama is nicer than he looks," said Dagbaran.

"A classic example of why you shouldn't judge a book by its cover. But you'd better not take his kindness for granted, Dagbaran. You'll have to repay Grevanas-sama with service befitting your station," Sansara instructed.

"I know. I don't want to come off as ungrateful."

"Hmm, good. Then let's start by nursing you back to health."

"Say, Captain..."

"What?"

"I want to thank you too."

“I-I don’t need any thanks, dummy!”

“Got it.”

The couple continued to banter as they headed for the barracks. The Gray Knight took note of them on his way to visit Grevanas’s lab.

“You certainly managed to win them over, Grevanas,” he remarked.

“I may not be as good as you once were, but there’s nothing wrong with having a few more pawns.”

Grevanas had been kind to Sansara and Dagbaran to further his own goals. He had few allies, and his appearance exacerbated that issue. No matter his strategy moving forward, he would need to put in the effort to win support. And for that, treating his test subjects and their loved ones kindly was extraordinarily effective. The same was true for the assistant he’d recruited.

“You could say I came here today to become your pawn,” the Gray Knight offered.

“...What’s this about?”

Grevanas narrowed his eyes slightly as he invited the Gray Knight inside. At the same time, he used his bracelet to send a message to his assistant in the next room asking to be left alone for a while. Grevanas had only recently learned how to use the bracelet-model terminal, and he’d mastered it in no time at all.

“Right this way,” urged Grevanas.

“Here is fine. I don’t intend to stay for long,” the Gray Knight replied.

“I’d like to make sure our conversation isn’t overheard.”

“I see.”

The Gray Knight nodded and followed Grevanas to the lab’s lounge. The lich had cast several spells on the room, shielding it from electronic interference and preventing sound from escaping. Understanding this, the Gray Knight took a seat without complaint.

“From what I can tell, you’ve practically perfected resurrection,” he began

upon sitting down.

Grevanas thought some length of small talk was in order first, but he obliged cutting straight to the chase with a smile, for Maxfern had always been that way too. Granted, not many people could distinguish Grevanas's smile from his normal expression. "Ohoho! I played my entire hand to make it happen."

"Forthorthian science, spiritual energy, and that waste, huh?"

"Indeed. If the test subject is recently deceased and we have access to someone who knew them well, the procedure is nearly flawless."

Forthorthian science could accurately replicate DNA, and spiritual energy and the waste made it easy to reconstitute a soul. Magic alone wouldn't have been enough to resurrect someone so accurately, but with new tools at his disposal, Grevanas could bring the dead back to life with minimal sacrifice.

"So the problem now is how to reconstitute Maxfern's soul since he's been dead for two millennia, right?" the Gray Knight asked.

"Yes. I only perished seven hundred years ago, and look how I returned." Grevanas smiled bitterly.

The tools Grevanas had just used to resurrect Dagbaran weren't available when he himself was resurrected in Folsaria. His resurrectors hadn't been as skilled with magic either. His rebirth as a lich was proof of that. His soul had only been partially reconstructed, and the image his resurrectors had of him filled in the blanks, resulting in a personality much closer to Maxfern's.

"That's where my offer comes into play," said the Gray Knight.

"So you intend to help me solve this problem."

"That's right. I'll collect Maxfern's bio and spiritual signatures. I can also lend you the powers of chaos when resurrecting him."

"That *is* an appealing offer..."

Grevanas's hideous appearance and his lack of familiarity with Forthorthe made gathering information difficult. The Gray Knight offering to do it for him was an ideal scenario. Moreover, the possibility of borrowing the power of chaos was also alluring.

“That said, I will reserve resurrection via chaos as a last resort.”

“Because it affects one’s personality?”

“Yes. I want to resurrect Maxfern-sama as I knew him, so I will only rely on chaos after exhausting my other options.”

Chaos blurred the boundary between life and death, which made resurrection easier but also blurred the very lines of a subject’s personality, so Grevanas was rightfully wary of that approach. That was why he’d aimed to perfect his resurrection technique—to truly bring the Maxfern he knew back.

“If you don’t want to use chaos for it, that’s fine,” said the Gray Knight.

“I would greatly appreciate using it for other things, if you don’t mind,” replied Grevanas. He was thinking of eliminating any enemies that appeared while gathering the necessary information on Maxfern, making quick escapes, and the like. The power of chaos would make things very easy for them.

“I assume this means you’re taking me up on my offer?” asked the Gray Knight.

“I’d be happy to—depending on what your terms are.”

Grevanas was getting exactly what he wanted out of this exchange. The Gray Knight was capable, and Grevanas had no doubt he could gather the data he needed on Maxfern. There was likely no one better for the job. The only hitch was that Grevanas knew the Gray Knight wasn’t offering to help for free.

“No need to worry,” the Gray Knight assured him. “I won’t ask for anything too extreme. I only want you to provide me with the magic and spiritual energy technology you have.”

“Spiritual energy technology?” Grevanas’s eyes opened wide. He hadn’t expected that request.

“I will eventually drag Sanae into the whirlpool, but unfortunately, I’m no match for her psychic powers at the moment. So I want the support of spiritual energy technology.”

The Gray Knight was possessed of great strength after sacrificing eight girls to the whirlpool of chaos. But as far as his spiritual energy went, he was only

drawing on what he'd gained from sucking in the haniwas as well. He was no match for Sanae-nee. He knew she might come at him with a surprise counterattack he'd be unable to defend against.

"And you want spiritual energy technology from *me*?" Grevanas asked.

"That's right. I came to you."

"Hmm..." Grevanas mused. Magic was one thing, but Ralgwin also had spiritual energy technology. So if the Gray Knight was specifically asking Grevanas for it, it could only mean one thing. The lich exhaled and grinned bitterly. "So you've seen through me."

"Now that resurrection is within your reach, by the time I fight Sanae, you will already—"

"You needn't say more. I may have measures in place, but I'd still rather not hear a word of it breathed aloud."

"So, what do you say?"

"You're a terrifying man, Gray Knight... Hahh, but I understand. Allow me to assist you as well."

"Then we have a deal."

"A deal? Surely you mean an arrangement under duress," Grevanas said jokingly, although he saw no humor in the truth of the situation. His dry eyes watched the Gray Knight carefully.

"How rude. If you wish to decline, you can just say so."

"The fact that you actually think that is the most terrifying part about you..."

Thus the Gray Knight and Grevanas struck a secret deal, by which the Gray Knight would supply Grevanas with information and Grevanas would supply the Gray Knight with magic and spiritual energy tech. At first blush, there was nothing terribly remarkable about the exchange, but it would pave the way for something far greater.

Koutarou's Job

Tuesday, October 18th

DKI, also known as Dragon Knight Industries, was enjoying record-breaking business. The reason? The recent release of the PAF, which, while not very profitable per unit, was being produced at incredible volumes to meet surging demand. The result was unprecedented revenue.

“Why is it selling this much...?”

The current owner of DKI, Koutarou, was puzzled by the situation. He'd imagined that the PAF would primarily be used as a prosthesis or a mobility device for the elderly, so the massive orders pouring in from all sectors came as a surprise to him.

“Consider the vastness of Forthorthe, spread throughout the galaxy. General-purpose machinery that can be used for most anything is bound to be in high demand. Of course, there's also the appeal that *you* bring to it,” said Kiriha with a smile.

The Holy Forthorthe Galactic Empire was, true to its name, spread throughout the reaches of the galaxy. It was constantly developing planets and expanding its borders. A great deal of machinery was required in the process, and on the individual level, the PAF could perform the functions of many different machines. That made it much more efficient. And the more Forthorthe expanded, the more critical logistics became—so reducing the number of machines needed in any given location only made sense. Moreover, since a worker with a PAF could do the work of several, the device did wonders to make up for lack of manpower in understaffed areas. It was also invaluable in dangerous fields like deep seas and mines. So even overlooking the fact that the PAF was the Blue Knight's product, Kiriha figured it was well-suited to Forthorthe's needs.

“But regardless of why it's taken off, the fact remains that DKI is seeing

unprecedented profit from the PAF. If you stay true to your word, then you're going to have to spend all that money on something... So, how are you going to use it?" Theia asked, getting to the point of the day's meeting.

Koutarou wanted to avoid having a major influence on Forthorthian society. He feared the damage he might cause whenever he became personally involved in something. With the PAF, it wasn't hard to imagine the impact its debut might have on other machine-making companies, so Koutarou was taking steps to mitigate exactly that. But the money the PAF generated was a separate issue. Finance wasn't Koutarou's strong suit, and if he sat on too large a percentage of Forthorthe's wealth for too long, the galactic economy would stagnate. So the capital he'd unintentionally amassed needed to be reinvested into Forthorthe somehow. Koutarou couldn't just save it up like he had the pension Alaia left him.

"Even if you ask me that... it's not like I can come up with an answer right away," Koutarou replied to the princess. The question at hand troubled him, which was why he'd called the meeting in the first place.

"Then let's put the specifics aside for now. Have you given any thought to how you'd *like* to use the funds?" asked Harumi, throwing Koutarou a lifeline. She believed Koutarou already had an idea of how to spend the money, so they could make a plan by bringing that to life.

"Vaguely... but I'd like to do something useful for the world. Maybe something other people have been avoiding doing?"

The PAF was turning out to be a boon to Forthorthe, and Koutarou wanted to spend the profits from it the same way. He wanted to continue helping people in need, to continue helping the nation regain what it had lost. And since money would be no object in whatever operation he chose to pursue next, it had occurred to Koutarou that he would be free to take on enterprises that weren't considered profitable and had likely been overlooked by other parties.

"How about investing in the rebuilding effort?" asked Maki. Her idea was to bankroll construction companies and suppliers in the hopes that it would accelerate the sorely needed restoration.

"You could give the money to healing angels like yours truly!" volunteered

Sanae-chan.

“You wouldn’t use it for anything good,” replied Koutarou.

“Boo, I didn’t really mean *me*! I’m talking about the angels in white gowns, like nurses and doctors!”

“Wow, you actually thought about this.”

“I expect an apology.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Very good.”

Sanae’s idea was simple, but it wasn’t bad. Forthorthian hospitals and medical facilities had suffered under the strain of the civil war, so they could likely use the support. Koutarou agreed with that much.

But Kiriha countered, “That said, there’s plenty of financing in construction already and the peak strain on the medical industry has already passed. Tax breaks would be more effective.”

Nothing was wrong with either Maki’s or Sanae’s plans, but construction and medicine were natural funnels for investment in the first place. And, as Kiriha had pointed out, the medical industry was already returning to normal six months after the war. Kiriha believed that the imperial government could help them the most via tax cuts and the like, which wasn’t exactly how Koutarou had imagined his philanthropy effort.

“I’d like to see the money invested in the military. We have a lot of equipment that will need to be updated or retrofitted now that magic and spiritual energy technology are on the table,” Theia put forward.

“I’d normally say that can wait, but it’s a real possibility right now,” Koutarou replied.

Theia’s idea was to supply the Imperial Army with new and necessary countermeasures against magic and spiritual energy now that their enemy had access to them. It would be a huge and expensive undertaking not already factored into the national budget. And since magic and spiritual energy were still classified, it would be difficult to allocate the required funds for it without

raising questions. Considering all this, Koutarou realized that Theia had a point.

“If that’s the level of investment we’re talking, I’d like to see more money put into agriculture,” said Shizuka. “Maybe it’s because I like cooking, but if people are in need, I think food is the way to go.”

“As for me... I would want to support education and welfare. A lot of children lost their families in the war,” said Ruth.

“I would like to promote the arts, science, and athletics, which are often overlooked at times like this,” said Clan.

As everyone began to get their heads around the issue at hand, ideas popped up one after another. Only one person wasn’t keeping up with the conversation. It was none other than our beloved Princess of Love and Courage, Magical Girl Rainbow Yurika.

“Hmm...”

She watched on as Koutarou and the others discussed the matter but kept her thoughts to herself. As a magician, Yurika naturally wanted to invest in magic and magical studies... but that would lead to chaos given the current state of the world, so she knew it was off the table. That was her initial line of thought, so in truth, she’d been considering the issue in her own way. But something else had since occurred to her, and she was still stewing over it.

“What’s the matter, Yurika-san?” asked Elfaria in a whisper so as not to disturb the ongoing conversation when she noticed the young magician was lost in thought.

The empress was sitting next to Yurika as she often did at meetings. As easy as it was to forget, Yurika was an expert on magic and often had keen insight to offer whenever the subject came up. For that reason, Elfaria consulted her frequently during councils and the like, when they’d whisper back and forth to one another like this.

“Um, Elfaria-san...” Yurika said in a hushed, pensive tone.

“What is it?” Elfaria answered with the same gentle smile she always wore while watching over the girls.

“Well, when did Satomi-san start acting like Forthorthe’s king... er, emperor?”

Yurika was perplexed to see Koutarou behaving like a politician, or more aptly, as she put it, like an emperor. That was how Koutarou appeared to Yurika as he tried to decide how best to spend his coffers on his people.

“I was just wondering how this happened...” she muttered, answering the empress honestly. *Huh?!*

That was when she noticed a change come over Elfaria. The empress was suddenly very, very imposing. Yurika had been looking at Koutarou, but when she felt the change in the air, her eyes darted to Elfaria.

“Shhh,” Elfaria said quietly.

“E-Elfaria-san...?” Yurika said nervously.

The same gentle smile remained on Elfaria’s lips, but her eyes were now cold. They perfectly matched the intimidating aura she was radiating. Yurika shuddered.

“Yurika-san, that’s not something we need to discuss.”

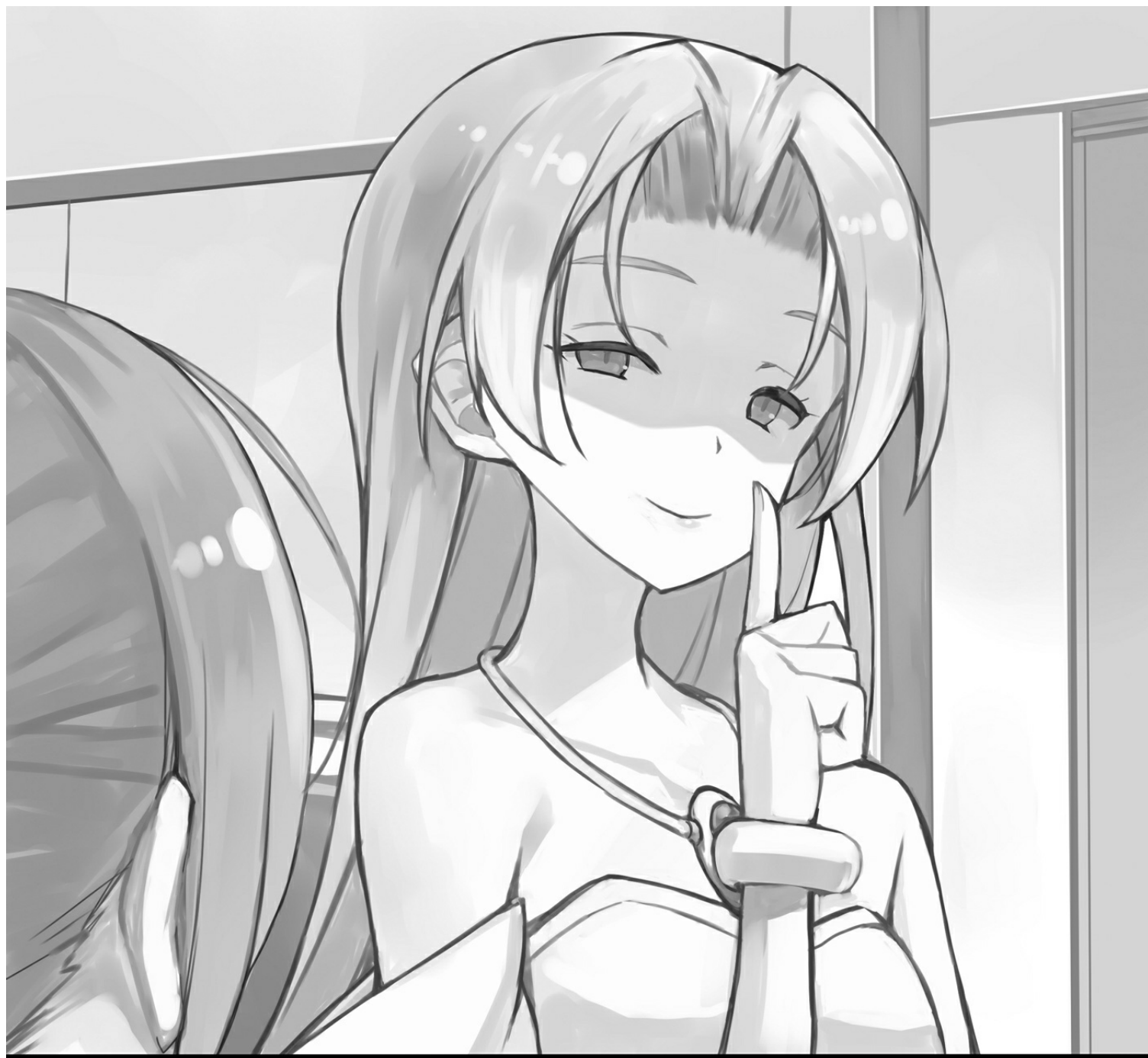
Yurika could clearly hear the part Elfaria *wasn’t* saying: *“Do you know what’s going to happen if you mention it again? If Layous-sama catches on, everything will have been for nought—and I’ll have you take responsibility. So tread carefully.”*

“Y-Yes, Your Majesty!” Yurika yelped, fully aware of and shrinking before the danger she faced. *S-Satomi-san is getting dragged into some sinister scheme!*

Yurika understood that much—but she hadn’t the courage to pry further.

“Good,” said Elfaria. With that, her intimidating aura disappeared and she continued to smile as if nothing had happened.

Just forget it... Try not to think about it too much...



While Yurika was steeling her nerves, Koutarou and the others reached a conclusion.

“Out of all our options...let’s focus on logistics. Especially on routes that are considered unprofitable,” announced Koutarou.

That was what he’d decided after hearing the girls’ opinions. They’d fielded a variety of options, from construction to healthcare to agriculture, but logistics was vital to them all. Many industries would benefit from an increase in ease of transport for both people and products. Koutarou specifically wanted to focus on under-traveled shipping lanes that slowed the restoration efforts for faraway planets. He felt that would be a worthy way to spend his money.

“Kiriha-san, what do you think?” he asked. He was confident in his plan, but he still sought the approval of the wisest among them.

She nodded with a smile. “I also think that would be an excellent use of resources.”

Kiriha agreed that investing in the distribution of goods was a sound choice. The idea of raising the economic floor for all citizens also agreed with her personal ideals. But the greatest influence of all on her approval was the bright smile Koutarou had given when announcing he’d made up his mind.

Elfaria was satisfied as well. She felt this was a worthy new enterprise for Forthorthe’s hero. “That’s Layous-sama for you. What a wonderful decision.”

The only person unsure about this development was Yurika. *What is she scheming behind that smile...?* the magical girl wondered. She was extremely curious about the way Elfaria was acting, but she chose to keep her mouth shut for her own safety.

“Layous-sama, I have a suggestion for your new business endeavor,” the empress continued.

“I’d love to hear it,” replied Koutarou.

“This is actually something I’ve considered before...” Elfaria used a computer to pull up several holograms, each displaying a different mark with the text *Blue Knight Business Certified*. “As you can see, I still haven’t decided on a design,

but I was thinking of an official seal of authenticity.”

“A seal of authenticity...?” Koutarou was agog. He couldn’t get his head around why they’d need such a thing.

“Yes,” Elfaria replied. “You only have PAF right now, but if we consider future business operations, there will inevitably be less than scrupulous people who would appropriate your name to make a quick profit. This is a necessary measure to prevent that.”

“Ah, so it’s to prevent scammers. That’s a good idea.” Koutarou nodded upon hearing her explanation.

Even though the PAF was Koutarou’s only product right now, it was increasingly likely that he’d produce more in the future. In truth, there were already several ideas for variations of the PAF. And as his business expanded, there would no doubt be people who tried to take advantage of his good name to sell inferior products, which would both harm buyers and damage the Blue Knight’s reputation. Measures to prevent that were absolutely necessary.

“Then do you mind if I continue, Layous-sama?” Elfaria asked.

“Yeah, go ahead. I don’t want to distrust the people of Forthorthe, but I’d feel even worse if they ended up suffering,” said Koutarou. The seal of authenticity was predicated on the idea that someone would attempt to rip off the Blue Knight, which was an unpleasant assumption to make, but he appreciated that instituting safeguards against exactly that would ultimately help people.

“This new enterprise will be the first to use the seal of authenticity, but we won’t limit it to logistics. We’ll need to rebrand future PAF devices as well,” Elfaria explained further.

“Thanks a lot, Elle. Without you, we wouldn’t have gotten around to addressing this until it became a problem,” Koutarou said with a pained smile.

Elfaria had promised to lend her aid, and she’d quickly made good on that promise by coming up with the idea for a seal of authenticity. Her help was a great relief to Koutarou. He knew the problems she was trying to prevent easily could have snuck up on him right under his nose.

“How forward-thinking of you, Mother. Like Koutarou, I was only seeing what

was in front of us,” said Theia. She felt the same way Koutarou did, albeit with a bit of pride since her mother had been the one to come up with the idea.

“Truth be told,” began Ruth, who uncharacteristically looked a bit proud herself, “I’m helping to devise countermeasures against forging the seal.”

“Well done, Ruth.”

“I’m honored, Your Highness.”

Thus Koutarou’s new business venture was already proceeding smoothly. Unfortunately, however, the same couldn’t be said for other ongoing operations. News of one came in as the meeting was winding down.

“Sorry, but may I have a bit of everyone’s time?” Kiriha requested after looking at her bracelet.

“I don’t mind,” Koutarou agreed right away.

None of the girls raised any objections either. When Kiriha made a request, it was always important, and this time was no exception.

“I just received a message from Nana. Their raid on the recently discovered enemy stronghold was a success, but they’ve found no clues leading to any other bases. They now believe Ralgwin is very carefully guarding his intelligence network.” Kiriha tapped her bracelet to display a feed of information on the 3D monitor, relaying how Nefilforan’s unit and the court magicians had captured the mountain stronghold and what they’d discovered there—or the lack thereof.

“So they *are* being more cautious now...” Maki concluded upon seeing the diminishing returns they were receiving from the capture of enemy bases.

“After last time, you can’t blame them,” added Koutarou, who felt the same way.

Ralgwin had suffered terrible losses due to the man-made disaster at the factory, but the greatest problem of all was that the Imperial Army had discovered the factory in the first place. Even without the explosion and ensuing fire, there still would have been a battle for the production facility. And even if Ralgwin had managed to save the facility and his men, there was nothing he

could have done to prevent the hacking. In other words, Ralgwin's information network was his greatest liability. He would have been a fool *not* to revamp the way intelligence was handled within his army after realizing that.

"Still, not knowing what they're up to now makes me nervous..." admitted Clan with a bitter expression. After Ralgwin's overhaul of his network, she could no longer follow the rebel army's movements. It left her with a haunting feeling.

"What bothers me is that they were stockpiling magic and spiritual energy weapons. They must have had plans to use them somewhere in the area," said Ruth. She was alarmed by news of the cache found at the stronghold. Neither side was currently capable of producing such weapons en masse, so the cache was a good sign that they were meant for use in an imminent enemy attack.

"Somewhere nearby and soon, hmm?" Theia used her own bracelet to display a star chart of the region, scanning major star systems one after another for potential objectives. "It would be here... Planet Waragthorn of the Bandiet system."

It didn't take her long to find a target worthy of Ralgwin's attention.

"What do you think?" she asked Kiriha.

"I also believe that is Ralgwin's goal," Kiriha confirmed.

"What kind of planet is that? Why would he be after it?" Koutarou asked, unclear what Theia and Kiriha had seen that he hadn't. He cocked his head as he stared at the star chart.

"Layous-sama, Waragthorn has long been a vital part of the mining and shipbuilding industries. Also..." began Elfaria. She was normally quiet and calm, but she struck Koutarou as incredibly angry right now. "It's also where the new Blue Knight is being constructed."

In truth, Elfaria *was* livid. Waragthorn was the temporary home of Koutarou's namesake battleship. And, her own daughter aside, Elfaria wouldn't stand for anyone attacking the Blue Knight.

The report from Nefilforan's unit prolonged the meeting beyond its intended

duration. By the end, Koutarou was stiff from sitting for so long. He rotated his arms and tilted his upper body side to side while twisting to loosen up.

“Ugh, ouch...” he groaned.

“The chairs in the meeting room are pretty small for you, aren’t they Satomikun?” remarked Shizuka.

“I *would* appreciate it if they were a little bigger.”

“Ahaha, growing boys sure have it hard.”

Shizuka was stretching too, although she was moving her body in different ways. Curious, Koutarou decided to ask her about it.

“What are you up to over there, Landlord-san?”

“This? Oh, it’s a method of correcting how I stand that my osteopathic doctor taught me.”

“How you stand?”

“Yeah. Most people think they stand up straight, but it’s actually pretty rare. Our habits and how we use our muscles gradually change our centers of gravity.”

“And you’re trying to fix yours?”

“Yeah. Proper posture makes a huge difference in stability when it comes to fighting.”

“Ah, so this is the kind of stuff karate fighters think about, huh?”

“I’ll admit I was pretty shocked when my doctor first told me. I can’t believe what a difference it makes when I’m kicking.”

“Does it really change that much?”

“It does! But it’d be faster to show you than explain. For starters...”

Koutarou followed Shizuka’s instructions and began moving various parts of his body. Overall, the exercise was similar to stretching, including sits, squats, and backbends, but the routine was more designed to relax the muscles than warm them up.

“That should do it,” announced Shizuka.

“Okay... but I don’t really feel any different,” said Koutarou.

The routine didn’t take long—only a few minutes at most. But Koutarou couldn’t feel any change. The best he could say was that he didn’t feel as stiff after moving around some.

“That’s fine,” replied Shizuka. “If you really want to see the difference, either video yourself doing it or get someone else to look at your posture.”

“Someone else, huh? Hey, Mackenzie, c’mere!” Koutarou called out.

“What is it?” Kenji replied.

“Take a look at my form, would you?”

“Yeah, sure.”

Koutarou began his usual pitching practice routine as Kenji and Shizuka quietly observed. He didn’t have a ball, but he swung his arm as if throwing one for real. Seeing this, Kenji nodded.

“How’m I looking?” Koutarou asked.

“Like you’re back to your usual form. Your lower half is clearly more stable. Of course, you’re built for swordsmanship now, so you’re still nothing like you were in your prime.”

Kenji’s impression was that Koutarou had gotten some of his edge from his baseball days back. Koutarou was primarily focused on sword training now, however, so he still moved a little differently. But thanks to Shizuka’s exercises, he was much closer to his old pitching form.

“Yeah, I felt like it was easier to balance too,” Koutarou remarked. He’d felt the difference for himself. Raising and swinging his legs was easier, which lined up with what Kenji was saying, leading him to the conclusion that Shizuka was right about the exercises.

“Maybe you should try this out before playing grass-lot baseball next time,” she recommended.

“Hey, that’s a good idea.”

“Do you get it now, Satomi-kun?”

“Yeah, I’ll give you that, Landlord-san. Posture is important.”

“By the way, if you don’t repeat the exercises daily, you’ll slowly return to how you were standing before,” she added.

“So I gotta keep it up until I get used to this new way of standing, huh?”

“That’s right,” Shizuka said with a smile before getting back to her own exercises. Koutarou wasn’t the only one who’d gotten stiff during the long meeting.

Koutarou got back to stretching too. Kenji watched them both for a moment, wondering what he should do before turning around and taking his leave. He made it a point to stay out of the girls’ ways.

“As thanks for the exercises, let me help you stretch, Landlord-san,” Koutarou offered.

“Really? Then could you push on my back?” Shizuka asked.

“You got it.”

With that, Koutarou and Shizuka started working together. It was more efficient than stretching alone.



“Owowowow...” she whined.

“For someone claiming to be stiff, you’re actually pretty limber,” remarked Koutarou.

“Well, I do karate. Aren’t baseball players the same way?”

Although stretching had been painful at first, Shizuka quickly folded flat on the floor. As she’d implied, range of motion was important for martial artists. Shizuka was incredibly flexible.

“In baseball, it kind of depends on what position you play. As a pitcher, I moved my shoulders and hips a lot, but lots of fielders are stiff and sturdy. When you’re super muscular, getting stiff is always a problem.”

“Huh, so people that can hit homers must have *really* stiff joints.”

Shizuka spread her legs and pushed her upper body against the floor, which required both pliant joints and muscles. Some sports, like weightlifting, required the development of certain muscles that could actually narrow the range of motion on certain joints. Shizuka, however, was always careful to remain lithe enough to lift her legs and swing her arms with ease. She also wanted to keep her weight down, but she saw no reason to share that part with Koutarou.

“If you can bend that far, do you really need me to push your back?” he asked, astounded by Shizuka’s flexibility. He’d barely had to apply any pressure to get her upper body on the ground.

But Shizuka shook her head. “Don’t stop, Satomi-kun. I can’t pass up this chance to have you touch me in public,” she whispered so that only Koutarou could hear.

“What am I supposed to do with an answer like that?” Koutarou whispered back, genuinely troubled.

“I wouldn’t mind stopping now if you’ll touch me on other occasions.”

“We’re not joking around here, Landlord-san.”

“Then quit complaining and keep going. Please, Satomi-kun. There are times when I want to feel the warmth of the person I love, just like Sanae-chan and the others, I’m sure.”

Shizuka comparing this to the way Sanae clung to him left Koutarou unable to argue. How could he refuse Shizuka asking for attention when Sanae climbed onto his back on a daily basis? All Shizuka wanted was to feel Koutarou's hands on hers.

Kenji was watching Shizuka and Koutarou from a distance, and while he couldn't hear what they were saying, he had a pretty good idea based on their expressions.

"Jeez, Kou would have it so easy if he'd just learn to give in a little..." he muttered.

"Koutarou doesn't play that way, Glasses-kun," Sanae proudly boasted. Her smile indicated she understood the situation as well.

"But doesn't that make things hard for you girls?" Kenji questioned.

"Eh, not so much."

"But—"

"We already have our answer. Regardless of what Koutarou says, we only want him. So he's really the one who has it hard. He's always looking for the right answer for our sake, even though there might not be one."

"Yeah, that's just like him. He's so stubborn. Especially when it comes to other people," Kenji conceded.

"Aha, so *that's* what you're worried about, Glasses-kun!"

"Seriously, what is he doing? Even the role of hero seems to be too much for him..."

Kenji looked and sounded exasperated, but he looked at Koutarou with gentle eyes. With her psychic powers, Sanae could easily tell how Kenji felt.

Hmm, so this is what childhood friends are like...

She was grateful that Kenji was Koutarou's friend. He'd no doubt played an important role in Koutarou becoming the person he was today. As thanks, she now wanted to do her part to help mend Kenji and Kotori's relationship.

Inspection and Contact

Friday, October 21st

Overseeing DKI wasn't Koutarou's only job. He also had his duties as the Blue Knight, which included inspecting the construction of his namesake ship. Although he'd used it as a pretense for his return to Forthorthe, the ship inspection was indeed his responsibility. Two thousand years had passed, but he was still the preeminent figure of the Imperial Army. The commander-in-chief ignoring the construction of a ship in his honor would only cause major headaches for the operation, so Koutarou obligingly sat through all the briefings.

"I want to go too..." Theia grumbled with a sullen look, as she wouldn't be party to the inspection of the new Blue Knight.

"You'll get over it this once. You need to go inspect your own flagship," Koutarou replied.

The new Blue Knight was being made for him, meaning Theia no longer had a personal ship of her own. To rectify this, Forthorthe was also building a royal-class battleship named Saguratin for the Golden Princess. Theia, accordingly, would be touring her new ship while Koutarou toured his.

"That's true," said Theia. "But Ruth and I designed Saguratin down to the finest detail. All I'm going to see is the ship being built to spec. That's so boring."

Theia already knew what Saguratin would look like inside and out given her role in the craft's conception. She was far more interested in seeing the new Blue Knight.

"Don't be like that," Koutarou scolded her. "The workers at the shipyard would cry if they heard you say that."

"I'm only saying that seeing the ship is going to be boring—not that they did a

boring job.”

“Quit griping and get a move on. This is your job, isn’t it?”

“Oh fine...”

Despite her complaints, Theia understood that the job ahead of her was her responsibility as a royal. She was a princess above all—even if she spoke her mind freely.

“We are leaving now, Master,” Ruth called out.

“Take care, Ruth-san,” Koutarou replied.

“Don’t you have anything to say to me?” Theia asked.

“Please return safely, Your Highness.”

Appreciating Theia’s delicate feelings, Koutarou respectfully addressed her as princess. But that wasn’t enough for her.

“Add a little more for your beloved Theia-chan,” she pressed him.

“I’ll play with you later, so shut up and get going already,” he shot back.

“It’s a date!” Theia shouted before running off.

Ruth smiled gently at Koutarou before bowing to everyone and chasing after Theia. Following that, the other girls began talking amongst themselves.

“Heehee, I’m glad we get to check out Theia’s ship first,” said Sanae-nee.

“Attagirl, future me!” cheered Sanae-chan. “Don’t you just want to see Koutarou make his big debut dashing to the rescue?”

“I actually wanted to see Koutarou-san’s spaceship first...” mumbled Sanae-san.

“Ahaha, we all know Sanae-san has a thing for captains,” Yurika chimed in.

“Th-That’s not true!” she protested.

“It is, ho! Sanae-san likes the pretty boys, ho!”

“In her room at home, she has a *Super Dimension Fortress Yamato Nadeshiko* poster and a photo of Big Brother hung up, ho!”

“H-Hey, haniwas!” Sanae-san stammered.

“That’s nothing to be embarrassed about,” Kiriha offered. “I have a picture of Koutarou in my room too.”

“You do?!”

“Yes, although I don’t have any posters of pretty-looking boys to go with it.”

“Jeez, Kiriha-san!”

Yurika, the Sanaes, Kiriha, and the haniwas would all be going with Theia and Ruth to tour Saguratin. Even though it was just a ship inspection, they wanted to send a well-rounded team just to be safe.

Koutarou saw the girls off with a dubious look. “I swear, she can be so childish... Although I guess she *does* get what’s important,” he muttered, quickly recovering from his exasperation with Theia’s behavior.

“Consider it her way of relying on us,” Harumi said with something of a strained smile. “I doubt she acts like that in front of everyone else.”

Harumi understood how the princess felt. Theia’s only family was her mother, so there was something special about the close bond she felt with Koutarou and the other girls. Harumi was sympathetic and watched over her much like she would a younger sister.

“I can’t say I don’t understand her behavior myself...” admitted Clan.

“To be honest, I get a little more emotional than I should on occasion too,” added Maki.

“Heh, aren’t we all like that sometimes?” threw in Shizuka.

Harumi, Clan, Maki, and Shizuka would be accompanying Koutarou on his tour of the Blue Knight. Kenji, Kotori, and Nalfa were all tagging along too.

“What is it, Mackenzie?” Koutarou asked, turning to his best friend. “You look like you have something to say.”

“I now understand why you never get mad at Elfaria-san, Kou,” Kenji replied.

“Why bring that up all of a sudden?” Koutarou questioned.

“It’s not just because she’s Theiamillis-san’s mother. It’s actually—”

Kenji didn’t get to finish his sentence. Before he could, Koutarou brought his fist down on Kenji’s head to shut him up.

“You don’t need to say anything unnecessary,” he warned Kenji.

“So you’re not denying it?” Kenji smiled at Koutarou while rubbing his noggin.

“I’ve matured past that.”

“Hmm, I’d call that growth. Keep up the good work,” Kenji replied in satisfaction. He knew how self-isolated Koutarou had once been, so seeing his personal relationships flourishing now was a welcome development.

“Wow... Nii-san’s acting like his old self again,” Kotori observed admiringly.

“Hasn’t he always been this cool, even if it was hard to tell?” questioned Nalfa.

“Ah, yeah. Maybe...”

Koutarou wasn’t the only one whose relationships were going smoothly these days. Kenji was starting to mend his with his little sister, which was also a welcome change.

“Anyway, Kou, shouldn’t we get going soon too?” Kenji asked.

“Yeah, let’s head out. Don’t want to keep them waiting,” Koutarou replied.

There would be on-site staff and a guard detail waiting for Koutarou and company, so he wanted to be punctual. When he called out to gather everyone and set off, they all followed him toward the Hazy Moon.

Nefilforan’s unit assumed responsibility for escorting both Koutarou and Theia on their tours. Nefilforan was personally overseeing Theia’s group, while her second-in-command, Nana, was watching Koutarou’s.

“In other words...we have a close-combat expert backing up Theia, our resident wild shooter, while you got stuck with us to make up for my lack of brains, Nana-san,” Koutarou reflected on the arrangement.

“It’s hard to agree when you put it like that, so can’t you find some other way

to say it?” Nana asked.

“But I’m not wrong, am I?”

“Why are you so mean from time to time, Satomi-san?!” she demanded.

And so the banter began almost as soon as Nana arrived. As Maki observed her back-and-forth with Koutarou, she noticed something.

Now that I get a good look at her, she’s wearing natural makeup that most anyone would overlook, but it’s really well done. She’s surprisingly ready for anything.

Nana’s makeup looked so natural that she seemed to be wearing none at all. But upon closer inspection, her eyebrows and eyelashes were neatly groomed and she was wearing foundation that perfectly matched her skin tone. Her lipstick was modest with only a little color too. The overall impression struck a magnificent balance that allowed her cherubic appearance to shine through without being garish. Since it all looked so natural, it didn’t interfere with her work either. She couldn’t have chosen a better look as a military woman.

“You just look so cute today that I thought I’d make you a little angry,” said Koutarou.

“Who in the world would use *that* method to try and balance things out?!” Nana exclaimed.

Listening to their conversation, Maki smiled. *That’s it. Well done, Satomi-kun. That was exactly what Nana-san wanted to hear from you...* She understood exactly why Nana was wearing makeup, for she was diligently working day and night toward the same goal.

“I’m just messing with you,” said Koutarou to the furious Nana.

“I know that, jeez!” she replied. “You’re the only one around here who treats me like a child!”

“...You mean I’m the only one you *notice* treating you like a child...”

“Did you say something, Satomi-san?”

“Nope. Not a thing.”

“Good grief...”

Though Nana wore an unhappy expression, she was struggling to stop herself from smiling. In other words, Maki was right on the money.

“Anyways, we’ll be using this setup for security today,” said Nana.

“Nana-san, could you please cheer up already?” Koutarou ribbed her.

“I don’t want to hear that from you!”

Maki watched the two of them carry on with a smile, even though she was slightly jealous. Someone else in the group, however, had a completely different reaction...

“Serves you right! Tell him off some more!” Clan shouted.

Koutarou often teased her too, so she sympathized with Nana. But even so, the brainiac princess knew they had work to do. She swiftly switched to using her bracelet to display the day’s schedule for everyone.

“Regarding our itinerary, we will be descending via the Cradle rather than using a transfer gate. They wanted to hold a reception party at the spaceport,” she informed the group.

“Do they really need to go that far for an inspection?” Koutarou asked. He wasn’t sure what about the tour warranted a reception and felt they were going overboard.

“Veltlion, every planet wants to boost the morale of its citizenry. Especially a manufacturing planet like Waragthorn,” Clan answered.

Unlike touristy planets, planets that specialized in industry tended to lag behind socially with far fewer opportunities for economic upturn. Because revitalization began with individual spenders, remote planets were often left floundering for ways to galvanize their own people. So for the leaders of Waragthorn, Koutarou’s visit was a golden opportunity.

“I guess you’re right,” Koutarou hesitantly agreed. “All right, I’ll cooperate as much as I can.”

Knowing the circumstances, Koutarou couldn’t refuse. The new Blue Knight was all about revitalizing the economy in the first place, so lending a hand with

a simple welcome reception to that end would be in the spirit of the operation.

“After the reception, we take arranged transport to the shipyard,” Clan continued.

“During that trip, my team will escort you and lead the way,” Nana added.

“Then I’ll be in touch later,” Clan concluded. “Everyone, please move to the Cradle for now.”

“Got it,” Koutarou replied as he looked at a hologram.

It displayed Nefilforan’s battleship flying alongside the Hazy Moon, and they were gradually moving away from each other. They’d both be landing on Waragthorn but in separate cities, so they were now splitting up to go their respective ways toward their destinations.

The vehicle transporting Koutarou and the girls to the shipyard cruised along smoothly, floating in the air rather than rolling along the ground with tires. Nalfa and Kotori spent the ride reviewing the footage they’d just taken at the welcome reception.

“They really do give Kou-niisan the idol treatment...” Kotori sighed.

She’d felt the same when they’d first arrived in Forthorthe, but the crowd at the reception had truly been something to behold. Countless flags and electronic banners had fluttered in the air as if in welcome for a popular celebrity on their first international visit. Even now, crowds were still waving flags along the side of the road as the convoy carrying Koutarou and the girls passed by. The sight alone told Kotori how much Koutarou meant to the people of Forthorthe.

“Kou, you need to stop turning everything into a major event,” Kenji teased, grinning and nudging Koutarou with his elbow. He knew the situation troubled him.

“It’s not my fault!” Koutarou protested. He hadn’t gone out of his way to draw a crowd. He’d only meant to solve the problems in front of him, and this was the result.

“This *is* your fault. It’s only like this because you saved Forthorthe twice,” Clan argued. She was used to being the victim of teasing when Koutarou was involved, so she readily took the opportunity to get in on the fun Kenji had started at Koutarou’s expense. Still, her point was valid, for she’d witnessed Koutarou’s heroics firsthand.

“Yeah, well, the first time was only because you said I killed the Blue Knight!” Koutarou objected. His actions in the past had been influenced by a misunderstanding on Clan’s part, so he wasn’t willing to take all the credit.

“And what about the second time, hmm?” she shot back calmly, stopping him in his tracks.

“The second time, uh... I was just going with the flow. Cleaning up my own mess. I mean, I couldn’t betray Her Majesty Alaia’s allies...”

“Why don’t you just give it up already?” Clan pressed him.

If there had been any doubt about Koutarou as a hero, saving Forthorthe a second time put the final nail in the coffin. He’d acted entirely on his own with no script to follow. In other words, he had no one to blame but himself.

“Why not ask Nalfa-san how the locals see it?” Shizuka asked.

Suddenly made the center of attention, Nalfa blushed. “W-Well, Koutarou-sama—I mean the Blue Knight—suddenly rose from an ancient legend to put down a coup, so I think this response is perfectly natural.” Nalfa fiddled with her hair as she answered. Koutarou had always been a hero to her, which was a bit of a problem in her current predicament. “And when everything was over, you left without a word... We all thought it was just the sort of thing you would do.”

“You heard her, Satomi-kun,” Shizuka declared.

“Landlord-san, Forthorthe would have been a mess if I’d stayed. Even me being here now is an issue...”

Koutarou still believed in remaining as hands-off as possible with Forthorthe. After the coup d'état, Forthorthians had been ecstatic to see the slew of problems, both social and political, that he would solve next—which was why he’d left promptly. He felt he’d had no choice.

Shizuka continued, “But you going home is what sealed the deal.”

“Ugh...”

“Kou, you really should just give up. You’re treading quicksand, man,” threw in Kenji.

“You got me there...”

Koutarou ultimately relented. He couldn’t change what had already happened, nor could he think of a way to diminish the esteem he’d earned. It wasn’t like he could go out and commit some wrongdoing, for he couldn’t stand the idea of betraying the memory of Alaia and all his former comrades.

The next thing anyone knew, Maki called out as a massive structure came into view outside the vehicle window.

“Ah, I can see it!”

She’d spotted the shipyard. Since it was made to create spaceships over a kilometer in length, the facility was far larger than that. Maki could tell how huge even a single dock was from a distance.

“So that’s how big the new Blue Knight’s gonna be, huh?” Koutarou muttered.

Clan smirked. “Only a part of it.”

“What is that supposed to mean?!” Koutarou exclaimed.

“Only the torso is being built there. Once it’s done, the full assembly will take place in orbit,” Clan explained.

The new Blue Knight was the first knight-class ship in history. Public opinion dictated that the Blue Knight’s ship needed to be the strongest of all, so it was larger than even royal-class crafts. Its size, however, had left its designers with the question of how the ship would be built. The new Blue Knight was humanoid in shape like Theia’s old ship, making it difficult to centrally stack generators of sufficient size. Instead, smaller generators needed to be spread throughout the body. The designers took advantage of this and had made the decision to construct the major parts of the new Blue Knight separately. Each part had been designed to function independently, but they were now being

outfitted as spaceships in their own right too. The plan was then to join them together in space.

“Man, I bet Sanae and Yurika are gonna love this...” Koutarou muttered. The very notion of combination and transformation would be enough to excite both girls. He could easily imagine their eyes aglitter when they learned what the new Blue Knight could do.

“Satomi-kun, let’s keep quiet about that part for now,” said Harumi with a knowing smile.

She knew how big the reveal would be, so she thought it best to keep it a surprise for the time being. Koutarou couldn’t help but agree.

Koutarou’s inspection was scheduled to last for several days. This was partly to allow him time to visit the various sections, but also partly because the construction of each one couldn’t be paused for long. Koutarou only intended to visit the shipyards after they’d shut down for the day.

“So, where are we now?” he asked.

“The dock making the head, or rather, inside the head itself,” Clan explained.

The group was currently in the middle of their first tour, inspecting the Blue Knight’s head. With artificial gravity already operational, they were walking down the ceiling of a corridor that would eventually be the floor once construction was complete.

“The head will serve as the bridge,” Clan continued. “We’ll get an overview of things there before visiting the right arm, left arm, right leg, left leg, and torso in that order.”

The head was the command center of the ship. It contained very little equipment unique to the Blue Knight, so it was the furthest along in construction. It was nearly finished now, as it would need to be completed ahead of the other parts for testing purposes. That was also why it was the first stop on Koutarou’s tour.

“We only really need to see one leg, don’t we? I mean, they’re symmetrical, right?” Koutarou asked. The arms would be different since the right would be

equipped with a sword, but he couldn't imagine there'd be much difference between the legs.

"You can tell the workers that yourself," Clan replied.

"Actually, I think I'd like to see both legs..." Koutarou could only nod in agreement once Clan pointed out the real reason for both visits.

"Good," Clan said with a smile.

She felt no need to say anything further now that Koutarou wasn't resisting, so she took the lead and continued walking. Clan had been in charge of the Blue Knight's overall layout, so she already knew her way around the ship.

"This is the bridge," she said as they reached a large room in the center of the head.

"Size-wise, it's not much bigger than the old one," Koutarou remarked.

"Indeed. It's intended to use the same personnel."

"Ah, gotcha." Koutarou nodded.

The same crew would man the new Blue Knight, so it only made sense that a core facility like the bridge would be similar in setup. It was slightly bigger, but an expanded ship AI would handle all additional functions and responsibilities.

"However," Clan continued, "there is a sub-bridge below for additional crew in the case of a major battle. There's one such sub-bridge in every major part of the body as well."

"Because they can operate independently, right?" Koutarou asked.

The main bridge had a sub-bridge for support, but the other parts of the body had sub-bridges capable of full operation in the event they were detached. In that sense, the new Blue Knight functioned like its own military base, albeit on a smaller scale—an important feature given that it would likely be used as a station in orbit around Earth.

"So we don't want the head getting done in, eh?" Kenji commented. He recognized the vital importance of the head to the ship, so he was sure it would be at the greatest risk in an enemy attack.

“That is true. The other parts of the ship have independently functioning sub-bridges, but none of them can replace the main bridge. After all, arms and legs won’t work without a brain. That’s why the head has the highest level of protection in Forthorthian history.”

Kenji’s conjecture was correct. As valuable as the head was, it had been fashioned with the most cutting-edge technology imaginable. But there was another reason for such serious safety precautions.

“Also, if Satomi-kun were to fall, morale would plummet and panic would spread, which might be even more dangerous than losing control of the ship,” Harumi surmised in a somber tone.

Since Koutarou would be presumed aboard his namesake ship, the new Blue Knight would undoubtedly be the focus of enemy attacks. The devastation of losing him in battle was unfathomable, so Forthorthe was putting everything the nation had into ensuring his safety.

“Veltlion’s presence in battle will be an explosive boon to the Imperial Army’s morale, yet that also makes him our greatest weakness. Which is precisely why he’ll be shielded with a stupid amount of protection. So please don’t worry, Harumi,” Clan assured her.

“All right. I have faith in you.”

Just like how Alaia had blessed Koutarou with Signaltin, Clan would bestow him with the greatest protection she could provide. Harumi was certain of that. Still, it wouldn’t stop their enemies from making attempts on Koutarou’s life, so she couldn’t help but fret over his safety.

“Don’t worry, Sakuraba-senpai,” he assured her himself.

“Satomi-kun...”

“We just have to stop the bad guys before it comes to that, right?”

“Well, I suppose so.”

Diplomatic efforts, political games, and the like—there were plenty of cards to play before war broke out. Each potentially had the power to forestall the future Harumi feared most. Koutarou didn’t care for battle either, so he would

take every measure possible to prevent it. The only fighting he wanted to see was a good sparring match.

“Kou-niisan, I don’t think it’s that simple...” Kotori interjected. Harumi had been satisfied with Koutarou’s answer, but Kotori, who had yet to see real conflict for herself, remained uneasy. Even with Koutarou reassuring her, the very idea of war unsettled her.

“All right, Kin-chan, why don’t I show you what I’m talking about?” Koutarou said, turning around to face a seemingly empty section of the bridge. “Whoever’s hiding over there, I’m not sure how to handle you, so come on out.”

There was nothing there but a normal operator’s seat. No workers were present. The Imperial Army detail had even confirmed the bridge was clear before Koutarou and the girls had entered. And yet... a petite figure in dark clothes appeared. Nefilforan’s soldiers immediately trained their rifles on the mysterious figure.

Despite having weapons pointed at them, the figure remained calm. Their face was covered by a hood, but they said nothing and their movements indicated no distress. They emerged from the shadows and slowly raised their hands to their hood. If they’d done so any faster, they knew they were liable to be shot. Fortunately, nobody opened fire while the figure in black lowered their hood.

“Don’t move another muscle!” Nana shouted, drawing her gun. She wasn’t going to let the intruder pull anything.

“What are you doing here?!” Maki asked, likewise readying her staff.

Both Nana and Maki looked deadly serious. They both recognized the person in front of them and knew they’d be in mortal danger if they let their guard down... The mysterious figure, after all, was the sniper who served as Ralgwin’s right hand—Fasta.

“Calm down, Nana-san. And you too, Aika-san,” Koutarou ordered. Unlike the girls, he kept his composure. He knew Fasta wasn’t there to fight, so he casually approached her. “She doesn’t have any intent to kill, and her hostility is wavering. Besides, she’s not the type to come in for a close-quarters brawl.”

Even with his spiritual energy, Koutarou couldn't sense any bloodlust coming from Fasta. She radiated a vague emotion that could be considered aggression and appeared to be on guard, but he couldn't imagine she meant to throw down. Moreover, she was a sniper. If she had truly intended to attack, she would have done so while Koutarou and the girls were on their way to the shipyard or while they were entering or exiting the transport vehicle. Knowing that, Koutarou was sure Fasta had come with something else in mind. What baffled him instead was that she'd willfully chosen not to hide her presence with spiritual energy like she had previously when trying to snipe him. That was why he'd decided to call out to her.

"Now, let's hear what you're here for..."

The only thing Koutarou knew for sure was that Fasta had come for a reason—and after seeing the serious look in her eyes, he wanted to know what it was.

"Looks like I won this gamble..." she muttered.



When it became apparent Koutarou was willing to hear Fasta out, the air about her changed. Her wavering hostility mostly vanished, and while she didn't exactly seem friendly, it was clear that she wanted to talk.

Ah, so that's what it was!

Koutarou finally pieced together why Fasta had appeared before him and revealed herself. It was unlikely they'd meet under any other circumstance. Fasta hadn't been certain how their encounter would go, hence the flickering hostility.

"Let me get straight to the point," she began. "Blue Knight, I want you to save Ralgwin-sama."

"What?!"

Koutarou was floored by Fasta's request. He'd sensed she had come to negotiate, but never had he imagined *that* was what she'd ask.

Before anyone could get to the bottom of Fasta's request, she needed to be cuffed. Koutarou personally thought it was unnecessary, but the law demanded it and, to be safe, he felt it would be best to take all due precaution by treating Fasta as if she were dangerous in order to placate the people watching.

"Sorry about this, Fasta-san. Just bear with it for a while," he implored her.

"I understand the situation," she replied.

Koutarou and Fasta now stood facing each other in the conference room aboard the Hazy Moon. Fasta was in Forthorthian-style handcuffs, which used an AI that could detect hostile intent and neutralize the wearer with electricity accordingly. With these, no further restraints were required.

"I expected to remain cuffed until we were done—even afterward," Fasta acknowledged.

"You came here knowing that?" Koutarou questioned.

"I had to."

"I can understand that..."

Fasta had come to talk knowing the risks. A strong will burned in her eyes. Whatever her reason, it was deeply compelling and personal.

“So, what is it you’re after?” asked Theia. “I’m curious to hear what you have to say as well.”

The princess was in the conference room too, although not in person. She was participating by hologram on a secure channel via a device that floated in the middle of the projected hologram’s head. The other girls in Theia’s group were attending the emergency meeting remotely in the same fashion. The lack of face-to-face contact made it difficult to read emotional nuance, and Theia remained especially leery of Fasta.

“Like I said before, I want you to help me save Ralgwin-sama,” Fasta repeated.

“That’s the part I don’t understand. Save him in what way? Why is that even necessary?” Theia asked.

Everyone else was wondering the same thing. Ralgwin was the current leader of Vandarion’s former faction. He was responsible for every move they made. So Koutarou and the girls trying to stop him was one thing, but *save* him? Fasta’s request remained a mystery to the group.

“More specifically, I want to save Ralgwin-sama from danger in the future. I want to pull him away from the old wizard and the Gray Knight before it’s too late, but he won’t agree to it. So I need your help.”

Fasta saw Grevanas and the Gray Knight as threats to Ralgwin. Ralgwin himself knew that they would betray him before long, but he was content to ally with them until that time to suit his own personal interests. But the more Fasta learned about Grevanas and the Gray Knight, the more she came to understand how dangerous they were. She wanted to spare Ralgwin from their designs, which was why she’d come to Koutarou.

“You want to save Ralgwin from danger in the future? Are you saying he’s not in danger right now? Does that mean that Grevanas and the Gray Knight have yet to make their move?” Kiriha asked with a discerning look.

“As of when I left the faction, yes, but I don’t know how the situation has developed since. I think he may already be in danger,” Fasta answered.

“Wait... You left the faction?” Maki interjected. She was a defector herself, so that particular piece of information piqued her interest.

“Yes. Some time ago, I advised Ralgwin-sama to cut ties with that foul wizard and the Gray Knight. He refused me and told me to leave instead... I think he wanted me to escape,” Fasta reported.

Fasta had bared her heart to Ralgwin, fully expecting and prepared for the consequences. She desperately wanted him to be rid of his dangerous allies, but instead, Ralgwin had chosen to dismiss her—a kindness on his part. He had even prepared a fake identity and another job for her, for he was well aware of the danger she’d sensed and wanted to keep her away from it.

“When Ralgwin-sama first told me to leave, I almost refused at first. Yet after thinking it through, I chose to go... I didn’t think I’d be able to save Ralgwin-sama if I stayed.”

Fasta had risked her life to warn Ralgwin in hopes of saving him that way. But at the end of the day, she knew there was only so much she could do from within the faction. Fasta wasn’t foolish enough to think that she could protect Ralgwin by herself. Moreover, if she’d tried to rescue him, it would have been seen as an act of rebellion. That was why she’d chosen to remove herself from the situation and try an alternate means of saving her lord.

“So,” Koutarou began, “you’re here to find outside allies?”

“You’re the only ones who understand how dangerous the wizard and Gray Knight are. You also have the power to stop them.”

Grevanas and the Gray Knight were real threats, but they were both elusive and mysterious threats. Not many knew who they were, much less how dangerous they were. Just getting most people to believe in magic was difficult enough. That left Fasta with a very limited pool of potential allies, and she’d wagered everything on making contact with Koutarou.

“I can make it worth your while,” Fasta continued. “With my information, you should be able to apprehend Ralgwin-sama, after all.”

Fasta had come to negotiate, meaning she had something to offer Koutarou in exchange for her request. She’d known better than to come empty-handed

when trying to strike a deal, so she was prepared to offer up Ralgwin for a guarantee of his safety. Without him, the rebel faction would naturally fall apart, and Fasta was certain that prospect would be enough to get Koutarou and his crew on board.

“Still, it’s not easy to trust you out of the blue,” Nana commented with a stern look. Fasta’s story was convincing, but Nana wasn’t willing to buy it just yet.

When Kiriha-san asked if Ralgwin was in danger right now, Fasta said she couldn’t confirm that. So she seems to be telling the truth. If she were trying to force our hand, it would’ve been easier to say we needed to help Ralgwin immediately. But still... there’s a possibility that this is a very clever trap designed to prey on that very assumption. We cannot act without knowing for sure.

The experienced Nana very carefully considered the situation. How to proceed was not an easy decision for her with so much on the line. Her mission was to protect Forthorthe, the royal families, Folsaria’s future, and Koutarou.

“Calm down, Nana-san,” Koutarou urged her.

“I am calm,” she replied. “But we’re dealing with someone who’s made more than one attempt on your life.”

Even with Koutarou’s reassurance, Nana remained vigilant. She couldn’t ignore the possibility that Fasta might try to attack even now. She knew her priority in such a situation would be defending Koutarou and Clan, and she would stop at nothing to keep them safe.

“It’s only natural that you don’t believe me. I don’t blame you for that. But I can’t let negotiations end here,” said Fasta. She wasn’t the least bit bothered by Nana’s response, which she thought was perfectly rational. She knew she’d have to prove herself in some way. “Hmm... I don’t know if this will be enough for you, but in the battle where you accessed the transport ships, you should have received a security code.”

Thankfully, Fasta had previously lent Koutarou and the girls a hand back when Ralgwin was attempting to escape Earth. Both sides had been locked in battle in orbit, and Fasta—who was already suspicious of Grevanas at the time—had secretly planted the security code Koutarou and the girls needed to access the

enemy network.

“That was your doing?!” exclaimed Clan.

“I have the very same code on me now. Would you like to confirm it for yourself?”

“No need,” said the princess. “I believe you. At least, I believe you’re the one who helped us.”

If Clan hadn’t been able to crack the enemy’s network in that fight, the outcome could have been fatal. It was clear whoever had planted the code wasn’t Ralgwin, Grevanas, or the Gray Knight. Only someone like Fasta would have thrown them such a bone. And she was carrying the code now as a bargaining chip of sorts. That was proof enough for Clan.

“So you really have turned on Ralgwin...” observed the cautious Nana. Even she was starting to believe Fasta. Not just anyone could set a trap so elaborate. If they were up against an opponent capable of such guile, Nana thought, then their defeat was a foregone conclusion regardless.

“I have not turned on him,” Fasta replied in a stern tone. She’d been calm thus far, but she was finally showing emotion. “A terrible fate awaits Ralgwin-sama if nothing is done. This is the only way for me to forestall it.”

“He’s done enough to deserve it,” Nana quickly reminded her.

“I don’t trust the Gray Knight or that foul wizard. They mean to use Ralgwin-sama for something terrible. More than just his life is at risk—his soul is in danger!”

At this rate, Ralgwin was doomed to a demise worse than death. Fasta was convinced of that. She knew the Gray Knight had used a strange power to revive Grevanas and that Grevanas was capable of manipulating dead dragons. When they inevitably turned on Ralgwin, Fasta feared that Ralgwin’s very being was in jeopardy. She desperately wanted to save him from the maddening nightmare of undeath.

“I hear you,” said Koutarou. “Aika-san, is there a chance that Grevanas is using Ralgwin?”

He felt that Fasta was telling the truth, but he didn't think Grevanas or the Gray Knight were trying to turn Ralgwin into a monster. That felt too simple.

"The only thing I can think of off the top of my head is using him to resurrect Maxfern..." said Maki.

"Oh yeah. They were scouring tombs for anything having to do with Maxfern, and they were clearly experimenting with spiritual energy at that factory. It all adds up if they plan to revive Maxfern, and they might use Ralgwin as a fail-safe since he's a descendant," Koutarou speculated.

Grevanas wished for nothing more than the return of his lord and blood brother, Maxfern. He'd even been working on gathering Maxfern's remains, and it clearly wasn't out of nostalgia for his old friend. If resurrection was on the table, it would also explain the rebels' interest in spiritual energy and spiritual energy technology. And the linchpin was Ralgwin himself. Since he shared DNA with Maxfern and possessed a similar aura, he would serve as an excellent catalyst for the resurrection. When Fasta heard Koutarou put that all together, her eyes shot wide open.

"They mean to resurrect that legendary tyrant?! Ralgwin-sama doesn't know anything about that! No... perhaps he's vaguely aware of their plans but intends to find a way to use the situation to his advantage before pulling out. Still, even then..."

"He's not up against easy opponents," remarked Clan.

In truth, Ralgwin was likely already onto Grevanas. There was plenty of circumstantial evidence. Still, Ralgwin wanted to use his allies for as long as possible. At present, the rebel commander felt cornered, to the point that his defeat at Koutarou's hands would be all but sealed if he struck out on his own. Ralgwin was on the verge of having spiritual energy tech of his own, but magic was a different story. He was completely defenseless against it. But even if he waited to obtain magic for himself, would Grevanas and the Gray Knight allow him to cut ties at that point? Fasta feared they'd make their move before then.

"I think I have a better idea of the situation now. But Fasta-san, if we capture Ralgwin, he's looking at a life sentence at the very least. And more likely... he'll be executed. Are you prepared for that?" Koutarou asked.

Ralgwin had committed treason and all sorts of other atrocities. Under the Forthorthian legal system, his punishment would be severe. Realistically, it would be capital.

“Unfortunately, he *has* done enough to deserve it... But losing his life is still better than losing his soul,” Fasta replied. “And if it comes to that, I’ll rescue him from prison.”

“If you did that, you would also be—”

“I would gladly accept it in order to save Ralgwin-sama.”

Fasta was filled with grim resolve. She knew Ralgwin was staring down a tragic end, but as long as he could get away from Grevanas and the Gray Knight, there was a glimmer of hope for him. He wouldn’t be executed the day he was captured, for Forthorthe would want to interrogate him for intel about the rest of the rebel army. Fasta could use that time to rescue him, no matter how impossible it seemed. That was far more achievable in her eyes than wresting Ralgwin from Grevanas and the Gray Knight’s clutches. In her eyes, she was trading one enemy for another.

“So you want a temporary truce until Ralgwin is captured?” Koutarou asked her point-blank.

Their alliance would last until Ralgwin was captured. Afterward, they would part ways. Koutarou and the others couldn’t release Ralgwin, and Fasta couldn’t give up on rescuing him. That would be the natural end of their relationship.

“Yes,” said Fasta. “But it’s not such a bad deal for you.”

“Okay, we understand what you’re asking for. Give us a minute to think about it,” said Koutarou.

“The decision is yours,” said Fasta.

And with that, she fell silent. She’d said her piece and now could only pray that Koutarou would accept her offer.

“What should we do...?” Koutarou muttered, folding his arms.

The conundrum he faced was a difficult one. There were various pros and cons to Fasta’s deal. If Koutarou accepted, it could be their chance to capture

Ralgwin at last—but Ralgwin had eluded them so well for so long that this naturally seemed like a trap. Especially now that they'd just exhausted all their leads trying to find him. The timing was almost too good to be true. Moreover, Fasta had very little to prove her intentions. It also wasn't outside the realm of possibility that Ralgwin had tricked her into a scheme even she was unaware of. The complexity of the situation made Koutarou hesitate.

Surprisingly, it was his best friend who showed him the way forward. "I have no intention of interfering with your business, Kou... but I think you should take her up on it," Kenji said after Koutarou fell silent.

"Why's that, Mackenzie?"

"If you turn her down, she'll probably go try something even crazier. And if she's out there on her own and gets captured by the wizard or the knight, they'll pump her for intel on us, right? If it comes to that, you can kiss capturing this Ralgwin guy for yourself goodbye. In other words, I think this'll be your first and last chance to run damage control. Taking everything into consideration... can you really afford to pass that up?"

Kenji was concerned about the potential fallout of refusing Fasta. He knew she wouldn't simply give up on trying to save Ralgwin. He could tell extricating the enemy general from his current position wasn't going to be easy either. If it were, Fasta wouldn't have come to Koutarou and the others to begin with. So when weighing the risks of accepting Fasta's help against the risks of letting her run amok, Kenji thought the former was a better deal—even if only slightly.

"That's a good point," agreed Koutarou. When he stopped to consider Kenji's opinion, he became convinced that the smartest move would be preventing escalation.

"Besides, Kou, you know you're a sucker. If you send her away, you'll regret it for the rest of your life."

In truth, helping Fasta as an anti-escalation measure was only a pretense. Kenji knew that turning Fasta down would only put her in danger, and he knew Koutarou would ultimately regret that. So, in his eyes, if both paths forward were risky, he wanted Koutarou to follow his heart.

"That's kinda brutal, man," Koutarou replied with a grimace. He knew Kenji

was right, and he'd be happier taking the path of least regret.

"I wonder if that's really okay..." Shizuka murmured with a clouded expression. Unlike the boys, she was thinking of Koutarou's safety and not Fasta's.

"Landlord-san, which decision should I make in order for you to still like me?" Koutarou asked.

Shizuka's eyes shot wide open when she heard him, and after a grand sigh, she shrugged. "Then I guess it's decided. But gosh, you only talk like that when it's convenient for you..."

Koutarou was stubborn, but he'd reveal himself in moments like this. Shizuka thought it was terribly unfair—even if she was a little happy about it. All she could do was give in.

Fasta, who'd been awaiting the verdict, responded in a similar fashion. "Heh, men are so incorrigible."

"Sounds like you've had it rough too," Shizuka remarked.

If only Ralgwin had followed Fasta's advice, the current situation could have been avoided. But the rebel general was determined to avenge his uncle. Fasta had faithfully followed him all this time because he was a man with a mission, but her journey thus far had been one of both great joy and great hardship.

Once Koutarou decided to cooperate with Fasta, they uncuffed her. Restraints were no longer necessary now that she was an ally. They only would have gotten in the way during the strategy meeting that quickly followed.

"At present, this is their most likely target," Fasta shared, using her freed hands to project a hologram in the conference room. It showed classified intel she'd taken with her when escaping the faction.

"Is that... a map of the shipyard?" Koutarou asked.

"It is," she replied. "Once it was decided where the new Blue Knight would be constructed, we began discussing possible attack strategies."

Fasta was displaying detailed blueprints of the shipyard that Koutarou and the

others had just inspected with an overlay indicating the facility's regular operations. This map was how she'd been able to infiltrate the shipyard in the first place.

"They know that if they can sabotage the new flagship, it will hamstring public morale, which is at an all-time high after winning the war and the return of the Blue Knight," Fasta explained.

"That is certainly true," Theia commented. "The Blue Knight reconstruction project is a symbol of the great Forthorthian restoration. It would make the perfect target if the enemy's goal is to disrupt the economic upturn."

Theia saw the merit of Ralgwin's plan. He wasn't targeting the Blue Knight to stymie Forthorthe's military might; he wanted to deal a deadly blow to morale and the economy. That would hamper the Imperial Army far more than the loss of any one ship, for the military was dependent on funding as much as anything. It was a smart plan in Theia's eyes—and that made her all the more uncomfortable.

"Okay, the real questions now are when and how they'll attack," said Koutarou.

He agreed with Theia. He felt an attack was inevitable, but Fasta had shared multiple plans for such an attack. They had no way of knowing which one the enemy would use or when they would spring their assault. Would it be today? In a year's time?

"I think the answers are obvious enough," said Kiriha. She could tell what the enemy was up to just glancing at the plans. "There's a perfect opportunity coming up."

"When?" Koutarou asked, concerned.

"In five days."

"What? That's awfully soon."

"Indeed. They'll descend on the dock making the torso," she said further with absolute confidence.

"How can you tell, Kiriha-san?" Harumi asked. She believed in Kiriha, but

there was too much at stake not to ask for details.

“As you know, the new Blue Knight is being constructed in parts at multiple docks, and the torso will serve many of its critical functions as a space battleship,” Kiriha began.

“Whereas the arms and legs serve as weapons and armor, correct?” Harumi wasn’t well versed in weaponry, but she understood the general structure of the ship. She didn’t want to hold anyone back in an emergency, so she’d studied up.

“That’s right.”

Each part of the new Blue Knight was being built as a self-sufficient spaceship, but the equipment governing the fully assembled ship’s chief functions would primarily be housed in the torso. It would contain the main generators, the main armaments, the warp drive, and barrier generation devices.

“The torso is a vital part of the ship, and in five days, a certain someone is due to inspect it,” Kiriha spelled out.

“Ah, so they’re also after me,” remarked Koutarou.

“Unfortunately so.”

If Ralgwin truly meant to crush the Forthorthian people’s spirit, his real goal wouldn’t merely be to destroy the new Blue Knight. He’d also want to crush its namesake, Koutarou himself. He’d have the perfect chance to attack both in five days when Koutarou was scheduled to tour the ship’s torso, and given how shrewd Ralgwin had been so far, it was hard to imagine he’d overlook such a golden opportunity.

“That’s why I was in such a hurry to make contact,” said Fasta. “There’s no time to spare.”

“So you also think Ralgwin will attack in five days, Fasta-san?” asked Koutarou.

“I helped draft all these plans. The torso was always the highest-priority target. Everything else is just a secondary objective. Ralgwin-sama knows what he’s after.”

Fasta had known rushing to her enemy was reckless, but with an attack on the horizon, she'd had no choice. She also knew that Ralgwin's attack plans had likely been updated since her departure, meaning the information she had was outdated. She'd needed to gamble everything on this sort of cooperation and strategizing before it was too late.

"And if Ralgwin-sama's going to attack the torso in five days' time, he'll use this formation," Fasta continued, using her computer to switch the hologram to a projection of the dock surrounded by Ralgwin's forces.

"Why not use a long-range bombardment or missiles and call it a day?" Koutarou asked. He was puzzled by the encirclement.

"Killing you is one of their objectives," replied Fasta. "They want their method to be certain."

From Ralgwin's point of view, destroying the torso would be unsatisfying if Koutarou were to get away. Ralgwin wanted Koutarou dead, and he'd planned accordingly. Surrounding the dock would ensure Koutarou had no escape.

"So he might've gone for a long-range assault if not for me, huh?" Koutarou muttered.

"Your demise is part of Ralgwin's grand plan, after all," said Fasta.

"...So why didn't you think about assassinating me?"

"Even if I eliminated you, it would be impossible to kill the royal families and take over Forthorthe. And Ralgwin-sama will be ruined if Grevanas makes his move after you're assassinated."

It wasn't like Fasta hadn't considered killing Koutarou. It would be one less thing Ralgwin felt he had to do before cutting ties with Grevanas and the Gray Knight. However, Fasta knew the odds of successfully assassinating the Blue Knight were low. She'd already failed to snipe him, and he'd had no issue detecting her in the shipyard. If she were going to kill Koutarou, it would have to be in an out-and-out fight, but killing him too soon would leave her without anyone to face Grevanas and the Gray Knight. Ultimately, she'd chosen to spare Koutarou's life for the sake of protecting Ralgwin.

"Sounds like you're in a pretty sticky situation," Koutarou remarked.

He understood that Fasta wanted to protect Ralgwin on her own—she simply couldn't given what she was up against. That was why she'd resorted to beseeching Ralgwin's sworn enemy for aid. But again, she was only trading a foe for a foe. If she couldn't overcome Koutarou herself once their truce was over, Ralgwin would be in danger all the same. In spite of how detached Fasta appeared, Koutarou could easily imagine the complex emotions swirling within her. Under ordinary circumstances, she wouldn't have tolerated so much as being in the same room with him.

After a brief pause, Fasta said, "Let's get back on topic."

No one knew exactly what she was thinking, and Koutarou didn't try to read her mind. He felt it best to leave her be.

"Ralgwin-sama will probably be here," Fasta continued as she enlarged a topographical map to highlight a valley a short distance away from the shipyard.

"Are you sure?" Koutarou asked to confirm. He wanted to know what potential gaps in knowledge they might be facing since Fasta's information wasn't up-to-date.

"Ralgwin-sama may be fierce, but he's not the kind of leader who treats his subordinates as disposable. He'll always make sure to secure an escape route. And because of its importance, he will protect it himself."

Even under Koutarou's scrutiny, Fasta was confident. The exact attack plans may have changed since Fasta left Ralgwin, but his morals hadn't. He was bound to defend the escape route.

"Now that you mention it, he *does* always seem to be looking out for his troops," Koutarou mused. He recalled how he'd seen Ralgwin protect his men in battle, going so far as to surrender to save them. "Is that why you want to save him, Fasta-san?"

Fasta responded with a firm nod, "That's right. I will save my companions, whatever the cost."

Fasta knew that Ralgwin could never take back the things he'd done. That he'd earned the death penalty that awaited him. But even so, she'd never turn her back on him. They were comrades in arms who'd been through thick and

thin together.

“What a shame... If only he hadn’t chosen to fight,” Koutarou muttered.

He understood where Fasta was coming from. He’d had plenty of comrades in the past that he would have rushed to save without hesitation, and he had plenty more in the present day. That was precisely how Fasta felt about Ralgwin. The only hitch was that Ralgwin was an enemy.

Fasta quietly stared at Koutarou, who looked a little sad. Perhaps they were thinking the same thing.

Fasta wasn’t a prisoner, but she wasn’t exactly free either. Aside from Koutarou and company, no one else was likely to trust her, so she was being kept aboard the Hazy Moon.

“Sorry about the restricted living arrangements, Fasta-san,” said Shizuka.

“This is rather superlative treatment for an enemy defector,” Fasta replied. “Besides, it’s only for a few days.”

“That’s nice of you to say.”

Shizuka was making small talk with Fasta while showing her to her room. The group had chosen Shizuka for the job because she was used to making people feel welcome as a landlord and she wouldn’t be missed at the strategy meeting, but most importantly, she’d have no trouble if Fasta suddenly decided to put up a fight. Fasta was an ally for the time being, but she was in a precarious position, and no one was better than Shizuka at playing the role of caretaker. She was accordingly escorting Fasta to a guest room in the residential block of the ship. Along the way, she decided to broach a topic she’d been curious about.

“Um... can I ask you something?” she said hesitantly. She was dying to know and didn’t want to walk along in silence, but it was a personal question.

“It depends on what it is. I won’t tell you where any bases are,” Fasta replied, but not coldly. She was ready to answer anything that wouldn’t compromise critical intel.

“I’m not going to ask you about bases. I’m just wondering what Ralgwin really means to you. You’re risking your life to save him and all.”

That was what Shizuka wanted to know. She could understand wanting to save an ally. But for Fasta to put herself on the line so readily, Shizuka thought there was more to it.

“He’s my savior. He was originally my father’s subordinate, but when my father died in combat, he looked after me.”

Ralgwin was born to a knight family, and while he was a skilled commander now, that hadn’t always been the case. Immediately after joining the army, Ralgwin built up experience as a lowly soldier and honed his leadership skills. His superior officer at that time was Fasta’s father. They got along well and Ralgwin looked up to the man as a second father. So when he fell in battle, Ralgwin took it upon himself to care for the man’s family. That was how Fasta, in turn, had come to admire Ralgwin.

“That’s a relief,” Shizuka said with a smile.

“What do you mean?” Fasta asked uncertainly.

“I can understand that.”

Shizuka had been a little uneasy. She couldn’t imagine how someone who’d join a rebel army felt—but she could understand wanting to save someone she owed her life to. She happily would have done the same for Koutarou and the other girls, so she was glad to relate to Fasta on that level.

“I see...”

Although Fasta’s expression didn’t change, Shizuka thought she looked a little gentler. She knew it might just be her imagination, but she was hoping it was real.

“Here we are, Fasta-san.”

Before long, they reached the room Fasta had been assigned. The sealed door automatically slid open, letting out some of the air inside with a soft hiss. Shizuka stepped into the room and frowned.

“This is pretty barren...” she remarked.

It was a guest room, but it was a guest room aboard a warship. It was so plain that Shizuka's inner landlord was thoroughly disappointed.

"This is just what military facilities are like," Fasta explained.

"I know just the thing! Wait just a second, Fasta-san!" Shizuka declared before running out of the room.

She left the door open... Does that mean she trusts me? Or is she testing me? Fasta wondered.

She sat down on the bed to wait, and Shizuka swiftly returned... with a small bouquet in hand. She didn't know what the flowers were called since they were alien to her. One was red and the other had large, pink petals.

"Here we go," Shizuka said as she plopped the flowers in a vase. It added a bit of color to the room and made it feel less austere.



“Thank you,” said Fasta. As a woman, she appreciated the consideration.

“Don’t worry about it. If there’s anything else you need, just let me know.”

“Understood.”

“Well then, I’ll be on my way now.”

Shizuka lightly bowed her head before departing. It would have been weird to be too friendly with a stranger who would one day become an enemy again, so Kiriha had specifically instructed Shizuka not to get too close to Fasta. Shizuka understood why, but she still felt it was a shame.

The door let out another quiet hiss as it opened and closed again. Fasta stared at it for a while after Shizuka left.

So these are the people we’ve been up against...

Fasta knew what Shizuka was like during a battle. She was a supremely dangerous foe with superhuman strength and incredible fighting prowess. But this was the first time Fasta had faced her as a person—and the same went for Koutarou, Theia, and the others too. Outside of war, they weren’t legendary heroes or princesses. They were just normal people.

That realization started a small ripple in Fasta’s heart. It was yet unclear how big a wave it would create. Still, the look in Fasta’s eyes wasn’t the way she would behold just any enemy.

Ralgwin's Battle

Wednesday, October 26th

Koutarou's inspection of the new Blue Knight was going well so far. After touring the head, he'd visited the right and left arms the following two days. It was now the fourth day of his inspection tour, and he and the girls were visiting the right leg. They were currently at the control center of the dock building the leg, getting an overview of the ship from an engineer.

"...Which roughly translates to propulsion and propellant, with the surplus going to storage and the hangar?" Koutarou asked in summation.

"That understanding is mostly correct," the engineer replied hesitantly. "The Blue Knight is, erm... Well, it has a very unusual structure, so—"

"Hahaha, it's okay. You can say it's ridiculous. I think the same thing."

"Much obliged, Your Excellency. Now, in order to overcome the disadvantages of the Blue Knight's unique structure, the legs are equipped with large propulsion units. But this means that moving Blue Knight's legs can reorient propulsion for the entire ship, which allows it to change directions at speeds unthinkable for a ship its size."

"So the humanoid design has *some* advantages," remarked Koutarou.

"Yes. Granted, it shouldn't be used often for the sake of structural integrity, but I'm convinced that the new Blue Knight is as mobile as the old one—if not more so."

"It's just as mobile despite its size? Sounds like you've really put a lot of work into this. I'll be mindful of the ship's durability. Thank you."

"It's an honor, Your Excellency!"

Clan wasn't with Koutarou today, so the on-site engineer was doing all of the explaining. Koutarou made sure to keep his replies polite and businesslike. He was trying to be respectful in Clan's absence, for she was absent to take care of

an important job only she could handle.

After the overview from the engineer, Koutarou, Shizuka, Harumi, Maki, Nana, and their escort moved to another location. Clan greeted them there.

“Hello, Veltlion.”

“Hey, Clan. How’s it looking?”

“I finally found some bugs and explosives—hard evidence of a plot.”

Clan’s job for the day was finding evidence that Ralgwin’s forces were planning to attack. She made an excellent sweeper in that regard, so everyone had left her to her own devices.

“They weren’t there yesterday, mind you,” she continued, “so they must have been planted last night. They were installed rather sloppily, however. Maybe the enemy is bumbling in a rush after hearing about your sudden inspection. Since the ship is still under construction with plenty of eyes everywhere, the bugs and explosives are concentrated at the main dock. Based on that, I’d say they’re planning on attacking when you enter.”

“Can you tell what their main target is?” Koutarou asked.

“Judging by the number and distribution of the explosives, the torso is their most likely target.”

“Figures... So, what do we do now?”

“If we charge in and defuse the explosives, I suspect the enemy will withdraw. So instead, we’ll continue to monitor the explosives and all communications channels. Pardomshiha’s already working on it.”

“You can count on me, Master,” Ruth chimed in. “I will do my utmost to protect both you and the Blue Knight.”

With the discovery of the explosives, Koutarou and the girls considered an enemy assault all but confirmed. Clan and Ruth would continue to gather information without revealing that they were onto the scheme. The plan was for Koutarou and the others to intercept the enemy when they attacked and capture Ralgwin. Koutarou and Theia needed to continue their inspections in

order to keep Ralgwin from getting suspicious, however, so other members of their groups were occasionally splitting off to handle various jobs. Preparations for battle were underway in the shadows.

Fasta looked displeased when she saw the footage and information regarding the planted explosives. Shizuka was the first to notice and decided to ask her about it.

“Is there something bothering you, Fasta-san? Are you thinking maybe this wasn’t Ralgwin-san’s doing?”

“No, not that. I have no doubt this was Ralgwin-sama’s plan, but the execution is just so sloppy. My squad would never botch work like this.”

Fasta didn’t like how the devices had been planted. Such a covert job should have fallen to her squad, but the standard of the work she was seeing was far below her expectations. The devices weren’t camouflaged properly and the wiring was bad, leaving them easy to find and at risk of premature detonation with the slightest mishap.

“It’s likely an adverse effect of the enemy’s return to Forthorthe. The homecoming dramatically expanded their area of operation, so I imagine they were forced to rely on local troops for this over Fasta’s elite unit,” said Maki. As a longtime member of a military organization, she understood why Fasta was upset. She’d encountered the same problem herself now and again.

Ralgwin had been on the defensive on Earth, but now that he’d returned home, he was shifting gears and going on the offensive. He still only had a finite number of elite soldiers, however. Depending on the operation, he would inevitably end up with less-experienced troops on the job. There were many factors that could lead to a disadvantage in battle, and in this case, the size of the theater—an entire galaxy—was working against him. Even with a carefully constructed plan, Ralgwin had struggled to mobilize a highly skilled unit to handle the job. As a result, critical preparations had been lackluster.

It’s true the increased area of operations poses an issue. But this is... The situation seems bad.

Fasta knew Maki was right—at least in part. She thought there was more to it. Ralgwin’s preparations had proceeded without a hitch so far, so why would he

compromise when it came to the execution? She found it hard to believe he hadn't foreseen the sloppy work. Knowing Ralgwin's personality, she was confident he would have reviewed every last detail of the plan. That was just the kind of commander he was. And yet he'd pushed forward with this plan, meaning he was aware of its flaws and had proceeded regardless. Fasta couldn't imagine any good reason for that. She figured that Grevanas and the Gray Knight were moving so fast that Ralgwin had felt his hand forced. Fasta could tell the grave danger her commander was in just by glimpsing the sloppy explosives—a testament to how long she'd been with the organization.

If he's determined to attack, this will be my first and only chance to save Ralgwin-sama. I have to succeed here...

Fasta had left Ralgwin as she felt the walls closing in around the rebel army, and their situation would only worsen as time wore on. The only trump card she had was insider knowledge, and that grew more and more outdated by the day. She wasn't green enough to believe she'd get more than one good shot at saving her commander. This would be it. She had to pull herself together.

Five days after Koutarou inspected the head, on the sixth and final day of his Blue Knight tour, he was scheduled to visit the torso at the main dock.

"The question's how they're going to come after us..." Koutarou mused as he looked out of the transport vehicle window.

The shipyard was coming closer into view. It produced spacecraft over a kilometer in length, so the facility was even bigger than that. Even with floating or flying machines, a tremendous amount of space was required for construction—and the new Blue Knight's torso was *especially* large. It was being built at one of the largest facilities on the planet.

"You sure seem composed, Kou. I can't stop myself from shaking," said Kenji, who was riding alongside Koutarou in the transport vehicle. In demonstration, he held his right hand up, and just like he'd said, it was trembling a little.

Koutarou smiled at him. "It's always like that for new recruits."

Koutarou was no stranger to battle. He was all too familiar with the nerves a freshly trained soldier had to fight before taking the battlefield for the first

time. In fact, compared to most, Kenji was handling himself quite well.

“So you do this kind of thing all the time, huh?” Kenji asked hesitantly.

“I’m a bit of a special case,” Koutarou replied. “I wasn’t thrown into battle with my life on the line at first. I started with smaller skirmishes.”

Koutarou’s first fight had been with the invaders of room 106. Following that, he’d assisted each of them in their own personal fights, which had escalated into real battle. Eventually, it had all climaxed into full-blown war. Unlike Kenji and most new recruits, he hadn’t been introduced to life-or-death combat from the get-go. He’d had the luxury of acclimating to the idea over time.

“You’ll get used to it eventually too, but scary things will always be scary,” he assured Kenji.

“Do you still get scared, Kou?”

“Yeah. Imagine Kin-chan and a dozen of your closest classmates fighting with guns.”

Koutarou’s loved ones were joining him in battle. Some might be injured. Some might even lose their lives. And it would all be under his command. He would be the deciding factor in whether the people serving under him lived or died. It was a responsibility he would never get used to. Fighting on the front line as a rank-and-file soldier was less scary in his eyes.

“You really are something, Kou... I don’t think I could do this.”

“That’s fine. This isn’t your battle. We’ll protect everyone, so you just need to follow instructions and escape somewhere safe.”

Kenji continued to travel with Koutarou so as not to arouse enemy suspicion. He’d been with the tour group from the start, so it would raise attention for him to disappear suddenly. Thankfully, Nalfa and Kotori had stopped coming after the second day, so only Kenji’s presence was required. Still, Koutarou had no intention of making him fight. The plan was for Kenji to make his exit before battle broke out.

“I’m counting on you guys, Kou! You had better protect me! If I have to fight, I’d at least want some training first!”

“Dude, I don’t know if you’re brave or a coward...”

For a moment, Koutarou thought that Kenji might be more suited for battle than he was—but he quickly reconsidered. Kenji’s courage was likely for his sister, Kotori, who was in the same situation. So it wasn’t that Kenji was particularly cut out for war. He was just desperate to protect his sister.

All of a sudden, Shizuka, who was attuned to the unique energies of the battlefield, perked up. “Satomi-kun, I’m starting to feel a stirring...” she warned. Specifically, Alunaya’s bestial instincts were speaking to her. She couldn’t see them, but the enemy was close.

“Satomi-san, let’s allow Matsudaira-san to escape now,” said Nana. Genius though she was, her spiritual perception was that of a normal human. She couldn’t yet detect the enemy herself, but if Shizuka said they were coming, Nana believed her. She was ready to evacuate Kenji, who wasn’t just a civilian—he was Koutarou’s best friend.

“Hold off,” replied Koutarou. “it doesn’t feel like they’re going to attack just yet. Besides, the timing would be too obvious. We’ll let him off at the checkpoint up ahead.”

Koutarou was endowed with spiritual energy perception from Sanae, so he had a more detailed grasp of the situation than Shizuka. He could sense the enemy too, as well as their mood. Right now, they were mostly just excited and tense. There was no mounting bloodlust, as would be natural right before an assault kicked off. If Koutarou made the wrong move now, it might spur the enemy and put Kenji in even greater danger. The safest move would be to help Kenji make his escape at the shipyard.

“You probably don’t need to hear this from me, Kou... but be careful.”

“That’s not true. Thanks for worrying about me.”

Kenji had now played his part. The enemy was preparing to attack, oblivious to the interception that awaited them. From here on out, the rest was up to Koutarou and the girls, who would step in to engage and capture Ralgwin. A decisive battle was nigh.

Since the shipyard produced battleships, it had all the security of a military

facility, including multiple checkpoints upon entry. Koutarou's plan was to let Kenji off at the final checkpoint, which was the largest of all. The vehicle they were traveling in could pull into the station, completely concealed from outside view. That made it the optimal place for Kenji to disembark.

"Take care of Mackenzie," Koutarou said somberly.

"We will guard him with our lives!" a security officer replied dutifully.

"You don't have to make that big of a deal out of it..." Kenji grumbled.

"Quit yammering and get going, Mackenzie!"

"Yeah! See you later!"

"Right this way, Matsudaira-san!"

"Thanks!"

The shipyard used spatial distortion technology to move people and supplies via gates that resembled a larger version of the one Theia used to travel to room 106. The escape plan was for Kenji to use the gates to get as far away from the shipyard as possible before battle broke out, or to take refuge in one of many emergency shelters at the yard if he couldn't make it in time. Once he was on a course for safety, the transport vehicle pulled out from the final checkpoint with Koutarou looking relieved.

"Aha, so Matsudaira-san really is special to you," said Nana as she shuffled over next to Koutarou.

When Nana switched seats, she switched appearances too. She now looked like Kenji via the power of Maki's magic. Similarly, Maki—who was sitting across from them—transformed herself into Nana. This switcheroo was a precaution against alerting the enemy of Kenji's departure once the group disembarked.

"I can't deny there's some truth in that," Koutarou replied.

"Hmm... I guess Shizuka-san and Maki-san have their work cut out for them," said Nana in Kenji's voice as she smiled and leaned on Koutarou's shoulder. Maki's transformation was so flawless that Nana both looked and sounded exactly like Koutarou's best friend.

"You doing that in his form is giving me the creeps, so please spare me."

“Ah, so boys get close in a much different way.” Nana readily pulled away. She was only teasing Koutarou, and this was an emergency situation. She was discerning enough to know the teasing could wait.

“I suppose so,” Koutarou said, looking far less tense. Nana teasing him in Kenji’s guise really was bad for his heart.

“Well, there you have it, Maki-san, Shizuka-san,” said Nana. “You probably won’t be able to get between them through physical contact. So you’ll have to think up a different plan.”

“Duly noted,” Maki replied seriously with a firm nod. She was keen to learn how to get closer to Koutarou, so she considered this information critical intel.

“Boys are so hard to understand,” Shizuka said bitterly. Kotori had told her that Koutarou trusted the girls and Kenji the same way, but she had her doubts after what she’d seen. Her feelings were complicated.

But that was the conclusion of all carefree conversation in the car, for the doll-size Alunaya in Shizuka’s lap suddenly perked up.

“Shizuka, they’re coming.”

Hearing this, Shizuka and the rest of the group shifted their attention to the situation at hand. As for Alunaya, he seemed to disappear as he made his own preparations for battle. In reality, he’d simply ceased projecting himself in stuffed animal form.

“Seems they’re making their move now,” Shizuka confirmed. She could detect exactly what Alunaya had—a prickling in the air that made her skin tingle. It was unmistakably the sensation of a fight on the horizon.

Koutarou picked up on it too and immediately opened a comms channel. “This is the Blue Knight! All units prepare for battle! Engage at your commander’s discretion! Stay vigilant! The enemy is upon us!”

While Koutarou was leading the operation, he trusted the expertise and knowledge of the Forthorthian army when it came to modern warfare. He readily deferred field command of the soldiers on the ground to their unit commander, Nefilforan.

“You heard him, everyone! Safeties off! Stick to the plan!” she ordered.

“Raaaahhh!” her troops rallied.

Koutarou’s decision to put command control in Nefilforan’s hands was wise. It allowed her unit to function per usual, which skyrocketed morale. Every soldier present was grateful to have the Blue Knight as their commander-in-chief.

It wasn’t long before a resounding explosion rang out. Ralgwin’s primary target in the assault was Koutarou. The new Blue Knight was an important objective too, but a secondary one nonetheless. Ralgwin had to make a move on Koutarou before he entered the shipyard facility or risk losing him entirely, so the initial onslaught was concentrated on him—including the explosion. Ralgwin wasn’t after the ship just yet.

“Situation report!” Ralgwin demanded.

“The generators have stopped! The distortion field is down!” an officer informed him.

The first explosion had actually been two simultaneous blasts. Modern warfare in Forthorthe was all about how to break through an enemy’s barrier. The strategy in a normal battle was whittling down an enemy’s defenses with firepower, but breaching a base was a different story. Stationary strongholds housed sturdy distortion field devices with massive generators to support them, and the shipyard was as well defended as any military facility. Getting inside either meant relying on high-caliber siege weapons or strategic reliance on infiltration and sabotage beforehand, and Ralgwin had chosen the latter to spread as much fear and panic as possible in the shipyard. The plan was to blow out the barrier, charge in, and eliminate Koutarou in the chaos. If they could take out the new Blue Knight in the process, that would be icing on the cake. Either way, the first step was now complete.

“Send out the squads according to plan! Don’t give them any time to recover!” Ralgwin ordered.

“Understood!” the officer replied. “Attention all units taking part in this operation! Abandon cloaking and begin assault plan 6-A! I repeat—”

As the officer passed on his orders, Ralgwin continued to monitor a hologram displaying his troops surrounding the shipyard and gradually closing their encirclement. Ralgwin had had them use a combination of spiritual energy tech and traditional camouflage to get as close to the facility as possible without being discovered. The initial explosions were the signal to begin the strike in earnest.

Things are going well so far. If we can infiltrate before the next round of explosions, we can reach our target!

If Ralgwin's only goal had been to destroy the shipyard, he could have detonated all of his planted explosives at the same time, causing maximum chaos for the Imperial Army in one fell swoop. But in this case where Ralgwin had two intended targets—Koutarou and the new Blue Knight—drawing the confusion out over a longer period of time was to his benefit. For that reason, he'd intentionally staggered the detonations in waves. With foreknowledge of when and where they would go off, Ralgwin's troops could easily maneuver around them while the Imperial Army flailed.

Moreover, Ralgwin knew that the Forthorthian army would focus on protecting Koutarou above all else. The opening strike of this assault was the most critical, and in spite of Ralgwin's meticulous plan, there was still plenty of opportunity for something to go awry. There was always a chance the army would do something unexpected in their panic following the first round of explosions, and any unexpected diversion might thwart the assassination squad closing in on Koutarou. There was even a chance the Imperial Army would be unfazed by the blasts, leading to greater resistance than expected. That could jeopardize the entire operation. Knowing all this, Ralgwin couldn't help wanting to pray. There was nothing else he could do now.

"Your Excellency, the Imperial Army is reorganizing their formation! Troops located at points C, D, and F are moving to point A!" Ralgwin's officer informed him.

"So they're abandoning the head and arms, are they? Their commander is as bold as ever," Ralgwin mused.

The Imperial Army was swiftly reorganizing after the explosions. Point C

represented the dock where the head was being built, and points D and F represented the docks for the left and right arms. The Imperial Army seemed to be funneling forces from all three points to point A, the dock where the torso was being constructed. Sacrificing the arms and head to protect the most important part of the ship was a daring strategy, but for Ralgwin, who had hoped to keep the enemy from converging, it was a painful move.

“Still, they’re undoubtedly moving to protect the Blue Knight himself too,” surmised Ralgwin. “In that case... proceed to the next phase as planned. Detonate the explosives at choke points C, D, and F.”

If the Imperial Army had only been moving to protect the ship’s torso, their daring strategy would have worked. But in truth, they were primarily concerned with protecting Koutarou. They were acting without due consideration for the situation at hand, leaving themselves vulnerable as they unwittingly jumped into Ralgwin’s trap.

A second explosive roar erupted from the shipyard.

“Detonation of wave 2 explosives confirmed, Your Excellency,” Ralgwin’s officer reported. “The enemy has taken heavy losses, but they’ve now activated a sub-generator and deployed a reserve distortion field.”

The second round of the assault had inflicted mass casualties on the Imperial Army, but it wasn’t all good news for Ralgwin. The army was quickly pulling itself together. They’d already raised a secondary barrier and they were beginning to mount other defenses concentrated around point A—the dock with the torso and Koutarou. Nevertheless, Ralgwin remained confident.

“They’re ten seconds too late! It’s already over for them!” he cried.

If the army had erected their barrier before the second round of explosions, it would have spelled a protracted battle for both sides. But they weren’t quick enough. They’d taken the secondary blasts at full strength, which had devastated both their troops and their defensive equipment. Ralgwin’s men would have no trouble reestablishing the upper hand. The shipyard’s sub-generator was in plain view, and it would only be a matter of time before they took that out too.

I’ve done it! I won this gambit, Uncle!

Ralgwin's forces had begun their assault not knowing where the sub-generator would be. If they'd been unable to locate it after it came on line, they could have been in serious trouble, but their brazen gamble had paid off. The sub-generator was practically right in front of them, so it seemed the battle was all but clinched now.

"The heavens are on our side! Don't let up on the attack!" Ralgwin bellowed.

To cement his victory, he spurred his men to action. Now that success was finally within his grasp, he was growing restless.

If the situation had been entirely as Ralgwin perceived it, he might have actually stood a chance of assassinating Koutarou. His plan was meticulous and luck was on his side. But, unfortunately for Ralgwin, the results he was seeing were just an illusion.

"Kiriha-sama, the enemy forces have reached the retreat limit line," Ruth calmly reported.

Kiriha was currently seated in the commander's chair of the temporary command center they'd set up in the shipyard. She was overseeing the Imperial Army's operation with the help of both Ruth and Clan. The retreat limit line Ruth had just mentioned was a virtual line Kiriha had drawn on a map of the shipyard representing the battlefield. After hearing the enemy had reached it, Kiriha made her move.

"Good," she said. "Instruct all forces to begin the counterattack."

"At once, Kiriha-sama!"

The Imperial Army was set to stage a large-scale counteroffensive once the enemy hit the virtual line. If they'd struck before then, there was too high a chance that Ralgwin would withdraw. That was why Kiriha had devised what she called the retreat limit line and waited until the enemy troops crossed it before acting.

I was nervous for a while, but it seems there was no need for that. Thank goodness...

While Kiriha kept calm in front of the soldiers, she was intensely relieved.

Ralgwin had deployed his men just as Fasta predicted, but there was no guarantee everything would go to plan. With the lives of so many troops in her hands, Kiriha had to remain wary of even the slightest possibility of a trap. Fortunately, the pressing danger had now passed. Fasta's information had proven good—although that didn't yet prove Fasta was an ally.

“Now, Ralgwin, the ball is in your court. The outcome of this battle depends on what kind of person you are,” Kiriha murmured.

Koutarou and the girls wanted to avoid casualties, even on the enemy side. Fasta felt the same way, especially since she was going up against people she knew personally. But not even the wise Kiriha knew how things would play out.

When the first round of explosions had gone off, Fasta was able to remain calm—primarily because there was something else occupying her mind. She was fixated on what she could see through the scope of her sniper rifle.

“To think I would end up shooting my allies...”

Fasta hadn't wanted this. Ralgwin wasn't the only person she cared about. The information she leaked had put people she knew in danger—people she would ordinarily be protecting. But if Fasta looked the other way now, she would only be enabling Grevanas and the Gray Knight. At their hands, her former allies would be lucky if they were only conscripted or killed. Grevanas could use his magic to subjugate an ancient dragon, so stealing the souls of humans was undoubtedly a trifling matter. The lich might well be on his way to building an army under his control, or worse, under the resurrected Maxfern's control. Fasta had to tell herself that intervening now was the best way to spare her friends from the worst possible fate.

“Don't worry. You're not wrong. The scary magician and that gray guy are the real bad guys here,” said Sanae, who'd been stationed with the snipers and other long-range attackers to serve as their eyes.

“I know that, but accepting the situation is still difficult. What would they think if they knew I was on the enemy side...?” Fasta replied darkly. Sanae's comforting wasn't enough to lift her spirits.

Sanae looked around and answered in a clear voice, “Well, they don't seem

very angry.” Her expression said that everything was all right—that Fasta had nothing to worry about.

“What?” Fasta replied, dumbfounded.

“I’m talking about your friends,” Sanae explained. “They’re not angry at all.”

Fasta still couldn’t get her head around what Sanae was telling her. It just sounded like a cruel joke. “What are you talking about? Are you making fun of me?”

“I’m not making fun of you.” Sanae shook her head. Naturally, she had no such intentions. “You probably can’t tell, but there are a lot of spirits around you, like Bandana Spanner-kun and Metallic Sunglasses-neesan. At the very least, they’re not angry, so you’re probably fine.”

Sanae wasn’t talking about Fasta’s friends that remained on the battlefield, but rather her friends who were watching over her from somewhere else. She could sense the spirits around Fasta, and she could tell they weren’t hostile. If anything, they seemed to be protecting her.

“Medhein and Gilfara...?!” Fasta gasped, her eyes wide with shock.

Medhein was an engineer who’d joined up around the same time Fasta had, and Gilfara was the squad leader who’d taken Fasta under her wing during her first battle. They were part of the reason Fasta was so attached to the rebel army. Both had fallen in the line of duty. Fasta would never forget them, but there was no way Sanae would know about them—which convinced Fasta that she was telling the truth.

“And the most raring to go of all is this old guy with a scar on his forehead, thin hair, and a shaggy beard,” continued Sanae.

“You can’t mean my d—”

“They all want you to win. I think they know that this is a very important battle. So... I think even if you shoot without really aiming, you’re going to hit everything you want.”

Spirits normally had minimal impact on reality, but in moments of spiritual intensity, they could increase their influence. That meant Fasta would be

especially susceptible to it while sniping, an exercise that required the utmost focus and concentration. The assistance of spiritual energy in that state would make a considerable difference in her performance, and the fact that the spirits around her were willing to help was further proof Sanae was telling the truth. They weren't angry.

"Believe in yourself and your allies, my disciple," said Sanae.

She was reciting a line from an anime, but she meant every word of it. Fasta's comrades believed in her, and Fasta should believe in them in return. It would surely bring forth a better outcome.

"A year ago, I would have questioned what kind of foolish nonsense you're spouting... but now I want to believe you," said Fasta. She'd been stirred to action because of an evil magician, so the existence of protective spirits wasn't that much of a stretch. Fasta had already witnessed all kinds of miracles, so she was ready to believe Sanae.

"You should have faith in us too, my disciple. The bullets we gave you are sure to defeat your comrades without hurting them."

Fasta was currently shooting with special bullets made with spiritual energy technology that, upon contact, would disrupt a target's spiritual energy and knock them unconscious. With these, Fasta didn't have to worry about killing her friends.

"Trust me, my disciple," Sanae repeated.

Thanks to Sanae, the burden weighing on Fasta's heart was a little lighter. She now had no reason to hold back.

"But you know, be careful not to hit anyone in the head. The bullets still move fast, so that'd definitely hurt."

"Don't worry. I'm sure my comrades will be sure to avoid any headshots."

"That's the spirit, my disciple."

Sanae flashed a smile. With her psychic powers, she could tell that Fasta had cheered up a little. She was thoroughly satisfied that her psychic powers were helping someone.

It wasn't long afterward that they received Kiriha's order to begin the counterattack.

Apart from Koutarou, who was acting as a decoy, Shizuka, Nefilforan, and the elite troops with the two of them were taking on the most dangerous role. The Imperial Army was tactically withdrawing to force Ralgwin's men across Kiriha's retreat limit line. Simply put, they were luring the enemy to a more advantageous battle location. It was a risky job, and Shizuka and Nefilforan were leading the maneuver.

The dock where the new Blue Knight's torso was being built lay on the east side of the shipyard, and it was the closest point to the facility's outer perimeter. Ralgwin had a large unit there to try to siege and destroy it, so the east side was seeing the fiercest fighting. Supporting the front line in such a situation was a complex and delicate operation. Staying abreast of the heated battlefield took a well-rounded fighter with many long years of experience under their belt.

"If I'd known I'd wind up in fights like this, I would've trained harder in marksmanship..." Nefilforan grumbled as she fired her rifle with a bitter grin.

Nefilforan hailed from the Glendad family, famous for its long history of military service and accomplishment. She was thoroughly trained in martial arts and technology, and while she was primarily a close-quarters fighter, she wasn't a bad shooter either. With careful aim, she was as accurate as Theia off the cuff. And after she defeated the umpteenth soldier...

"Commander, we are reaching our limit. Let's retreat and reorganize," suggested Diahale, a middle-aged man with a beard. He was a seasoned officer who'd trained and fought alongside elite soldiers, and he was acting as Nefilforan's second-in-command while Nana was protecting Koutarou.

"It looks like we still have some leeway," Nefilforan argued.

Diahale had suggested retreat several times already, but Nefilforan didn't yet see the need. Ralgwin's forces had seized the buildings on the perimeter of the shipyard and were using them to set up makeshift bases. The enemy assault was gaining momentum as they gradually advanced toward the dock building

the torso—where Koutarou was. But Nefilforan’s unit had known what they’d be up against and suffered minimal losses so far. There had been structural collapses here and there courtesy of Ralgwin’s troops, although Nefilforan had mostly evacuated the area beforehand. They were also using mobile weapons to draw enemy fire, so only a few people had been injured as of twenty minutes into the battle. It was an impressive holdout.

“Yeeeeeeeeek! They’re throwing even more bombs now!” Shizuka cried out.

“Calm down, Shizuka. Those little things wouldn’t even put a scratch on you,” Alunaya reminded her.

“Say what you will, but I almost got buried alive!”

Despite their brave stand, the situation remained dangerous. Shizuka had just gone to help soldiers who were slow to escape, and the building they were in had collapsed on top of them. Luckily, Shizuka was strong enough to force her way out and save several other people in the process.

“I understand what it *looks* like, Commander,” Diahale said. “But a clever opponent will intentionally make things appear less dangerous than they truly are. You do it yourself when you adjust the timing of your attacks. Just think of this as taking that to the extreme.”

“I see... I trust your judgment, Diahale. Fall back,” Nefilforan acquiesced.

“Understood!”

Nefilforan had reached the rank of regiment commander at a young age, and she more than lived up to the name of Arda Sine—“the piercing spear”—in her focus on offensive maneuvers. Defensive battles and withdrawals like this were nearly foreign to her. She understood them theoretically, but there was practical knowledge one could only gain by experience, so she ultimately chose to trust in her second-in-command and give the order.

“This is Nefilforan!” she began over the comms line. “The eastern line is pulling back! Any forces with power to spare, bombard the enemy’s rear line! Slow their advance! Additionally, use antiair weaponry—”

Nefilforan had a company of 160 men under her direct command, and safely relocating them would take extraordinary effort. There was also the risk of

being attacked on the move. She needed to be especially wary of incoming artillery fire and air strikes.

“Shizuka-san, we’ll be counting on you again!” Nefilforan called.

“You got it! I’ll be right there!” Shizuka replied.

Shizuka, with the help of Nefilforan’s shock troops, would take up the extremely dangerous job of rear guard as the company fell back. They were uniquely suited for it. Shizuka was virtually a walking tank, and Nefilforan’s troops were specially trained by the veteran Glendad family. No one else was as equipped for the arduous task ahead of them.

But as soon as Nefilforan made her decision, a high-priority message came in over her comms application. After confirming the caller and other details, the AI opened the line automatically.

“Attention all forces! The enemy has crossed the retreat limit line! Follow the plan and move to counterattack! I repeat, the enemy has—” Ruth’s voice rang out.

This was what Nefilforan had eagerly been awaiting, and she wasted no time passing it along. “You heard her, men! Cancel the retreat! We’ve done well to hold out this long—now it’s time to fight back!”

“Raaaaaaaahhh!”

With that, morale skyrocketed. The soldiers had dug their heels in to endure their stand all this time, so Ruth’s message was a huge relief to them. Naturally, it was for Nefilforan as well. But Ruth’s message wouldn’t be the only boon they received... for a five-meter-tall giant then appeared before them. It was a vivid blue and carrying a backpack with a red stripe.

“You don’t mind if I join in, do you, Princess Nefilforan?” said Koutarou from inside.

“Your Excellency?!” Nefilforan gasped.

“I’m here too!” cried Theia. “I’ve been on edge this whole time, so I’m going to go wild!”

The giant was Warlord III-Revised equipped with the Red Line backpack. In

other words, Koutarou had arrived with Theia to back up Nefilforan's unit.

Sending the Blue Knight himself to the front lines... Ah, so that's what this is!

Nefilforan was taken aback by the enemy's prime target willingly putting himself out there, but she soon realized what was going on. If Kiriha had given him permission to sortie, it was a good sign that either the eastern front would be the site of the decisive battle or there was uncertainty about the enemy's next move. The Blue Knight's presence was a measure to be prepared for whatever may come.

"Raise the flag!" Theia shouted.

The top of Warlord's backpack then deployed a beam shooting straight upward. It didn't have much power, but it wasn't meant to be used to attack. When it reached its apex, it traced a pattern in the sky—an emblem of a knight fighting a dragon. This large beam-based banner was a signal to all that the Blue Knight had deployed.



Once the beam was visible overhead, the shipyard came alive with the rallying cry of the Imperial Army soldiers who saw it. Their voices came together in a low rumble that shook the very ground. They were even more excited than when Nefilforan had passed on the order to counterattack. Morale was through the roof now.

Something very similar was happening on Ralgwin's side, although the reaction was quite different.

"Damn... It's the Blue Knight! They're sending out the Blue Knight!"

"This is our chance! If we kill him, the reward will be enough for us to live in luxury the rest of our lives!"

There were those who turned pale at Koutarou's appearance and those who rejoiced. The former simply feared him—a perfectly natural reaction to going up against a legendary hero in battle. The latter were eager to slay him and claim their share of fame and riches.

"Kiriha, the other side is getting worked up now too. According to our Global Sanae Channel, they're split evenly into Little Scardies and Big Meanies," Sanae reported.

"I see," replied Kiriha. "You heard her, Koutarou. The enemy is focused on you, so your location will become the heart of the battle."

Hearing the enemy's reaction dispelled Kiriha's worries about the situation. If there was simply going to be a fierce battle ahead, then high morale was exactly what they needed and it made sense for Koutarou to show his strength on the front line. The enemy's next move depended on Koutarou, so by deploying him before they could act, she'd effectively forced their hand and determined the location of their decisive clash.

Even when he saw the beam banner of a knight and dragon, Ralgwin's expression remained unchanged. He was commanding the battle from a warship in the rear and observed the development calmly. Only the other crew members aboard were freaking out.

"So you've come out, have you, Blue Knight? Let's see how this goes..."

Ralgwin was able to keep his cool because he'd expected that Koutarou would take the field personally. In preparation for this assault, Ralgwin had brought a force twice the size of the Imperial Army outfit stationed at the shipyard. With his superior numbers, he'd surrounded the facility and jammed the transfer gate with gravitational waves. Unless the Imperial Army managed to break through his siege, their defeat was only a matter of time. They were effectively cornered, leaving them with few options. There were countless variations of plans they might come up with, but in broad strokes, their goal would have to be the same—either breaking through the encirclement or using a decoy to escape. And given the way the Blue Knight had fought in their battles before now, Ralgwin was convinced it'd be the former. He couldn't imagine Koutarou running away. In fact, raising the flag was proof he wouldn't. It would go against Forthorthian chivalry for him to use his knightly banner to deceive an enemy, and the Blue Knight was a model knight.

"If this is your choice, so be it. Everyone on the rear line, advance! Let's join the party!"

Ralgwin was personally intrigued by Koutarou's decision to take part in the battle himself, but there was only one way for Ralgwin to respond—funneling his troops to Koutarou's location. Meanwhile, Ralgwin and his unit would increase surveillance and reconnaissance to monitor for anything unexpected. That way, even in the unlikely event that Koutarou was using a decoy, they'd be poised for anything. At least, that's what Ralgwin thought, but the situation took a turn he never expected.

"Your Excellency!" his officer called. "I have an urgent report!"

"What's all the fuss about?" Ralgwin asked.

"The enemy's main generators have restarted and their primary distortion field is back on line! Our forces are now trapped between the two fields and are unable to retreat!"

"What?!"

Ralgwin's first move had been to blow up the shipyard's generator, thereby disabling its distortion field, and then using that opportunity to attack. The Imperial Army had been fending him off this entire time with the help of a

reserve generator. But as soon as the Blue Knight took the field, the main generator and distortion field had powered up again. The output of the backup generator had increased too, effectively sandwiching Ralgwin's forces between the main and backup fields.

Ralgwin immediately barked his orders. "If we don't do something, we'll be ripped to shreds! Have our tanks and artillery take out that distortion field! And have the advancing reinforcements hurry up!"

The Imperial Army could now selectively lower their barrier to open fire on Ralgwin's stranded troops, mowing them down in orderly fashion. The only way to prevent that was to bust through the outermost barrier to save them. And the only way to do *that* was to unload their firepower on it.

Still... how were they able to get a step ahead of us so decisively? There's no way they planned that on the spot!

Even Ralgwin was beginning to panic now. The Imperial Army had played him all too perfectly. They must have noticed the explosives and responded accordingly, although that wouldn't have been easy to pull off. Destroying the enemy's main generator was a standard opening move, but given how quickly the Imperial Army had responded to the planted explosives... Something was wrong. They must have found the bombs ahead of time. Ralgwin now had to reckon with the possibility they'd already dealt with *all* the explosives he'd planted.

"Detonate all remaining explosives that don't have any of our units in range!" he ordered on the spot.

"Understood!" his offer replied. "Sending the detonation signal!"

Ralgwin could no longer afford to be particular about his methods. He was now aiming to confuse the enemy and minimize his losses. There were also Imperial Army soldiers trapped between the two barriers, so it should have been easy enough, but...

"The bombs aren't activating!" the officer reported. "There's been no blast!"

The planted explosives remained inert. Nothing happened, and the battle proceeded without change.

“They’ve already dismantled them?!” Ralgwin asked in shock.

“No, we’re still getting a signal saying they’ve been detonated. The enemy probably just disconnected the bombs themselves.”

A bomb consisted of an explosive and an electronic detonation device, and Ralgwin’s officer suspected all the Imperial Army had done was decouple them. The detonation devices were still sending and receiving signals, but they were completely harmless now. And no one had been any the wiser until the explosions didn’t go off.

“So they were a step ahead of us on that too. I see our foe is as clever as ever. Perhaps this was even Empress Elfaria’s doing... Damn it!”

Ralgwin slammed his fist down on his armrest in frustration. Either the opponent had outwitted him, or he’d made a blunder. Whichever the case, Ralgwin felt cornered and had nothing else to take his anger out on.

Still, it would have been unfair to pin the failure on Ralgwin. He didn’t know that Fasta had betrayed him, and the only reason his enemy had outmaneuvered him was thanks to the information she’d leaked. Objectively speaking, he’d done nothing wrong. Grevanas and the Gray Knight had also forced his hand with regard to the timing of his attack. His one arguable slipup had been trusting the rigging of the explosives to operatives less skilled than Fasta’s elite unit. But even so, they’d had all the standard experience and training expected of them.

“What shall we do, Your Excellency?” Ralgwin’s officer asked.

They could no longer blow up the new Blue Knight, and their forces were caught in a distortion field cage. At this rate, disaster was inevitable. Ralgwin knew that as well as everyone else on the bridge.

“Concentrate all the firepower we have on the outer distortion field. Once it’s breached, all forces are to retreat! We’ll move in as well, but don’t go too far! We’ll be protecting the escape route!”

Ralgwin had decided to save his men. It was the same decision he always made, yet the soldiers on the bridge breathed a small sigh of relief. To soldiers stranded on the battlefield, their commander’s word was a matter of life or

death. If they knew help was on the way, they could dig in and fight back even in the face of grave danger. With that hope rekindled, the crew aboard Ralgwin's ship quickly pulled themselves together and got to work.

Kiriha had first come up with the idea of trapping Ralgwin's men between barriers when she'd learned from Fasta that he would try to siege the shipyard with an encirclement. The plan was to trick Ralgwin into advancing by making him think the main barrier had been destroyed, and then stop them with the secondary barrier before closing them in by reactivating the main barrier behind them. That would keep Koutarou safe while making it easy to pick off the enemy, but Kiriha also had another objective in mind.

"We've detected an enemy strike ship approaching at maximum speed," an Imperial Army soldier reported.

A hologram of the ever-changing battlefield was on display in the command center. A new red dot had just appeared on it like a shooting star. Kiriha's eyes sparkled when she saw it.

"So you've come, Ralgwin..." she muttered.

Ralgwin was a tricky foe—always present but always hidden. To siege a shipyard of this size, it would ordinarily take two battalions, or twelve hundred men. That meant there had to be a ship capable of carrying that many men hiding somewhere nearby. Strike ships were fast and stealthy by definition, meaning it would be virtually impossible to find as long as it stayed hidden. But now Kiriha had successfully drawn it out.

"You truly are an excellent commander," Kiriha observed.

She watched as the strike ship streaked toward the location Fasta had predicted—the enemy's extraction point. Ralgwin was closing in to protect his retreating soldiers while also offering up his ship's attack power in the assault on the shipyard barrier. Commanders who cared for their forces made for tough opponents. Kiriha had only been able to outsmart Ralgwin with Fasta's help. If not for that, there would have been far more casualties on both sides. Kiriha knew that, so she wasn't willing to let her guard down for so much as a split second, even with the upper hand.

“Koutarou, Ralgwin is inbound,” she reported. “How are things on the front line?”

“Not bad. Thanks to Theia, not a single missile or shell has hit us. But—”

“I can’t do anything about the beams!” Theia interjected. “Do something, Koutarou!”

“All right already!”

The newly arrived strike ship had joined the enemy ground forces in bombarding the shipyard barrier in an attempt to wear it down from both sides. Thankfully, the Imperial Army’s antiair weaponry was intercepting most of the incoming fire. Theia in particular was performing remarkably well from Warlord. Warlord’s Red Line backpack was stocked with long-range weapons just for her, including antiair options. She was personally gunning down anything that made it past the shipyard’s automatic defenses. The only exceptions were energy-based attacks like lasers and beams, which were much trickier to deal with, but a distortion field would be enough to block them while Theia eliminated the missiles and mortars. The shipyard’s barrier was robust too, so the Imperial Army side hadn’t yet taken any considerable damage.

“Just how many shots are they going to fire?!” Theia exclaimed.

“Welp, as you can hear, we’ve got our hands full,” Koutarou explained.

Even over the comms, Kiriha could indeed tell that Koutarou and Theia were busy. But after a quick glance at the command center hologram, she said something that would add even more to their plate...

“Sorry, but could you go out and stop the enemy reinforcements?”

In order to liberate his trapped men, Ralgwin was moving all of his available units—including his own strike ship—in to break the shipyard barrier. Kiriha wanted Koutarou and Theia to stop their advance, but that wouldn’t be easy. They, too, were currently hemmed in by the donut-shaped ring created by the two barriers.

“If we leave, our antiair defenses here will be weaker,” Koutarou warned.

“If you leave, it’ll weaken the enemy’s bombardment,” Kiriha countered.

Ralgwin's troops outside the barrier had the most firepower and the greatest chance of breaching the barrier. Not only did they have heavy artillery set up, but they now also had whatever weapons were aboard Ralgwin's strike ship. Meanwhile, the infantry inside the barrier donut were only outfitted to combat vehicles and other infantry. So if Koutarou and Theia went outside in Warlord, they would undoubtedly draw the heaviest enemy fire to them and away from the shipyard's distortion field.

"Okay, but how are we going to get through?" Theia asked. "Even though we've trapped the enemy, we're stuck behind them."

"Just leave."

"Huh?!" Theia blurted out unwittingly. She even stopped shooting for a moment. She was that taken aback by Kiriha's answer.

"You said it yourself, Theia-dono—the enemy is boxed in. Just follow the distortion field up and over them to escape."

The enemy was sandwiched between two layers of barrier that joined at the top in a rounded dome. This was an important feature, for without an effective lid on the barrier, enemy units would be able to escape via flight. And since it was capped, Koutarou and Theia could safely walk right over the top of it. It was more than strong enough to support Warlord.

"You always think up crazy things... Wait, were you planning this from the start?!" Theia was surprised at first, but she soon saw the full picture. *Kiriha never had any intention of fighting the first wave of enemies! The plan was to seal them in and lure out the reinforcements—including Ralgwin! Making it look like we were going to annihilate the first wave was just to force him out of hiding!*

Kiriha had laid this trap using Ralgwin's personality and tactics against him. Theia's jaw hit the floor when she realized the extent of Kiriha's strategy.

"That's right," Kiriha replied, nodding calmly. "Things went better than I expected, all thanks to Fasta-dono."

Not even Kiriha could have laid such a delicate trap without inside information, which she'd gotten from Fasta. The grand plan had stemmed from

a sincere understanding of who Ralgwin was, both as a person and a commander. But that wasn't all she'd considered.

"I thank you, Kiriha-dono," said Fasta.

"For what?" she replied.

"Never mind... It's nothing."

The real beauty of Kiriha's plan was that Fasta would only have to fight a limited number of her former comrades. Fasta was extremely grateful, but Kiriha feigned ignorance. She wanted nothing from an ally who would, unfortunately, soon become a foe again. Getting too close now would only make things harder for both of them down the line. Fasta knew that as well, so she settled for quietly thanking Kiriha in her heart.

When Koutarou and Theia ignored the first wave of soldiers to come out and engage him, Ralgwin realized what a massive trap he'd fallen into.

This is what their commander was after from the start. By capturing the first wave, they forced me to decide between running away and coming to help. Either way, I'd have to come out of hiding. Which naturally means their next move would be...

"Your Excellency, we're reading an energy reaction behind our ship! It's an ambush!" his officer cried.

"I knew it."

From a strategic point of view, Ralgwin was simply part of the reinforcements and would be easy enough to defeat—but he could always turn tail and flee. That necessitated a pincer attack of some kind to keep him from escaping, and it seemed the Imperial Army had planned for just that. Even Ralgwin was impressed.

"But it does me no good to praise my foe..."

Though omens of his defeat were mounting, Ralgwin refused to throw in the towel. He might yet be able to rescue his forces and retreat. He had one recourse left.

“It looks like I was right to bring you with me.”

And that recourse went by the name of the Gray Knight. He’d silently been watching over the battle so far, only speaking up now that Ralgwin turned to him.

“I won’t refuse to help you, but there’s a limit to what I can offer,” he said. “What do you want me to do?”

The enemy was both before and behind them. Meanwhile, their allies were trapped in a circular barrier prison. Not even the Gray Knight was powerful enough to swoop in and save the day in a situation so dire.

“I want you to do exactly what you did before—allow my cornered men to escape,” Ralgwin asserted. The last time Koutarou and the girls had cornered Ralgwin’s men, the Gray Knight had used the whirlpool of chaos to evacuate them. Ralgwin sought the same aid now.

“You don’t want me to kill the Blue Knight?” the Gray Knight questioned.

“No. I wouldn’t be able to save my stranded troops that way.”

If Ralgwin tried to rescue his forces himself, it would mean pooling his reinforcements, and the Imperial Army would naturally move to stop them. But with the Gray Knight’s assistance, he could sortie on his own to distract them. Ralgwin was convinced his mysterious ally was the man for the job.

“It won’t be easy for you to hold back the Blue Knight,” the Gray Knight warned.

“Even so, this is my chance to help save my men,” Ralgwin replied.

Ralgwin was certain of his decision, but his plan would mean he was responsible for holding off the Blue Knight until the Gray Knight completed the rescue operation. It wouldn’t be easy, but he believed it’d be his greatest shot at success.

“I see...” the Gray Knight muttered and began speculating.

The Blue Knight isn’t the only one we’re up against. The real problem is the Sanaes. Their psychic powers are superior to mine even individually, so engaging both of them at the same time will be problematic... It would be a different story

if Grevanas was done with what I asked for, but I'll go along with Ralgwin's little plan for now.

In the end, the Gray Knight decided to help Ralgwin. Ralgwin still had his uses, after all. His galactic connections and his army were both attractive prospects to the Gray Knight.

"All right, I'll give it a shot," he said with a nod.

"Can I count on you?" Ralgwin asked.

"Yeah," the Gray Knight replied, then quickly turned to leave.

Ralgwin called out as he went, "This is a big job. Once it's over, I'll buy you a drink."

"I don't know if I can get drunk in this body... but I'll look forward to it."

Ralgwin wasn't looking at the Gray Knight, nor was the Gray Knight looking at him. They knew that they didn't have much time, and so they parted ways to begin their respective battles.

Theia, Maki, and Shizuka were fighting alongside Koutarou. Kiriha and Ruth were stationed in the command center. The remaining girls—Harumi, Sanae, Yurika, and Clan—were with Fasta as part of the ambush party behind Ralgwin.

"Harumi-sama, the enemy will be in range soon!" a soldier informed her.

"We will attack together with Layous-sama. Leave the timing to them," she instructed.

"Understood, Harumi-sama!"

Since Nefilforan couldn't lead the ambush party herself, she'd temporarily placed Harumi in charge of it. Harumi was the oldest of all the girls and the most emotionally mature, so she was best suited to taking command. But even so, Harumi was worried about whether she'd be able to do a good job. She didn't want to barge in on an established team and take charge, nor did she think she was fit to lead.

"Pardon, but could I ask you to stop calling me 'Harumi-sama'?" she politely requested.

“I’m afraid I cannot do that,” the soldier replied. “You are a member of His Excellency’s band of knights and must be treated with the utmost respect. It is an honor to have you lead our forces!”

Despite Harumi’s concerns, Nefilforan’s unit was in unusually high spirits. No one was disgruntled over her command, much less her presence. She was holding her own, and the troops heartily welcomed her—especially when her hair started glowing silver as she prepared for battle. Everyone was stealing glances at her from time to time.

“Say, Harumi, are you sure you don’t want to come?” Sanae-nee asked.

“It’s fine. I’ll know when Lay—er, when Satomi-kun uses the sword. I can control it from here.”

“That’s why I said this arrangement would be fine,” chimed in Clan.

“Maybe so, but I thought Harumi would still want to see Koutarou too. Anyways, I’m off now!” Sanae-nee exclaimed.

“It’s our time to shine, ho!”

“Now we will join the fight, ho!”

“Please be careful, everyone!” Harumi called.

With that, Sanae-nee and Clan took off aboard Ohime, the high-mobility combat module for the haniwas. They joined the Imperial Army’s fighter squadron standing by in the air to form the aerial force that would attack Ralgwin’s ship.

“Why don’t we get a move on too?” said Harumi.

“Yeah,” replied Yurika.

Rather than joining up with the aerial squad, Harumi and Yurika would be rendezvousing with the ground troops. Instead of attacking Ralgwin’s ship directly, they were responsible for defeating the reinforcements Ralgwin deployed.

“Harumi-sama, before we deploy, please address the soldiers,” requested the soldier serving as Harumi’s aide. The squad had already synchronized with Koutarou, and the countdown to the start of the battle was ticking.

“Again?” she asked timidly.

“If you would, please.”

Harumi wore a troubled expression. She’d been asked to address the soldiers once before and wasn’t sure she was the right person for the job. Still, with everyone putting their lives on the line, she’d been willing to do it on the remote chance it might help. The same was true now, and with barely any time remaining, she swiftly used a computer to connect with all the soldiers under her command.

“To all units hearing this message!” she began in a powerful tone, although the words were not her own. She was drawing on Alaia’s memories of addressing troops as a reference. “Though we put down Vandarion’s coup over half a year ago, the remnants of his faction have continued to sow havoc! That ends today! We shall claim victory here and put a stop to the rebellion once and for all!”

Right now, Harumi had no issue acting like Alaia. Koutarou had once been in the same situation with the Blue Knight, feeling he was only playing the part. But because the heart he’d put into his role was real, he’d slowly begun to inhabit it and eventually became the real thing. There was no guarantee the same trick would work for Harumi, but it was enough to give her hope that her actions weren’t in vain.

“Layous-sama stands on the other side of the enemy! Let us seize glory and greet him proudly! Stand tall! Protect the citizens of our country!”

Hearing Harumi’s words, her aide thought, *As I suspected, she’s no ordinary girl. She holds an incredible power within her. Maybe she’s even the empress’s...*

It wasn’t just her aide either. All of the soldiers thought the same thing. So when Harumi pronounced the start of the battle...

“Follow my flag! Let the battle begin!”

The soldiers cheered as loudly as they had for Koutarou, and the shouts weren’t coming only from over the comms. Everyone around Harumi was swept up in her speech. Just like last time, she’d rallied the army with great success.

Sanae quickly learned Koutarou and Harumi were attacking, but not from a comms line or message. The explosive increase in spiritual energy over the battlefield told her everything she needed to know. It was a telltale sign.

“It’s started, Fasta,” she said.

“So it seems. I can see them too,” Fasta replied. She could now see the enemy—her former allies—through her scope, though she didn’t let it shake her. *Still, to think I really can snipe from this location...*

Fasta had taken up her current position at Kiriha’s request. Since the front line would move back and forth over the course of the battle, Fasta needed a specific location to account for that. She’d been doubtful Kiriha could predict the ideal spot, even with the detailed intel she’d handed over. Surely, Fasta had thought, there was no way Kiriha would be able to anticipate Ralgwin’s movements to such a degree.

No wonder we could never win... The bigger the scale of the battle, the more profound the influence her monstrous brain has on the outcome.

Fasta had seen Kiriha’s tactical prowess firsthand during their clashes on Earth, but never had she witnessed anything so impressive as this—primarily because Kiriha had only just recently gotten the full picture of Ralgwin’s forces and their encounters before now had been on a much smaller scale. But now Ralgwin had reunited with his entire faction and allied with other anti-government factions to create a much larger army, which was much easier to predict. Fasta made a mental note to report as much back to Ralgwin later.

“All right, spotter! Get going!” Sanae-chan ordered.

“Why me...?” Sanae-san whined.

“You’re scared of Fasta, right? Or would you rather trade places with me?”

“Okay, I’m going!”

An astral projection of Sanae-san flew up and away from her body. Sanae-chan looked a little jealous, but her expression quickly turned serious again. She knew this wasn’t the time to play around.

“Here they come! Let’s do this, Fasta!”

“I’m ready anytime.”

“Special attack, Local Area Sanae-channel!”

Sanae spread a vast amount of spiritual energy over her surroundings. Sanae’s job was to become Fasta’s and the others’ eyes. The Imperial Army had other snipers and long-range attackers hidden in the area. Sanae-san up above them all would use her spirit sight to collect information and relay it back to Sanae-chan, who would pass it along to the others to orchestrate swift and coordinated bombardments.

“How is it?” Sanae-chan asked Fasta.

“Great. This helps me narrow down my targets,” she replied as she opened fire. Fasta used different guns depending on the situation, and she was using an anti-materiel rifle at present that had the power to pierce armor from several kilometers away. Her shots went straight through the antiaircraft artillery shelling the area.

“Direct hit! The guy using it is running away, so I don’t think it works anymore,” Sanae-chan reported.

“Next target,” Fasta requested.

“Wait, someone noticed your sniping. This person.”

Fasta had put an antiair cannon out of commission, but an enemy soldier had noticed the incoming shot. They whipped around and turned their gun in Fasta’s general direction. Sanae had sensed their hostility and warned Fasta accordingly.

“Do you want to move?” she asked.

Sniping and other stealth attacks relied on keeping one’s position hidden from the enemy. The safest way to ensure that was to relocate after every shot.

“No, I’ll take them out before they can notify anyone,” Fasta replied, switching rifles and looking through her scope.

Targeting a single person on a chaotic battlefield was difficult, but Fasta soon took aim with the help of some psychic assistance courtesy of Sanae. She then exhaled and squeezed the trigger. The gunshot was quieter than before, as

Fasta had swapped to a silenced antipersonnel weapon that packed less power and therefore produced less of a flash when firing. It was perfect for not drawing too much attention.

“Direct hit. Target took the shot straight to the chest and is now passed out,” Sanae-chan reported.

“Next one, then,” said Fasta.

Fasta was using special bullets that could be stopped physically by simple distortion fields, but the spiritual energy contained within them would bypass such barriers to render a target unconscious. They could still be lethal if the shooter wasn’t careful—which was no concern with Fasta’s incredible skill.

“Um, go for that cannon over there next.”

“Roger that.” Fasta switched back to her anti-materiel rifle and took aim at the new target.

“Wait a minute,” said Sanae-chan. “Cancel that.”

“What is it?”

“Our cannon team says they can take that location.”

Immediately after that, Fasta could see a flurry of shells rain down through her scope. Sanae then sensed the life in the area fade. Fasta felt it too.

“I’m sorry, Fasta...”

“This is war.”

“Yeah...”

Fasta had been given nonlethal bullets as a kindness so she wouldn’t have to kill her own men herself, but the rest of the Imperial Army was armed with deadly force. In a battle of such scale, lives would inevitably be lost in the fray. The Imperial Army didn’t have enough nonlethal equipment to pursue any other option. Anyone under Koutarou’s command subscribed to Alaia’s ideal of killing no more than absolutely necessary, but war still demanded sacrifice.

“Let’s hope it comes to an end soon,” said Sanae-chan.

“Not a day goes by that I don’t hope for that,” replied Fasta.

Fasta then took aim again without hesitation. She understood that this was a fight that her people had started, and she averted her eyes from her sin to focus on repaying a favor.

There was no need for Shizuka to transform against infantrymen. She could handle them just by wielding Alunaya's mana. But it was a different story against tanks or mobile weapons, which were a virtual hybrid of a tank and a helicopter. She'd accordingly turned into her half-dragon form to draw on even more of her power.

"It appears there are no people inside these contraptions," observed Alunaya.

"This is a lot more fun when we're just going up against heaps of metal!" Shizuka shouted as she pummeled mobile weapons.

Her humanoid appearance belied her power, for she tore through the machines like they were paper. With her immense strength, it would be all too easy to accidentally kill a target. So because it was hard for her to hold back, she was primarily being used against larger and automated weapons. Of course, that was exactly what she wanted.

"Landlord-san, you're getting a little too far ahead," Koutarou called.

"Sorry. I'll be more careful," Shizuka called back.

Koutarou and Theia were following Shizuka in Warlord III-Rev, gunning down incoming artillery rounds as they went and providing covering fire to the troops behind them. With Signaltin, Koutarou could even deal with enemy infantry too. His versatility made him ideal for supporting frontline fighters like Shizuka and Theia. He was playing a role not too dissimilar from that of a tank.

"You're getting too far forward too, Satomi-san!" Nana interjected.

"Really?"

"Really! Talk about keeping me busy!"

Unfortunately, however, Koutarou's tanklike role meant he had many of the same weaknesses a tank did. Unlike Shizuka in her humanoid draconic form, Warlord III-Rev was a five-meter giant. The massive machine had several blind

spots that enemies loved to target. It was Nana's job to cover them. She was jumping all around, protecting Koutarou from a plethora of incoming attacks with her specialized pistols, Over the Rainbow.

"I wouldn't mind a little thanks!" Nana shouted, gunning down two soldiers in the process. There were all too many men who hoped to make a name for themselves by killing Koutarou, resulting in an unbelievably high number of suicide attacks.

"Thanks, Nana-san," said Koutarou.

"How dare you speak to Lord Veltlion that way..." Nefilforan followed up in a low voice.

"Commander!" Nana yelled.

Nefilforan was leading the ground troops behind Koutarou and the girls, following the path they were forging toward the enemy. The farther they pushed the front line, the more they pushed Ralgwin's troops to reposition artillery and other equipment not suited for close-range combat. The arrival of Nefilforan and her troops further reduced the strain on Nana too.

"The commander is unhappy because speaking so harshly to the Blue Knight is bad for appearances," one soldier explained.

"If that's the case, then you can all lend a hand! The enemy is swarming us because Satomi-san went and raised his banner!" Nana continued to yell.

"There you go again..." Nefilforan sighed.

With their commander at her wits' end, Nefilforan's troops swiftly eliminated the attacking enemies. Thanks to them, Nana was able to catch her breath. And after the immediate threat was neutralized, they were able to move up their distortion fields and other equipment meant to protect the entire unit. Slowly advancing in this fashion was the name of the game.

"Say, Satomi-kun, how—"

"Shizuka!"

Shizuka was about to ask something when she took a direct hit from a surprise shell from out of nowhere.

“Kyaaaaah!”

It had been fired from a mobile weapon, but it didn't contain enough power to injure Shizuka in her current form. Still, the explosion obscured her field of vision, and it wasn't like she was immune to the pain or impact. Following the hit, she collapsed to the ground and didn't move.

“Landlord-san! Damn it!”

Koutarou dashed out in Warlord to cover Shizuka, but a second and third shell reached her before he could. With each hit, Shizuka screamed.

“Theia, can't you intercept them?!”

Even though she wasn't seriously hurt, Koutarou hated seeing Shizuka get attacked repeatedly. He knew she wasn't enjoying it either. He was desperate to do something to protect her.

“Their shells are too small! It's impossible to intercept antipersonnel weapons from this distance!”

“Can't you aim for whoever's shooting, then?!”

“Not from this angle! They're on the other side of that building!”

Theia had no visual on the attackers from their current position, but she was picking up heat signatures from the far side of a still-standing building. The structure made it impossible to retaliate.

“So we need to go and— Oh?”

Theia was about to suggest in frustration that she and Koutarou advance when... Kaboom! There was an explosion from the other side of the building in question. Within seconds, the heat signatures had disappeared. The mobile weapon attacking Shizuka had exploded.

“What just happened?” Koutarou asked.

“I don't know, but it seems our foe is no more,” Theia replied.

“I-It was Sanae-chan and Fasta-san. They were helping me out,” Shizuka declared between coughs. The exact cause of the explosion was a precision shot from Fasta. Sanae had realized Shizuka was in danger and directed Fasta's

attack accordingly.

“Are you okay, Landlord-san?!” Koutarou cried, running over and using Warlord’s shield to protect her.

“Ugh, that was rough... but I’m okay. I’ll have to thank them later.”

“Really, phew...” Relief washed over Koutarou when he saw Shizuka smile. Even though he’d known she’d pull through, it was a horrific sight to witness.

“That’s why I told you to devote more mana to defense,” Alunaya scolded her.

“The bare minimum is fine! I didn’t get hurt anyway!” Shizuka snapped back.

Thankfully, she had indeed escaped injury. She flexed and moved to make sure everything was still in working order, and once Koutarou was sure she was safe, he turned back toward the building and looked up at the high ground far beyond it.

“What a shot...” Koutarou sighed, half in admiration and half in terror.

Fasta was positioned over two kilometers away. Even with a Forthorthian long-range rifle and Sanae’s psychic help, being able to destroy a mobile weapon from that distance was incredible.

“Hmph, I could’ve done that,” Theia insisted.

“What are you getting upset for?” Koutarou questioned.

“I’m not, you fool!” she shouted, firing off a shot. Even though she was in a foul temper, she didn’t forget her job. She was supposed to be gunning down aircrafts with her laser cannon. However... “Huh?”

“What is it?” Koutarou asked.

“I let one get away.”

“I thought you could do long shots.”

“This is different! They’re pretty skilled!”

Theia’s volley had missed the final craft in the enemy’s formation. It proceeded to use an unmanned drone as a shield to advance, making it impossible to shoot down.

“I’m sorry, Theia,” Koutarou said suddenly.

“Huh?” Theia went wide-eyed when she heard him apologize.

“You’re right,” Koutarou said further with a stern expression. He’d sensed a familiar presence, and he now understood why Theia hadn’t been able to take out the final craft. “Ralgwin’s here.”

“What?!”

“Indeed! It’s been too long, Blue Knight! Princess Theiamillis!” called Ralgwin’s voice over the comms. It was now clear that he was aboard the final craft, just as Koutarou had suspected. “Today is the day I avenge my uncle, Blue Knight!”

“That’s not going to happen! We’re going to defeat you and put a stop to all this fighting!” Koutarou glared at the incoming aircraft as he readied Warlord III-Rev’s sword and shield.

Ralgwin appearing now either meant he was exceedingly confident or he was up to something. Perhaps even both. He was not a foe to be underestimated.

Right around the time Koutarou noticed Ralgwin, Sanae-nee with the aerial force also picked up on an extraordinary presence. When she did, she poured a large amount of spiritual energy into Ohime to make a sharp turn.

“What are you doing all of a sudden?!” Clan demanded from the gunner’s seat. The abrupt maneuver had caught her off guard, causing her to lose track of the enemy they were attacking. She quickly ordered the drones under her control to give chase.

“He’s here! The Gray Knight! It will be a disaster if we don’t do anything!”

Sanae-nee had set a course for the most dangerous foe of all. Clan immediately understood her urgency when she heard his name.

“So it’s *him*!” she cried. “Where is he?!”

“Over here! By the donut!”

According to Sanae-nee, the Gray Knight was near the distortion field trapping Ralgwin’s main force. At some point, a small unit of humanoid mobile weapons

had appeared there—and carried with it the power of the whirlpool of chaos.

“Veltlion, the Gray Knight has appeared!” Clan informed Koutarou over the comms as she deployed more drones.

The Gray Knight was far too dangerous for her and Sanae-nee to engage alone. She knew that much, but she never expected the reply she received...

“Sorry, Clan! We’ve got Ralgwin over here!”

“Then they’re going all out! Ralgwin is probably a diversion! Their real goal must be to save the trapped troops!” Clan surmised.

“I bet! But since Ralgwin’s gone out of his way to show himself, he’s bound to be after my head! Especially since I’ve got Theia on board!”

Ralgwin had been quick to talk of revenge, but Koutarou and the girls suspected that wasn’t his primary motive. He was most likely serving as a diversion while the Gray Knight saved his men. In other words, just like Koutarou, he was playing decoy. The harsh reality was that Koutarou didn’t have enough manpower to send after the Gray Knight too.

“We’d like to intercept with Ohime,” said Clan. “What do you think, Kii?”

Once the Gray Knight freed Ralgwin’s men from the donut field, Ralgwin would have no reason to stay on the battlefield. He wasn’t the type of gambling man to risk it all when the odds weren’t in his favor. That was why Clan wanted to take Ohime and focus on the Gray Knight instead.

“Indeed, we cannot sit idly by as he acts,” replied Kiriha. “But remember who you’re going up against. Don’t try to defeat him. Just cooperate with Harumi and the others on the ground to buy time,” Kiriha replied. Considering the unique threat the Gray Knight posed, she knew sending Clan and Sanae-nee alone was too dangerous. She thought it would be better to have them coordinate with additional forces to stall him.

“And we will use the time you buy us to capture Ralgwin,” added Koutarou.

“That’d be great!” said Clan.

If Koutarou could catch Ralgwin, it wouldn’t matter if the Gray Knight freed his men. The entire point of this battle was to detain the rebel commander. If

anything, they might even be able to use his remaining forces to turn on the Gray Knight. Either way, Koutarou and Theia knew that how swiftly they could accomplish their goal would be the deciding factor in the outcome of this battle.

Though Ralgwin had now revealed himself, he didn't try to close the distance. It was clear enough what Koutarou was thinking, so he descended to the surface and hid.

"I thought he was piloting an aircraft, but it looks like that thing can handle itself on land too," Theia groaned.

Warlord III-Rev had been modified into a two-seater, but the cockpit was cramped. Koutarou was close enough to her that he could easily see the upset look on her face.

"Does he think he can beat us?" Koutarou asked.

"He probably had that thing made specifically to fight us. What a pesky foe."

Theia was well versed in warfare, and she had a pretty good idea of how strong Ralgwin's craft was. He'd known in advance that he'd need to be able to handle both aerial and land-based combat to go toe-to-toe with Theia and Koutarou. It was clear he'd considered what he'd be going up against with them, leaving them to assume he'd similarly prepared measures to engage with any of the other girls too.

"Sanae, where is he now?" Koutarou asked.

"I don't know. His aura disappeared."

"It's most likely a spiritual energy stealth module," Fasta explained. "Ralgwin-sama was having research done on it."

Because of said module, not even Sanae could find him. He'd virtually disappeared after making his presence known. The stealth module wasn't perfect, but it was enough to make him indistinguishable from other soldiers. It likely had similar countermeasures against magical detection.

"He's not the type to act without a plan..." Koutarou murmured.

Ralgwin was cautious, even in his current situation. He was playing his cards just right to put Koutarou and the girls in a tight spot—time was against them with the Gray Knight also on the field.

To think he'd show up now too of all times...

Koutarou was honestly surprised. He hadn't fully believed in the alliance between Ralgwin, the Gray Knight, and Grevanas. Yet here the Gray Knight was.

Not knowing what he's really after is an issue... Never mind that! I need to focus on Ralgwin for now!

Koutarou was unsettled by the Gray Knight's actions, but he shook his head rapidly to regain his focus. If he didn't hurry up and find Ralgwin, the Gray Knight would break out the trapped soldiers.

"Theia, what would you do if you were in Ralgwin's situation?"

"I would hide and wait for the enemy to get impatient."

"Not try to go after me or you?"

"That would only be a secondary goal. Ralgwin isn't the type to get his priorities mixed up."

"Then we'll just have to find him."

"We'll have to pin our hopes on Ruth."

At present, it was impossible for Koutarou and Theia to take out all the enemies ahead of them while searching for Ralgwin. But there was yet hope. Following the battle against the blink beast, Ruth had devised a swarm of microdrones capable of searching out invisible foes. And right now, they were spread far and wide in search of Ralgwin. Koutarou knew Clan, Sanae-nee, and Harumi were in danger, but for the time being, all he could do was wait.

The girls' battle against the Gray Knight was the inverse of Koutarou's against Ralgwin. The Gray Knight was the one working against the clock to free the trapped soldiers. Until he was done, Ralgwin would be unable to retreat. Clan and Sanae-nee were therefore aiming to draw things out as long as possible.

"Say, Glasses, should we really be attacking this ridiculously?!"

“To be honest, no! But it’s the best plan we’ve got right now!”

Their current strategy was to lean into an all-out attack. Getting too close to the enemy was dangerous, however, so they stuck to firing at range. Between Sanae-nee’s incredible psychic power, the haniwas, and its spiritual energy generator, Ohime had enough power to attack from incredible distances. Clan had also moved her drones in, making it difficult for the Gray Knight to dodge. But their strategy wasn’t flawless. Haphazard attacks wouldn’t be enough to pin the Gray Knight down, and they knew that. They were trying to make up for it by attacking with everything they had, but at this rate, they wouldn’t last long.

The Gray Knight clicked his tongue.

“A spiritual energy cannon and drones... That must be Sanae and Clan! And considering the firepower they’re using, they must be trying to buy time for someone else to make it here!”

It was evident that Clan and Sanae-nee were stalling as they awaited an ally’s arrival. There was no other reason they’d so readily spend all of their unmanned crafts and ammunition. Once the slower ground forces they were waiting for hit the scene, they could safely fall back on lasers or other attacks.

This is where losing out in spiritual energy hurts...

The Gray Knight had been worried about having to fight two Sanaes, but having to fight one aboard Ohime with a spiritual energy generator and the haniwas to amplify her powers was just as bad. He’d already asked Grevanas for a countermeasure to make up for his lack of spiritual energy, but a future boon wouldn’t save him now.

I could use the power of chaos to force my way through, but that would leave me with no way to rescue the soldiers... What to do?

The Gray Knight would have to rely on the power of chaos to rescue the soldiers trapped in the donut-shaped distortion field. It was the only way to rescue so many people at once and allow them to get away. There were close to a thousand trapped soldiers, and Ralgwin had two hundred more men with him. Safely whisking that many people away would take a tremendous amount of energy, meaning it was too risky for the Gray Knight to tap into it so soon. If

he exceeded his limits, there was no guarantee he'd be able to maintain his own existence.

"I'll just have to do what I can. Sorry, Ralgwin, but it doesn't look like I'll be able to help you out after all."

The Gray Knight made up his mind. He abandoned the naive notion of trying to fulfill every ideal and instead began plotting how to achieve the best possible outcome.

Indeed, isn't this why I obtained the power of chaos?

The Gray Knight drew the sword of the humanoid mobile weapon he was piloting. When he grasped it with both hands, there was no hesitation in his heart.

Unsurprisingly, it was soldiers from Nefilforan's unit who discovered Ralgwin's craft. The discovery, however, was a complete coincidence. Ralgwin had moved away from his original descent location, and the soldiers happened upon him while searching the rubble of a collapsed building. They immediately notified their superior officer, and the report quickly made its way up the chain.

"Lord Veltlion! Soldiers under my command have found Ralgwin!" Nefilforan reported after word reached her.

"Where is he?!" Koutarou asked.

"I'm sending the location to you now!"

Warlord III-Rev had a live map of the battlefield displayed in the cockpit, and with Nefilforan's report, a new red dot appeared on it. The dot was just outside the area where Ruth had deployed her microdrones.

"What is he doing there? Is that even really him?" Koutarou asked skeptically.

"I don't know," said Theia. "Maybe he's just buying time, or maybe it's a trap and he's going for an ambush on our flank when we least expect it. Either way, we'll just have to go check it out."

Had Nefilforan's men merely discovered a decoy fighter or balloon in disguise? Both Koutarou and Theia suspected trickery, but they had no time to

investigate. They rushed straight to the site with their guard up.

“I’ve got new information, Lord Veltlion. There’s no energy reaction from the craft. It appears to be completely shut down,” Nefilforan reported as Koutarou and Theia neared the location in question.

“Is he trying to shake us?” Koutarou muttered. Generators produced heat and other signatures, even when a ship was idle and perfectly still. So cutting all power to a craft was an easy way to avoid detection. “This is getting suspicious...”

The more Koutarou learned, the more his doubts grew. Wary of an ambush, he and Theia stayed on the move as they approached the landing site. When they reached it...

“Koutarou!” Kiriha cried over the comms. She was always calm, but right now she sounded panicked. “I know what he’s after! It’s the underground tunnels!”

“The underground tunnels?!” Koutarou repeated.

“They’re right below his craft! He means to intercept you from below!”

Just then, Nefilforan’s troops wrenched open the cockpit of Ralgwin’s custom fighter... and found no one inside. The craft was deserted.

“You mean he abandoned his new toy?!” Even seeing the empty cockpit, Koutarou couldn’t believe it.

“But it *does* make sense. He managed to fool us this way,” Theia replied, having parsed Ralgwin’s ploy.

Most of Ralgwin’s remaining troops were engaged with Nefilforan and Harumi’s ground forces. He had scant remaining manpower at his disposal, making it dangerous to go toe to toe with Koutarou and Theia. If Ralgwin held the power to turn the tides of battle himself, he would have done so from the beginning. The best he could manage with his craft alone was killing Koutarou, albeit at great cost. A suicide attack was hardly the mark of a great commander. He had to keep the greater operation in mind, meaning he needed to buy time, kill Koutarou if he could, *and* retreat successfully.

Thus Ralgwin had set his sights on the tunnels running beneath the shipyard.

The narrow passageways made it impossible for too many people to fight at one time, lessening the risks of being outnumbered. More importantly, the tunnels were a quick escape route. They connected to all manner of places across the facility—including the interior of the donut-shaped distortion field.

Ralgwin had sacrificed his custom fighter to fool Koutarou and the others. He'd shown himself to make it look like he was ready to fight, then used the craft to send Koutarou on a wild-goose chase while he descended into the tunnels. He meant to fight—and kill—Koutarou underground before rescuing his trapped troops. Even if his odds of succeeding were low, it was the best plan he could manage alone.

"She's right, Blue Knight! I had you completely fooled!" the enemy general taunted.

"Ralgwin?!" Koutarou gasped.

"Will you come after me? Or will you go after the Gray Knight? I don't mind either way—I've stalled you plenty already!"

Ralgwin was right. His going into hiding had already forced Koutarou and the others to spread out and waste time searching. And it would take more time still for them to regroup and pursue the Gray Knight. The risk of Ralgwin's plan succeeding was increasing by the minute.

"What are we going to do, Koutarou?" Theia asked.

"We're going after Ralgwin. I hate to say it, but at the very least, we *have* to capture him."

Koutarou felt he had no choice but to play along now. But in truth, Koutarou had been dancing to Ralgwin's tune this entire time.

Not long after entering the tunnels, Koutarou found Ralgwin. He was waiting with a dozen or so soldiers by his side.

"Welcome, Blue Knight."

"I'm here to fall in your trap, Ralgwin."

After a prolonged conflict, Koutarou and Ralgwin were finally face-to-face.

Neither had any large weapons. Underground, they were limited to both smaller arms and smaller teams. Ralgwin had chosen to make his stand at a parts depot, which would only facilitate a proper fight between twenty men at most. In other words, the decisive duel would be settled in close combat—the opposite of how their battle had begun.

“My trap? Hahaha, you overestimate me, Blue Knight. I don’t have *that* many tricks up my sleeve. This is as far as I go,” Ralgwin declared with a bitter smile.

He had lured Koutarou into the underground, but that was as far as his ruse went. He was now prepared to fight, but he had little in the way of men or weapons. He needed to draw things out as long as possible for the Gray Knight to rescue the rest of his troops, but the longer the fight took, the greater his risk of defeat. It was a do-or-die situation that demanded he steel his resolve.

“Same here. So I have a suggestion,” said Koutarou.

“And what is that?”

“Surrender, Ralgwin.”

“I’m afraid that’s not an option. I come from a family of warriors, after all. I can’t give up without a fight. Besides, I need to avenge my uncle.”

With a click, Ralgwin released the safety on the gun he was holding. As the descendant of knights, he would have preferred to fight with a sword, but he knew drawing one against the Blue Knight was a fool’s errand. He’d accordingly chosen a firearm instead.

“There’ll be fewer casualties that way, Ralgwin. I know you hate seeing your men die,” Koutarou insisted. He’d yet to draw his own weapon, but Shizuka, Nana, Theia, and Maki standing behind him were all primed for battle.

“Even so, this is the way it must be.”

“I see...”

With that, Koutarou grabbed the hilt of his sword. Ralgwin’s soldiers all knew the elegant silver-white blade, and they gasped at the sight of it—the sword of kingship, Signaltin, greatest treasure of Forthorthe’s royal families. In a majestic display, Koutarou drew the legendary blade on Ralgwin’s guards. They knew

how foolish it would be to challenge the Blue Knight with that sword, but they held fast... all because their commander had chosen to fight.

It would be a waste to lose this man... He's not like Vandarion.

Koutarou rued the situation as he watched the soldiers readying their weapons. Ralgwin had done terrible things he'd never be able to take back, but he was clearly different from Vandarion. Vandarion's men had followed him out of fear, but Ralgwin's men were choosing to stand by him. Seeing this, Koutarou understood why Fasta had wanted to save him.

"I shall take the Blue Knight," Ralgwin announced to his men. "I want the rest of you to take the other four."

"Good luck, Your Excellency..."

"You too."

Ralgwin took a step toward Koutarou. His soldiers moved behind stacks of boxes to take aim at the girls.

"I never imagined you'd take the front," Koutarou said, moving forward as well, sword in hand. One more step, and their duel would begin.

"It was a simple matter of how to kill you—this is the only way."

"You don't have to go along with this," Maki urged from beside Koutarou. She'd already transformed her staff into a greatsword and was ready to attack. Ralgwin had said there weren't any, but she was prepared for a trap or two. She wanted to settle things before Ralgwin had a chance to use them.

"I accept, Ralgwin," said Koutarou.

"Satomi-kun?!" Maki gasped.

"Aika-san, you support the others."

"I understand how you feel," Theia assured her. "But this is how knights do things. It's an important part of what makes Koutarou who he is. We need to respect that."

Maki stopped to think about what Theia said for a second before returning her staff to normal. She'd decided that magic would be better for supporting

Koutarou and dealing with the attacking soldiers.

“I thank you, Blue Knight. I may yet be able to avenge my uncle this way.”

“I’ve decided to stop caring about your real intentions.”

“How harsh,” Ralgwin replied with a bitter smile.

It was true that he was facing Koutarou himself on Vandarion’s behalf—but that wasn’t the only reason. He’d judged that the Blue Knight would respond in kind and be willing to face him in single combat. And knowing Koutarou had figured that out, Ralgwin couldn’t help chuckling.

“Staying true to chivalry in this day and age is hard, Ralgwin.”

“I agree with you there. Being born to a family of knights is quite a burden.” With that, Ralgwin turned his muzzle on Koutarou and took aim at his torso. “Now then, let’s get to it, Blue Knight!”

“It’s on, Ralgwin!”

Ralgwin fired the instant Koutarou finished his sentence. The shot scratched the surface of Koutarou’s armor. It didn’t do much damage, but it had pierced his distortion field.

“Satomi-kun!” Maki shouted. Not a moment later, Koutarou’s sword was aglow with magic. She’d enhanced it to increase its attack power.

Koutarou quickly exhaled and took a swing. His blade connected with the barrier produced by Ralgwin’s armor but did not penetrate it. Koutarou hadn’t had enough momentum, and the barrier was too powerful.

“What power at this range... How terrifying.”

Ralgwin had escaped a direct hit from Koutarou, but the power behind the blow was still unsettling. He’d equipped a sturdier distortion field than normal, yet one hit had drained most of its energy.

“I could say the same. You weren’t kidding around.” Koutarou was also surprised by the frightening power of Ralgwin’s attack. *It might be best to listen to Aika-san after all...*

Ralgwin had studied Koutarou’s fighting style and challenged him with

countermeasures in hand, including magic and spiritual energy technology. For example, the shot he'd just fired was powered with spiritual energy and designed to pass through distortion fields. It was also scattershot, covering an area and making it harder for Koutarou to dodge completely. The shotgun had also been modified with magic and spiritual tech, giving it unreal speed and accuracy. On top of that, the tunnels were narrow with a low ceiling, meaning Koutarou couldn't move as nimbly as normal. If he'd been careless, Ralgwin's first shot could have peppered him and taken him out immediately.

It looks like he's still got something else up his sleeve... I'll need to be more careful!

It was now painfully clear that Ralgwin hadn't been bluffing when he'd announced his intent to take on Koutarou himself. Koutarou adjusted his grip on his sword as he reassessed just how tricky of an opponent Ralgwin was proving.

Although he was unharmed, Koutarou being struck by a bullet shocked Theia and the others terribly. Ralgwin was the first foe since Elexis to give Koutarou such a run for his money. The girls were truly taken aback.

"So his confidence wasn't unfounded..." Theia muttered as she used her computer terminal to check Koutarou's vitals and confirm he was unharmed. She wasn't wearing her Combat Dress, which would have only held her back in such narrow quarters, but she was using Command Green's main assault rifle.

"He isn't the only one we need to worry about. We've got those guys on our hands too," said Nana with a stern glance at Ralgwin's ten guards. She sensed as much danger from them as she did from Ralgwin.

"They look like they've got solid defenses," Theia admitted. "But that's nothing we can't solve by setting Shizuka loose on them."

"Should I go for it?" asked Shizuka.

Theia felt Nana was overly concerned given the power of the Fire Dragon Emperor they had on their side. Shizuka was optimistic as well. She no longer had to worry about getting shelled underground.

“No,” cautioned Maki. “It looks like there are several traps around.”

The former Dark Navy had picked up on the danger that Nana was sensing. The enemy already knew about Shizuka’s strength, so surely they had countermeasures in place. They were currently lurking behind cover and showing no signs of coming out. Maki suspected that meant they had something to prevent Shizuka from rushing them, and when she looked around, she confirmed her suspicions.

“What kind of traps?” Theia asked.

“I’m detecting mind manipulation and denaturation mana... so illusions and gas. I can also vaguely sense necromancy, so there are probably also spiritual energy traps too.”

“Noooooooooooo!” Shizuka screamed involuntarily. Thanks to Alunaya’s power, it would take large-caliber weapons to stop her by force—but illusions and mind manipulation were a different story. And after seeing some of Yurika’s exploits firsthand, she knew just how dangerous magic could be.

“That said, we can’t defeat them if we can’t get closer. This is a problem,” said Maki.

Ralgwin had decided the battlefield and set up the best defenses he could, including a distortion field generator and laser point defenses to shoot down incoming missiles and grenades automatically. Ralgwin’s men were keeping their distance and staying behind them, so as of yet, neither side had inflicted any damage on the other. Koutarou couldn’t let his guard down either. They’d need to get through the enemy’s defenses somehow.

“Hey, maybe I can use Uncle’s fire to... No, I guess that won’t work here,” Shizuka muttered.

“A breath of my flames would end this in a single blow, but that would include everyone here.”

“And if we hold back to prevent that, they’ll just block it.”

Wide-area attacks were impractical in the constricted tunnels. Alunaya’s flames were a good example. If he used them, he would fry the enemy—and the girls right along with them. And even if he didn’t, he would use up the

oxygen in no time.

“It’s a clever strategy. The enemy has really studied you,” said Nana. *Wait...*

Something suddenly occurred to her. The enemy had clearly studied up on Koutarou and the nine girls. Potentially even Nefilforan, as she was a famous commander.

But what about me?

Nana thought back on her encounters with Ralgwin’s forces. She’d fought against them, certainly, but she had no recollection of going all out. In other words...

“Let me give this a shot,” Nana said with a slight smile as she tapped her computer.

“Do you have an idea, Nana-san?” Maki asked.

“Maki-san, I’ll be counting on your backup... Releasing final safety device!”

“Release code required to execute the input order,” the AI informed her.

“Radiant Angel Magical Girl Rainbow Nana!”

“Code accepted. Releasing final safety.”

After Nana recited the release code, her body began glowing the colors of the rainbow. Valves opened on her limbs, releasing air. The rainbow light was a sign her prosthetics were operating at full power, and the exhaust was the result of the massive amount of heat that generated. Both the light and exhaust continued to grow stronger.



“You guys haven’t seen this yet!”

In truth, Nana didn’t care for the way she looked without her limiters. She disliked the inhuman silhouette and strength—but she knew it was necessary right now. She also knew the girls wouldn’t treat her any differently for it, so she’d activated it without hesitation.

“I’m going all out, Maki-san.”

“I’ll do my best to keep up. Greater Protection from Soul Energy!”

Maki had a sinking feeling about this as she cast her spell. As a former foe of Rainbow Nana’s, she knew it was bad news when she went all out. Maki knew exactly how busy she was about to get.

At the same time, Clan also had a terrible feeling, albeit for a more urgent reason. Ohime was running out of ammunition.

“Clan-chan, Sanae-chan! We have less than a tenth of our ammo remaining, ho! We’ll be down to the spiritual energy cannon in thirty seconds, ho!”

“The drones are running low on power too, ho! They’ll be nothing more than floating boxes before long, ho!”

“This is bad! This firepower is what’s holding everything together!”

Ohime was all that was holding back the Gray Knight in his five-meter-tall humanoid mobile weapon and the soldiers under him. Clan was throwing everything she had at them in order to keep them in check. She fired missiles with reckless abandon and deployed her drones in an all-out attack. She was also making good use of the heavy combat module for Ohime. If she’d had allied forces with them, she wouldn’t have had to fight so hard, but right now, she was trying her best to hold out until Nefilforan and Harumi arrived. She was also up against the Gray Knight. She couldn’t risk anything less than a full tour de force against him... but now that she was nearing her limit, she was beginning to panic.

“Attacking like this is quite unlike you, but it seems you’re almost spent now, Princess Clariosa,” said the Gray Knight. He could sense Clan’s agitation. While

his psychic powers were nothing like Sanae's, he could still read her growing fear.

"You are awfully talkative today," she replied. "Perhaps *you're* the one getting nervous."

"You're right. So allow me to finish this quickly!"

The Gray Knight was in a hurry himself. He still needed to rescue over a thousand soldiers, so he couldn't use too much of the power of chaos in the battle. He couldn't very well leave Ralgwin's men trapped after defeating Clan and Sanae, so he was forced to bide his time and power. And now that Ohime's attacks were finally waning, he had his chance.

"Here he comes! Sanae, just focus fire on him!" Clan called.

"What about the others?!" she replied. "You don't have any more ammo, right?!"

"We'll cross that bridge when we come to it! I'll stop them by ramming them with my drones if I have to!"

"Got iiiit!"

Pumping herself up, Sanae-nee repeatedly fired the spiritual energy cannon. At present, spiritual energy attacks were virtually the Gray Knight's only weakness. And with Sanae bearing down on him at full power, he was forced on the defensive.

Her attacks fly as true as ever...

The beams from Ohime's cannon came right for the Gray Knight. While Sanae-nee could guide them with her psychic powers to chase targets, they typically flew in straight lines. So though the attacks kept him occupied, he could avoid them with relative ease.

Ohime's spiritual energy cannon was just a stream of beams that passed through distortion fields. They could only be blocked by something draped in spiritual energy. For this, the Gray Knight used his shield. He was piloting a humanoid mobile weapon, and he was channeling his own spiritual energy to the machine's shield to make it stronger. He blocked two beams with it and

lithely dodged the rest.

“Now it’s my turn!”

The Gray Knight brandished the sword in his mobile weapon’s other hand. He’d been on the defensive so far, but now he could get in a counterattack.

“Glasses! He’s coming!”

“Amplify the spiritual energy and distortion fields to max!”

“Understood, ho!”

“On it, ho!”

When the Gray Knight brought down his giant sword, lightning magic sparked from its blade. Lightning moves at speeds over a hundred thousand kilometers per second, meaning that it’s already struck by the time the brain has processed seeing it. It assailed Ohime at terrifying speed, shaking the jet violently. Its spiritual energy field excelled in absorbing elemental attacks, but it couldn’t fully negate the blast.

“A direct hit, ho! It’s a miracle we didn’t drop out of the sky, ho!”

“Switching the navigation to subsystems, ho, but we’ve lost 30 percent of our mobility! The spiritual energy field has stopped functioning and it will take sixteen seconds to recover! We won’t be able to take another hit, ho!”

Ohime was badly damaged. Fires were erupting here and there, and a plethora of parts were malfunctioning. Thankfully, however, the ship was still airborne.

“I knew you’d be fragile once you were out of ammo,” the Gray Knight observed.

Clan had known that would be the case too. Her all-out assault had been the only thing keeping her and Sanae-nee safe so far. The Gray Knight couldn’t keep up with Ohime at full power, but now he’d managed to snare the ship while it was flagging. The tables had turned.

“Tch! Sanae, take evasive measures!”

“You won’t be able to dodge me in that state! Sorry, but I’ll be finishing this

now!” The Gray Knight brandished his sword once more, and just like before, it began to spark with lightning. “With this, it’s over—”

“Gather, spirits of water! Dance, spirits of wind! Combine your pillars of power and appear, spirits of lightning! Thunder God who rules the sky, pass judgment on my foe!”

“The Silver Princess?! Shit!”

“Appear, Lightning Sword of the Thunder God!”

In a miraculous turn of events, it was the Gray Knight who was struck by lightning. Pure white light smote his mobile weapon, and he instinctively shifted the mana he’d gathered to defend himself. Still, it wasn’t enough to ward off Harumi’s spell.

“Aaaaaaaaagh!”

The brilliant bolt blew off the mobile weapon’s left arm, which the Gray Knight had thrown up in front of him as a sacrifice, and pierced the cockpit.

“Nice timing, Harumi!” cried Sanae-nee.

“Sorry for being late! Are you okay?!” she replied.

“We’re fine!” called Clan. “You did good to make it!”

With Harumi’s arrival, the tables had once more turned in the girls’ favor. Harumi had half her men with her—she’d left the other half with Nefilforan—but they still outnumbered the Gray Knight and his soldiers.

“So it’s come to this, has it? I can no longer afford to be picky about my methods,” the Gray Knight muttered.

“Everyone, be careful! That strange whirly power is increasing!” Sanae-nee called.

When he saw Harumi, the Gray Knight made up his mind. A complete victory was now out of the picture, so he needed to prioritize. And he did so calmly.

“He’s attacking— Wait, no, he’s not! What is this?!” Sanae-nee exclaimed.

The Gray Knight suddenly vanished, leaving the soldiers with him behind.

“He disappeared?! Why now?!” said Clan.

“Everyone, over there! He’s after the trapped soldiers!” Harumi indicated.

She’d followed the flow of mana and spotted the Gray Knight reappearing within the donut. He’d left the two hundred or so reinforcements under his command as fodder to save the trapped soldiers. Now that he was moving solo, slipping inside the barrier was easy for him. After taking cold stock of the situation, his decision was clear. He’d chosen to sacrifice two hundred men to save a thousand.

Aglow with the colors of the rainbow, Nana was unbelievably fast. She moved at inhuman speeds with her generator at full power. She was even faster than the last time she’d released her safety. So fast, in fact, that she wouldn’t have been able to control herself if Maki hadn’t enhanced her cerebral nerves with magic.

“All I can see is a rainbow...” Maki sighed. She had great vision, but not even her eyes could keep up with Nana. All she could see was the trail of a rainbow Nana left behind her, so she aimed her support magic just ahead of the blur, and she had her hands full trying to keep Nana safe at the speeds she was moving.

“Even I can barely follow her,” remarked Alunaya.

“She’s even kicking off the walls and ceiling... I could never do that,” Shizuka muttered.

“I can’t believe it,” said Theia. “She’s already gone by the time the traps she steps on activate.”

With her safety released, Nana had made the decision to advance. She ran right through traps and incoming fire alike as if they weren’t even there. She kicked off the walls and ceiling to change direction as needed in a flash. In no time at all, she’d breached the enemy line and was swiftly approaching their defensive equipment.

“I’ll leave the rest to you, everyone,” she casually reported back to the other girls while opening fire.

Her guns, Over the Rainbow, were outfitted to use both mana and spiritual

energy ammunition. By firing them alternately, she obliterated the defensive equipment Ralgwin's guards had set up. The guards—who had no idea who Nana was—simply watched in awe.

“Okay! Just get back!” Theia called.

“I think I'll do just that!” Nana replied.

Nana could move with superhuman agility, but she couldn't do it for long. Her artificial limbs were reaching their limit. Black smoke was now pouring out of her vents with the exhaust, and the rainbow-colored light was fading. She was already spent. She'd broken the girls out of their stalemate, but fighting was out of the question now.

Meanwhile, Koutarou was still locked in a difficult battle. Ralgwin had painstakingly collected data on his fighting style, and his countermeasures were just as thorough.

“I can do this! I'm fighting the Blue Knight!” Ralgwin shouted.

His eyes were locked onto Koutarou's every move. He couldn't keep up with Koutarou's spirit sight, but he'd come close with the power of stimulants and other drugs administered via his armor. He was confident he could make up the remaining difference with power. He was using weapons Koutarou had never seen before, allowing him to get the better of the Blue Knight here and there—like now, when he fired an unexpected rocket from a hidden launcher between his left arm and shield.

He has a rocket launcher in there?!

Koutarou sensed it just before Ralgwin let it rip, but it caught him totally off guard. The best he could do to defend himself was brace for impact and count on his distortion field and Signaltin to do the rest. Yet just before it reached him... the rocket exploded. A direct hit would have done more damage, but the wide area of the early explosion made it impossible for Koutarou to avoid it. Because Ralgwin had fired with his nondominant arm, he wasn't willing to take any chances. The blast rocked Koutarou and obscured his vision.

“Ugh, you're pretty good, Ralgwin!” Koutarou shouted, reflexively raising his

sword. He knew Ralgwin had more up his sleeve.

“I used to despair at the overwhelming difference between us, but now you’re within my grasp, Blue Knight!”

Not an instant later, Ralgwin’s axe met Koutarou’s sword. He’d jumped in to strike while Koutarou was still blinded from the explosion—a quick attack only made possible by not having to switch weapons. The weight of the axe in Ralgwin’s right hand had crushed Koutarou’s already weakened barriers. If Koutarou hadn’t raised his sword ahead of time, that might have been the end of him.

So he survived by a hair’s breadth yet again... Legendary heroes truly are the highest heights!

After incredible time and effort, Ralgwin was finally within reach of the summit he’d tried so hard to conquer, yet it eluded his grasp even now. But even so, he did not lose heart. He’d known this was how things would turn out.

If only I’d a little more time... No, there’s no point complaining! I must seize victory here once and for all! That’s what my uncle would tell me!

Ralgwin had lost the race, but not against Koutarou and the others. He’d lost to Grevanas and the Gray Knight. It was entirely possible Ralgwin could have beaten Koutarou with time and the right resources, but before he could achieve that, Grevanas had begun making his move. That forced Ralgwin to make a play too—he either needed to defeat the Blue Knight or destroy his battleship. He’d joined forces with Grevanas and the Gray Knight to defeat Koutarou in the first place, so he’d have no reason to continue working with them if he could take out Koutarou here and now. So he was staking everything on this duel, even knowing he was at a disadvantage.

As Ralgwin steeled his nerve, his AI began displaying information to him even though he was in the middle of battle. It was that important.

The Gray Knight has rescued the trapped soldiers? Good work!

It was just the message Ralgwin had been waiting on. Though he knew he and the Gray Knight would eventually be enemies, in the moment, he felt nothing but gratitude for the mysterious hooded knight. It passed quickly, however. He

soon pulled himself together and shot a sharp glare at Koutarou.

“Let’s settle this, Blue Knight!”

“Yeah... It’s about time.”

Koutarou had just received the same information. Up until this point, Ralgwin had had a reason to drag out the fight, but the situation had now changed. Ralgwin needed to end things swiftly in order to retreat. Koutarou could already sense he was preparing to make his final attack.

How are you going to come at me, Ralgwin...? No, I should be the one to make a move.

Koutarou rapidly closed the distance between them. Ralgwin was thoroughly prepared to fight Koutarou. If Koutarou gave him the privilege of attacking first, Ralgwin would undoubtedly use it to its fullest advantage. So by taking the offensive first, Koutarou was limiting Ralgwin’s possible moves.

“Here I come, Ralgwin!”

“Have at you, Blue Knight!”

As Koutarou rushed forward, Ralgwin quickly swapped from his axe to a gun. He could tell based on Koutarou’s charge that he meant to attack with Signaltin. If he engaged Koutarou fair and square in melee combat with his axe, he knew he wouldn’t stand a chance. By switching to a gun, he could at least keep Koutarou at range. It was the right call—but it was exactly what Koutarou had planned for.

“Heads up, Ralgwiiiiiiiiin!”

Koutarou attacked in a most unusual fashion. He grasped Signaltin with one hand and swung it as if to slash... then released the blade.



“What?! The Blue Knight *threw* Signaltin?!”

Ralgwin never would have predicted that. Koutarou was a legendary hero and a paragon of knighthood. A knight’s sword was their soul. He couldn’t even imagine the Blue Knight—of all people—doing something so uncouth. The whole of Forthorthe would have been shocked. And since Ralgwin’s AI had never seen such an attack before, the best defense it could muster was blocking a thrown weapon.

“Now, Sakuraba-senpai!” Koutarou shouted.

“Gust, spirits of wind! Whirl, spirits of water! Glad in the pillars of these two powers, come, glacial empress! Meld ice and snow together into a frozen lance...”

“Remote casting through Signaltin?!” Ralgwin exclaimed.

“Pierce, Silver Ice Spear!”

Just throwing Signaltin may have disgraced Forthorthian chivalry and Alaia’s memory... but Signaltin’s contractor could freely control the blade. Harumi channeled her magic into it as soon as it left Koutarou’s hand, transforming it into a powerful bolt of ice. It was a devastating attack combining the powers of a knight and his princess.

“Noooooooooo!”

Ralgwin couldn’t dodge it. His armor tried to shoot it down with lasers, but the icy spear just kept coming. It pierced through all of Ralgwin’s shields before finally burying itself in his shoulder. The momentum sent him flying backward into a wall before they both came to a stop.

“O-Of course... Signaltin is a magic blade...” Ralgwin slowly rose to his feet, supporting himself against the wall. Signaltin was still protruding from his shoulder. He looked pained.

“Sorry, Ralgwin. I know this was supposed to be one-on-one,” Koutarou said as he extended his hand.

With that, Signaltin returned to its owner. It left a tremendous gash in Ralgwin’s shoulder, but the wound wasn’t bleeding. Harumi’s spell had frozen it

over such that not a single drop of blood was spilled.

“The Silver Princess is just another one of your powers, Blue Knight. Don’t worry about it. Besides, not even I could pull off my grand finale alone...”

“Your grand finale—? Wait!”

Koutarou now spotted the small device in Ralgwin’s hand, and his armor’s AI immediately identified it. It was a remote detonator with a simple switch.

“I was going to use this as a defensive measure when we retreated,” said Ralgwin, “but I think I’ll use it as an attack now instead. If I collapse the tunnel, it’s bound to kill even you.”

“If you do that, you and your men are goners too,” Koutarou quickly countered.

“Don’t worry. Your side is the only one rigged to collapse. Well, more accurately, there wasn’t enough time to cover everything... but that’s ended up working out in my favor.”

Ralgwin’s grand finale was to cave in the tunnel. He couldn’t have risked setting off the explosives when he was closer to Koutarou, but Koutarou had just knocked him far enough away that there was a safe distance between them. Now he could both crush his enemy and escape, and there was nothing Koutarou could do about it.

“You’re really something, Ralgwin. No one else has ever gone this far. I truly am sorry it has to be like this,” said Koutarou.

“I am too,” Ralgwin replied. “Farewell, Blue Knight. Know you were the strongest opponent I’ve ever fought.”

Without that short goodbye, Ralgwin moved his finger to the switch. There was no time to chat. Koutarou and Theia both were both strong enough to turn the tables in a heartbeat if given the chance. Ralgwin knew that better than anyone. Thus he flipped the switch without hesitation, but...

“It’s not detonating? Oh dear...”

Though he’d activated the detonator, the explosives hadn’t gone off. The tunnel was still standing, and Koutarou and the girls were unharmed. They’d

considered the possibility of a tunnel collapse from the start and taken proper precautions against it.

“So in the end, you were always one step ahead of me... You got me, Blue Knight.” With a bitter smile, Ralgwin tossed away the detonator. At this point, accepting his fate was all he could do.

“No, I didn’t,” said Koutarou.

“What?” Resigned to defeat, Ralgwin had closed his eyes as his strength left him, but Koutarou’s words snapped his eyes open again.

“I didn’t beat you,” Koutarou continued. “She saved you.”

“What are you talking about? Who is ‘she’?”

“...I am sorry, Ralgwin-sama.”

“Fasta?! What are you—”

The moment Ralgwin caught sight of the figure behind Koutarou, he understood everything. Why his plan had failed. How Koutarou had gotten ahead of him. Even how his grand finale explosives had been discovered and defused. It was all because Fasta had taken their side.

“So *that’s* what it is. Phew... Who knew you’d side with the Blue Knight, Fasta? No wonder I couldn’t win. Still, to think my lack of charisma would be my downfall... I made the same mistake my uncle did.”

Several factors had contributed to Vandarion’s ultimate defeat, but the biggest was his lack of public support. Ralgwin felt he’d met a similar end after losing Fasta’s support. It was ironic. He couldn’t help wondering if it ran in the family.

“It’s the other way around,” Koutarou insisted. “Like I said, you didn’t lose. She saved you.”

“She saved me...?”

“I’m sure you’re not totally in the dark. Especially considering how you rushed into this fight.”

“Yes...”

Ralgwin now saw why Fasta had betrayed him. After all, he'd worried about the same thing.

Thinking about it, Fasta was the only one to suggest that I cut ties with Grevanas and the Gray Knight...

In truth, Fasta hadn't betrayed him at all. If anything, she was his greatest ally. She'd even braved a temporary alliance with the enemy to tear Ralgwin away from Grevanas and the Gray Knight. As someone who'd shared her impending sense of danger and similarly felt compelled to action, Ralgwin understood Fasta.

"Just wait a little longer, Ralgwin-sama. I swear I'll rescue you," Fasta called to him.

"I'll wait, but know I expect nothing. I'll gladly take this chance to finally rest..." Ralgwin replied as he closed his eyes again.

It had now been a year since Vandarion had left Ralgwin behind and he'd gotten stuck on Earth alone. And at long last, the curtains fell on both his fight and his isolation.

At the time Ralgwin was defeated, his remaining forces were still fighting. They were down to the roughly two hundred men who'd been sent as reinforcements. Once they learned their commander had been captured, however, they surrendered. They were willing to dig in for him—a sign of his great leadership—but even they knew the battle was over now.

As for Ralgwin, he was seriously injured by Koutarou's final attack. Koutarou accordingly carried him to the hospital aboard the Hazy Moon, where he underwent surgery. Fixing up his shoulder was no easy feat. Fasta intently watched the operation through a glass observation window.

"Are you sure you're okay with this, Fasta-san?" asked Koutarou.

He, Shizuka, and Sanae were escorting Fasta, as she was still considered to be in custody. They trusted her at this point, but not everyone would accept her so easily. She'd killed a great many Imperial Army soldiers. To their surviving allies, she would always be a loathsome foe.

“There was no other way. This will protect Ralgwin-sama from those two for a while,” she replied.

Without intervention, Ralgwin would have undoubtedly succumbed to Grevanas or the Gray Knight. But now that he’d been arrested, neither one of them could touch him. He would inevitably be sentenced to death for treason, but his sentence wouldn’t be carried out anytime within the next year. He wouldn’t be executed until the army was satisfied they’d learned everything there was to know about Vandarion’s faction from him. Then there would be his trial. It would all take time—and during that time, Fasta planned to help him escape. But until then, the Imperial Army would keep him safe.

“I’ll come and get you,” she quietly muttered while looking through the glass before turning around and leaving.

Sanae could sense her intentions. “Are you leaving, Fasta?”

“Yes, this is goodbye, Sanae. Shizuka.” Fasta nodded. She needed to go make her preparations to free Ralgwin.

With a worried expression Shizuka walked over to her. “I take it I can’t stop you...?”

“Yes. His soul is safe for now. Next, I need to save his life,” Fasta replied as she glanced back at Ralgwin. Leaving him was hard, but she had a job to do. She couldn’t just abandon him to the death penalty. She’d have to risk everything again to break him out of Imperial Army custody.

“Fasta-san, when you leave, we’ll wait one hour before sounding the alarm. Pursuers will be right on your tail... I’m sorry,” said Koutarou. He found the whole situation unfortunate. He’d gotten to know Fasta and Ralgwin, and he could no longer think of them as just enemies.

“There’s nothing to be sorry for, Blue Knight. This was our deal from the start,” she said in turn. She seemed unaffected, but in truth, she felt the same way about Koutarou and the girls. Over the past few days, she’d come to understand what they were fighting against. She was no longer sure she could turn her gun on Shizuka or Sanae.

“I shouldn’t really be saying this, but... do your best, Fasta,” said Sanae,

squeezing her hand. Her words were few, but the feeling behind them was immense.

“I intend to,” Fasta replied with a small smile, squeezing her hand back. She tried to be tough, but she couldn’t hide her emotions.

Shizuka put her own atop both of theirs. “Fasta-san, try not to do anything bad if you can, okay?”

She no longer saw Fasta as an enemy either. She was just another girl now, and that meant the world to Fasta.

“I can’t promise anything,” she said. “I will eventually instigate a prison break, after all.”

“Dummy! That doesn’t count!”

After lingering a little longer, Fasta departed. Koutarou, Sanae, and Shizuka watched her go, but she never once looked back. She walked forward with resolve. Her very silhouette said she knew what she must do—right up until it disappeared from sight.

Upon returning with the thousand soldiers he’d freed, the Gray Knight informed Grevanas of what had transpired. The lich was surprisingly outraged.

“Why did you rush to attack, Ralgwin?! Now it’s all gone to waste!”

The resurrected Grevanas had a far fierier personality than when he had lived—the result of his resurrector’s mistaken perception of him. He was still calm and rational under most circumstances, but right now, his naked rage couldn’t have been more palpable.

“It looks like he fell for those vixens’ trap,” said the Gray Knight, who was unaware of Fasta’s betrayal. He presumed Ralgwin had fallen for some ruse of Elfaria’s or Kiriha’s. “It was an elaborate one.”

“Damned fool! How am I supposed to resurrect Maxfern-sama with him captured?!”

Ralgwin’s full name was Ralgwin Vester Vandarion. He was the nephew of Marswell Daora Vandarion, a descendant of Maxfern. Grevanas had intended to

make use of that blood tie and sacrifice Ralgwin in order to resurrect Maxfern—a plan that was now ruined. That was the reason Grevanas was so furious.

I don't think he was a fool for rushing. Rather, I suspect he realized Grevanas's motive. He likely sensed something around me too...

The Gray Knight had realized Ralgwin's haste wasn't the result of a short temper. He'd been in a hurry, yes, but Ralgwin had remained calm from start to finish.

"So, what are you going to do now?" the Gray Knight asked, putting aside his thoughts and turning his mind to the future.

With Ralgwin captured, Grevanas and the Gray Knight would quickly lose their hold over the remnants of Vandarion's faction. There would soon be an internal power struggle over the next leader, and Grevanas and the Gray Knight were mere outsiders in the matter. If they intended to act, now was the time.

"I'm going to retrieve him, of course! His body is going to be Maxfern's vessel!" Grevanas shouted.

Ralgwin was the only remaining adult male of the Vandarion bloodline. He was therefore the ideal host for the resurrected Maxfern. Vandarion would have been a better candidate because of his temperament if he were still alive, but Ralgwin was the next best thing. Grevanas wasn't about to lose him.

"Be it execution or sacrifice, all that awaits is death... I pity you, Ralgwin."

If left imprisoned, Ralgwin would face capital punishment. If Grevanas rescued him, he would be murdered. Either way, Ralgwin was doomed. Even the Gray Knight felt sorry for him.

"But there's no need for sorrow. All will return to primordial chaos eventually. Life and death, love and hate..."

In spite of his pity, the Gray Knight had no intention to interfere with Grevanas's plan. He had his own agenda, and Ralgwin's ultimate fate made no difference to him.

Fasta had stayed on the Hazy Moon for five short days in a spare room in the

residential block. It was unoccupied again now that she was gone, and Shizuka had volunteered to clean it. She had time to kill and she was used to the job as a landlord, but there was more to it than that. She missed Fasta.

“Thanks for helping, you two,” she said.

“It’s cool. We’re free anyway, right, Koutarou?” replied Sanae.

“Not that I can really brag about it,” retorted Koutarou.

“Yeah, the commander-in-chief sure seems to have a lot of time on his hands.” Sanae snickered.

Shizuka laughed too. Sanae and Koutarou had offered to help her clean Fasta’s room. They, too, had developed a fondness for her, and with the three of them, the work went by quickly. Sanae used the vacuum while Shizuka cleaned the nooks and crannies of the room. Koutarou got all the high places. The job was nearly done inside of half an hour. Fasta had cleaned up before she left too, so it was an easy task. But toward the end, Koutarou noticed that Shizuka had stopped working. She was just standing there looking wistful.

“Is something the matter, Landlord-san?”

“Satomi-kun...” Shizuka momentarily went wide-eyed, but soon revealed what was on her mind. “Do you think Fasta-san will be able to rescue Ralgwin-san?”

Shizuka was concerned for Fasta’s future. She’d taken off right after Ralgwin was detained, and once his injuries had healed, she’d be back to rescue him. Shizuka didn’t know what to think of how it would all go down. She was worried.

“I’m sure it’ll be difficult. He’s a dangerous criminal, so the Imperial Army will make sure he’s locked up tight,” said Koutarou.

He couldn’t imagine Fasta succeeding. As the leader of a rebel army, Ralgwin would be under maximum security, including strict surveillance to keep him from committing suicide and becoming a martyr for his cause. It would be an extreme challenge for Fasta to rescue him solo. She’d need an army of her own.

“Yeah... I know that, but I think she’ll still try.”

There was no way that Fasta could sneak into a maximum security Imperial Army facility. As capable as she was, it would be a gravely dangerous mission. That's what Shizuka was worried about.

"That's how she looked to me too," said Sanae. She was worried too.

Though neither of them would say it out loud, the girls understood that Fasta might very well lose her life. Yet even so, they couldn't help her. Ralgwin had committed unforgivable crimes. Conflicting emotions roiled inside them.

"Fasta said Ralgwin was her savior. That's why she's going to save him now," said Shizuka.

"Her savior, huh?" remarked Koutarou.

Even evil people weren't evil toward everyone. Fasta was one such exception to Ralgwin. That's why Fasta would go save Ralgwin. Koutarou could understand that, but that's why he felt sad.

"Landlord-san, Sanae... As commander-in-chief, I need you to keep this a secret, but I honestly hope she stays safe in the future, no matter what happens."

"Me too."

"Yeah."

The three shared the same fleeting hope that Fasta's future would be a safe and happy one, whether she rescued Ralgwin or not. They cared enough for her to wish for that much. They weren't heartless.

Shizuka suddenly let out a giggle, which seemed rather contrary to the conversation. Koutarou looked at her in puzzlement and saw she was slowly walking over to the table in the room.

"What's so funny?" he asked.

"See this vase?" Shizuka asked, turning back to Koutarou with a smile and pointing to the vase on the table.

"Yeah. Sanae almost knocked it over earlier."

"Boo, that doesn't matter now!" Sanae cried.

“I put the flowers I brought Fasta in this,” Shizuka explained.

“Maybe they got thrown out—or maybe not. It hasn’t been long enough for them to wither.”

Cut flowers typically lasted a week, but with Forthorthian nutritional supplements, they easily lasted twice that. Yet Fasta’s flowers were gone now. It hadn’t been long enough for them to wither, so it was unlikely anyone had tossed them out, but everyone had noticed the vase was empty when Sanae had nearly toppled it while they were cleaning.

“I’m sure Fasta-san took them with her.” Shizuka was convinced Fasta had taken them with her as a keepsake, so she smiled to see the empty vase.

“I think so too,” said Koutarou.

“Yeah!” cheered Sanae. “That has to be it!”

No one knew what would happen next. They had no way of telling whether Fasta would accomplish her goal or make it out in one piece. But the connection they’d shared was real, and that brought Koutarou, Shizuka, Sanae, and likely even Fasta some small joy... like finding a tiny flower on the side of a road to an unknown destination.



Afterword

Long time no see, everyone. I apparently wrote the last afterword in August, so it's been roughly half a year since the previous volume. The reason this one was delayed, as before, is because I'm still working at a reduced pace thanks to my eye surgery. I can't put these books out on my own, so there's a lot of coordinating with various departments too. We ended up settling on March for the release date for this book—as I'm sure you're now aware (lol).

Medically speaking, my eye is healing well, and I'm slowly adjusting to things. At first, my vision would blur when I wore a helmet, making it difficult to ride my bike, but lately that's gone away and I can ride again. I think my brain's getting used to it. I mean, my eyes suddenly changed after over forty years, so I'm grateful for that. My life is—slowly but surely—returning to normal. I'm very sorry for any worry the delay may have caused. I hope to get back to my usual pace soon, so thank you for your continued support. I appreciate all the encouragement I received from everyone.

But that's enough about my eye! Let's talk about this book. Since it'd be tricky to discuss this one without spoilers, those of you who go straight to the afterword first should stop here and come back once you've read the book.

This volume more or less sees the end of the battle against Ralgwin. Grevanas acquiring the spiritual energy waste and learning how to control it was the catalyst here. Ralgwin himself was fine with Grevanas learning to use the waste as a weapon, but he didn't anticipate Grevanas's designs on resurrection. That oversight forced him to act quickly, so you could say that the factory accident was a mortal blow to Ralgwin. His biggest loss wasn't weapons or technology, but time. Fortunately, Fasta's betrayal(?) spared him the worst possible outcome. This is where his fate differs from Vandarion's. It's also representative of the difference between them as leaders.

In the next volume, Grevanas will finally make his move. On the surface, his goal is to rescue Ralgwin, but he has ulterior motives. Meanwhile, Fasta plans to

save him in the truest sense. It's a troublesome situation for Koutarou and the girls to be in. Both plots need to be stopped, but now they feel for Fasta. That will be a point of contention in the next book.

To be honest, I struggled writing this volume. Technically I always do, but I'd like to talk about it this time. Specifically, I'd like to talk about having a genius in the story. Broadly speaking, there are three types of geniuses. There are geniuses in battle like Theia. Then there are inventor-types like Clan. And lastly, there are problem-solvers like Kiriha. The first two are easy to handle. They both produce results that you can see. Theia defeats enemies, and Clan creates things (like the PAF or a way to defeat an army of zombies with overwhelming firepower). That makes them simple to understand. It's the political geniuses like Kiriha and Elfaria that are the tricky ones. The difficulty with characters like this is showing what they achieve and do. You can't just write things like "The enemy came, but fell for my trap" or "A problem happened, so I solved it." At some point, you actually have to break down their actions and thought processes. The real problem is that *I'm* not a genius. Something that would take Kiriha five seconds to come up with takes me days.

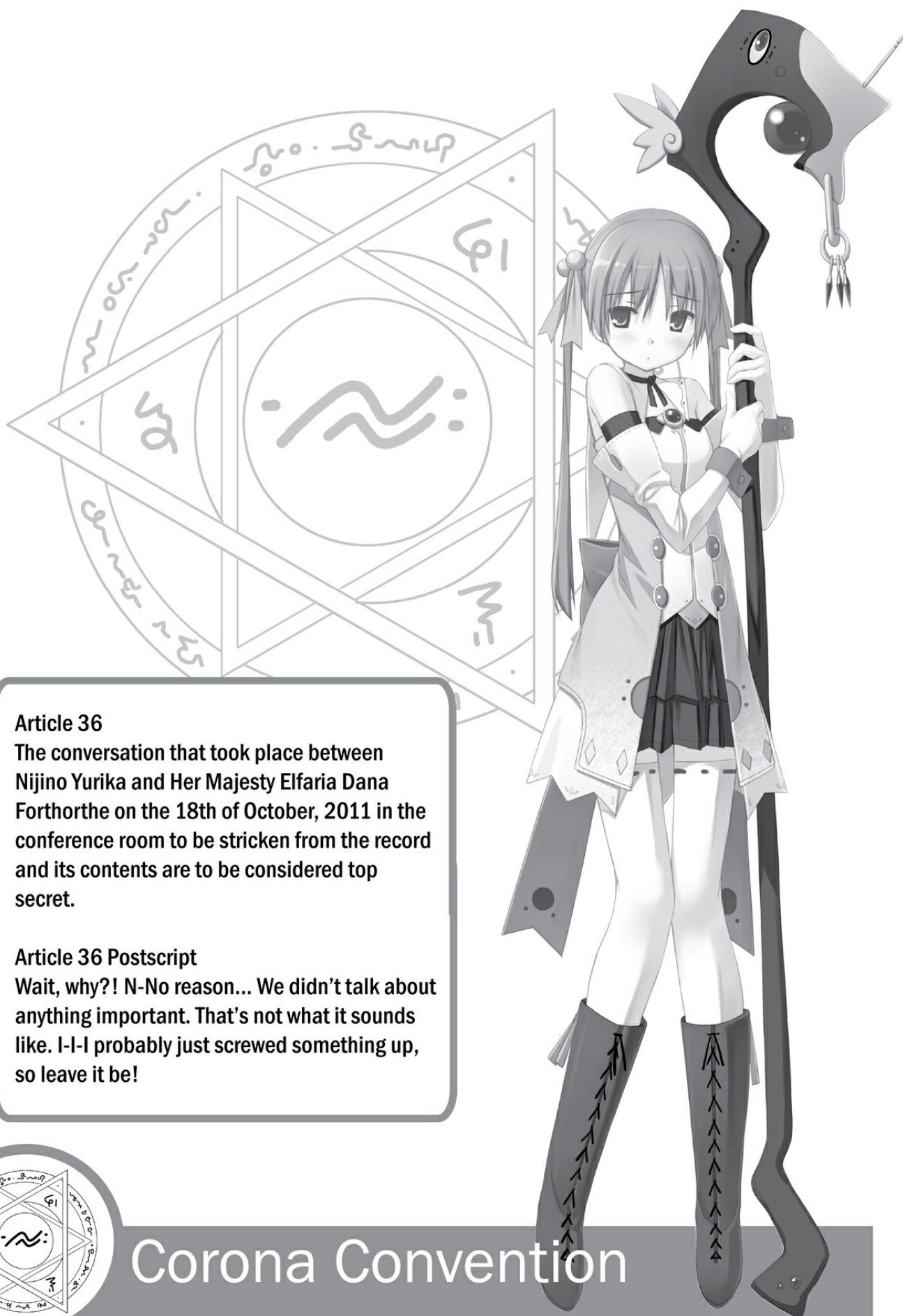
In this volume, she lures the enemy into a donut-shaped distortion field that would safely allow her allies to travel over it. This battle has to be won with minimal casualties out of consideration for Fasta, and the donut field idea took me several days to think out. Koutarou and Maki sometimes fight using defensive barriers as footholds, so maybe Kiriha got the idea from them, but I didn't (lol). I'm sure other authors struggle with strategic and political geniuses too. You can use loopholes and abilities like clairvoyance, but when the size of your cast increases and the scale of the story gets bigger, relying on that just gets boring. Even if you try to skirt the issue, you'll have to face it eventually, so lately I've resigned myself to doing it the proper way. I hope the end result was a tolerable book.

And just like that, I'm out of space. I'd like to wrap up with my usual acknowledgments. My deepest gratitude to HJ Bunko's editorial department and related companies; to Poco-san, who ended up getting thrown around last volume and this one because of my eye; and to all of you for your continued support despite the worry I've caused.

Let us meet again in the afterword of volume 43.

February, 2023

Takehaya



Article 36

The conversation that took place between Nijino Yurika and Her Majesty Elfaria Dana Forthorthe on the 18th of October, 2011 in the conference room to be stricken from the record and its contents are to be considered top secret.

Article 36 Postscript

Wait, why?! N-No reason... We didn't talk about anything important. That's not what it sounds like. I-I-I probably just screwed something up, so leave it be!



Corona Convention

New! October 30th, 2011

Bonus Short Stories

Sanae

Now that there were three of them, there were lots of things Sanae could do. The only problem was that all three of them had slightly different tastes.

“I want the new *Love Killa* game!” exclaimed Sanae-chan.

“I want to see the Messiah spin-off movie...” said Sanae-san.

“Now wait just a second, you two!” insisted Sanae-nee. “We should totally go attack that new cake shop in the next town over!”

The Sanaes only had but so much allowance between the three of them, and they were split between buying a game, going to see a movie, and hitting up a bakery.

“What are you three fighting over?” asked Koutarou, who happened to be passing by as they debated their plans.

“You won’t believe it, Koutarou! These two are saying that I can’t buy the new game I was looking forward to!”

“That’s an unfair way to put it, Sanae-chan! You know I’ve wanted to see the Messiah movie too!”

“And I’ve been looking forward to hitting up this cake shop since it opened!”

“Ah, got it. So you’re trying to decide how to spend your allowance,” said Koutarou. He could immediately see their conundrum.

“Hey, I know! I’ve got a way to solve this!” Sanae-chan, who’d been deep in thought, declared with sparkling eyes.

“Wait, what is it?” asked Sanae-nee.

“It had better not be something silly...” grumbled Sanae-san.

“We can just get Koutarou to give us more allowance! There are three of us

now, after all!”

Sanae got her allowance from Koutarou—a holdover from her days as a ghost. He’d increased her allowance when she’d reunited with her body, and now she was arguing for a similar raise.

“That’s true,” said Sanae-nee. “I don’t feel like I’m getting my fair share.”

“You can’t ask for that without a good reason,” argued Sanae-san.

“What about seeing your movie? Can you go without it?” Sanae-chan argued back.

“Th-That’s...”

“I can’t do without my cake,” interjected Sanae-nee.

Sanae-san fell silent.

“I’ll take that as an agreement, then!” said Sanae-chan. “So it’s decided! This is all for equality between Sanaes! The Sanae union demands a raise!”

Koutarou had unwittingly become the focus of their discussion. If he upped their allowance, their problem would go away. It was a very simple, Sanae-esque solution.

“You three aren’t exactly working for it,” he countered.

“It’s your job to show love to your longtime supporters!”

“What are you even saying?”

“K-Koutarou-san, do you not love us?”

“Ugh, that’s not...”

“Well said, Sanae-san! You must really want to see Messiah!”

“Wow, even Sanae-san is becoming more Sanae-like.”

“Stupid Onee-chan! You shouldn’t have said that!”

Koutarou quickly went from the center of their discussion to the literal center of attention. The girls closed in around him.

“Take this! Special Sanae-chan arm lock!”

“Hey, when did you learn Aikido?!”

“My mom taught this to me the other day.”

“Kanae-san, why?!”

“Stop standing there and help hold him down!”

“O-Okay!”

Koutarou resisted at first, but not even he could hold his own against three people. The Sanaes swiftly had him pinned down.

“Owowowow...”

“How’s that? Do you give? All you have to do is say, ‘Sanae-chan is cute!’”

“And give us head pats around the clock!”

“Um, I think you guys have forgotten our original demand...”

Three times the Sanaes meant three times the trouble, but it also meant three times the fun.

Nalfa

As a proud member of the cooking society, the first thing on Shizuka’s mind when they reached Forthorthe was food.

“Nal-chan, there’s something I want to ask you,” she said, calling out to Nalfa.

“What is it?” Nalfa replied.

“I’d like you to teach me Forthorthian cooking.”

Shizuka wanted to know about homemade Forthorthian cuisine. She’d only been getting the VIP treatment so far, including luxurious meals. Koutarou’s knowledge of Forthorthian food was horribly outdated and mostly limited to campfire and field cooking. Rather than all that, Shizuka was curious about what Forthorthian families ate at home.

“I’m not very good at cooking...” Nalfa replied timidly. She wasn’t an everyday cook like Shizuka was, and she couldn’t imagine she had anything to teach her.

“That’s fine. I just want to know more about what normal food is like here.”

“In that case, please let me help you.”

Shizuka was interested in the tastes of the common people. Once she realized that, Nalfa felt she had something to offer after all.

Overhearing their conversation, Kotori approached with a beaming smile. “Nal-chan, why don’t we film it? We can have Shizuka-san make similar dishes from Earth!” She was confident that lots of people would be interested in seeing the similarities and differences between the two cuisines.

“I wouldn’t mind that,” said Shizuka.

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah. It sounds like fun, and I’m interested in the similarities myself.”

“Then I look forward to working with you, Shizuka-san.”

Fortunately, Shizuka was eager to help out. And so the three girls got to work filming a cooking show.

Nalfa made a soup of root vegetables and bird meat, simmered with spices. When Shizuka tasted it, her face lit up.

“Oh, this is delicious! This small nut... or is it a seed? Anyways, its peculiar flavor is addictive!”

Shizuka’s first impression was that the Forthorthian soup was similar to pot-au-feu, but once she got it in her mouth and the spices kicked in, the taste reminded her more of curry. The poultry and vegetables had a great harmony.

“I’m glad you liked it,” said Nalfa.

“Aren’t you glad you practiced your cooking, Nal-chan?” asked Kotori.

“Yes!”

“Now I’m getting fired up! I won’t be outdone!” exclaimed Shizuka, moving to the kitchen as soon as she was done with Nalfa’s soup.

Kotori took up filming while Nalfa commentated.

“Shizuka-san, what are you making there?” she asked.

“This is curry soup. You’ve tried normal curry before, haven’t you, Nal-chan?”

“Yes. It’s served over rice or with naan, and it’s very delicious.”

“Well, this is the soup version of that. The soup you made today... Fakeri was it? I think this is going to be very similar.”

“I see. I’m looking forward to it.”

Nalfa watched Shizuka’s hands as she artfully chopped vegetables she’d brought from Earth. She looked like a professional chef.

“You’re really good at cooking, Shizuka-san,” Nalfa observed.

“You grow into it,” Shizuka replied.

“I’m not so sure about that...”

“Don’t worry. If you put your heart into it, you *will* get better even without anyone’s help. At least, that’s how it was for me.”

“Put your heart into it...”

When Shizuka said that, Nalfa recalled why she’d started cooking in the first place. She immediately blushed, and before she knew it, she was red all the way to her ears.

“Nal-chan’s heart is *definitely* in it,” said Kotori, who knew Nalfa’s motivation. If Shizuka was right, she was confident Nalfa would eventually become a great cook.

“I get that. Heehee...” Shizuka had an idea of Nalfa’s reason too. She flashed an empathetic smile.

“P-Please stop, you two! We’re in the middle of filming!” begged Nalfa.

“I’m sorry. I’ll take this more seriously,” said Kotori.

“Curry soup, curry soup!” Shizuka began humming.

“Jeez...”

Though Nalfa was pouting, Shizuka and Kotori were doing their jobs properly. As she watched them work, Nalfa’s expression gradually relaxed and then became unsure.

“Don’t worry, Nalfa-san. Food’s always better when it’s made with love, y’know?”

“Shizuka-san... Yes, you’re right!”

With that, a smile returned to Nalfa’s lips thanks, and she continued smiling afterward. Shizuka’s curry soup was absolutely delicious.

Yurika

Yurika was faced with a dilemma. She had to choose—between manju and the scale.

“If I step on the scale first, I don’t think I’ll be able to eat this...”

Yurika reached out for the manju, but she had a terrible feeling. If she got on the scale, she was sure she’d see a much larger number than she was used to. There was so much good food to enjoy in the autumn, and she knew she’d enjoyed more than her fair share of it. If she saw what the scale had to say about it, she was confident she’d be compelled to skip the manju.

And so she made up her mind. Manju first, then the scale. That was simply the only option. You see, Yurika was the type to ignore what she didn’t want to be true.

“But, but...”

She was moments away from grabbing the manju when her hand stopped. It was currently summer in Forthorthe, and there was talk among the girls about going swimming. Yurika couldn’t imagine a fate worse than having to wear a swimsuit after putting on weight.

“If I stood next to Sakuraba-senpai or Maki-chan...”

She’d already given up hope of ever looking like Kiriha. The real problems were Harumi and Maki, who shared Yurika’s build and were both determined to stay trim. Being compared to either one of them would be...

“A living hell. Th-This manju could be a ticket straight to hell.”

An overwhelming sense of despair crushed Yurika. If she was already getting

fat, one more manju could be the final nail in the coffin. When she imagined a flabby version of herself sandwiched between the adorable Harumi and Maki, she couldn't bring herself to pick up the manju. But just then, something occurred to her...

"B-But they say boys like 'em a little chubby, and Satomi-san was just telling Clan-san to put on some weight!" The unfounded belief that boys like slightly chubby girls was her only saving grace right now. She was that desperate. "I'm sure it'll be fine! Satomi-san is nice, so he'll still say he loves me!"

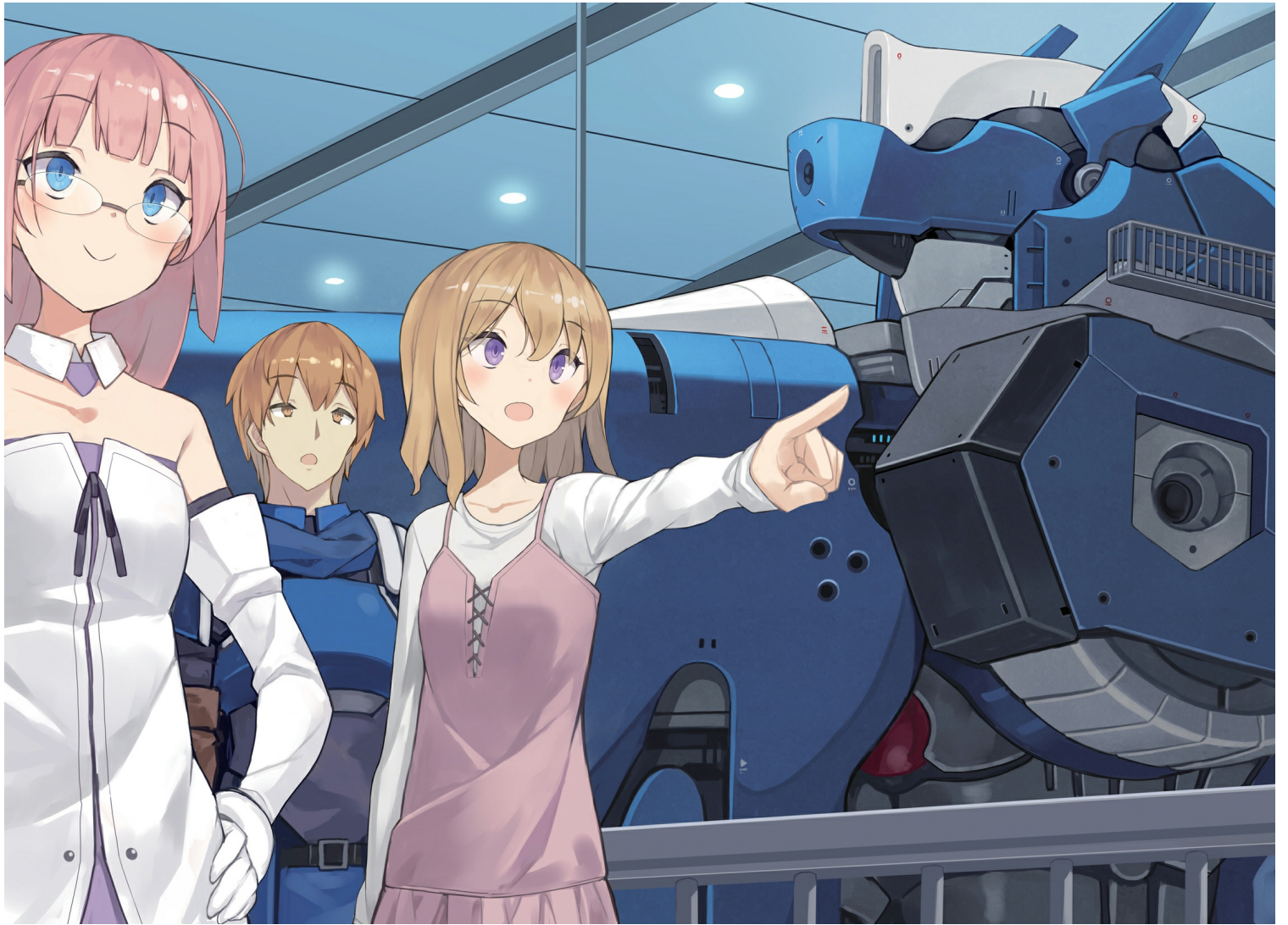
Putting her faith in that, Yurika snatched up the manju and ripped off its plastic wrapper. She'd already forgotten about swimsuits.

"Down the hatch! Hom! Oooh, that's sooooo good!"

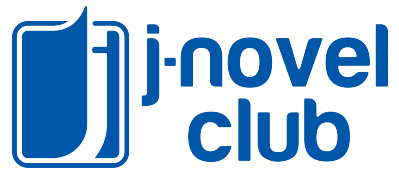
Nijino Yurika, eighteen years old, was a few short minutes away from the lament of a lifetime.











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Invaders of the Rokujouma!? Volume 42

by Takehaya

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